



FORT STREET PUBLIC SCHOOL



1952 - 1953 OPPORTUNITY CLASS



**55 YEARS AFTER
WE STARTED -**

**OUR FIRST
CLASS REUNION**

**10th - 11th MARCH
2007**

**“Be the adult Aco
hoped you’d be”**





THE 1953 CLASS PHOTO: REAR ROW: Ray Lowenthal, John Pym, Stephen D'Alton, John Fullagar, Brock Bryce, Peter Edelman, Ross Bonthorne, Brian Bagnall, Warren Butler, Gordon Murray CENTRE ROW: Chris Wood, David Cohen, Frank Hatherley, Dick Pollitt, Guy Parsons, Jim Denny, Paul Gaskin, John Hirst, Bruce Morgan FRONT ROW: Miss Alethea May Acason, John Kable, Adrienne Apps, Diana Rea, Margaret Blakemore, Victoria Edwards, Carolyn Gillings, Elizabeth Pearce, Lyn Ghys, Andrew Kirk SEATED: Dorothy Bartholomew, Susan Keating, Valerie Allen, Sarah Neal, Janet Green MISSING: Andrew Andersons, Ron Mattiske

1952 - Who we were and where we came from

We were the ultimate realisation of fifty years of the 1901 White Australia Policy, all children with pure white skin. Today, fifty more years on and decades after the discredited genetic apartheid population policy was finally abandoned, the 2006 photo on the school's website shows almost half the children are now of non-white racial origin. In 1952-53, however, not only were we nationally segregated by race, we were also locally segregated by intelligence testing. Taken away from our local primary schools, we were isolated in a distant two-year "Opportunity Class". This was, in addition, internally segregated from the local Millers Point children at the same school who occupied separate classrooms downstairs and had their own playground so we seldom mixed with them. This was our bizarre fate, 35 bright students kept safe in an experimental education greenhouse with Miss Acason as our keeper. We'll never know why there were only 12 girls but 23 boys.

We mostly came from primary schools on Sydney's North Shore – Mosman, Northbridge, Cammeray, and North Sydney. We were babies born in 1941-42 during the darkest days of World War II and many of our fathers were away fighting the enemy in the jungles of New Guinea, SE Asia, North Africa or Europe. Some of them came home shattered by the experience, lucky to have survived. Japanese midget submarines attacked ships in Sydney Harbour in May 1942, thus providing us unknowingly with our only first-hand experience of wartime hostilities. We grew up in the nuclear-age Cold War against communism and went to Fort Street during the Korean War of 1950-53, but hardly knew this at an innocent and carefree time of our lives in the Oh So Lucky Country. On 6th February 1952, the very month we started at Fort Street OC, Queen Elizabeth II began her long reign. Fifty-five years later she's still around and, mostly, so are we.



2007 – What we are doing and where we live

Without the advent of the Internet we might have remained forever scattered and not knowing what happened to most of our OC classmates of 55 years ago. The girls have generally kept in touch, however, and their network proved invaluable in starting the search through cyberspace for where we are today. Three are known to have died and five are still missing, leaving 26 out of a class of 34 available to join our historic reunion.

Extraordinary is the fact that 25 have felt inclined to participate and submit a brief personal story that is currently posted on our website, together with a contemporary photograph. From these amazing postings, together with a torrent of emailed reminiscences that has provided some additional insights on the website, we can glimpse what we have done with our lives, careers and families. Only a sociologist could tell us if our selective OC experience turned out a group of ordinary Australians or whether our supposed intelligence created a special breed of overachievers or troublesome adventurers. To date we have failed to find any scoundrels.

Many have spent years overseas yet finally returned to “Still Call Australia Home”. Just four remain permanently abroad. The majority still live in the Sydney area, others are in ACT, Victoria or Tasmania. Most of us are either retired or about to, having now reached 65 years. As expected, life has not always been easy for us, with ill-health, divorces or family estrangements. Some have been publicly recognized for their lifetime achievements, others known only by a few.

For this reunion we chose not to judge each other but to celebrate a remarkable bond that clearly shines in our joint spirit of new-found togetherness.

TRIBUTES

OUR TEACHER, MISS ACASON (1921-1986)



Alethea May Acason was our teacher for the two years of 1952-53. She came from a family that had known grinding hardship during the Depression. She spent 18 months teaching in Europe before getting her appointment to Fort Street OC. Part tough disciplinarian, part sweet mentor, she is remembered for being sometimes cruel but mostly gentle and caring. She kept in touch with some of us for many years afterwards. It was a tough job keeping the lid on our class of smarty-pants. In between the lessons on the three R's she introduced us to a wide variety of cultural activities such as singing, dancing and attending concerts and theatre performances. She married later in her life and had no children of her own but helped raise some reportedly unloving step-children. Gastric cancer struck her down at just 65 – our current age. We'd like to think that of the six to eight years she taught at Fort Street, our class of 1952-53 was an especially happy time for her. Without doubt she had a profound influence on us during two of the most formative years of our lives. We remember her with affection and awe.

