

Reflections on Albany High School

This piece was written by Meg for an Albany High School Anniversary, reflecting on her time as a student there and providing an insight to life in that era.

Born in 1923, I am roughly speaking, of the same vintage as ASHS, of the two, the school being better preserved.

I was brought up on a farm south of Highbury, a small settlement and siding on the Great Southern Railway line. It is about 14km south of Narrogin, halfway between Perth and Albany.

My early schooling at the one teacher school at Highbury was sketchy, as I was teased and bullied relentlessly and I spent most of my time plotting to avoid attending. I was aided and abetted by my old speckled grey pony I rode, named Myrtle. She had been taking children to school for years and found being tied up in the bush stable all day as unpleasant as I found school. She threw me off at least once a week, generally more often. I always hoped for obvious injury - skin off or blood flowing. It gave me a legitimate excuse to take sick leave.

My mother and brothers said I did not know how to ride and they would show me. I took pleasure in the fact that while Myrtle always waited for me to re-mount, when she threw them she galloped home leaving them to walk back.

I was hunted back to school finally after the teacher visited us and said if my attendance did not improve she would have to report me to the truancy officer. My parents had done their best to get me to attend school regularly but redoubled their efforts after her visit. Terror at the imagined threat of imprisonment did the trick for me.

Having missed so much school I was always behind especially with maths. No one ever pointed out or realized that I had never learnt the times tables! Mental arithmetic continued to be torture. It was during the Depression and although on the farm we had plenty of food there was very little money - certainly for boarding school. When I finished primary school I continued attending the Highbury school and studying the first year high school curriculum by correspondence. I began with a flourish but faded as the year progressed, completing only 13 of the 20 sets required.

My mother inherited a small legacy from an aunt in Scotland and generously used some of it to send me to ASHS or AHS as it was then called. Going to high school was the exception rather than the norm for country children in those days. Boys mostly stayed to work on the farms, girls also stayed to help their mothers, go into service, do office work or serve in shops locally. In fact there were very few high schools in the State - at Albany, Bunbury, Kalgoorlie, Northam, Geraldton and Perth Modern School.

From memory I think the attendance of ASHS when my mother took me down to enrol me in 1938 was in the region of 320 students. Coming from Highbury it seemed a lot! She also settled me into a small, private boarding house for students.

Very few people had cars in those days so students from the Great Southern travelled by train. A few came in to catch it at Narrogin on a branch line from Corrigin - further south from the Dumbleyung area connecting at Wagin. As the trains passed Highbury both ways in the middle of the night, the journey involved either catching or being met in darkness on the little platform at the siding.

Although I was never homesick when I was at school, leaving home to get there was a misery. When the alarm rang and I heard my father getting up, lighting the hurricane lantern, the gate bang shut as he went as he went down to the stable to harness up Mac, the sulky horse, I would feel sick with nerves.

The only noise as we drove down the white ribbon of track to Highbury were steady hoof beats and the whispering rustle of the iron wheels on sand. Standing in the gloom, the lantern lit, ready to wave when the train came round the bend to let the driver know to stop, is still a vivid memory. Holding my breath I would listen for the first faint hum of the engine. At first a whisper of sound, getting louder and suddenly the train came around the bend like a fiery dragon - lights, steam, screeching and crashing it came to a stop. I would be pushed into a compartment and we were on our way.

Boys and girls travelled separately but I do not remember any rules about this. Sometimes in an act of bravado during the journey, a boy would slide out of the door and walking crabwise on the running board and holding onto the iron rail on the carriage side make his way to visit the girls in their dog box and return.

Eventually having exchanged holiday news and collected the Wagin crowd, we would try to sleep, hunched up, contorted on the narrow seats. There was very little sleep for anyone.

Further south there were cream cans to be loaded for the butter factory in Albany adding to the rattling, screeching and jolting as the train brakes were applied and carriages came to a shuddering halt. We reached Albany in time for school. The local carrier collected our luggage and took it to distribute to our boarding houses.

