

Silver-plated trowel

The inscription on this trowel reads: 'Presented to WH Mitchell Esq JP on the laying of Foundation Stone Jannali School of Arts, 1.10.28.' This is strange as there has never been a school of arts at Jannali. What is the story behind this mysterious inscription?

Haberfield teacher William Mitchell, first president of Jannali Progress Association, owned land in what was a slow growing area with no train station until 1931.

Wishing to see Jannali prosper, Mitchell donated a block of land in Alice Street for a school of arts, and when he died in 1935 left a bequest of £100 for the building.

The timing was unfortunate. Changing leisure patterns, including the growing popularity of cinema-going, meant the golden age of the school of arts – providing alcohol-free evening amusements – was over.

Such organisations were either dissolved or taken over by local councils. And when a pound for pound subsidy provided by the NSW Government was withdrawn, others closed. Also, during the 1930s depression the building industry was on its knees.

So even though a foundation stone was laid with this trowel in October 1928 the school of arts at Jannali was never built.

Silver-plated trowel

The silver-plated trowel presented to William Henry Mitchell on the laying of the foundation stone for Jannali School of Arts in 1928 – even though there has never been a Jannali School of Arts – is mysterious in more ways than one. Mitchell did not live in Jannali, even though he owned land there and he was the first president of the Jannali Progress Association. Also, Mitchell Avenue – which runs along the western side of the railway line – is named after him. Little else was known about him. Until ...

One day in 2020 SSHS received an email out of the blue from a UK based distant cousin of Mitchell's who was researching her family history. Liz Summerson had seen a 2014 *Bulletin* article on our website featuring the mystery behind the silver-plated trowel and the role of William Henry Mitchell. She offered to write an article for the *Bulletin* on discoveries her research had unearthed of Mitchell's life in Sydney. This was published in the *Bulletin* in May 2021, and below is an abbreviated version of that article. It offers unique and valuable information on this little known man who helped shape Jannali as we know it today.

The full article can be accessed from SSHS website: www.shirehistory.org. Go to Main Menu and scroll down to Publications/Bulletins, and download *SSHS Bulletin* No. 219, May 2021.

WILLIAM HENRY MITCHELL - 1858 to 1934

LIZ SUMMERSON



W H Mitchell's parents were Thomas Mitchell, a gardener, and his wife Mary Ann, née Nutt. They were born in the 1830s in Herefordshire, England and arrived in Sydney, aboard the *John and Lucy* on 6 May 1857, with their baby son Thomas. WHM was born at Kissing Point, Ryde on 25 January 1858. Thomas and Mary eventually had a total of 11 children, of whom four died very young, including Thomas junior at six years of age. This made WHM the *de facto* eldest in the family.

At Plattsburg, Wallsend (in Newcastle, NSW) in 1877, at the age of 19, William married Catherine Nottle Owen, who was three years older, and the following year, their son Owen was born. This child sadly died at only two months old, making WHM a bereaved father at only 20. In the same year WHM joined the temperance movement, and, for the rest of his life, he remained tee-total.

In his youth and early manhood, William worked in gold digging and tin mining, mechanical and civil engineering. Heavy drinking was a male cultural norm, but precisely why William signed the pledge, at this very difficult time in his personal life, is unknown.

In 1882, William enrolled at the NSW Teachers' College. A male teacher at that period would either be given temporary posts or the headship of a small school, later progressing to bigger schools. In 1883 he got his first permanent post as First Assistant at Mortdale School: good timing, as early in 1884 Catherine gave birth to their second and last child, a daughter, Elma Marie.

William remained at Mortdale for ten years until spring 1893, when he transferred to Kellyville School, Parramatta. Here he formed a school choir.¹ In 1896 the Minister for Public Instruction, the Hon. Jacob Garrard, visited the school and described Mitchell as 'popular and painstaking'. Mitchell's 12-year-old daughter Elma took a starring role in the visit, singing and accompanying the other children on the organ. The following year, William was teaching at Williamstown and his daughter again featured in the end of year concert.

Then came what must have been the most devastating moment of the Mitchells' lives. Their lively, bright daughter Elma caught measles and developed complications. On 24 February 1899 she died, aged just 15.

