

**HISTORY OF
BELLBRAE
PRIMARY SCHOOL**



Foreword

As part of the 125th celebrations it was decided to write a history of the Bellbrae Primary School. We have deliberately taken the decision to try and reflect the personalities of the period. As far as possible we have tried to allow the newspapers and the letters of the day tell the story. In retrospect neither of us realised the amount of effort required. Hence the time allowed for writing the history has been far too short. We would have liked to have had more time to research some of the more interesting aspects of the history such as the reason for the change of name from Jan Juc to Bellbrae but such was not to be the case. This account should therefore not be considered as complete but rather a base which can be amended and added to over time. We would like to thank all those who so generously assisted in providing material for the history. We hope that the history, such as it is, will assist in making the 125th celebrations a success. We hope that what we have found will be of interest and that one day someone will find the time to write the history of Bellbrae itself.

Joan Duval

Hugh Moore

The history of any school is inexorably linked with the community it is a part of. The development of the community has a direct influence on the school. This linkage is particularly close for a small rural primary school as the school often becomes a focal point for the community. The development of rural areas can often be reflected in the history of their primary schools. So it is with Bellbrae.

Early Settlement

In August 1835 John Helder Wedge, former Assistant Surveyor-General in Van Dieman's land led a party of Batman's Port Phillip Association from Indented Head through the district. He recommended the area for its grazing and timber potential. An ironbark forest existed from about what is today Freshwater Creek through Bellbrae to the coast. The Bellbrae area was originally called Jan Juc and was changed to Bellbrae in 1922. The name Jan Juc means, in the language of the tribe of local aborigines in the area at the time, a forest of iron bark. It is believed that the natives of the area traded the iron bark shafts from the Jan Juc forest with other tribes throughout Victoria, receiving in return items in which the area was deficient. In 1839 the Gundry family arrived and took up land along both sides of Spring Creek, from the present Torquay township to Forest Road and Paraparap in the hills. During the 1840's the Gundry and Tait families held pasture licences around Jan Juc with other licence holders, towards Breamlea, Mt. Duneed, Moriac and Paraparap. The Crown began selling land in 1857 and the first blocks were purchased by Joseph Gundry and W.M. Bell. In 1857 Joseph Gundry, Manager of the Iron Bark Station, commenced a school in a small wooden room attached to his home, as there was no school nearer than Geelong. This school was for the Gundry children, and other people paid to have their children taught with them. The township continued to grow, with more farms and homes, and two churches.

At the time Victoria had denominational schools which were established by various religious denominations and national schools which were designed to be of benefit to all denominations on equal terms.



James Hill

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A Reunion of Jan Juc Scholars. The old school is shown in the background.

In early 1861 when Mr. Gundry build a new brick house, the people of the area decided to employ the same builder, Mr. James Hill, to erect a brick school along Spring Creek. Jan Juc School was therefore opened on the 26th August 1861 as a national school with 35 children. The first national school established in Australia was in 1849 and by 1861 at the time of the establishment of the national school at Jan Juc there were 181 national schools in existence in Victoria. The Geelong Advertiser described the opening, in what would probably be regarded today as sexist terms, as follows:

Spring Creek Jan Juc National School

This improving district was enlivened on Thursday, the 26th Instant, the occasion being the opening of the first national school in this district, which was inaugurated by a social tea festival, and when it is considered that a year or two ago the principal residents of the district were the kangaroo and the wombat, and on this occasion about one hundred and fifty farmers and residents met to quaff the social 'That cheers but not inebriates', it speaks well for the progressive nature of the district.

The spot chosen for the demonstration was a beautiful spot on the banks of Spring Creek. The company were accommodated under a spacious marquee provided by the school committee for the occasion, and tastefully adorned with festoon of native shrubs and flowers. At one of the marquee was a raised platform and thereon a rustic chair for the accommodation of the worthy Mayor, W. Bell Esq., who presided. The chair was ornamented with evergreens and flowers. At the extreme end of the marquee were represented certain diagrams from the pencil and brush of Mr. Hall, illustrating (shall we report it?) the ancient method of punishing scolds, a delicate hint we presume to married folks and aspiring longing ones if they would prosper at least in that district they must pull together if they pull at all.

