

# EARLY SCHOOL DAYS

## 1870s to 1920s



### TRAVELLING TO SCHOOL

Most children walked to school, usually along unsealed roads that were dusty in dry weather and muddy in wet. Some children travelled by horse and cart and others rode a pony that would have grazed in the schoolyard or neighbouring paddock during the school day. Children who lived close enough travelled home for lunch.

Attendance at school wasn't always regular as children often had to help on the family farm. Between 1868 and 1879 the average daily attendance of enrolled students was 66%.

### WHAT DID CHILDREN TAKE TO SCHOOL?

Children carried a bag, usually made from canvas or hessian, often a cut-down sack, containing their books, slates, drinking pannikin (cup) and lunch. Some children had a leather satchel. Their lunch was usually homemade bread or damper with dripping (animal fat from roasted meat), jam or treacle (known often as "Cocky's Joy"). They may also have taken other items such as boiled eggs, cheese, meat and fruit if available. Lunch was wrapped in a piece of fabric and in later years, newspaper. Often the tank water at the school was undrinkable, in which case the children would also have to bring a bottle of water to school.

### HOW DID THE SCHOOL DAY BEGIN?

At the sound of the bell, triangle or whistle, the children lined up outside their classroom or an outdoor assembly area, in two separate lines: girls and boys. The children would say an oath and salute the flag. Some schools started the day with the national anthem, *God Save the King/Queen*. Before entering the classroom, the teacher would inspect the palms of the children's hands for cleanliness. The children would then march silently into the classroom, girls first, and remain standing until the teacher gave them permission to sit.

### WHAT DID CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE?

There was great variety in early school buildings - from large elaborate Gothic-style stone buildings to tiny slab huts. In the many one-teacher schools, the teacher's residence, providing the bare minimum of accommodation, was a small dwelling attached to or adjacent to the school.

Classrooms were built as galleries with stepped floors designed for collective teaching of large numbers of pupils. Windows were high to minimise pupil distraction and the glass was often coloured or frosted to reduce the glare. An open fire provided heating and the windows and oil lamps provided lighting.

Children sat on backless wooden benches (long toms) at long desks attached to the floor. Each desk sat at least five or six children. In schoolrooms that accommodated several classes, the infants children sat on rows of long toms on one side of the room. Fixed dual desks were introduced in the late 1890s but in some schools long desks continued to be used up to the 1940s.

### LESSONS

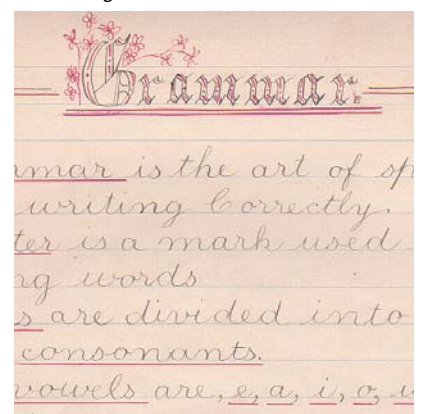
Most of the school day revolved around learning the "three R's" - reading, writing and arithmetic. The children learnt by rote and were expected to memorise many facts. There were five classes: First to Fifth Class. Progression of children through the classes was based on assessment and therefore classes often contained mixed ages.

In addition to the "three R's", subjects included grammar, geography, object lessons, history, singing, drawing, scripture and Euclid. In Fifth Class, algebra, natural science, Latin (for boys) and French (for girls), were also taught. Infants children wrote with a thin slate pencil on slates which they rested on their knees. The older children also undertook a large amount of their work on slates, often practising their work before writing it into their workbook.

Dumb bell drill



Page from 4th Class Exercise Book



# EARLY SCHOOL DAYS CONT.

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Maypole dancing

*Morning.*

At 8:45. Pupils to assemble in the playground. All school materials to be prepared for lessons.  
At 8:55. Pupils to be arranged in ranks, inspected as to cleanliness, and marched into school.  
At 9. Lessons (or Special Religious Instruction) to commence; as noted in the Time-table prescribed by Rule 131.  
At 10:30. Recess for ten minutes, to be spent in the playground by pupils and teachers.  
At 10:45. Lessons to be resumed according to the Time-table.  
At 11:55. Class-roll to be called and marked.  
At 12. The school to be dismissed for mid-day recess.

*Afternoon.*

From 12 to 1:20. Recess for dinner and recreation, under the superintendence of the teachers.  
At 1:20. Pupils to re-assemble in the playground. School materials to be prepared for lessons.  
At 1:25. Pupils to be arranged, inspected, and march into school.  
At 1:30. Lessons to re-commence as noted in the Time-table.  
At 3:25. The Roll to be called and marked.  
At 3:30. The school to be dismissed.

Regulation 128, NSW Public Instruction Act of 1880

Much time was spent copying work from the blackboard. School children often had one workbook for all their subjects and great emphasis was placed on neatness. Headings using fancy lettering featured at the top of each page, together with ornate borders and other decorations.

Copybooks were used in teaching writing. For the lower grades these consisted of pages of strokes, ovals, letters and words and increased in difficulty to sentences and ornate lettering styles. Each line was printed with spaces for repeated copying. Morals were often written for the children to copy, for example, *It is easier to mend our faults than to hide them*. Children were not permitted to write with their left hand and some "left-handers" had their left arm tied behind their back. Others were hit with the cane on their left hand. The style of writing taught was Copperplate, also known as Round Hand, an ornate style with loops and curves that could be written with speed.

### DISCIPLINE

Discipline was strict. Full attention was expected at all times. Children had to be silent and speak only when asked to. The Council of Education approved punishment for "persistent inattention and moral offences". Corporal punishment, commonly using a cane, was permitted. The right to cane was officially limited to the Principal Teacher, or "his" approved Assistant, and was supposed to be imposed after a lapse of time. Objects such as quince rods, broad slappers and ¼ inch canes were used as "instruments of punishment" and classroom offences included talking, playing, inattention, idleness, carelessness, impudence, impertinence and disorder. Children were hit on the hand, buttocks, and even occasionally on the head and shoulders. Other forms of punishment included being detained at playtimes, writing lines and sitting on a stool in the corner of the classroom.

### PLAYGROUND GAMES

Girls' games in the playground included hopscotch, skipping, hoops and cat's cradle whilst the boys played marbles, jacks, tug-o-war and "fly" (played with sticks). Some games were played together such as rounders and hide 'n seek. Children were very good at improvising. They made bats out of fence palings and sticks and balls out of various materials such as roots, rags and tins.

### TEACHERS AND INSPECTORS

Both men and women taught - although many women resigned once they got married. Just over half of the teachers were male. Inspectors travelled from school to school carrying out inspections of the operation of the school and testing student progress using oral and written tests. The aim was twice-yearly inspections. Between 1905 and 1910 headmasters took over the responsibility of examining students, although the inspection system continued.

### SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

Most children went to school until they were twelve or thirteen. There were very few secondary schools and the vast majority of children went off to work. In the towns children over thirteen worked in factories, as office workers, shop assistants, and in trades. Country children usually worked on farms or in rural industries such as mining.

**NSW SCHOOLHOUSE MUSEUM  
OF PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Cox's Road, North Ryde, 2113

Phone/Fax 9805 1186

info@schoolhousemuseum.org.au

www.schoolhousemuseum.org.au