

MEMORIES OF A WELLESLEY BOARDER

(1942 – 1951)

By

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FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL

The first day at school was quite remarkable. After being dropped off by your parents you were taken up to your bedrooms, where some of the older boys would say "He's a new kid". They grabbed the cap off your head, put the button in their mouth and screwed the cap round till it broke off. Spat out the button, then tossed the cap back – initiation over.

New boys with tears in their eyes.

If you were unlucky enough to be gripping a small bag of lollies in your hand, you lost them too – "Mum..."

BATHING

Bath nights consisted of two baths per week whether you were dirty or not.

For eighty odd boarders there were two baths, and a third bath for the staff. Bath days were rostered according to dormitories. The two baths were filled, two boys per bath. They kept changing the boys but not the water. Once the water was black it was changed.

If you had something infectious or contagious (for example ringworm), you had your bath by yourself in the staff's bath. If you got dirty in between bath nights you had to make-do with a sponge down at the wash basin.. No extra baths were allowed.

DOCTOR TAWSE

Doctor Tawse was the leather strap cut into strips at the end. This used to reside in Hoppy's back pocket – to administer punishment at a moment's notice. 'Six of the best' was the most you got.

One hoped the teacher was tiring fast by the time he got to you. When you held out your hand the strap used to go up your arm a bit and leave welts where the split ends hit.

If you moved your hand it came down and hit the teacher's knee, much to the amusement of the class, but not to the teacher.

JOINING THE CHOIR

I knew for a fact that I was never a singer.

But my brother Trevor had been in the choir for a few years. He said at the end of the year they had a party for the choir, plus you sometimes got extra food (supper), if you sang at one of the churches in Eastbourne. The food appealed much more than the singing.

On the first day I joined up I had to stand by the organist and choir teacher (Mrs Hertzog).

I didn't realise I would have to stand there for so many sessions. She would push on one note repeatedly, saying "this is the note I want, David". I didn't like to tell her I didn't know what note she wanted or how to achieve it. Many sessions later she finally said "you're in the choir". I'm sure it was out of pity.

The annoying thing was my brother Trevor then left the choir and I was stuck there for the rest of my school days.

OFF TO CHURCH - AT SAINT ANDREWS, DAYS BAY (NOW GONE)

We attended church twice a week. Wednesday morning for boys at the school, Sunday mornings open to the public as well. Wednesday wasn't very interesting because there was no collection. On Sundays we were all given threepence or a penny to put into the collection bag. If you chose your seat wisely (at the back of the church), when the collection bag came along it was fair bulging with pennies and threepences. The wise (some would say the sinners) of the congregation flicked the bottom of the bag and took out more than what they put in. A handful of spoils to be spent later that day at the Days Bay corner shop.

To get to the shop was a bit of an obstacle course as it was out of bounds.

But he who dares wins – sometimes.

You left the grounds by one of two routes. Through the tennis courts at Williams Park, into the bushes and then come walking down the road to the shop. Alternatively under Hoppy's garage, through a culvert that ran out to the beach and a mad dash along the beach to the shop.

If Hoppy was in a sporting mood he'd be looking through binoculars from his bedroom, see us scuttling through the bush, hop in his car, meet us at the shop and ask if we'd like a ride back to school.

LETTER WRITING

After lunch Sunday we all had to write a letter home.

The whistle would go and we had to get to the classrooms to write the letters. Hoppy or the teacher in control read all the letters. Because of this they usually read: Dear Mum and Dad, how are you getting on, I am fine. Hoppy would then give you an addressed envelope and when putting the letter in, we would slip another note in. Usually saying: Please Mum, send more tuck, or other messages wanting something – not for the teacher's eyes.

SUNDAY TEATIME

At some time over the years I was at Wellesley, for a treat they started having assorted cakes at Sunday night tea. When we came in from our line up we used to pick up our big thick cocoa mugs from the trolley, then went to our appropriate tables. The tables held twelve to fifteen boys (a class). On each table were two plates piled high with the assorted cakes.

The idea, if you were quick and before grace was said (grace was said while standing up), was to grab the best looking cake and put it under your mug. By the time grace was over and you sat down again, the slow ones ended up with the dregs of the assorted cakes.

FOOD

I remember the food. Who could forget. Eight odd years and every Wednesday we had mince, swede and potato. The porridge left a lot to be desired. The old oatmeal was soaked overnight. Had lumps as thick as your finger and about two inches long. I'm only just starting to eat porridge again at the age of sixty-five.

Bread used to arrive from Denhard Bakery in a van and a trailer. Smelt really good.

Some days you got fresh bread and we thought if we ate it flat out we would get fresh bread all the time. Somehow it didn't work out. Stale bread seemed to win out. Bakery was nick-named 'Damm hard bread'.

