

The History of Mount Hunter Public School

Updated by Mark Latham 2009

Mount Hunter is one of the oldest districts in Australia. At the time of white settlement in 1788, it was inhabited by the Tharawal and Gundungurra peoples. The first visit by officials from the new Sydney colony was in 1796 when Governor John Hunter “ascended a hill which, from every point of view, appeared the highest in the neighbourhood.” He called it Mount Hunter, a peak situated one kilometre east of the modern Calf Farm Road.

In 1848 Governor Fitzroy appointed a Board of National Education to establish schools in rural districts, using a combination of government and private funding. Previously schooling in the colony had been under the control of the three churches (Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic), supported by limited amounts of state aid. Fitzroy’s policy produced a steady increase in the number of NSW schools, with 259 operating by 1866. Mount Hunter was one of these new schools.

Getting Started

The driving force for establishing the school was the Macarthur family, pioneers of the Australian wool industry and doyens of Camden society. An application was lodged in 1857 and construction work on the school building commenced the following year. It is not clear from the records if a separate teacher’s residence was built at this time. The first reference to the construction of a residence was in 1884. Most likely, the school started with a single building, a traditional schoolhouse, accommodating both the teacher’s family and a classroom. Other buildings came later.

In November 1858, James Macarthur (the fourth son of John Macarthur) wrote to the Education Board, informing it that the building would be completed by the beginning of the following year. He estimated the likely number of students as between 40 and 60, with perhaps as many as 80 attending. He also referred to the school as being at Mount Hunter Bridge.

In these early days of public education in NSW, the local residents of a district were expected to provide one-third of the cost of school buildings by subscription, with the Board providing the remaining two-thirds. Macarthur gave a personal contribution of 20 pounds. For this era, it was a significant donation, pointing to the early financial success of the Macarthurs and the general prosperity of the Mount Hunter district. The settlement was large enough to warrant a school, ranking third behind Camden and Cawdor in population. The school became Mount Hunter’s first public facility – the Westbrook (Mount Hunter) Anglican Church followed in 1875.

On 12 February 1859, Macarthur again wrote to the Board, noting that the building was ready and requesting that the school’s first teacher depart from Sydney on Monday 21 February. This was Cornelius Traveller, a 27-year-old who had received one month’s training at the Fort Street Model School. He arrived in Camden with his wife and three children on 22 February. Heavy rain hit the district, however, delaying the opening of the school until the following day. This was an occasion of great significance and celebration for the young farming community.

The Name ‘Westbrook’

In a letter written at the time of the school opening, Macarthur suggested that it be known as Westbrook. He maintained that:

The school on the bank of the Mount Hunter Creek (is) commonly spoken of as Mount Hunter School for brevity but (this) is a very inappropriate designation. Westbrook would be that applicable to the situation. If the Board sees no objection to naming it Westbrook School, Camden, we will cause it to be so inserted in the chart of the Estate and will name the fine ‘flat’ on the Mount Hunter Creek, in which the school house occupies a central position, ‘Westbrook Meadows’ instead of ‘Brooks’ Flat’ – the name it has borne amongst the old residents in this part of the country since the year 1813, when the late Captain Brooks had a station there.

During this period, public schools were managed by committees of local patrons of education. Initially at Westbrook the patrons were James Macarthur, Stephen Gardener, Nicholas Carney and Samuel Wheeler. Soon after the school opened, Macarthur recommended the appointment of additional committee members, namely Sir William Macarthur (the fifth son of John Macarthur), James Chisholm and Kenneth McLennan. Within the Macarthur business, James was the financier, the organiser of their plans and profits, while William was the stock manager and agriculturalist. Their close involvement with the new school gave it a sound start and secure financial base.

In March 1859, James Macarthur sent the Board a cheque for almost two pounds, which brought the total contribution from the people of Mount Hunter to more than 66 pounds, fulfilling their obligation to contribute one-third of the 200 pound cost of the school. Reporting on a recent visit to the site, Macarthur said there were 34 pupils in attendance, out of a total enrolment of 41 (coincidentally, the same school enrolment as this sesquicentenary year of 2009). He described the students as “nice looking children but generally speaking, quite untaught.” He also suggested that Mr and Mrs Traveller, both of whom were teaching in class, should visit the school in Camden “to familiarize themselves with the proper system of teaching which is practised in the National Schools.”