Mitchell sought a transfer from Williamstown School, inevitably unbearably full of memories of Elma. He opted for the *Sobraon* Training Ship, an educational facility for destitute and neglected boys and others thought to be at risk of turning to crime, and was appointed First Assistant.² He expressed a wish to 'instil the temperance sentiment in the boys.'³ In the event, he spent only one year on the *Sabraon*, which would not have been an easy post, although the approach to the pupils at that time was positive and progressive, based on wholesome discipline and rational recreation. In fact it produced many outstanding sportsmen – another of Mitchell's interests.⁴

He taught at Balmain school until 1916. This was a period in which his many other interests came to fruition, particularly temperance, cricket, adult education, and political and local affairs. His interests had become more political in 1905, with a report of the first Annual Meeting of the Prohibition Party, at which he was elected as a council member.⁵ This was at a time when teachers' involvement in political movements was becoming acceptable; as civil servants, overt political activity had been forbidden until teachers combined to work for their rights.

Mitchell was Director of the Young People's section of the NSW Alliance of Temperance organisations, and 1925 saw the first examinations in temperance for young people⁶ which promoted study of the many adverse effects of alcohol at the personal and societal level. He had long been involved in preparing this scheme, and it must have been a source of pleasure in 1841 when young people took the exams in their inaugural year. The WH Mitchell gold medal was awarded for the first time to the

best candidate in the State. These exams became an annual event and were reported in the papers throughout the 1930s and quite possibly later.

Another of Mitchell's enduring passions was cricket. Sport was associated with wholesome living, however, few in the cricketing world were tee-totalers, making William very much the exception to the rule.⁷ In 1906 he began a career in cricket umpiring.⁸ He was umpiring at the Sydney ground week after week, and in 1914 was appointed as the first President of the newly-formed NSW Cricket Umpires Association.

Umpires had come in for a fair amount of criticism from players and it was felt that greater clarification and consistent application of the rules was needed. Mitchell set off for a six-month trip to England that year, taking a list of issues to discuss with the MCC at Lord's. He had a fine send-off, with gifts,⁹ and was made a welcome guest on arrival at Lord's. After his safe return over seas that were quite risky, following the start of the Great War, he was able to report back usefully to colleagues in Sydney.¹⁰

Mitchell's next teaching post was at Grafton School, where he put much effort into reviving interest in playing cricket amongst the boys, again with wholesome living in mind. After a period at Mortdale School he retired from teaching. In September 1921, he retired from cricket umpiring too, but remained a spectator, rarely missing a game at Sydney, 'with many chatty stories to tell of games at Lord's and elsewhere'.¹¹ There is a W H Mitchell Cup in the cricket world.¹²

William and Catherine lived for many years at 183 Alt Street, Haberfield, a garden city development. He named his house Coo-ee, an Aboriginal phrase meaning 'Come in'. In Haberfield he began working on a School of Arts project – a facility which would provide the community with educational and recreational facilities, in the spirit of self-improvement and as an alternative social centre to places that sold alcohol.

W H Mitchell's interest in Jannali

In 1924, the Jannali Progress Association was formed, with Mitchell as President, using his Haberfield experience in this developing community. Why did he have an interest in Jannali, which was 25km from his Haberfield home, and not apparently in a direction that he would have taken for work?

The area had begun to be developed in the 1880s. WHM had bought land in Jannali in 1889, for reasons unknown. It is, however, clear that he had an interest. Could he have intended to retire there? One of the main aims of the Progress Association was to lobby for a railway station to be built at Jannali: the line passed through and was important to Jannali's future development; but, as it stood, passengers had to make their way three miles to the nearest station. The Progress Association, under William's leadership, was instrumental in achieving the station. Having been promised there would be a platform at Jannali in 1889 when he had purchased his home,¹³ this had at last happened after a great deal of community action. The same year, he was listed in the National Party nominations for the Western Suburbs and in 1926 was elected as a National Party council member.