OUR DEPARTED CLASSMATES

PETER EDELMAN

One of our youngest OC classmates, Peter Edelman was born in London in May 1942 and came to Australia at age six. A brilliant mathematician at high school, he then studied medicine at Sydney University and returned to London in the late 1960's where he practised as a gynaecologist. He died there on 4th September, 2001 after becoming ill a few days earlier while on holiday in Turkey.

DIANA REA

The youngest of seven children, Diana was working for Queensland Rail when, at 35, she decided to fulfill her life long ambition to teach. Using her long service payout she returned to Sydney, qualified as a teacher and taught mainly at Berala Primary School until her retirement in 2004. Her many post-career plans were never to be fulfilled as she died from cancer on 4th October 2006.

CHRIS WOOD

Chris died from cancer in April 2004. His father was NSW Government Astronomer and they lived next door to the school at the Observatory. Chris taught Mechanical Engineering at Sydney Technical College and at Hunter Institute of Technology in Newcastle, later becoming Assistant Principal of Mechanical Engineering within The Sydney Institute.

THOSE WE ARE STILL SEARCHING FOR

Whatever happened to Adrienne Apps, Warren Butler, Andrew Kirk, Bruce Morgan and Gordon Murray? Send information, guesswork, sleuthing suggestions to Jan at: jan@home.netspeed.com.au

THE N.S.W. OPPORTUNITY CLASS SYSTEM

At the end of our fourth Class in primary school we were somehow chosen to take “Intelligence Tests”. They were apparently routine Stanford-Binet IQ multiple choice tests but seemed unusually strange to us. We have no idea how many students took these tests but were then not selected to go to OC class. We were regarded as lucky to have passed this academic hurdle at the time. Nobody called us gifted, just bright.

One might have thought that a school programme, begun in 1932 and which resulted in geographic isolation of high-achieving students from their local school communities, would have well-defined policies, goals and measurement of outcomes. Alas, we have not found anything that defines the purpose of the Opportunity Class system in NSW and, more strangely, we have not uncovered anything at all that reports on the results. We have not seen any opinions from those selected for this unusual form of class segregation. We were guinea pigs in an educational experiment that has apparently never been subjected to academic peer review and has yielded no data. There is a 1993 published paper, entitled “Selective Schools for Intellectually Gifted Students – Are They Justified?” by Dixon & Gow, that sheds some light in this dark corridor of the NSW Education Dept. They concluded:

Whether or not selective high schools and O.C classes can be an effective provision for academically gifted children has never been adequately evaluated in an Australasian context. Relevant research evidence, particularly in the area of school-related affective variables, would indicate that this type of provision can have an unforeseen negative impact that can depress rather than enhance academic achievement.

Some of us think that we were segregated away into an OC class to give us a fresh opportunity to do better academically and culturally. Others have postulated that we were actually sent away to prevent us from disturbing the so-called normal school students at our local primary schools. Our reunion will give us an opportunity to share our thoughts on the effect our two years of OC had on our future success. Many of us are profoundly grateful that we enjoyed early freedom in the inner city and had a rich start to a lifetime full of culture, especially music and theatre. Others think that we underperformed at high school and perhaps suffered from “low academic self-concept” as a result of being kept away from regular school kids that we previously knew we could out-perform. There nonetheless seems to be a strong sense of community among us OC classmates, as evidenced by the remarkable response to our website and reunion event.

OC classes ceased at Fort Street many years ago but continue to this day at over 60 primary schools throughout NSW. The “Vinson Report” of 2001 made the following recommendations:

(a) That the number of opportunity classes in New South Wales be halved from 2006. The decision on which schools to delete should be made in order to retain a spread of classes across the state. Schools that have had opportunity classes should be encouraged to continue to utilise their expertise in teaching academically talented students when teaching all students in the school.

(b) That the Department of Education and Training Strategic Research Directorate undertake research into the short- and long-term outcomes of students who attend opportunity classes, including investigating the social and emotional effects of early segregation.

(c) That a review of remaining opportunity classes in New South Wales be undertaken in 2010, to ascertain their continuing need.

We are unaware than any of these recommendations have yet been implemented.

VIEWS ON OUR CLASS EXPERIENCES

Adventure of the bridge, city and travel to and from the school

With its dramatic setting at the southern end of Sydney Harbour Bridge, encircled below by a deep unfinished roadway known to us as “The Cut”, it was a huge adventure to attend school right by the city’s then-20-year-old landmark engineering structure. In those days of electric trams, which many of us perilously travelled by each day, the Bridge was a living monster that literally roared as train and tram carriages crossed every few minutes. That 10-year-old children were permitted to travel alone so far and were free to explore the adjacent city streets seems remarkable today. Some even remember crossing multiple lanes of bridge traffic after being dropped off at the tollbooths from a parent’s car.