The following is the order of the proceedings: after full justice was done to the very excellent repast provided by the ladies of the district, the music being presided over by Messrs Bartlett, Grove and Beevil.

His Worship briefly expressed his delight in seeing so many present on this interesting occasion, and especially so many of the fair sex; and he was frank to admit that if they put their shoulders to the wheel, very little was wanting. He was happy in stating all the funds necessary were subscribed, a school master appointed, and everything augered well for the prosperity of the school if the families increased in the same ratio in that part as they had done in the last two years.

The following programme was then gone through — Music 'Beauty Upon the Mountains'; a lecture by Mr. Hall upon England as she was, and he related some anecdotes illustrative of his own diagraph, much to the amusement of the audience; music, 'Promised Land'; address, Mr. Hill; music, 'Fall of Babylon'; address, Mr. Bartlett; music, 'Alarm'.

Mr. Musgrove then moved a cordial vote of thanks to the ladies for their valuable assistance at the festival. Seconded and responded by Mr. Birch.

Thanks were then voted by acclamation to the trustees, Messrs Gundry and Butters, as also to the mayor for his presence on that occasion; and the proceedings closed by singing 'God Save the Queen'. A very general feeling of satisfaction was expressed at the arrangement, and for a reunion of a similar character.

(The Shire of Barrabool was not in existence in 1861 and W.M. Bell was Mayor of the City of Geelong. W.M. Bell had purchased two blocks of land at the original land sale in 1857 but whether he ever lived in the area is unclear.)

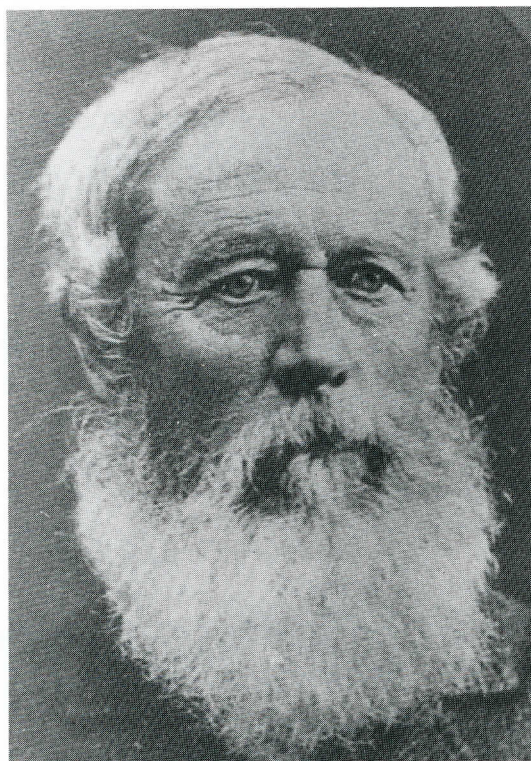


Early School Group pre 1900.

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The site for the school was a block of land situated near Spring Creek. The land was probably not entirely suitable for a school as the land was uneven and sloped down to the creek. The bank of the creek was steep in places and parents were concerned when the creek was in flood that the smaller children would fall in. In addition it would appear that a road commonly used by the public actually cut across the school grounds. William Cook was the first head teacher and taught at the school for 16 years. His job would not have been all that easy teaching children of a variety of age levels, some of whom had not been to school before. In a letter to 'The Age' (undated) D. McKenzie described what life was like at the school.

“ . . . The first person appointed teacher was a Mr. William Cook. His job was not an enviable one. Young men and women who had run gloriously through the bush were brought there. When the teacher tried to teach them there was more than one fight between them. It was an amusing sight to see small boys and girls who could read and write a little teaching others with whiskered faces to read and write. Several of them got married from school. Our family could read and write a little. We were taught by our parents out of their Gaelic Bible. The first books we had were called Sequels; then we had the Irish national school books. We always got religious lessons at school every morning, generally about Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, Joseph going to Egypt for corn, and the Children of Israel. We were taught music and singing . . . ”