Puddings left a lot to be desired. I.e: cold macaroni pudding. Some of the new kids were too fussy to eat some of the meals, but by the end of their first week they were putting it away with the rest of us.

Anyway, we got used to the meals and in the end they didn't do us any harm. In retrospect, probably a healthy (but hard to stomach) diet. When we came out we would eat anything.

HOMEWORK

The whistle would go after tea and Standard five and six would go up to do their homework.

Hoppy would come up and mark it. Quite often there would be a queue of boys waiting with their finished homework just when Hoppy arrived. Usually, if the first one got it wrong, the whole lot would get it wrong. Owing to doing it after school and before tea a little bit of copying would be going on. If we got it wrong we had to stay there until we got it right. If we got it right quite often Hoppy would say "you've all done very well" and give us another lot for our troubles.

When the day boys came next day and some of them got it wrong Hoppy would say "was this a bit hard for your Mother?" Which always got a bit of a laugh.

CHEMISTRY

Chemistry with Hoppy was an experience at Wellesley not to be missed. One of the things he loved to do was get a jar of liquid oxygen/hydrogen and dip into it a dead rat or anything that bounced, like tennis balls. When they came out of the mixture frozen and you hit them with a hammer, bits of frozen rat and tennis ball would fly everywhere. Hoppy would tell us if we stuck our finger in it, it would end up like the dead rat.

We used to play around with a bit of mercury Hoppy brought and rub it into pennies. It made them silver and we would try to hock them off as half crowns. Sometimes you got away with it at the dairy.

Another trick was to get a real big weather balloon, fill it up with hydrogen and oxygen and let out a little bit of air over a bunsen burner. There'd be a bang and a drop of water would appear. Everyone was impressed until the day he had a big balloon and was doing the demo.

The kid that was holding the balloon caught the flame – there was a real big bang. It cleared all the classrooms, one to six upstairs and downstairs. Boys all running out dazed and screaming “what’s happened?” They also heard it at the Days Bay dairy.

Hoppy had a rash right down the side of his face and down the front of his ear, which remained deaf for three months.

Where was O.S.H. in those days?

BEDTIME

(In the dormitories at night after lights turned out by the teacher and good nights said).

The main dormitories were over Hoppy's lounge and dining room. When the lights were out, like all good boys we started talking. Hoppy would come halfway up the stairs and tell us to keep quiet and go to sleep. The braver ones would start talking again.

You'd hear him coming back up the stairs with his permanent limp. The door burst open, light turned on and he'd say "I've warned you once – who's making all the noise?"

The ones that owned up were told to wait outside his office after breakfast for a meeting with Doctor Tawse. There was no more noise but the ones going to wait outside the office didn't sleep too well, wondering how many they'd get.

After breakfast you waited outside his office, the other kids gloating as they walked past.

Hoppy would come bursting out from his bathroom under the stairs or his office.

Sometimes he'd give you the strap. Other times he'd say "what the hell are you doing here – get out of my sight quick" and no strap!

GUY FAWKES

Guy Fawkes was something to look forward to at Wellesley. A week or so before, a lot of the older classes were allowed to go to the top of Ferry Road after school and get branches of pine trees, drag them down the road and make a bonfire on the beach.

On the morning of Guy Fawkes the standard six boarders were allowed to make a guy.

Before breakfast we took it round the streets behind the school, begging for money - "penny for the guy". On our travels we met up with some Eastbourne kids who came over and tossed our guy out of the wheelbarrow. Most annoyed, we went and tipped their guy out. Whereas our guy fell in a heap on the road, their one got up and ran away.

Any money raised went towards buying more fireworks to be let off at night with the school ones. Hoppy helped us make crackers with his own gunpowder mix which was made at chemistry.

He also must have had good friends in Wellington. He used to get distress rockets.

All in all it was a good night with plenty of big bangs.

After the bonfire was over the parents had a cup of tea and cakes with Hoppy while the boys had a raspberry bun and a mug of cordial.

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

One left home healthy to go to boarding school at the age of five, only to start the primers with a wave of illnesses. With scarlet fever we were put in an isolation hospital under the Trentham grandstand. When I was there I ended up with chicken pox. Finally got out only to get mumps and measles. Then had to be kept an extra year in the primers.

Finally got into the standards and was running around on top of the desks, fell out the window and broke my arm (on a Sunday night). No rushing to hospital there.

"Don't worry Dave, we'll take you in on Monday".

They weren't feeling the pain like I was. In the Hutt hospital they set the arm Monday.

Only to check and find it had to be re-set as they'd done it wrong.

My arm was in plaster for three months. Finally got it out of plaster. Nurses waving goodbye and saying it had healed well. Went back to school, jumped over the tennis court net, fell. Back at Hutt hospital that night with the same arm broken again.