Mr Traveller resigned from his position on 19 October 1860 but did not leave the school until 16 March 1861, when he and his family travelled to Madras, India (where his father had been a missionary in the early 1850s). They subsequently moved to Bangalore, where Cornelius was employed as the editor of the Bangalore Herald – the first English newspaper to be printed in India. The Travellers returned to Australia in the mid-1860s, whereupon Cornelius taught at several schools across NSW. He passed away in 1879 at Oakhampton, near Maitland.

In late October 1860, one of the Westbrook patrons, Mr Chisholm, asked for another teacher to be appointed. The records do not provide a date for when the next teacher, Simeon Brown, arrived in Mount Hunter, but during 1861 and early 1862, repairs and additions to the school costing 60 pounds were made. It is, therefore, likely the school was re-opened soon after the Travellers left.

Teething Problems

The school, however, had other problems. In July 1862, the Education Board asked for an explanation

about its poor attendance record. A letter from the local patrons explained that this was not Mr Brown's fault, "but owing to the settlers being busy mowing their wheat to make hay in consequence of the rust (and needing their children home to help)." They also pointed out that due "to the drought last year, the parents have not been able to pay their school fees." Under government policy, these fees were intended to augment the salary paid to teachers by the Board.

At the end of 1863, Mr Brown and three other teachers in the Camden area wrote to the Board asking for a special financial supplement in lieu of the school fees. The inspector for the central district (which included Westbrook), Mr Gardiner, refused the request as he thought it would make the settlers lazy and encourage them to avoid their fees during times of prosperity. School attendance was an ongoing issue. In November 1866, many pupils were again kept home to help with the harvest.

The head of the school committee was now Captain Arthur Onslow, the husband of Elizabeth Macarthur (the only child of James Macarthur) and later the Member for Camden in the NSW Parliament (1869-80). In June 1868, Onslow wrote to the government asking for improvements to the school. A tank was needed to supply water, plus the slabs on which the schoolhouse was constructed had shrunk so badly "the place was full of draughts."

Later that year, Mr Brown asked to leave the school, as he felt that a change would be beneficial to him and his family. He and his wife had six young children but their accommodation consisted only of four rooms and a kitchen. The Browns, however, did not leave until September 1871. The next teacher, William Rollo, commenced his duties at Westbrook on 10 October. A month later he listed the things he felt could be improved at the school. There was still no water supply for the classroom. There was no glass in some of windows. And much to Rollo's discomfort, "the best room in the house is so full of vermin that we often have to get up in the night and clear the snails and frogs from the bed." Those school principals, they are always complaining!

An Enrolment Campaign

Despite these difficulties, Rollo was enthusiastic about his new position and during the end-of-year vacation he visited each of the families in the district, urging them to send their children to school. Notwithstanding these efforts, the attendance was still below 30 at the beginning of 1872. By the end of the school year, however, he was able to report an average monthly attendance of 31 and a quarterly enrolment of more than 40. Captain Onslow wrote to the government in February 1873, saying that the school's numbers had increased considerably since Mr Rollo's appointment, mainly due to his enrolment campaign.

Unfortunately, however, the school soon lost Rollo, as he was transferred to Molong in the State's central-west. Westbrook was without a teacher for six weeks until the arrival of John Boate, who was known as a diligent and capable teacher. He stayed at the school until March 1875. Initially as a temporary measure, William Millar and his wife Matilda were appointed as the replacement teachers.

Mr Millar was 60 years old and slightly deaf. He had been educated at the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and had previously taught at Yass Presbyterian Denominational School. He looked after the primary-aged students while Mrs Millar taught the infants class and also gave instruction in writing,

singing and sewing. For these services, she requested ‘a small salary’ (there is, however, no record of it being paid).

In December 1878, Mr Millar, not for the first time, absented himself from the teachers’ examination, after which he was forced to resign. Mr Walker from Mulgoa Forest Public School was appointed as the school’s teacher in January 1879. This coincided with a proposal to close the schools at Cawdor and Westbrook in favour of a new central school equidistant between the two. Resident protests in both localities, however, forced the abandonment of this idea.

A New School is Built

By early 1880, consideration was being given to the construction of a new school at Westbrook. The district inspector’s assessment of the school facilities condemned them as “very old and past repair – most of the plates, floor joists and most of the slabs are perfectly rotten.” He recommended “the erection of new brick premises for the (school) attendance will warrant it.”

In September 1883, the Minister for Public Instruction referred the problems at Westbrook to a conference of inspectors of schools. As a result, in 1884, a contractor named Wheatley built a new classroom and a residence at a cost of 1060 pounds. This appears to have been the point from which the school had separate buildings. It was a time of great change, as also in that year, Richard Todd replaced Mr Walker. Todd became the school’s longest serving principal, teaching through to 1898. During his tenure, on 8 March 1888, the school’s name was officially changed to Mount Hunter.

