

A Brief History of the Wonthaggi State School Swimming Pool

A 'basin' to be proud of

Since 1923, thousands of Wonthaggi children have learned to swim at the Wonthaggi State School swimming pool. Nowadays, people who drive past it may be attracted more by the colourful murals on the fence rather than by the humble basin itself. Not many are aware of how special and significant that pool is, and not only in the context of the history of this town. Swimming pools in schools are still rare in the 21st century. In the first half of the 20th century, hardly any school, public or private, had one. This was not only true of Australia but of the rest of the world.

In February 1910 the first school swimming pool in Australia, at Junction Park State School, in the city of Brisbane, was officially declared open. With the encouragement of the Queensland education authorities a few other schools in Queensland followed suit. Apart from Victoria, where Footscray State School in 1913, and Nichols Point School in Mildura in 1915, built swimming pools, no other state followed Queensland's example in pre-World War 1 Australia. The war put a stop to whatever other projects might have been in the works at the time and immediately after the war there were other more immediate problems to deal with. After the disruptions and tensions of World War 1, in the wake of the Great Influenza Epidemic, by 1920, Wonthaggi was eager to resume the extension of the social welfare system that had been created in the first five years of its history also as a way to heal the wounds caused by the war. Plans were being made for the establishment of a Miners Co-operative Dispensary to add the provision of affordable medicines to the medical and hospital schemes. The Miners Unions were also in the process of planning a Co-operative Union Theatre to provide adequate Union offices and cheaper entertainment for the mining community. This would be an addition to the Workmen's Club co-operative and to the Wonthaggi Co-operative Distribution Society. The Wonthaggi community was also in the final stages of convincing the State government to establish a technical School to provide secondary education for its young people and building an Infant School. Things were happening. Wonthaggi was on its way again. It was in this atmosphere that the idea to erect a swimming pool on the State School grounds was born. Wonthaggi is surrounded by beautiful but treacherous beaches. The Powlett river is not far

away. Lake Lester, on the edge of town, was a popular recreational area for fishing and swimming. Most people did not know how to swim. Almost every year there were drowning fatalities at one of the beaches or waterways. The news of near fatalities underlined the need for a facility where youngsters could learn how to swim. However, building and maintaining swimming pools was, and is, not cheap.

It is partly true, as popular history would have it, that 'The miners built the pool,' since almost all of the manual labour was certainly carried out by volunteer miners. Wonthaggi women were also involved in the project, but to say that the pool was an initiative of the Wonthaggi State School Mothers Club' is historically inaccurate since the Mothers' Club was not formed until 1926. As yet I have not been able to discover who might have sowed the seed of the project. The first mention of the proposal to build a swimming pool at the State School I have found came in July 1922 in a small article in *The Argus*. After briefly describing the progress made in the newly-established Wonthaggi Technical School, the community involvement in raising funds for a library and a piano for the new school, and the transformation of the 'tea-tree scrub' covered grounds into 'a fairly good field' by 'Working bees of the scholars on Saturday mornings', the reporter writes:

'Wonthaggi expects to possess shortly the largest American swimming pool in the State. Mr Warriner, of the Wonthaggi State school is leading the movement.

Mr Edwin Warriner was born in Indented Head in 1861. In 1877, at the age of 16, as was common at the time, he entered the Education Department as a student teacher. By the time he came to Wonthaggi in January 1922, he was nearing retirement. Among the many schools he had taught in and been head-master of were Leongatha Primary School and Hamilton Primary, just prior to accepting his latest promotion to Wonthaggi. Mr Warriner was a devout Presbyterian and a committed freemason. Wherever he went, he, his wife and two daughters became heavily involved in the social, cultural and sporting life of the community. He soon showed that he had not come to Wonthaggi to see out his time before retiring.

In August 1922, Wonthaggi was in a celebratory mood. Cr J. McVicars, secretary of the local Miners' Union as well as secretary of the Victorian branch, had once again been elected Mayor directly by the rate-payers. August 29 was to be 'a red letter day', a school holiday. The Director of Education, Mr Frank Tate, a progressive education reformer, who had overseen the building of the 'model school' at Wonthaggi in 1912, and other dignitaries would be here to

officially open the new Infant School in the morning. They would then unveil the World War 1 honour board and the memorial bell in the school. The distinguished visitors would then be given a civic welcome, and, in the afternoon, they would officially open the Technical School. An official dinner, lecture and other entertainment in the Soldiers Theatre would follow in the evening. All the public was invited.

The Baths committee also had something to celebrate, as the report in the August 20 edition of the *Powlett Express states*'. They were

'almost ready to make a start with the excavating. Parents who have not already been called on will, in a week or two, be visited by one or two of the committee.

It entails a great deal of time and work to cover the whole of the town. Those who have already been interviewed need not wait for the second visit, but forward their donations to the Head Master, Mr Warriner. Parents have shown already by their willingness to contribute they are alive to the advantages of the swimming basin. We feel sure that all will be only too willing to do all in their power for the welfare of the children. The swimming baths will be a boon to them, as they will all be taught to swim, under the supervision of certified teachers in school hours. Competitions will be held annually, which will tend to make the kiddies school life what it ought to be.'

The school committee, led by their secretary Mr Reynolds, and Mr Warriner, were also 'untiring in their efforts' to make their 'State School all that one could desire' by arranging Arbor Day and making preparations for 'painting and renovating the school, fencing the school grounds and laying them out in lawns and flower gardens.

