

The Early History of Heathcote Valley School

By Barrie Woods

Schooling in Heathcote Valley can trace its origins back to an advertisement placed in the Lyttelton Times on May 28th, 1859. It read:

Wanted – A mistress, a member of the Church of England, for a mixed school of boys and girls to be held temporarily in the Heathcote Valley parsonage.

It is presumed that this signalled the first formal school lessons in the valley, though the official date recognised for the establishment of the Heathcote Valley School is 1860, when lessons commenced at the house of Captain William Morgan (Cwm House).

Captain Morgan's house was in the area now known as Morgan's Valley. He generously made a room in his house available for lessons until a proper schoolhouse was built.

The schoolroom was described in an 1863 report of the Education Commission as being 15½ ft (4.7m) by 11½ ft (3.5m), with no fireplace and poor ventilation. It was one of four rooms in the house and was leased to the Education Commission for £30 per year. At the time of the report, the school had a roll of 28 pupils, though they most likely did not all attend at the same time.

Prior to the arrival of the First Four Ships of the Canterbury Association in 1850, most of the first European settlers had little or no formal education, so little priority was given to the establishment schools. In January 1851 Rev. Henry Jacobs opened a boy's school in two rooms of the Lyttelton Immigration Barracks. This was the first school in Canterbury. He only had twelve pupils, and it cost two guineas to

enrol. In April 1852, the school made the move over to Christchurch, initially setting up its base at Christ's Church (now St Michael and All Angels) parsonage, before moving in 1857 to its own building on what is now the Christ's College site.

Initially schools for settlers' children were mostly run by churches or private teachers and were for the more well-to-do families who could afford to pay, but within a short time the provincial councils also became involved, often on a collaborative basis. Eventually this arrangement would give way to the state schooling system we know today.

When Henry Sewell, later to become an MP, visited Heathcote Valley in 1853 he is said to have been so impressed by the valley that he recommended it as the site for the establishment of Christ's College. How different our area may have been if his recommendation had been followed.

In Heathcote, work had commenced on building the railway and tunnel to Lyttelton in 1861, resulting in a significant population increase locally. There was insufficient space for the growing number of pupils at Cwm House and a group of local residents began to petition the Bishop of Christchurch for the building of a proper schoolroom. The Lyttelton Times of 8 March 1862 records their meeting, which was convened by Rev H Fendall:

The meeting, which was very numerously attended, resolved that "the proper course was to erect as soon as possible a commodious school room on the half-acre of land offered to

the district for that purpose by Mr. Lee. That a plan of the proposed building should be laid before the Bishop of Christchurch for approval, and on that being obtained, that subscriptions be raised for carrying out the object in view."

It was predicted that space would be needed for around 100 pupils. Local landowner Mr George Lee agreed to provide a suitable plot of around ½ acre of land for the building at "a very advantageous position at the meeting of the bridle path and Hills Road" (now Port Hills Road).

In March 1862, Bishop Harper gave his approval of the plan of the proposed school building but stated that owing to the very small allowance made by the Provincial Council for educational purposes, he would not be able to give any monetary assistance to the building fund. The local community subsequently resolved to open a subscription list for the building and asked that the "landowners and all parties interested in the district be requested to cooperate to raise the necessary funds".

The School Committee, was also made aware of Clause 23 of the Education Ordinance of the Provincial Council, which effectively said that if the local committee raised one quarter of the estimated cost of the buildings", the Council would provide the rest of the required money.

By May of 1862 the School Committee had already raised their portion and wrote to the Provincial Council seeking funds to complete the project but approval was not immediately forthcoming. The timing of events is a bit vague, and it is possible that the ordinance was still in draft form at this stage as it does not appear to have been formally adopted and published until 1864. Nonetheless, the school committee

appears to have used the intent of the ordinance to make their case.

In December 1862, the Heathcote parson, Rev. GJ Cholmondeley, wrote to the Provincial Council on behalf of the School Committee bemoaning the inadequacy of the current schoolroom, reminding them of the gracious offer of a suitable site, and making a case for funds sufficient to erect a new schoolroom and master's house.

Just like today, bureaucracy had to be negotiated, and letters were exchanged between the Education Board, the Provincial Council and the School Committee. Eventually, in December 1862, the Provincial Council agreed to provide a sum of £350 towards the building of a school in Heathcote Valley. In addition, they bargained Mr Lee for the provision of an additional half acre of land, making the total site just over one acre.