William Cook

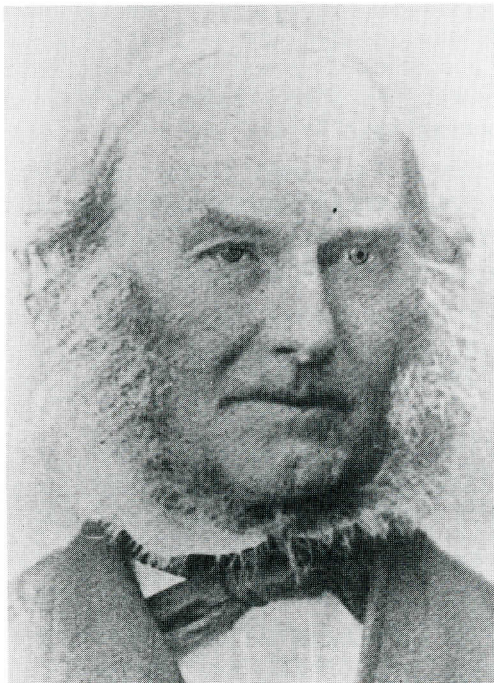
(There were no secondary schools in Victoria until after the 1900's, and so it was not unusual to find whiskered pupils in schools in Victoria at the time.)

In June 1862 the Common Schools Act was passed which was an attempted compromise between the denominational and national systems. Under this Act the name Common School would be used by all which received State Aid. The Jan Juc school became a vested Common School under the Board of Education and received the number 319 in 1863. The number of the school does not entirely indicate sequence of establishment as the number system did alter from time to time.

At some stage a school residence was also built but the date and details of the building of the residence do not appear to be available.

The school entered a period of decline during the 1880's both in attendance and in the physical condition of the school. The monthly average attendance of the school dropped well below the number of children attending at the time of the opening of the school. Attendance fell as low as 4, so in April 1882 the school was closed and the school residence was leased. The closure was only for a short period and in November 1882 it was recommended that the school be reopened. The state of the school and the school residence continued to deteriorate in condition and the Board of Advice was continually writing to the Education Department about the poor state of repair of these buildings.

Unfortunately the pleas basically went unheeded. At one stage the Board of Advice indicated that the Education Department should buy the Independent Church which was situated opposite the school. This plan was not accepted by the Department because of the small size of the land area and because the condition of the church was little better than the school. So the complaints went on. In 1897 probably driven to despair by the condition of the school residence, the Head Teacher, Mr. James penned this plaintive letter:



Joseph Gundry

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Sir,

I have the honor to respectfully ask when repairs will be done to the residence of the above named school so as to render it fit to live in?

I expected to find it fall in the storm of Friday night last week and hope to not put in such a time of anxiety again. The building settled a little lower on the south side during Friday night.

Is it healthy to live in these rooms where the breeze is playing nightly through every chink and crevice and the floor-carpet rising and falling in time to the inrush of air? (and the house creaking with every wind). One tank is empty on account of the spouting: — and in to dry a locality? No springs here of fresh water: a rotten roof — panes of glass falling out of windows rotten with age — and many other faults — all for 15/- a month!

I have done a great deal to improve the property of the Department and amongst which was buying an oven for the kitchen.

The Building Inspector has long ago reported on this matter and I am not mistaken will show by his report that I have reason to complain. It would be hard to find a worse residence in Jan Juc, or one of so dilapidated in appearance. I never trouble the Department except when the case is urgent!

I have the honor to be
Sir,
Your obedient servant
J. James
Head Teacher

(The Head Teacher replacing Mr. James found no stove in the kitchen of the residence when he took occupancy.)

In 1906 the Board of Advice decided to build a shelter shed and asked that the Department met half of the cost. The department agreed and the Board of Advice held a concert to raise funds. The concert raised 7 pounds 9 shillings and expenses were sixteen shillings and 6 pence. A shelter shed was duly constructed but the Department only provided its share after some correspondence by the Board of Advice.

The basic state of the school remained unchanged, however, on the 15th November 1907 George Imer wrote a letter to the Department of Education which stated in part:

“This floor has been down since the school was erected and is now so thin that the Head Teacher and some scholars have broken it whilst walking and it is therefore unsafe”.

