

## PLOD ESSAY: THE OLD TECH SCHOOL by Kit Sleeman

*In light of changes, which may come to Wonthaggi Secondary College including the threat of a name change that would eliminate the word, Wonthaggi altogether, we print these memories from Kit Sleeman. Except for those from the Catholic schools, which taught their students through Year 8, Wonthaggi students went from the Primary Schools to the Tech in Year 7. Many girls stayed only until they achieved their Merit Certificate at the end of Year 8, which qualified them to go into nursing. Boys stayed through Year 9, when they got their Jr. Tech Certificates, which qualified them for apprenticeships. Girls, who wanted to be office workers or teachers, finished their Intermediate Certificate. Only a few students continued right through to finish Year 12 and head for university. In Irene Liddle Williams' year only five Tech students sat their Matriculation exams at St George's Hall.*

The enlightened Town Fathers from the early days of Wonthaggi reserved large blocks of land, adjacent to the shopping centre, for their development into homes for a Primary school and also, later, a secondary school, which would eventually emerge as a uniquely combined Technical/High School. Their wisdom has served the town well.

I attended both from 1957 in prep at Primary to Leaving Certificate in 1968 at 'The Tech'. I'd hoped to complete my secondary studies at The Tech, but alas, in 1969 we were moved to the New High School, miles from town. This move to a brand new facility was supposed to be a positive one. However the new school buildings lacked the soul and history of the old school and it all was just not the same.

I commenced at The Tech in 1964. Over my pre-commencement Christmas break, my elder brother Jon who was in Matriculation that year, delighted in terrifying me with stories about initiation and hazing – what I could expect to be dished out to me at my first day at The Tech by older bullies. I was not exactly looking forward to such things.

On the first day, Jon walked me to school, so I thought I might be safe. However as soon as we hit the gate, Jon took off to sort out his own agenda and I was left alone and terrified. Desperately, I sought out some Primary friends and we set up a sort of wagon ring for safety. As it happened there were no initiations or hazings – my brother had been pulling my leg, much to his amusement. On that first day, all of the newbies were marshalled into classes. We found ourselves being split from former Primary

comrades with whom we might have been at school for up to seven years, and there were lots of new kids I'd never met before. New friendships were quickly started and we also bigotedly decided who we didn't like. Often the old relationships dissolved in the face of new ones.

Once we newbies sorted out the confusion of timetables and rooms we then concentrated our thoughts on other issues like the teachers with thick leather straps. We were warned of Trade Teacher Clinton Shiells and Senior Mistress Winnie Baker.

Mr Shiells would patrol the school yard, or spring out of nowhere and drag off misbehaving boys to receive 'the cuts' – a hard blow across the palm of the hand with the strap. Corporal punishment for boys via the cuts was normal practise in the day and though Mr Shiells was the most feared practitioner, any teacher might take on the job. At times he seemed like a hunter after a quarry, a task he enjoyed. Infractions leading to the cuts could be quite minor, but the punishment dose was graded. For a minor infringement, the perpetrator might get one or two painful blows. Six was for serious stuff and I had heard rumours of ten, though I'm a bit sceptical about that.

Winnie Webster had a similar role for the girls. I don't think she resorted to corporal punishment, but whatever she threatened the girls with, accompanied by her sour-faced glare was enough to scare them into line for the most part.

Over my Tech school career I avoided sampling Mr Shiells' wares, but two other teachers did nail me. So, I felt I knew all about the cuts. One of the big issues at the time, which incurred the cuts as just punishment, was smoking. The schoolyard had several 'hidden' smoking spots. First year students took their lives in their hands in their attempts to find them. Sometimes they would stumble upon them and the older kids would use the naïve newbies as foils to fool the teachers. Periodically there were raids on smoking spots and searches for cigarettes. It was all a bit annoying. There were no age restrictions on sale of tobacco products at the time and half or more of the teachers patrolled with cigarette or pipe in their mouths.