In its 29th September edition, the *Powlett Express*' was able to report the following:

'School Swimming Basin

Tomorrow morning, Saturday, at 8 a.m., the Wonthaggi School ground will be a hive of industry. The largest working bee that has been organized in Gippsland will be directed by Mr. J. Wilkinson on the excavation of the basin, the inside measurement of which is 50ft. X 30ft., with a depth of 3ft to 7ft. The earth taken out will be built around to form base for tarpaving track 10ft wide around the pool. The area will be enclosed with an 8ft iron fence. In the enclosure will be a dressing shelter shed 60ft long. About five chains of trenching will have to be opened for inlet and outlet pipes. It is expected that the whole of the work will be completed.

All well-wishers and friends of the movement are expected to come along and make the day a success. The committee have been promised horses, drays, plough, scoop, barrows, planks, tools, etc. and with the help of the fathers and big brothers, the children will be able to indulge in the benefit of learning to swim under expert supervision at the beginning of the coming season. A strong committee of ladies has



been formed to cater for the inner man, and making the necessary arrangements to provide 600 meals. The Education Department have made arrangements for an operator to be present to take pictures of the operations. These moving pictures will be shown in every town of Victoria, so be there and let your absent friends have the opportunity of seeing your smiling face giving your assistance in providing super insurance for our children.' Despite all the goodwill and hard work, the optimism

of the Pool committee that the basin and the other infrastructure would be ready for the 'opening of the coming season' was not realised. However, on the 23rd March, 1923, the *Powlett Express* was able to report that the pool had been completed at the cost of

£ 850 and would be officially opened on April 13 and 14, when parliamentary officials and teachers from headquarters would officiate and give

demonstrations to the children. The basin had all the latest improvements and mothers needed to have no

fear for the safety of their children since every class would be accompanied by a qualified teacher. The article also assured parents who had expressed reservations as far as hygiene was concerned that before any student 'hops in the "bath" he visits the showers, and gets rid of any dust that he happens to pick up along the street'. In the caption of the photograph published in The Argus on 25th April, it is specified that 'During the winter the pool will be artificially heated.' so it is logical to presume that the students were able to have hot showers.

Since most of the labour was voluntary and presumably many of the materials were either



donated or acquired at reduced prices, the cost of £ 850 was quite high. According to *Measuringworth*, a reliable online website that measures worth over time, the relative value of £ 850 in 1923 ranges from \$ 64,440 to \$1,643.800 in 2017, depending on how it is calculated. Whatever figure we choose, and a value in the middle is plausible, the pool was not cheap. The pool in Footscray in 1913 had cost only £ 150.

In the unsettled industrial situation that reigned in Wonthaggi in the early 1920s paying off the debt became a major problem. In October 1923, an article in the *Powlett Express* highlights the problem.

‘With the approach of warmer weather swimming and lifesaving will again drop into its important place in the school curriculum. Already our citizens have had the fact demonstrated that the basin is not a white elephant; and, also, that swimming is not a so-called department frippery. If further proof be necessary, it is forthcoming from a perusal of the list given below of last season’s successful pupils. There is a phase, however. Which, for the time, has been lost sight of, viz: that a considerable debt is still owing on the basin.’

The writer, almost certainly Mr Gannon, the owner and publisher of the weekly newsheet and an active and committed contributor to public causes explains why the paying off of the debt was languishing.

‘During the evil times through which the town has passed, the committee responsible for the construction of the basin has not asked a large percentage of the townsfolk to contribute their promised quota; now, however, with strikes, levies etc. passed, it is reasonable to resume operations, and collectors may be expected to call immediately on those who have not so far subscribed. ...

It would be an excellent feature should the basin commence its second season of usefulness free of debt. Even if this happy state cannot be reached, funds are needed for the basin’s spring cleaning and opening preparations.

The ‘evil times’ that the writer was referring to were the strikes in 1922 and especially the three months strike that took place at the beginning of 1923, which caused so much hardship to so many people, miners and business people alike. When work was resumed the miners had to pay the levies for hospital and medical schemes for the months that they had been on strike as well as the current levies.

I have found no record of when the debt on the pool was eventually paid off, but paid off it

was, thanks to levies, donations and many fund-raising activities. Children from all the state schools in Wonthaggi benefited from the pool right from the beginning. In 1934, children from St Joseph's school were also able to gain access to the pool. They had not been able to until then because they did not have a qualified instructor in charge as the Education Department regulations stipulated. In 1934 Mr Hugh Ross offered his services and so the scholars from St Josephs' walked down Baillieu street to the pool, the girls on Monday afternoon and the boys on Tuesday. Mr Ross also offered to teach swimming to children who could not swim every afternoon at 4.30 for a very small charge.

Until 1980, when the swimming pool at the Wonthaggi Leisure Centre was opened, the State School swimming pool was the only pool in town. How many people have not lost their lives because they learned to swim at the pool will never be known. The humble pool with a great history, a model and stimulus for other school pools in the state, has survived and served until now thanks to community support. It is a reminder of Wonthaggi's 'can do' attitude, of the self-help, co-operative community spirit that has characterised the town since its beginnings. We do not have many monuments left in the town, but we do have this living monument. We must make sure that it survives, adapts and continues to serve.

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BATHING POOL FOR WONTHAGGI CHILDREN.



This fine swimming basin, 30ft. by 20ft., has been constructed in the Wonthaggi State school grounds from funds raised in the mining township. During the winter the water will be artificially heated. The head teacher (Mr. E. Warriner) is chiefly instrumental in obtaining such an acquisition to the town. Miss Cox, of the Education department, is shown conducting a swimming and life-saving class.



The school pool in June 2018, empty and awaiting repair (Photo: A. Heislars)