

THE ARCHIVES OF THE KING'S SCHOOL, PARRAMATTA

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In 1972 and 1973 I went to England and the United States of America to investigate and report on ways and means of organising my employer's archives, a collection dating back to the 1830s. This was because there was then no authoritative voice in Australia which could seriously give advice concerning the particular needs of a large collection held by a school. Other facets of my brief were to recommend the best means of displaying elements of a valuable collection and to discover as much as I could about modern techniques of preservation. On my return my report resulted in the construction of a free-standing building with what was then considered to be adequate display and storage facilities. The building's only use was to display and house The King's School archives. As such it was very well equipped.

Having arrived in 1957 as a teacher, by 1966 I was being groomed to accept responsibility for The King's School's collection, then in the hand of a very skilful and artistic schoolmaster, Robert Robertson, then seventy-nine. He had been caring for the collection since 1922, having taken over this duty from David John Thomas who accepted the task in 1900. The collection had been started by the first headmaster in 1832, and his successors accepted responsibility for the slowly expanding collection until 1868, when the deputy headmaster, W. R. Burkitt, was allocated the role. His departure from the school in 1885 left a void which was filled by his successor, Mr. F. Bennett, until Mr. W. S. Corr arrived in 1888. Within two years Corr began sharing his duties with Mr. A. H. Coombes. Corr promoted the collecting while Coombes was allocated a storeroom for the collection. Part of the storeroom became a display area and soon the Coombes Museum took shape.

The Coombes Museum began accepting artefacts not part of the

school's fabric and in this decision lay future disaster, for so much was donated between 1890 and 1920 that one storeroom was insufficient to house the expanding collection. As a measure of expediency in the 1920s the school archives were separated from the Museum artefacts. The latter went into store in boxes and crates kept in Mr. Robertson's classroom cupboards or in suitcases under his bed at the school if the artefacts were fragile or valuable. A new headmaster, in the 1830s, closed the Coombes Museum and distributed its collection about the school. Valuable stamps went to the boys' Stamp Club and vanished. Valuable early Australian books went to the school library and disappeared. Historic documents from convict days, such as tickets-of-leave, were displayed on walls. They also vanished along with over fifty water colour paintings of early scenes done by local nineteenth-century artists. What else the boys did not immediately take they destroyed over the next twenty years.

The archives relevant to the school escaped the 1930s distribution, mainly because they were not visible to the "new broom" and Mr. Robertson did not enlighten him. Thus the school collection was fortunately preserved, though nothing further was done to conserve or expand it until the Robert Robertson Museum was opened in 1973. Since that time an active acquisitions policy has seen the collection grow to over two hundred thousand items in 1990.

The principal records are cross-referenced individual files for each boy and member of staff. They start in 1832 and all have unique numbers, which have become computer reference numbers for school records, address records and genealogical information. Eventually every photograph of a boy or teacher will be linked to this system. The school magazines from 1889 to the current issue have been extensively catalogued by subject and eventually they will also be linked to the unique boy and staff reference number. All pictures and photographs are now catalogued on computer, although it was felt that the large book collection should remain in a library format for easier reference purposes, as some of these books are extensively used. Artefacts that go on display are exhibited in good conditions in safe cabinets and a record is kept of the times they are shown so that donors may be satisfied that their gifts are being used, yet preserved.

Various departments of the school now utilise the Robert Robertson Resource Centre for research purposes. Geography, Art, General Studies and History are four areas to benefit at senior levels, with boys able to draw on the resources available for individual specialised units of work. Films, videos and sound recordings of school life, from speeches by visitors to drama and music, all are housed in climatically controlled conditions within the Centre, which also has its own facilities to use these aids, thus overcoming the problem of the "no borrowing" rule.

The Robertson Centre has also purchased most of the available New South Wales Archives microform kits, as well as microforms of births, deaths and marriages available for all areas of Australia. This material enables boys to research their own families and develops a keen sense of history. The material is also available to the whole school community. Despite its non-inclusion in the National Library's Bicentennial *Australian Historic Records Register* (because the person sent to record the collection felt he was not able to do justice in recording a large collection in the short time available to him) the Robertson centre provides a service to academic and family historians around the nation, for word of mouth has brought these people to our door. The school has also hosted two workshops for the Australian Society of Archivists and two workshops for the School Archives Special Interest Group, current policy being to promote the interests of the Society where possible.

The King's School Archives' collection is growing and living. It serves its own community within and outside the school and it provides a service for genuine researchers, amateur and professional. There is one full-time archivist who has twenty hours secretarial help per week. A generous budget is provided but it must be planned eight months prior to its year of operation, so unexpected needs are often unable to be met except from a contingency fund, access to which needs very solid arguments.

The Robert Robertson Resource Centre owes much of its successful planning to the archivists of the early 1970s at Eton College and Winchester College, though ideas came from hundreds of other institutions and from wide professional reading. Of course mistakes were made. They still are. They started in 1832, but the completion of the Robert Robertson centre compounded them. In some cases collections were broken up at the request of the employer. In other cases the mistakes were made by the writer and it has taken much time and effort to remedy them. Still, the survival of much early material is quite astounding, considering the chances of loss or damage. Even when the school commenced its move from Parramatta to North Parramatta in 1962, there was a danger the collection might not survive. No provision existed on the new site and the artefacts ended up in a disused wine cellar, subject to occasional sewer seepage to a depth of fifteen inches. The next move was to a shower and changing room where the collection shared space with the boys using the facility. Still, this was marginally better than the cellar or indeed the vegetable room at the old site which accommodated the material previously stored in Mr. Robertson's classroom but unable to be kept there once he gave up teaching for other duties.

The collection housed by The King's School Parramatta is now expanding rapidly. Thousands of items come in each year as the school

community realises the importance of grandpa's "old junk". Text books used in the first twenty years of the school's existence have been flowing in recently and these have helped establish when boys were actually at the school, for no Pupil Register prior to October 1895 survived although many other lists going back to 1832 did. The *King's School Register 1831-1990* is, thus, much stronger in detail than the 1981 edition because of these recent additions to the school's archives.

Two new display areas are envisaged in the 1990s. One will feature sporting artefacts. These will be housed in a trophy room to be incorporated in a new grandstand. The other display area will be in a new administration building and will incorporate displays suited to that area. The new administration building will also have storage space as the current surplus now fills a room six metres by five metres elsewhere. Only the fragile and valuable records are now able to be held in the air-conditioned walk-in safe built in the Robertson Centre.