When not skulking off for a secret smoke, boys were usually involved in schoolyard games during breaks. End to end football kicking was most popular during winter, and cricket in two nets during summer. There was also a tennis, netball, basketball and

handball courts. Some of these pastimes were almost lethal. The schoolyard was made of en tout cas like crushed redstone and was a good surface for kick to kick, but not so good for faceplants. Scrapes, bruises and scratches were worn as badges of honour. The netted cricket pitches were made of concrete.

In kick to kick, you have to acquire possession of the football to earn a kick. This is not so easy when you are smaller than most and there is a pack of twenty or thirty at each end, contesting marks then fighting in the scrum after a dropped mark with shoulders, knees and elbows. For the younger and smaller, a marking contest was out of the question and you had to fight in the scrum. It was often not a pretty sight – now and again someone would be carried off for first aid.

When a younger kid did miraculously gain possession of the ball, he would often attempt to pass to younger kids at the other end. This was considered beyond the pale by older kids and retaliation would follow swiftly with the perpetrator flattened next kick.

Cricket season held different but similar dangers. To get a turn at batting, one had to take a wicket, either by bowling the current batsman or taking a catch (with the ‘one hand off the net’ rule applying). To get possession of the ball, one had to battle the familiar scrum, so a catch was the more realistic option for smaller kids. Dangerously, though, this meant fielding within the nets – suicidal stuff with balls and sometime bats flying in all directions.

In post-primary school, Girls were dangerous. There were all sorts of proscriptions about how and when meetings between boys and girls could take place without retribution. Unfortunately, these particular rules were somewhat secretive, so you never knew when Clinton or Winnie would jump out and nail you for something.

Partial apartheid was part of the solution – the central quadrangle area was restricted to girls during breaks, and the girls were meant to stay there, while the boys had the yard with no access to the quadrangle. This was undermined somewhat because the canteen was in the yard and a logical meeting place.

The other breakdown was immediately after school. Many students were bussed in and out from Phillip Island and the surrounding countryside each day. Walking your squeeze to the bus each day was a time honoured tradition.

Some of the equipment used at school also struck me as dangers waiting to happen. Lathes,

machine saws and planing machines in woodwork rooms terrified me. This thought was reinforced somewhat by the fact that one teacher, Mr Lindsay was missing half of four fingers courtesy of a planing machine accident. There were also some holes in the ceiling where wood had spun off a lathe and crashed into it. Some of the metal working machines, folders or cutters and the like, were equally scary.

In Fourth Form, I became a paid employee of The Tech, a job I retained until the move to the new school. I was employed to work a couple of hours after school each night as a laboratory assistant to clean up. I sent my first tax return in as a fifteen year old in 1967.

There were three science rooms: one on the west side of the main ‘new’ building over-looking McBride Avenue and two opposite overlooking the central quadrangle. Between the two rooms on the east was an equipment and chemical store which was my main work room and de facto office. My job was to clear up each of the three science rooms, clean and store equipment used during the day, sometime put out equipment for the next day and keep the chemicals tidy and in order. Some chemicals were easy – I put elements and salts in alphabetical order, but organic chemicals were a mystery to me until one teacher, maybe Mr Henry, introduced me to how organic chemistry worked: look at the suffix of the name – put all of the “-ones” together, all of the “-enes” together, all of the “-dehydes” together, and so on. I later majored in organic chemistry at University – thanks, Mr Henry for that first lesson.

It was in science classes and in my laboratory assistant’s job that I realized just how dangerous school could be. Many classroom demonstrations and experiments would today be deemed illegally dangerous. Without face or eye protection, teachers would drop explosive pieces of lithium or sodium into water or allow phosphorus pieces to burn fiercely on contact with air. Students, without any physical protection would roast mercuric oxide to convert it into mercury. Poisonous fumes and subsequent handling of poisonous mercury without gloves!

As my knowledge of chemistry grew, I became terrified by the volume of dangerous chemicals stored and the nature of the mix – correctly combined there was enough dangerous stuff to blow half of Wonthaggi off the map.

I sometimes wonder how we all survived the Old Tech School days, but I know I enjoyed them more than not.