Mr Todd had started his teaching career in 1859 at a Wesleyan school in Parramatta. He was a devoutly religious man who, out of school hours, preached his faith in the local area. This practice, however, was prohibited by the NSW Government. In 1889 Todd was involved in a lengthy exchange of correspondence with the Minister for Public Instruction over the issue. It is not known whether he continued to preach.

In July 1891 the school celebrated Arbor Day. The local community raised eight pounds (Mrs Onslow heading the subscription list with one pound) which was then matched by a government grant. Substantial improvements were made to the school grounds through the planting of trees and shrubs by the students and their parents. Mr Todd was a very keen gardener and handyman.

Unfortunately, the classroom results were not as good. In 1893 Todd was asked to explain the unsatisfactory scores obtained from the district inspector’s test of the third class students in arithmetic. Their skills were described as “indifferent”. Todd explained that there had been a series of epidemics in the area, plus the students in this class frequently came late to school and left early to assist with the milking at home.

The Turn of the Century

Mr Todd was succeeded by Mr Knight, who immediately faced a water shortage due to drought conditions. The school had to buy-in water at considerable expense. In 1900 the residence had to be vacated for renovations, which included the addition of new verandas, a sitting room, bedroom, kitchen,

wash-house and bathroom. The school building was also upgraded, with the classroom lengthened by 12 feet.

At this time, the main economic activity in Mount Hunter was dairying. From 1880 to 1907, there was a cooperative creamery operating on land just west of the school, near the Mount Hunter Rivulet. The first creamery building burnt down in 1902 and was replaced by the two-storey timber building which still stands today. The wellbeing of the district was reflected in higher school numbers, with an enrolment of around 70 at the turn of the century.

In June 1904, Mr McNiven was placed in charge but unfortunately, after only a few days in Mount Hunter, he suffered an acute attack of bronchitis. He recovered, however, to oversee further improvements at the school. Towards the end of 1905, a new 600 gallon tank was purchased to overcome the chronic water problem. Two years later, the outside of the school buildings were painted. In late 1908, attendances were low due to heavy rains. All but the main roads in the district were unpassable. On one day, there were just seven students in class, out of an enrolment of 51.

When McNiven retired in early 1910, Mr S J Myers from the Parramatta District School took charge temporarily until Thomas Dibden arrived from the NSW north coast in May. Over time, dissatisfaction with the condition of the classroom building had grown. A school inspector described it as a 'beehive school', a long tunnel structure with a dome-shaped roof. It was badly lit and miserably ventilated. Tenders were called for the construction of a new building, plus improvements to the teacher's residence, which included the expansion of a room and the relocation of the bathroom. Work started in April 1912 at a cost of 652 pounds. The new classroom was occupied on 20 September 1912 (today this is the building which houses the school library).

This period was also notable for the appointment of an assistant teacher to Mount Hunter. Winifred Watts was appointed in January 1912 and remained until her resignation at the end of November. She was succeeded by Mary Henderson from Mullumbimby, who arrived at the school in February 1913. During 1914, Mr Dibden took long service leave and Samuel Young filled in as the relieving teacher.

Between the Wars

In April 1916, Horace Martin arrived as the new head teacher. His main project was to create a well-fitted room for woodwork classes, but he had considerable difficulty in persuading parents to supply the school with timber. As a result, timber was sent from the Education Department's Furniture Workshops. In October 1919, work commenced on removing the old school building which had become redundant seven years earlier, although a portion of it was left on site to establish a manual arts room. Further additions were also made to the residence.

World War I had a devastating impact on Mount Hunter, with 40 local men losing their lives. On Saturday 19 July 1919 the district celebrated Peace Day with a picnic on the school grounds. The buildings were decorated in Union Jacks and Australian flags, and the students were presented with souvenirs, such as inkstands, pocket knives and silver thimbles. Tributes were paid to the fallen soldiers and the ceremonies ended at 5pm. Later the gathering reconvened, in the words of The Camden News, "at Mr W.A.E. Biffen's for the lighting of the bonfire on Mount Hunter. About 50 assembled for this

purpose and sang patriotic songs and played games until 11pm.”

Subsequently a war memorial was consecrated in front of the school, “Erected by the residents to the honor and glory of the men of Mount Hunter who fought for God, King and country in the Great War 1914-1919”. The cenotaph later became the centrepiece of the school’s logo. It remains the most distinctive landmark in the district today.

