

The Duntroon Public School, Pialligo

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Next time you are driving down Fairbairn Avenue towards the airport, only to be caught in a traffic jam at the Morshead Drive traffic light intersection adjacent to Woolshed Creek, look ahead and slightly over to your right. The magnificent stand of conifers opposite the turn to the Majura Valley hides the old Duntroon Public School from view. Only a glimpse of the corrugated iron clad roof of the weatherboard headmaster's residence is visible to give a hint that a historic place exists there. The history of the Duntroon Public School is outlined here so that next time you sit in a jam you can entertain yourself by contemplating its history rather than revving your engine or tooting your horn.

The context for the Duntroon Public School site is bound up with the establishment of the Royal Military College (RMC) on the former Duntroon Estate, and the provision of schooling to children in the newly created Federal Capital Territory, which we now know as the ACT.

Robert Campbell's Duntroon Estate

The area where the Duntroon School is located, on the banks of Woolshed Creek at Section 2 Pialligo, was traditionally the land of Aboriginal people who lived in the Molonglo Valley. White settlement and the setting up of a large pastoral estate owned by Robert Campbell resulted in their displacement and disruption of their way of life. The land grant awarded to Robert Campbell in 1825 was known as the Pialligo property and the cottage homestead built for him in 1833 was known as Limestone Cottage. Campbell's estate was extensive and with judicious land acquisitions eventually stretched over both banks of the Molonglo River and up the Majura Valley. Robert Campbell died in 1846, and ownership, transferred to his son George. George and his wife Marianne had the cottage extended into a large homestead with gatehouse lodges and other outbuildings. The homestead and its Estate was then known as Duntroon after the family's Scottish connections. George and Marianne left Duntroon in 1876 to live in England where George died in 1881. Marianne returned to live at Duntroon until her death in 1903 after which the property was left vacant.

The Royal Military College

The Australian colonies federated in 1901 and the Commonwealth resumed the Duntroon Estate lands. The Duntroon homestead area was selected in 1910 by Colonel William Throsby Bridges to have a new use as the site for a Royal Military College. Bridges was appointed as the first RMC Commandant with the rank of Brigadier General. The RMC was officially opened on 27 June 1911 and the following year additional lands were added to the original RMC acquisition.

The Chief Architect of the Commonwealth, John Smith Murdoch, designed the College and the Department of Home Affairs and its Public Works Branch were responsible for the actual construction work. Many of the old colonial era buildings of the Duntroon station were incorporated into the military college and are still used today, carefully conserved by the Department of Defence.

The dislocations and expenses resulting from World War I interrupted the completion of the planned building program of new facilities at RMC Duntroon. General war weariness after the

end of hostilities, the removal of the pressing need for army officers, and the New Zealand government's decision to train officers at home across the Tasman, led to an overall decline in numbers at the RMC in the 1920s. This, coupled with the 1930s economic downturn, led to the College being temporarily transferred to Victoria Barracks in Sydney in 1931.

During the time the RMC was away from Canberra it retained links with the Duntroon site and it was always envisaged that it would return. During the RMC's sojourn at Sydney, a new parade ground was laid out and framed by new and impressive two-storey buildings with roughcast walls and red terracotta-tiled roofs to house cadet accommodation and classrooms. A matching cadets' mess building was also built in the complex. Landscape works were undertaken with windbreaks of pine trees planted along Morshead Drive and Fairbairn Avenue. The RMC training facility at Duntroon was re-opened in October 1937.

Early Education and the Earliest Duntroon School

With Federation and the setting up of a new capital city, the *Seat of Government Surrender Act 1909 (NSW)* granted the Commonwealth Government the land of the new Federal Capital Territory. This also transferred all schools in the new territory to the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs agreed with NSW that its Education Department would continue to manage and service the new territory schools in terms of curriculum and provision of teachers, while the Commonwealth would undertake the administration of the buildings. This organisational situation continued during the whole history of the Duntroon Public School at Pialligo.¹

As in other places early school provision in the Limestone Plains, which later became Canberra, inevitably closely followed demand arising from settlement. The existing pre-Federation schools in the region had been associated with established rural villages. After Federation and with the establishment of the new city, schools were needed to serve new suburbs of Canberra; and also the temporary tent cities of labourers working to build these and major Commonwealth infrastructure projects. With development post-World War II further schools were established in extended suburbs.