Didn't go down too well with the hospital staff.

Now to standard four. Had appendix out. Was in hospital in Martinborough. Most people got out in a week but I was stuck there for a couple of months due to inflammation and had to wait until it settled down before I could have the operation.

After that I made it to standard six with no further problems.

TRUTH OR DARE

As you moved up in the classes, so you moved up into the dormitories. One of the best dormitories was called the balcony which is situated above the main entrance.

Originally there were no fire escapes, but at some stage something had to be put in. Which happened to be a rolled up rope ladder stored in the balcony under a bed. A far cry from the wooden structures of today. Hoppy used to go to town every Friday and return quite late. This meant the rope ladder was a sure goer for 'truth or dare'. We always took on the dare. Throw the rope ladder out the window, climb down and bring a stone up from the gravel drive (to prove you'd been right down). Good fun until the nights Hoppy came back early, saw kids frantically climbing up the rope ladder in their pyjamas. Some got caught in his headlights. Next thing Hoppy would come up the stairs and the offenders told to wait outside his office after breakfast.

PASSIONFRUITS

After school we were quite often left to our own devices until the whistle went for tea. A lot of us knew where there were some nice vines of banana passionfruit. At the end of the road, just up the hill a bit, on a track called the zig-zag. The passionfruit climbed over a woman's garden fence and shrubs, at the end of a long path. The house was set well back, and the woman looked out to see ten or twelve kids in the vines, pinching the passionfruits. She came running down the path waving a broom and we all took off, never to be seen again. Unfortunately for us she rang the headmaster and Hoppy told us at assembly that all the boys who were pinching fruit had to line up outside his office. It ended up being quite a long line. We all had to pay two shillings.

GHOSTS

The primers dormitory used to have a window between the ceiling and the wall. Two brothers, Roger and Peter Holyoak, for a lark used to go down there after lights out and when the little darlings were just about asleep. The brothers, standing on each others shoulders, would make flapping noises at the window. All the young kids in the dormitory would be squealing and screaming. I think it was the first initiation to the Wellesley ghost.

LAWNS – PLAYING FIELD

When we first went to Wellesley there were no such things as motor mowers or gardeners. Hoppy would say “I want six of you to mow the playing field”. This was done with old hand mowers. The selected ones would grab the mowers, charge off down to the football field, running everywhere and carving our initials in the long grass. One of the teachers would come down, blow his whistle and line us up and tell us to do the job properly. Eventually Dick Levin’s father recommended they get some sheep. So ended the hand mowing. When the sheep arrived we reckoned they made a far bigger mess than we ever did. Anyone for marbles?

WHO’S GOT THOSE LOLLIES?

In the dormitories you usually had a friend in the bed next to you. If you had any lollies (rare occasions) one of the tricks after lights out was while scoffing a lolly or biscuit to rustle the papers and say loudly “who’s got those lollies? – you know you have to share them”. Not too many got shared.

THE BIG PLAY LUNCH SCAM

At Wellesley there were day boys and boarders. The day boys brought their own sandwiches and biscuits for morning playtime. The boarders would get friendly and say "if you give us a biscuit now, we'll swap you one when we get ours at afternoon tea time". This worked quite well for the boarders. The boarders never got biscuits in the morning, but when school was finished they could eat their own biscuits from home if they had them. If not the school supplied bread with butter and jam.

So at afternoon tea time the day boys would be waiting for their bus and the promised snack. The boarders would be hiding behind the sheds. Finally the bus would go and the day boys missed out. Needless to say, they wised up pretty quickly.

MANNERS A SPECIALITY

In the prospectus one of the features of the school's education was 'manners a speciality'. This was well proven when I went home for the holidays and one of the stock drovers was staying on the farm for sheep mustering. When we were having tea I promptly told him he wasn't holding his knife and fork correctly, to the embarrassment of my mother.

The table went silent for a moment.

WHO WAS THE BEST?

Out from the classrooms were the outside toilets. Three toilet pans and a concrete urinal. There was a little window above the urinal. One of the tricks was to see who could pee out of the window.

It was worth the strap if you got caught.

THE GYM

The gym consisted of one big room with a large fireplace at one end. All the years I was there I only saw the fire lit once. The sports equipment was sensational. The only thing they had was one medicine ball, which used to sit in the corner and that's where it stayed. That was our gym.

JELLIES AND PEANUT BUTTER

At Wellesley we were really quite well fed, but being boys we always seemed to be hungry. Off the servery there was the school pantry which had all the jams, etc. One of the tricks of the boys was to sneak into the pantry, grab a jar of peanut butter and packets of jellies. Go hide in the bushes off the vegetable garden and scoff spoonfuls of peanut butter. The jellies we put into jars, shook them up with water and left them, covered, under a bush until the next day, thinking we were going to have jelly. Only to find that they hadn't set and all we had was sugared water.