In 1928 Mitchell was presented with a silver trowel with which he laid the foundation stone of a future School of Arts on land in Alice Street he had donated for this purpose. Why the project never came to fruition, I could not discover (See 'Shire Mystery Solved: Jannali School of Arts', by Pauline Curby, *SSHS Bulletin*, May 2014, p.26:). However, in 1937, after WHM's death, the name of a road in Jannali was altered to Mitchell Avenue, commemorating his work for the community.¹⁴

1932 saw Mitchell's continued interest in politics on the wider scale: he called a meeting in Haberfield to form a branch of the United Australia Party, his enthusiasm for temperance remaining undiminished.

One of the last acts of his life was to donate a substantial drinking fountain to the Haberfield Public School, so that the children had better access to drinking water. The fountain is still there, though reduced to its core and not in working order. However, it still bears the quotation that William chose: *Youth perpetual dwells in fountains, not in flasks and casks and cellars*.¹⁵ The fountain was unveiled on his behalf, only a week before he died on 21 October 1934, of chronic myocarditis, aged 76.¹⁶

Invited to his funeral, along with family and friends, were representatives of the organisations to which he belonged - including Independent Order of Good Templars, temperance societies, sporting groups, United Australia Party and Jannali Progress Association.

He was buried at the Congregational Cemetery, Rockwood, the service being conducted by a Methodist minister.

Finally, W H Mitchell's interests were reflected in a will that he had drawn up with care and consideration:¹⁷

Mr. William Henry Mitchell, retired schoolmaster, late of Haberfield, made, by his will, the following gifts:—£300 to Hammondville Homes, £100 each to the Protestant Children's Home at Hurlstone Park, the Dill-Macky Homes, Western Suburbs Hospital, Haberfield Public School, Haberfield School of Arts, Jannali School of Arts; £50 each to the New South Wales Cricket Association, Amateur Athletic Association, Harmony Lodge of Good Templars, Grand Lodge of International Good Templars, and the Band of Hope Union. Mr. Mitchell's estate was sworn for probate at £1318.

References:

- Pauline Curby, 'Shire Mystery Solved: Jannali School of Arts', *SSHS Bulletin*, May 2014.
- Elizabeth Craig, 'From the Editor', *SSHS Bulletin*, May 2021, p.6
- Liz Summerson, William Henry Mitchell - 1858 to 1934, *SSHS Bulletin*, May 2021, p.8-12. (Accessible on SSHS website: shirehistory.org. Go to main menu and scroll down to Publications/ Bulletins/219_2021_may.pdf)

¹W H Mitchell's career history comes from the NSW Teachers' Rolls. Although he seems to have been a good teacher generally, a repeated failure to pass an examination in Blackboard and Freehand Drawing held him back in terms of his classification.

²NSW Teachers' Rolls;

³*Newcastle Morning Herald*, 7 Jul 1899

⁴*Barney Kieran, the legendary 'Sobraon Boy'*, J Ramsland, *Sport in History* Vol 27 No 2, Jun 2007. By coincidence, another W H Mitchell (William Hilton Mitchell) was working as third schoolmaster on the Sobraon at the same time as WHM. Nearly 20 years younger, this Mitchell was particularly involved in the sporting education of the boys.

⁵*Maitland Weekly Mercury*, 1 Apr 1905

⁶*Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 22 Apr 1925

⁷*A Sporting Teetotaller*, *The Sun* (Sydney), 20 Apr 1930

⁸Mentioned in WHM's letter to the editor of *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) 8 Aug 1908

⁹The Mayor of Ashfield .. on behalf of the various political bodies of the district presented Mr Mitchell with a large leather travelling trunk, a suitcase and a travelling rug. Mrs Mitchell received a silver tea and coffee service.' *Sunday Times* (Sydney) 22 Mar 1914.

¹⁰*Sydney Sportsman*, 14 Oct 1914

¹¹*Sporting Globe*, Oct 1934

¹²Mentioned in Annual Report, *Sydney University Cricket Club*, 1994-5

¹³*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 Feb 1931

¹⁴Announcement from David R Kirkby, Shire Clerk, Sutherland Shire Council, 16 Sep 1937: '... altering the name of that section of George's River Road between Soldier's-road and Jannali-avenue to Mitchell-avenue.'

¹⁵ From a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow entitled '*Drinking Song – Inscription for an antique pitcher*'.

¹⁶Transcription of certificate of death, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

¹⁷ Reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 Feb 1935