I took to high school like a duck to water and in spite of my rather casual attitude to learning previously, very soon caught up with the curriculum requirements in all but French and understandably maths. During 1938 Mr Laing (Whizzy because he rushed everywhere) was acting Headmaster deputising for Mr Reidy who was on leave overseas. Mr Laing was a tall, slightly hunched, rugged faced Scot. Like all staff he wore a gown when teaching but was rather ragged and as he charged along always reminded me of an eagle. He was passionate about English Literature and for me, an avid reader, his lessons were sheer bliss. I still have and read poems from my copy of the "Bond of Poetry".

All the teachers were treated with respect - none more so than Miss Stevens, the Headmistress. She was calm, very just and looking back, I think the best teacher I ever had. She taught Botany among other subjects and after one of her classes I never needed to revise. She had the ability to make information stick. Out of school behaviour and dress came under her portfolio too. Woe betide the girl seen in town not wearing stockings, hat and gloves or acting in a hoydenish manner! Make up of any sort was banned as was smoking.

Mr Collins, gentle, very good looking taught languages and geography. I was never in his class but know his female students adored him. He was the Deputy Head in 1938, I think.

Miss Birkhead, tall, fit was our Sports Mistress, brutal in hockey training. Our team played on Saturdays against Association teams on the town oval. We trained after school during the week and she made us run around the oval three times before training began, which for me, overweight and no runner was defined torture. Even getting to the oval was quite a marathon - entailing a run through several bushy paddocks and clambering over a 6 foot gate. It became more of a challenge

when I became goalie and had to lug pads along as well as my stick, school bag etc. I was exhausted before training began!

ASHS sent teams to Country Week every second year only, because of the distance and expense. I went with the hockey team in 1938. Bunbury beat us and won the competition. Country Week was cancelled when war broke out.

Miss Birkhead taught French and laid great emphasis on accents, teaching us to roll our "R's" on our molars, in the Parisian way! She must have had some success because years later when I visited France I was complimented on my accent.

Mr Calcutta taught maths and was always the star of our end of year concerts as he had a rich baritone voice and his rendition of "The Road to Mandalay" brought the house down. "Sing it again Sir ", - and he always did! The applause was thunderous. We had a social at the end of each term - preceded by several periods of dancing lessons! Once a year, a fancy dress School Ball was held in the Albany Town Hall.

Miss Bernasochi was our third year (Year 10) girls Form Mistress. Short, plump and rather dramatic she wore pretty, flowing dresses and flowery garden party type hats in class. We were never reprimanded if we failed to do our homework but suffered feelings of guilt as she wiped away her tears of disappointment. She always took her class to the beach for a picnic on the Saturday before the start of Junior Exams (Year 10). She said she did not want us to be swotting all weekend or we would be like "limp lettuces" for the exam.

Miss Lamb (a misnomer if ever there was one) taught us domestic science. Her cold stare could transfix at ten paces. We learnt how to make scones, Cornish pasties, white sauce and launder men's detachable shirt collars, gopher frilly pillowcases and embroidered lace edge mats. We used four stoves built around a central chimney for cooking, jockeying for the best position for our dishes. The flat irons that we used were heated on top of the stove and rubbed in bees wax to give a smooth finish. The whole room was warm and redolent of bees wax. It was hard to avoid smuts or scorching in spite of our best efforts.

I cannot in later life ever remember having a need to launder gentleman's stiff detachable collars nor gopher the frills on a pillow slip. (Gophering frills is achieved with hot hair tongs giving a corrugated effect).

The day before we broke up after second term was Boronia Day, a holiday, when we went bush to pick boronia to take home. We picked armfuls and the whole train reeked of the perfume on our homeward journey.

We were not greatly effected by the war but mourned for two ex-students who joined the RAAF as pilots and were shot down, I think in Europe, soon after. They were Prefects when I started and young Gods in my eyes.

We were a small group in Upper School when I reached the dizzy heights. Austin Holmes was Head Boy and I was Head Girl. I have a vivid memory of us laying the school wreath for Mr Reidy who had died from a heart attack. Austin was a brilliant student and went to work for Nugget Coombs in Canberra. The late Dr Ernie Manea (Mayor of Bunbury) was also in my year. We met up again some years later at the Adelaide University, where he studied Medicine and I studied Social Work.

Now I meet many people of my generation who mourn the fact that they had to leave school at 14 to help their families when they wanted to go on. I realize how privileged I have been to go to ASHS. No one can take my learning and its gifts from me.

Thank you ASHS and good fortune to all.