STONE FIGHTS

Quite often on a Friday night after tea we were left to our own devices. A lot of the boarders would congregate behind the classrooms where the clotheslines were and have a stone fight with the boys that lived around Days Bay, and went to the Muratai School, Eastbourne. We always thought it was quite good fun and would go on till dark when the whistle called us in to go to bed, or until irate parents broke it up. Strangely I have no recollection of anyone being hurt.

PUBLIC FLOGGING

After school some days we were sent on a cross country run. You went to the end of Ferry Road, through the pine trees, in a big loop round the ridges and came down the zig-zag track. (Now the school's cross country course.) At the end of Ferry Road there was an old house down in the trees. We were convinced it was haunted and thought we'd have to sort it out. We didn't go inside but broke a few windows (as you do), pushed over the outside toilet, then took off and finished our run. That night the police came and it wasn't haunted, but we were hunted. The next morning all involved had to stand in the front of the assembly while the Lord's prayer etc. was said, and we were to get a public flogging. Sounds really bad. Public flogging consisted of getting six of Hoppy's strap in front of the whole school. We gave up on ghost houses after that.

MAINTAINING THE GROUNDS

The lawns around the school were mostly mowed by the boys with hand mowers. As for the gardens, they were left mainly unattended unless there was a sports day coming up, or some other function where the parents were coming. Then Kitty Stevens (the headmasters wife), would take some of the boys under her wing and we would all be frantically weeding the flower gardens in preparation for the big day.

VEGIE GARDEN

The vegie garden was to the left side of the classrooms and looked quite big to a six year old. They used to grow quite a few vegies for a start, due to being just after the war. It was well remembered because on the path through the middle of the garden was a forty four gallon drum with a tap above it. Inside the drum was a big bag of manure underwater, which stank to high heaven. This was bucketed out and poured around the vegies. As times prospered again the vegie garden was dispensed with.

FORTS AND WHIPS

Bordering the old vegetable garden there was bush and a stream running down to the playing field with a path out halfway to the tennis courts. This was known as the rose garden, with very few roses. Through the school terms, (I don't know how it was communicated), but everyone would arrive with the respective games – marbles for one term, tops for another. One of the terms we used to make forts in the rose garden.

There were a lot of forts in there. Fort builders would pinch stuff from each other. We also made whips with flax. Pretty good fun for boys. We would spend all our spare time there. Looking back now, Hoppy even used to help and seemed to encourage it. Playing there after tea and in any spare time, until Hoppy came out where we used to assemble under the sick bay, and give a loud whistle. The kids seemed to pour out from everywhere. Look out if the whistle went and some of the boys were missing. Then you were in trouble!!

SCHOOL MILK

School milk was for making young kids stronger. At Wellesley the milk was left at the front gate. The boys had to bring it up (two boys to a crate) to the school, which seemed quite a hike in those days, and take the empty crates back down again when it was finished. Milk monitoring wasn't the most favourite of jobs.

POCKET MONEY

Parents gave Hoppy pocket money for haircuts and incidentals. The parents thought the boys got a bit given to them for odd occasions, but apart from the haircuts (which weren't too often), the boys never saw much of the pocket money. Still wondering where it went. We think it was pocket money for the school.

FRUIT

The Wellesley boy boarders had quite an eye for the fruit trees around the district. The hunger instinct seemed to tell you when the fruit was ready. Quite often we'd get caught and sometimes the punishment (if not lined up for the strap), was to line up for a spoon of castor oil. I quite like castor oil.

CHESS FOR TOFFEE MILKS

One of the teachers, Mr Stapleton, who lived at the school, was a keen chess player. When we were in bed waiting for lights out he would give some of the boys a game of chess. The incentive for the boys to try and beat the teacher was a toffee milk bar. This was a good incentive. He didn't get beaten very often, but he did end up teaching a lot of boys to play chess.

LETTING OFF STEAM

In this day and age there seems to be a lot of bullying going on at the schools. All the years I was at Wellesley and we were left to our own devices in our spare time, there was never any bullying. Apart from an odd fight where everyone formed a ring yelling "fight, fight" which seemed to clear the air properly.

STREETS AHEAD

Once you got to the standards at Wellesley the teaching seemed far superior than other schools. We used to have oratory, poetry, algebra, geometry, maths, history, latin, french, english, science/chemistry (Hoppy's favourite), and social studies. When I left Wellesley in standard six I went to Wairarapa College and didn't learn anything new the whole year I was there.

So at the end of that year I turned fifteen and as I was going farming, I left.