The history of a school known by the name of 'Duntroon' starts in the colonial period. In 1894 a slab school was built at the intersection of the Yarralumla-Queanbeyan Road (on Duntroon Estate land and roughly in the area where the Forrest Fire Station is located today). This operated as a half time school. Because of the land ownership of its location it was named the Duntroon School, or more locally and colloquially because of its immediate geography as the Crossroads School. That was until 1904 when the teacher William J Rolfe complained that mail for the school was being delayed by being sent to Duntroon Homestead. The school was subsequently renamed Narrabundah School to prevent further confusion. This school closed after the Telopea Park School was opened nearby in 1923.²

Duntroon School #1 at the RMC

With the establishment of the RMC in 1911, and a growth in the population of the Duntroon area from families moving to the College, educational provision was required for the incoming children. Initially Miss Ada Curley taught a small number of pupils at the College.³ She was the elder sister of Miss Sylvia Curley, after whom the bridge over the Molonglo River near Duntroon has been named. In 1914 a school known as Duntroon Public School #1 was established after petitioning from Duntroon residents. The first teacher in charge was a Mr David Jones who had previously taught at the Canberra/Ainslie School near St John the

Baptist's Church (Reid). There were two teachers and Mr Jones remained in the position of head teacher until his retirement in 1943.⁴ This Duntroon School operated out of various buildings on the RMC, including the former isolation ward and the old dispensary—hopefully a healthier environment for the mind than the body.⁵ The enrolment varied from 30 to 50 pupils, with children from the rural outlying areas and neighbouring farms also attending the school alongside children from RMC families. In 1923 when the Gungahleen School in the north of the territory was closed the former school building there was converted as a residence for Mr Jones who thereafter daily transported some of the former Gungahleen pupils to the new Duntroon School.⁶

With the transfer of the RMC to Sydney in 1931 and the consequent decrease of the population in the Duntroon district it was decided that there were insufficient children to merit keeping both the schools at Duntroon and further up the Majura valley open. The Majura School was closed with children subsequently being transported to Duntroon by bus for their education.⁷ The Duntroon School itself transferred into the vacated College classroom blocks where it remained until 1936. The 'Old School House' was variously used as a residence and used as an engineering store until it was demolished in August 1966.⁸

The Duntroon Public School at Pialligo

In 1936 with the imminent return of the RMC it was decided to provide new educational facilities for the children of Duntroon and Pialligo. The Canberra Times reported the calling for tenders and indicated that the school was to serve the RMC and 'Home Garden Sites'—Pialligo was the location of market gardens for local food production to feed the growing city population. Tenders were called for the erection of a new school classroom building, shelter shed, schoolmaster's residence and garage, together with the necessary conveniences. The site chosen for the new building was on the southern side of Woolshed Creek near the Duntroon-Queanbeyan road.⁹ This is the Duntroon School site that you will be looking at from your traffic jam. The main original elements of the 1936 school are still present at the site, with the school oval separating the residence and its garage from the classrooms. The conveniences have been replaced, but otherwise the original school in its planned form can still be discerned.

The ties between the new Duntroon Public School and the RMC were very close despite the educational facility now being located off the main RMC campus. For example the crest for the new school was a blue shield with a red border (RMC colours) surmounted by a crown and with a sprig of wattle and a yellow scroll bearing the motto 'Knowledge is Power' (an English translation of the RMC's own Latin motto 'Doctrina Vim Promovet) the word 'Duntroon' and the colours red and navy blue—the same as the RMC.

The Duntroon Public School operated in similar fashion to many others with an active Parents and Citizens Association; open days, dances and special fund raising events. One of the major differences, highlighted by the headmaster Mr Cox in 1954, was that most of the families in the enrolment (108 in the mid-1950s) were from service families where frequent personnel changes meant most pupils only attended for 2–3 years. Duntroon School P&C Records show the close ties between the school and the RMC such as the use of RMC Gymnasium by the children and a Fancy Dress Ball at RAAF Fairbairn 1952.¹⁰ The 1954 Duntroon School Christmas Party was held at the RAAF Fairbairn Station cinema with 300 children and children attending.¹¹ In 1960 the school children were using the adjacent RMC Ovals and their music education had links with the RMC band.¹² School reporting showed a

continuing use of RMC sporting facilities to 1965.¹³ In 1970 the school Annual Swimming carnival was held at the College Pool at the RMC in February.¹⁴ At the end of the year the Prize giving was in the Duntroon Cinema Hall.¹⁵

Because so many of the families with children at Duntroon School were service families there was a school emphasis on fundraising for service related causes. In December 1954 the Duntroon Public School was individually identified as a fundraiser with the RMC, HMAS Harman and RAAF for the Red Cross Button Day Appeal.¹⁶

Membership records of the P&C association records the military rank of parents from both the Australian Army and RAAF—'F/Lt, W/CDR, Sgt Major, S/Ldr, W/O, Gp/Cpt, Major, Major Gen' Despite the mix meeting minutes record generally harmonious operation of the parent association.¹⁷