School and its surroundings

In 1952 The Rocks and Millers Point were regarded as rather dangerous working-class neighbourhoods that we scampered through, fearful of being bashed-up by local toughies. The Observatory and its surrounding park provided us with ample space for fun at lunchtime and after school. At one o’clock each day we would witness its mysterious rooftop brown ball dropping right after the cannon fired from Fort Denison – our direct link to Sydney’s colonial past. The school itself was a small nondescript modern building with no tuckshop, hence our reliance on sandwich lunches and the ability to toss unappetising foods over the fence into The Cut. And with no refrigeration facilities our free milk was sure to be tepid and part-curdled in warmer months. Fort Street Girls High was just a few doors away, now a museum, but Fort Street Boys High was many miles away, no wonder we never figured out where the real Fort Street actually was.

Miss Aason (“Aco”)

She was the quintessential prim UK-experienced schoolmarm who had definite views about proper student behaviour. Those smart-alecks among us were quick to receive an elbow squeeze and verbal dressing-down from her with words we didn’t understand such as “obnoxious” and “precocious”. Sometimes she could be strangely cruel with protracted individual taunting that today would be considered heinous. Yet she is remembered as probably the first teacher we ever had who loved and respected us for what we were – intelligent young kids entrusted to her care for two whole years. She accompanied us on picnics and theatre outings and, years after, kept in touch with many. Her house in Mosman was frequently visited to receive ongoing hospitality and to check on her oft-anaemic health status. Her influence on our later lives is thought to be profound.

Singing, dancing, concerts and fancy dress parties

We assume that our government educators decided we should receive liberal quantities of cultural activity as part of the curious OC mandate. Why else would we spend hours square-dancing, choir singing and attending symphony and theatre concerts? Indeed we might conclude that the principal outcome of our Fort Street experience has been a life-long interest in things cultural. It helped that the 1953 coronation of our dear young Queen Elizabeth II provided added reason for us to sing even more fervently for the school radio broadcasts that we recorded in the nearby ABC studio. The final bizarre theatrical event was our yearly Fancy Dress party, captured forever in two memorable photographs.

Effect on our later education, careers and personal lives

Unless we carry out a survey, we have no idea if our OC experience was more or less beneficial to our later high school, university or life achievements. Some have commented that afterwards they did much worse academically than before the Fort Street years. We were streamed into selective high schools and thus went off the OC radar screens forever. Recent reunion correspondence, phone calls and informal get-togethers have revealed, however, a curiously strong remaining bond between us that has been described as almost like brothers and sisters getting together again after a very, very long absence. Our reunion has the potential to reveal the answers to such ponderous questions.

STAYING IN TOUCH

Having waited 55 years to hold our first reunion, it might seem intemperate to consider any follow-up plan, especially at our age. But, now that we have the luxury of time on our hands in retirement, it might be prudent to ask, "What should we do next?"

Website future options

There are costs and time needed to maintain a website. We have no plans to continue the website much beyond the reunion event. Are there alternative options?

Electronic archive document

We have plans to create an electronic archive document containing the entire contents of the website, this brochure and a report of the reunion events. This archive could be made available on computer disks.

Future reunions

No plans have been made for further reunions, but if the first is judged a success we might consider smaller follow-up events in future years.

Email contact list *please send any changes to Jan at jan@home.netspeed.com.au*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Valerie originated our reunion when she first found Ray and asked for his help with Diana's health. She also called a number of classmates by phone, having somehow tracked down their whereabouts. Sarah then arranged a lunch meeting and the reunion concept began. Particular credit goes to Sarah and Jan for their tenacious efforts to locate everyone. Brock and John F. also helped with the search efforts.

We thank the Principal and Staff of Fort Street Public School for making the school and its grounds available for us to visit on March 10th.

Frank, his daughter Beatrice, and Jan have done a truly incredible job creating and updating our remarkable reunion website www.fortstreetos5253.com. Jan also created the montage of our current photos based on positioning in the 1953 school photo.

We thank all who contributed biographies, photographs and reminiscences to the website.

Sarah and Frank kindly walked around the school neighbourhood to select a suitable restaurant and make the necessary reservations.

Brian and David provided ex-cathedra advice to those who actually did the hard work. Brian also compiled and produced this reunion brochure.

We thank Jim Acason for providing fresh information about his sister.

Your ad hoc ROC (Reunion Organising Committee) - Brian, David, Frank, Jan & Sarah

REUNION PROGRAMME

Saturday 10th March 2007

2.00 pm *Visit to School*
4.00 pm *Walk through Neighbourhood*
6.00 pm *Drinks and Celebration Dinner*

Sunday 11th March 2007

10.00 am *Balmoral Beach Recovery Party - meet at Rotunda, bring your own food etc.*

THE SCHOOL TODAY (2002 photo)