The adversity of war and then the challenges of the Great Depression helped to pull the local community closer together. In the 1910s, 20s and 30s, Mount Hunter was well-known for its Boxing Day sports carnival, which included such unlikely events as the Gents’ Nail Driving Competition and a tug-of-war between Wollondilly Shire and Camden Municipality.

In 1925 Robert Childe Hughes succeeded Mr Martin as the headmaster. It was at this time that the first reference to a Parents and Citizens Association at Mount Hunter was recorded in the Department of Education’s correspondence. Following representations by Mr E A Hoy, Secretary of the Association in 1926, and Mr F W Dawson, the Secretary in 1927, improvements to the school and residence, including a considerable amount of exterior painting, were carried out by the Department’s repair staff at a cost of 250 pounds.

At the beginning of 1928, the P and C offered to provide the labour for urgently needed fencing work on the school’s northern boundary. To meet the cost of materials, the Department granted just over 10 pounds. The local Inspector commented that the Association took great pride in their school, particularly its extensive gardens. In the years following World War I, the school grounds resembled a lush vegetable farm.

William McMiles became the headmaster in February 1929, while also serving as the district’s allowance postmaster. In 1935 extensive improvements were carried out in the school residence costing 116 pounds. McMiles retired from Mount Hunter in 1940 and was replaced by Richard Dodd. During the war years, the school had a number of headmasters, including George Rohan, Arthur Challinor, Thomas Curran and then Andrew Dezius, who arrived in June 1946 and stayed until the end of 1953. During this period, the school numbered around 30 students.

The Post-War Period

Mount Hunter remained a single-teacher school through the 1950s and 1960s. In 1958 the number of students fell to just eight, requiring a recruitment campaign to keep the school open. In the 1970s, however, the school experienced a period of sustained growth, warranting the appointment of a second teacher. Members of the P and C were active in lobbying for new buildings to meet the needs of the larger student population. A weather shed was provided by the Department in 1978 for the benefit of the children. In 1979 increased enrolments (to more than 80 students) necessitated the provision of a demountable classroom. Improvements were carried out elsewhere in the school, including the construction of a paved assembly area adjacent to the old classroom, plus the installation of carpet and vinyl flooring.

Mount Hunter became a three-teacher school in the 1980s, expanding under the guidance of Kevin Ford,

who was principal between 1980 and 1992. In 1981, for the first time, a clerical assistant was appointed. In September that year, Mr Ford wrote to the Department pointing out that, “Space in the (the old classroom) building is very limited and the only available area for an office (clerical assistant) is a section of the enclosed veranda, but this seriously erodes the space available for pupils’ private research and study, while access to the classroom is now disrupted.” The building was remodelled to overcome this problem, by “cutting a doorway through the rear wall of the classroom into an existing passageway.”

At best, this was only a temporary measure. The school had a critical shortage of space which could only be resolved through the construction of new permanent buildings. More than a century after it was first recommended, funds were allocated for brick buildings at Mount Hunter. In 1983 a classroom block which could accommodate two classes and a wet area, plus a new septic toilet block (with a bubbler system) were opened. At last, the school had modern facilities to match the modern demands of schooling. And best of all, from a practical point of view, it was able to cancel the toilet pan service from Wollondilly Council. The school had much to be pleased about when it celebrated its 125th anniversary on 20 October 1984 with its former teachers, staff and pupils and local dignitaries, including John Fahey, the newly-elected Member for Camden.

The Recent Past

Over the next 25 years, through to the present, Mount Hunter has experienced further change. As ever, the school has been a microcosm of the community it serves. The 1980s marked the start of a trend whereby the people moving into the district worked outside it, mainly as professional and trades people. They came to Mount Hunter not for an active role in agriculture but to enjoy the excellent lifestyle opportunities, especially for their children. Most of the old dairy farms closed down with the rationalisation of the industry. Wollondilly Council conferred on large tracts of land an ‘agricultural landscape’ zoning, reflecting its two uses: some ongoing agriculture and the new lifestyle component.

There were once 26 dairy farms in Mount Hunter, owned and operated by the great family names of the district, such as Biffen, Mulley, Dawson, Downes, Rofe, Moore, Windred, Butchers and Hanger. These names are well-known to our school, having contributed to its enrolments and well-being over the years. Many of the farms may be gone, but the legacy of these families to local public education lives on.