Relations between parents and teachers often became strained during the early part of the century. Apparently one teacher defended himself from a poor inspector's report by questioning the calibre of the students and rightfully deserved the dressing down he received when the Director of Education who wrote to him, in part,

“... Your explanation of the ——— addressed to the Inspector cannot be accepted. The responsiveness and intelligence of children does not depend upon the locality in which they reside, but upon the skilful training in self expression that they receive from day to day”.

Did the teacher in question really say that Jan Juc children were not all that academically endowed?

In 1907 an inquiry was held into complaints laid against the Head Teacher. As a result of the enquiry the Secretary of the Department of Education sent the following letter to George Imer:

“With reference to the enquiry held at the above-named school into the complaints laid



George Imer

against the Head Teacher, I have to inform you that the District Inspector has furnished the following report upon the matter, viz:—

‘There is no regulation against a teacher’s wife holding land near his school, nothing can be done in regard to this complaint.

Mr. Bennett certainly does not neglect his school.

The road through the school ground has been open for public use during the last thirty years, according to the evidence of Mr. Hunter one of the members of the Board of Advice; any other road would be almost impossible on account of the steep hill and deep creek.

Mr. Bennett is now remaining at school during dinner recess.

I recommend that any action be held over till I pay my examination visit towards the end of the year’.

It does not appear that any further action is called for at present. I have to thank the Board for its report on the matter and for the assistance rendered at the inquiry. An expression of the Board’s views as to excising the road from the school site is requested.”

Jubilee

The jubilee of the school was celebrated on the 12th and 13th of August 1911. Part of the Geelong Advertiser report of the events is as follows:

“The Jubilee of the Jan Juc State School was celebrated on Saturday, and although a heavy shower, which fell about 1 o’clock, prevented a few who had to travel a distance, from coming, there was nevertheless one of the largest and most representative gatherings ever seen in the township. Everything was at its best. The flower gardens, agricultural and vegetable plots showed the result of the careful industry of the children, under the direction of the head teacher (Mr. V.H. Richards). These, the cosy shelter shed, and the well-kept dividing guard and boundary fences, each received their share of approbation from the visitors. Every one looked forward to a couple of hours of sports, but owing to the rain these had to be abandoned for the day, and an adjournment was made to the Mechanics’ Institute close by, where afternoon tea, prepared by the ladies of the district, was partaken by all. To fill their cup of happiness

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to the brim the children, after having partaken as much of the 'good things' as they could comfortably hold, received bags of lollies and fruit. This important item having been successfully negotiated, and the weather having cleared up, an adjournment was made to the school ground, where separate photographic groups of the past scholars, and present scholars with district inspector (Mr. Rowe), and the head teacher (Mr. Richards), and of the only surviving founder, Mr. T.C. Caldwell, with the committee and speakers, were taken.

A public meeting in the school followed. The chair was taken by Cr. G. Imer, Chairman of the School Committee, who welcomed all who had gathered to help in the celebrations of the jubilee of the school . . .

. . . At the first meeting of the committee in connection with the celebrations a member of the Committee, Mr. W. Cunningham, had suggested commemorating the jubilee by presenting a photographic group of the founders, and the first head teacher, to the school, the cost to be defrayed by the residents, and he had much pleasure, on behalf of the subscribers, in formally presenting this, hoping it would always be given a place of honor in the school . . .

. . . The committee desire to specially thank Mesdames W. Cunningham, G. Imer, C. Bubb, G. Hooper, F. Seiffert and T. Austin, and Misses D. Bright, M. Grossman, A. Davies and J. Bright, who so successfully carried out all the arrangements in connection with the refreshments, also Mr. and Mrs. E. Berryman, Messrs McGinnis and G. and W. Hellings for their thoughtful action in sending prizes for the children.

Fair weather favoured the second day of the celebrations, and a large number of the residents again turned out to witness the programme of sports which had been arranged.

Girls' and boys' races, skipping contests, men's race and goal-kicking competition were carried out. Refreshments were then partaken of, and an adjournment was afterwards made to the school building, where some school songs were rendered by the scholars, and the proceedings were closed by all singing 'Auld Lang Syne'.

(The Mechanics' Institute was situated near the present tennis courts in Bellbrae and was removed when a new bridge was constructed later in the century. The photographic group of the founders and the first head teacher of the school is held by the Geelong Historical Records Centre.)



Possible Experimental Plot, 1914.