While this was happening, Captain Morgan was wanting to terminate the lease on the room at Cwm House as he intended to move his residence to Kaiapoi. He granted quarterly extensions for a while, then gave notice that the lease would not be renewed when it expired on 18th October 1863. This would leave the school without a room and the schoolmaster without a home as he lived in a cottage at Captain Morgan's property.

Plans had already been drawn up for the building and George Holmes, the engineer responsible for the railway tunnel, was engaged to complete the work. It seems however that the schoolroom was well down his list of priorities and work was slow to start.

On 24th August Rev G J Chomondeley wrote to the new Education Board to complain that work

had not yet commenced, reminding them that the lease at Cwm House was soon to expire. It appears that the Education Board may have addressed the delay by sacking the schoolmaster (Mr William Martin), it being recorded on 28th September that “the duties of the Heathcote Valley Schoolmaster have been brought to a conclusion”. There may be more to that statement than meets the eye, and perhaps they were keen for the schoolmaster to move on anyway. We can only speculate.

The chairman of the Education Board, Henry Tancred, then became involved and advised the School Committee that the management of the new building would be subject to the Board of Education Ordinance. He went further by returning the proposed plans to the Provincial Council along with a number of recommendations for changes. Then ensued a debate about the design of the school building and it was back to the drawing board.

After much to-ing and fro-ing a revised design was finally decided upon with Mr Holmes being given the final design on 6 October. However, due to his commitments to the tunnel work, he was not prepared to make an immediate start, much to the annoyance of local parents and the Education Board.

Then, to make matters worse, it appears there was trouble with the title for the land, which had been designated as part of the new railway reserve. The locals wanted building to commence regardless, leaving the title issues for later resolution. The urgency was probably understandable as it's likely school lessons were by now suspended.

Exactly what transpired is uncertain, but it's highly likely pressure from Heathcote parents

played a big part. On 14 November an advertisement in the Lyttelton times advised:

MR. WILLIAM DEMPSTER having received the appointment to the above school from the Education Board, will resume its duties on **MONDAY**, the 16th instant, at 9 a.m., when parents would oblige by having their children in attendance, so as to facilitate the arrangements for forming the classes.

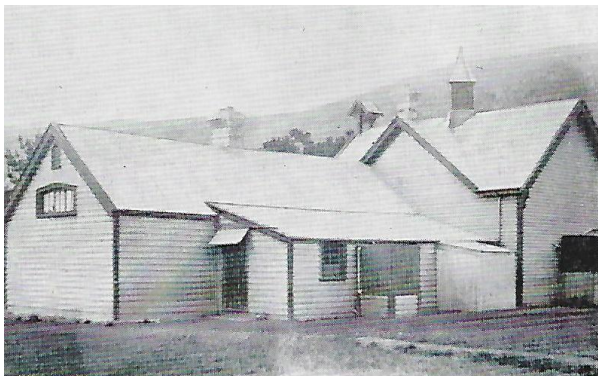
There must have been somewhere for the classes to commence as work on the new schoolroom had not yet been started. Perhaps an extension of time was agreed at CWM House, or an alternative room was located elsewhere for school lessons. Mr Holmes was urged to get on with the building work, and at last the schoolroom was completed sometime in 1864.

The school room was effectively just a large wooden shed 30ft (9m) by 18ft (5.5m), with one door, some windows and a fireplace. No insulation, electricity or plumbing, let alone an Internet connection! George Holmes, whose company built the new schoolroom was elected as the chairman of the School Committee. He only served for one year and was replaced by Mr William Dunlop.

Heathcote Valley School gained mention in the March 1867 Annual Report of the Board of Education, and what they had to say was not particularly favourable:

“In one case alone, that of the Heathcote Valley School, the Board found itself compelled to exercise its power of withdrawing a part of the annual grant. The repeated warnings given by the Board having failed to produce any effect, no alternative remained. The inefficiency of this school was partly owing to a want of proper supervision on the part of the Local Committee,

and partly to the remissness and unskilful management of the master. The Local Committee has since been completely reorganised, and a new master appointed, the result being that the work of the school is now performed in a much more satisfactory manner.”



An early photograph of the new schoolhouse - late 1800s

In April 1868 the school advertised for a new teacher:

WANTED a TEACHER for the Heathcote Valley School. A married man, whose wife could assist in the school, preferred.

Applications and testimonials to be sent in on or before the 15th May next. **WILLIAM DUNLOP**, Chairman of Local Committee, 6317 Heathcote Valley

Can you imagine an advertisement today seeking a married man with a wife expected to assist, presumably for no extra pay? Times have certainly changed! The new teacher appointed was Mr Ellenton Mitchell. He became popular for running singing lessons for the locals at the school.