The Duntroon Public School primarily serving the RMC was a success. The 1959 School Speech Day report notes the P&C lobbying for new rooms, specifically a new Infants block of three rooms to serve pupil enrolments of 190.¹⁸ In 1960 enrolments stood at 200 and efforts of the Education Department to move all Duntroon pupils to the new Campbell Primary School were overcome.¹⁹ A new building of three main rooms was even provided by the Department of the Interior and Works with assistance from the NCDC and the old school blocks refurbished. Enrolments grew to 210 and six teachers were employed at the Duntroon Public School.²⁰ This was a high point with enrolments falling to 196 in 1961.²¹ Mr A E York in his third year as Principle noted in his 1964 Annual report that enrolments stood at 185, down from 190 the year before and 205 previously.²² P&C requests for a library building remained unanswered.²³

The new Principle in 1965 was Mr Warren Deards who had come to Canberra from Moree Aboriginal School. Under his management attendance numbers did not improve and the 1967 Principle's report noted enrolments at 170-175.²⁴ By 1966 enrolments of only 164 necessitated composite classes.²⁵ At this point the school had four buildings. The original old weatherboard building, another building described then as 'old', the new kinder classrooms and a prefab building with two classrooms.²⁶

By 1968 enrolments had fallen to 150 and even as low as 144 at one period during the year. This was explained by the Vietnam War, transfer of families from RMC and that more service families were living in suburbia rather than at the RMC, and sending their children to the local suburban school.²⁷ Despite the falling numbers a new separate Library building was finally built in 1968.²⁸ In 1969 Mr Deards reported in a letter to the Department of Education and Science that children from Kowen Forestry Settlement were contributing to school attendance figures.²⁹ But by 1970 only 135 students were enrolled and transfers of students to the Campbell Primary School were often discussed given the widely fluctuating enrolments and a wide variation in social behaviour of students and academic attainment. This was attributed to the problems of the Vietnam War.³⁰ In addition the unsuitability of the old buildings and the increased nuisance of aircraft noise were cited as reasons for closure.³¹ The forces of history were too strong to resist and the Duntroon Public School near Woolshed Creek closed on 17 December 1970 after 34 years of operation.³²

AME School

But this was not the end of education at the site. In September 1970 Canberra architect Enrico Taglietti had been called in to assess the buildings soundness and suitability for

reuse.³³ He reported the buildings sound and useable. City planning then identified that Fairbairn Avenue required realignment and the empty school to be demolished, but fate was foiled again.³⁴ Planning for the foundation of the Association for Modern Education (AME) School began around 1970 and the school took over the disused Duntroon School buildings in Pialligo, opening in 1972 with Robin McConnell as headmaster moving into the old residence. The school was an educational institution run on progressive grounds, which sought to foster an atmosphere in which children were encouraged to develop their own particular areas of interest and talents, instead of sticking to a rigid set curriculum. The Duntroon Public School site on its well treed block, near Woolshed Creek, the Mount Ainslie Bush and close to the farms and nurseries of Pialligo provided an ideal educational setting. The school enrolled students from Kindergarten to year 10. In July 1973, to provide further an art and craft block, a part of F Block of the former hostel, Reid House, was relocated to the site after the closing of the 1948 hostel.³⁵ In 1974 Bernie Perrett took over as AME headmaster and remained at the school until early 1994. In 1977, the school moved to permanent newly purpose-built school buildings in the Canberra suburb of Weston. After the departure of the AME, the RMC and Defence used the site for various purposes until the Richmond Fellowship took over the site.

The Richmond Fellowship was established in the ACT in 1976 and has been at the Duntroon Public/AME School site at Pialligo since 1983. The Fellowship, founded in Richmond, England, in 1957, provides youth, family and mental health services to the ACT community. The Richmond Fellowship currently uses all the buildings on the site.³⁶

Acknowledgements:

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Figure 1.0 Aerial view showing the Duntroon Public School location. (Source: Google Earth base plan.)



Figure 2.0 The now demolished Duntroon School which was located on the campus of the RMC. The photo was taken in 1966 just before demolition. (Source: Canberra and District Historical Society)