Throughout this period of change, the school has kept its character and community focus. Two of its great identities, remembered fondly by scores of Mount Hunter students, were Betty and Flossie the Goats. Betty was introduced in 1983 to keep the grass down, given that the school did not have a groundsman. Usually Mr Ford would jump on a tractor during his lunch break to do the mowing. Betty and then her daughter Flossie (who passed away in 2008) relieved the school principals of this task. The school now has a part-time General Assistant.

In early 1981, Mr Ford moved out of the residence to live in Camden South – he was the last of the principals to live on-site at Mount Hunter. The building was then home to the school’s assistant teacher, Colin Lines, followed by the principal of Oakdale Public School, David Burns, and subsequently, it was occupied by a series of private tenants. In 1993 the paling fence which had separated the residence from the rest of the school came down and the old house was renovated to become the school’s administration

block and canteen. Until then the office had been part of the old (1912) wooden building in very cramped conditions. The new principal Phil Vanderwyk (who replaced Mr Ford at the beginning of 1993) was delighted by the changes.

In the classroom, several improvements have been made to the learning technology and environment for students. Apple computers were installed in 1989. The unreliable electricity supply, which on two occasions in 2003 forced the school to close for a day, was finally addressed with the installation of a power generator in 2006. Air conditioning was introduced to the main classroom building in January 2007.

There have been other changes around the school grounds. For many years the Mount Hunter fire brigade (established in 1952) stored its truck in the tin shed facing onto Spring Creek Road. In the early 1990s, however, it purchased a new truck which would not fit into the shed, necessitating the construction of a proper fire station, opposite the school in Burraborang Road. In 2005 the school's car park was upgraded from a sandstone surface to bitumen, also allowing the dual purpose installation of a basketball court.

The members of the school P and C have been particularly active, with strong attendances at their meetings and the successful hosting of Country Fairs in 2006 and 2008. Late last year, the P and C, aided by a \$1200 donation from the Telstra Kids Fund, financed the construction of a new playground shelter with a galvanised steel roof, allowing school assemblies to be conducted under cover.

A Family and Community School

Our school continues to provide a quality education for its students. In recent years Mount Hunter has achieved the best results in the Macarthur region for improved outcomes between years 3 and 5 in the national skills tests. In 2006 the Wollondilly Advertiser asked, "Is there something in the water at Mount Hunter making the kids extra clever?" Seven pupils had just won the South-West Sydney Tournament of the Minds competition for maths and engineering. This is typical of the academic results being achieved, building on the school's values of educational excellence and support.

In a dynamic and challenging world, size is not always an asset. Mount Hunter has always been a relatively small school (over the years, fluctuating between eight and 88 students). This has fostered a more personalised and caring approach to education, with committed families, teachers and staff. When James Macarthur established the school he was acting in the great Macarthur tradition of enterprise, self-improvement and community effort. Today, after 150 years of achievement, producing fine scholars and citizens who have contributed much to our society, these values live on at Mount Hunter Public School. This has always been a family and community school, proud of its past and confident about the education of the next generation.

The Principals of Mount Hunter Public School

Cornelius Lascalles Traveller	February 1859
Simeon Brown	1861
William Rollo	October 1871

John Boate	June 1873
William Millar	April 1875
J Walker	January 1879
Richard Todd	1884
F Knight	October 1898
A McNiven	June 1904
SJ Myers (relieving)	1910
Thomas E Dibden	May 1910
Samuel C Young (relieving)	July 1914
Horace Martin	April 1916
Robert Childe Hughes	August 1925
William F McMiles	February 1929
Donald Brooker (relieving)	October-December 1933
Richard Dodd	December 1940
George D Rohan	January 1942
Arthur Challinor	June 1944
Thomas Curran	May-June 1946
Andrew Dezius	June 1946
Isaac Wales	February 1954
Frederick Lett	March 1957
Leonard Hartigan	February 1965
Raymond Mullins	February 1966
J W Whalan	January 1969
P Smith	May 1978
Kevin Ford	February 1980
Phillip Vanderwyk	January 1993
Anne Bunga	April 1998
Clayton Reddie (relieving)	July 2005
John Thorne	January 2006

Note: This history has been prepared using material from three sources:

- 1. The official school history compiled from records in the Mitchell Library and Government Archives by the Division of Research and Planning, NSW Department of Education for the school's centenary in 1959.***
- 2. The updated history presented in the 125th anniversary booklet, prepared by one of the school's parents, Mr Matheson.***
- 3. New research and rewriting of the text for the school's sesquicentenary, undertaken by one of the 2009 parents, Mark Latham.***