Here's another interesting fact, in December 1868 the school advertised places for 'a limited number of boarders' for the next school year. Who knew that Heathcote Valley School once had boarders? It appears this was only for a few

years as the last advertisement for boarders was in 1870.

It was not long before the school needed to expand and more land was thought to be needed. In 1871 the School Committee proposed moving the school site to 'a more central location'. There wasn't a strong consensus for the suggestion, which appears to have been abandoned. The school committee began raising funds for an additional schoolroom and construction of a master's house as one had not been approved in the first funding allocation when the first schoolroom was built. As before, the committee needed to raise a portion of the money and the Provincial Council would provide the rest.

In February of 1871 tenders were called for the construction of the master's house. Prices ranged from £190 to £267, with the lowest tender being accepted. Construction did not commence however, as a spat erupted in relation to the money that the school committee had raised. There had been a change of chairman and the previous chairman (Mr Dunlop) refused to release £44 that he was holding. His reasoning was that the money was donated under the assumption that the school would be moving to a new site. With that plan abandoned, some of the donors would likely choose to send their children to Opawa instead, and should therefore expect the return of their money. He was worried the donors might sue him for its recovery. The matter went to court and the magistrate agreed with Mr Dunlop. The new chairman (Mr Smith) asked the Board of Education if a portion of the school committee payment could be deferred until after the building was completed, but the request was declined. He then suggested that only the schoolhouse be built, and not the master's

house and even offered to loan the school committee money so the project could proceed. In the end the school committee did take out a loan, possibly from Mr Smith, and in August 1871 tenders were called for the construction of a new schoolhouse and master's house, though the Education Board was unhappy with the cost and construction was once again delayed. Approval was finally given in March 1872 and the buildings appear to have been completed by 1873.

On 11 September 1873, The Press published a letter to the editor regarding the Heathcote Valley School, which read in part:

...on looking round the piece of ground the house stands on I often see cattle, pigs, goats, and fowls in abundance. Speaking to some friends of mine, I find that none of the above named things belong to the schoolmaster, but the committee allow him to be annoyed by other people's cattle, &c. ; not even a flower can grow in the verandah, even the perambulator has to be taken inside for fear of the mountain deer. I made some enquiries respecting some stumps of trees which are to be seen, round the school ground, and was informed that they were all that remained of the previous committee's work. The present committee are all Peabodys...

('Peabody' was a term used to describe vain or self-important people in those days.)

On 27 September there was a response:

TO THE EDITOR OF THE PRESS. Sir,—
Having seen a letter in the " Press " respecting the state of our school grounds, signed " Visitor," —and— being a resident,- I paid a visit to the ground to see what mischief the mountain deer had done, and to my surprise not one tree is growing out of the

three hundred planted. Now, if the Government are to go on finding trees for no other purpose than to have them destroyed in such a manner, the sooner they cry " a go" the better, for it must be understood that the country is at a great expense in raising such things. ~ I was glad to see that the Board of Education has given instructions to have the ground properly fenced, which may prevent a recurrence of the same. But what about the present chairman of committee trying to fence off a piece of the ground for one of his workmen. It looks just like "I pall you, and you pall me." But thanks to the Board of Education for the notice which they have given to the present committee. By what they have done they have "conferred upon the district the greatest possible benefit.
Yours, &c., A RESIDENT.

The Education Board funded a fence, but all was still not well. There was another letter to the Press:

Perhaps some of your numerous readers would like to know how we manage matters at home, as after reading such a comprehensive and enlightened report I have no doubt they will think us a model worth imitating. We never trouble ourselves about such trifling matters as looking after the schoolmaster, school, or school grounds. That we consider no part of our business. A paternal Government, through a little influence we possess, fenced in two sides of our school grounds in a very substantial manner, without asking us for a shilling towards the cost; but we leave the other side open, as the grounds grow good grass, and it is very convenient when our cattle get on the public road, as they are sure to go into the grounds, and often save us from getting into

the hands of the police. We also keep a tenant on the grounds, which brings us in 2s a week ; thus enabling us to draw 10s a week, from the Board, without I needing to tax ourselves in any way. We are thinking of dismissing our teacher, not on account of his want of teaching power—that I we know nothing about—but he actually had the impertinence to complain to the Board that our tenant (whom we value highly, and are very proud of) made him uncomfortable. If our out-offices blow over, with roof off and bottom upwards, as ours did a few weeks ago, close to the master's house, why we let it lie as beneath our notice. What is the master's comfort or convenience to us?...