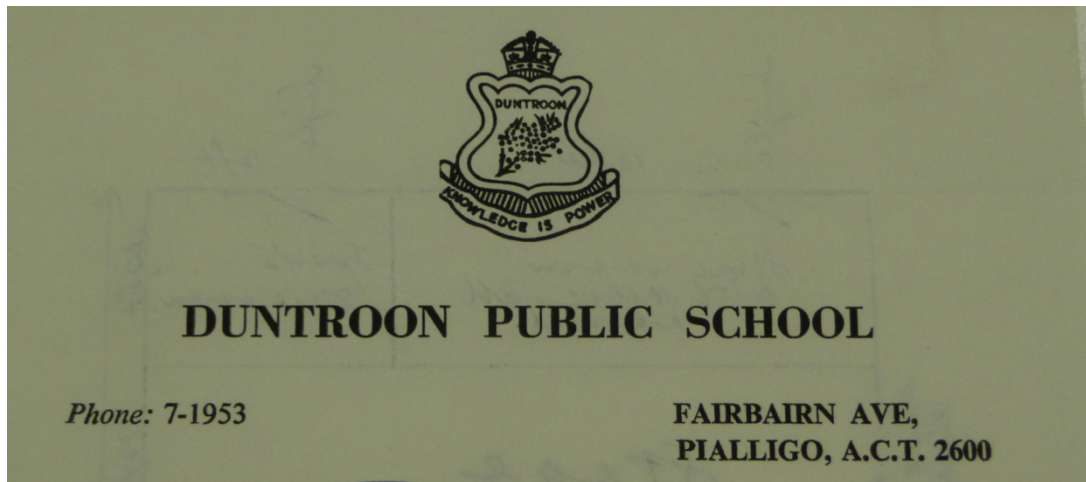


Figure 3.0 Duntroon Public School Letterhead with Crest and drawing for production of a school badge. (Source: ACT Archives files)



Figure 4.0 Aerial view March 1953 looking southwest over Pialligo. The 1936 school and shelter shed are visible on the site adjacent to the school oval and accessed by a circular entrance drive. What may be the two original toilet blocks are situated to the rear of the school at either side. (Source: ACT Heritage Library 009616)



Figure 5.0 The 1936 Duntroon Public School classroom building.(Source: GML 2012)



Figure 6.0 The 1936 shelter shed. (Source: GML 2012)



Figure 7.0 Part of the old Reid House Hostel moved to the site in 1973. (Source GML 2012)

Endnotes:

- 1 ACT Archives information site, History of Schools in the Australian Capital Territory, viewed May 2012, <http://www.archives.act.gov.au/__data/assets/file/0017/206027/Schools.rtf>
- 2 Gillespie LL 1999, Early Education and Schools in the Canberra Region, self-published, Canberra, p24.
- 3 Duntroon Society Newsletter No 2, September 1981, from RMC Duntroon Archives.
- 4 Duntroon Society Newsletter No 2 from the RMC Archives and Gillespie, LL 1999, p24 & Canberra Times 11 December 1925.
- 5 Gillespie, LL 1999, pps24-25.
- 6 Gillespie, LL 1999, p25 & Australian Archives A1 1924/10417
- 7 Canberra Times 17 January 1931.
- 8 Duntroon Journal photocopy held at RMC Archives.
- 9 Canberra Times 15 April 1936.
- 10 ACT Archives Item 2012/03121-1 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1940-1970
- 11 Canberra Times 8 November 1954.
- 12 ACT Archives Item 2012/03121-1 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1940-1970
- 13 ACT Archives Item 167 2012/03121-3 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1946-1970
- 14 ACT Archives Item 168, 2012/03120 Maintenance-DPS-Urgent Minor Maintenance 1968-69
- 15 ACT Archives Item 2012/03121-1 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1940-1970
- 16 Canberra Times 15 December 1954.
- 17 ACT Archives Item 2012/03121-1 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1940-1970
- 18 ACT Archives Item 2012/03121-1 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1940-1970
- 19 ACT Archives Item 2012/03121-1 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1940-1970
- 20 ACT Archives Item 2012/03121-1 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1940-1970
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- 25 ACT Archives Item 2012/03121-1 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1940-1970
- 26 ACT Archives Item 167 2012/03121-3 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1946-1970
- 27 ACT Archives Item 2012/03121-1 School Management Reporting Duntroon Primary School 1940-1970
- 28 ACT Archives Item 168, 2012/03120 Maintenance-DPS-Urgent Minor Maintenance 1968-69
- 29 ACT Archives Item 168, 2012/03120 Maintenance-DPS-Urgent Minor Maintenance 1968-69
- 30 ACT Archives Item 177 2012/03121-2 School Management Reporting- Duntroon Primary School 1946-70
- 31 ACT Archives Item T4974/55/PT1 AR 1655, folio 104.
- 32 Canberra Times December 1970.
- 33 ACT Archives Item T4974/55/PT1 AR 1655, folio 77.
- 34 Canberra Times April 29 1971 'School in way of Road'.
- 35 Foskett, A 2000, Reid – House of Fame, Instant Colour Press p48 and ACT Archives item ACT Archives Item T4974/55/PT1 AR 1655, File 2, folio 204.
- 36 Wilf Rath, CEO Richmond Fellowship, ACT, pers comm, 25 May 2012.