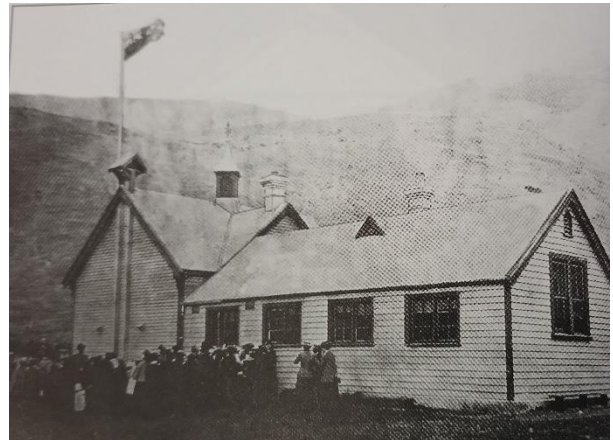
...The Board are of opinion that we should remove our tenant, but we think differently ; so we have elected the same committee and they have pledged themselves to fight it out to the bitter end, and they have not a doubt but that we will be successful; and to show our utter contempt for the Education Ordinance we have this year elected one of our committee as auditors.

It sounds a little tongue-in-cheek, but there's a serious note to it. There are various other instances of tensions between the School Committee and the Education Board over the years, and the relationship seems to have been an ongoing power struggle.

In the late 1800s the newspapers record a number of 'treat' days at the end of each year for students, with games, food treats and a prizegiving. It was a celebrated event in the valley.

In 1880 a large classroom was added to the eastern end of the school and in 1900 a new library was opened with 78 books being gifted

to the school. These buildings were still standing when the school celebrated its centenary in 1960.



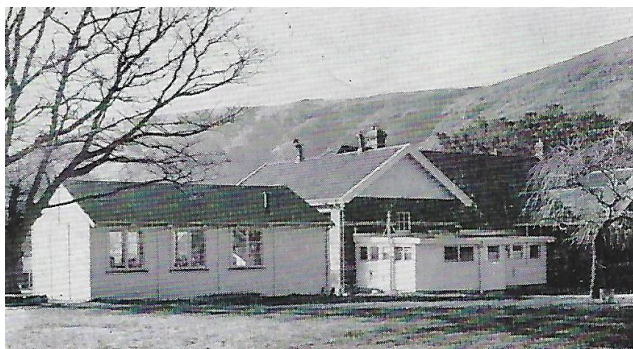
Patriotic flag raising for the Boer War, 19 June 1901

In 1911, the old 1873 classroom was demolished and a brick replacement built with a further addition in 1921. These buildings, along with prefabs added later would serve the school for more than 50 years. Also in 1911, an oak tree was planted in the school grounds to mark the coronation of King George V. It still stands today providing welcome shade for students.

Of interest is that Station Road used to extend further south than it currently does, before making a right angle turn to the east to join Bridle Path Road. To begin with this road, to the south of the station, was known as Short Street and was originally just a track from the railway station that served as a shortcut to the bridle path. Over time a few houses were built along

You may be interested to learn that the portion of Station Road running east to west (that was previously known as Short Street) still exists as a paper road through the middle of the school grounds, under which runs a water main.

Short Street and in 1950 it was incorporated into Station Road.



Heathcote Valley School at the time of its centennial in 1960

Around 1971 seven properties at the southern end of Station Road were acquired under the Public Works Act so the school grounds could be extended northwards, and the houses were removed. In 1974 the Canterbury Education Board called for tenders for 'the erection of a 2800 sq. ft classroom block, 900 sq. ft library and 240 sq. ft of additions to the existing administration block'. This marked the beginning of a major redevelopment of the school site. The new classroom block was of an open plan design, incorporating three classes separated by screens.

I have tried to focus on the early years, so I will finish my account at this point. There's obviously a lot more to tell than will fit in the space the editor has allowed me! Paul Corliss's book *In the Shadow of the Rock* contains a much more detailed history of the school. It's well worth a read if you are interested in learning more and is available from the public library.

Sources for this article include:

- *Papers Past*, National Library of New Zealand
- *Archives New Zealand*
- *Digital NZ* <https://digital.org>
- *Heathcote Valley School Centenary 1860 -1960*, booklet by centennial committee
- *In the Shadow of the Rock*, book by Paul Corliss
- *The Port Hills of Christchurch*, book by Gordon Ogilvie