

NAMBOUR: THE MODEL RURAL SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Rural Schools of Queensland. Starting with Nambour in 1917, the scheme incorporated thirty schools, and operated for over forty years. The rhetoric of the day was that boys and girls from the senior classes of primary school would be provided with elementary instruction of a practical character. In reality, the subjects taught were specifically tailored to provide farm skills to children in rural centres engaged in farming, dairying or fruit growing. Linked to each Rural School was a number of smaller surrounding schools, students from which travelled to the Rural School for special agricultural or domestic instruction. Through this action, the Queensland Department of Public Instruction left no doubt it intended to provide educational support for agrarian change and development within the state; in effect, they had set in motion the creation of a Queensland yeoman class. The Department's intention was to arrest or reverse the trend toward urbanisation – whilst increasing agricultural productivity – through the making of a farmer born of the land and accepting of the new scientific advances in agriculture.

NAMBOUR: THE BIRTH OF THE MODEL RURAL SCHOOL

The Rural School Initiative

The Rural School is an important experiment in education which the Department is making; upon the result of that experiment will depend very largely the future organization of Agricultural Education in this State (QSA Item Id. 16777, Re Temporary appointment of Miss Meredith to the Rural School at Nambour).

The Queensland Under Secretary of Public Instruction, John Douglas Story, in his personal biographic notes, highlighted his Department's change in attitude towards agricultural education between 1906 and 1917. In this period the educational focus on agrarianism moved from the implementing of 'schemes for the encouragement and fostering of horticulture, aboriculture and elementary agriculture' to the 'opening of Nambour Rural School' with its agricultural based curriculum in January 1917 (QSA Item Id. 934366). In one decade under Story's guidance Queensland's primary education system moved from an adherence to the three Rs, towards a student-centred model embracing practical subjects and vocational training, with agricultural education as one of the centre-pieces.

To facilitate the acceptance of agricultural education into Queensland schools, Story created the position of Teacher of Agriculture in 1909 and appointed James C. Stubbin to the post. Stubbin worked tirelessly to incorporate practical and theoretical agriculture into Queensland schools, but with only modest success. By 1913, Story realised that despite the massive amount of work performed by Stubbin, agricultural education was not developing within the primary schools to the degree that had been envisaged. The shortcomings of the program stemmed from too many schools attempting to teach agriculture with insufficiently trained teachers and the resistance these teachers and some inspectors to the reforms. Part of this resistance can be attributed to an error in judgement by Story. Possibly as a cost saving measure, Story did not promote Stubbin when he appointed him. In the status conscious profession of teaching, Stubbin and the advice he had to offer were often met with contempt from higher ranking teachers and inspectors (QSA Item Id. 995741, 996546). Stubbin denounced this attitude in a talk he delivered to the Darling Downs Teachers' Association, telling those present, that in, 'the past few years gardening had been brought under the notice of the teachers of Queensland. It had been welcomed by some, tolerated by some, and totally ignored by others' (QSA Item Id. 995792. Newspaper clipping of unknown origin, c.1914). What Story and Stubbin desired was a central school dedicated to agricultural education and staffed by skilled agricultural educators. This was the beginning of the Rural School experiment.

In 1916, Story was invited to the Directors of Education Conference in Adelaide. At the conference, Story expressed that he felt himself 'somewhat an interloper', but this did not obstruct him from playing a central role in the discussions concerning agricultural education (QSA Item Id. 664470. Story's response). Story presented the concept of the Rural Schools to the Directors present: Peter Board from New South Wales; Frank Tate, Victoria; Cecil Andrews, Western Australia; William McCoy, Tasmania and Reginald Roe from Queensland. In turn the Directors, particularly Tate, quizzed Story on the scheme's fine details. Some Directors then proffered their State's method of agricultural education, intimating as they did, the benefits of their technique (QSA Item Id. 664470. 'Rural Schools', p.33).

Director Tate opened the line of inquiry, announcing; 'I suggest, Mr Story, that you give us a concise statement of first, a rural school; secondly, why you chose it; and thirdly, what is the type of pupil?' Nambour, Story explained, had been selected due to its location mid-way between Brisbane and Gympie. Both of these locations had high schools and the Department had no intention of establishing a high school at Nambour. The region, he continued, is agricultural and 'will never become a commercial or industrial centre', and this, he stated, compels most of the children in the district to lean towards farming pursuits. Story proceeded to outline for the Directors the subjects the students would be engaged in, and the hours that would be devoted to them. He further explained that the quality of the rail service to the town, coupled with the large number of smaller schools in close proximity to Nambour, would see between twenty and forty external students receiving the special instruction, with a total of fifty to sixty students, once those from Nambour

were added (QSA Item Id. 664470. Rural Schools, p.33). Once the Rural School was in operation, Story's estimates proved to be quite conservative. The returns for the school, opening in January 1917, show that eighty-five of the ninety-seven senior level students were enrolled in the Rural School; the remaining twelve had opted to progress along the traditional path towards a state scholarship. The eighty-five Rural School students comprised fifty-five from Nambour and thirty from the surrounding district's schools (QSA Item Id. 16777. Summary of first month).

Tate responded to the plan Story had outlined, stating Victoria was moving along very similar lines in what they termed 'higher elementary school'. Quizzed again by Tate, this time on details of the domestic instructor, Story informed the group that initially the school would utilise a visiting teacher, who had passed the relevant course at the central technical college, aided, once necessary, by a junior teacher. Tate suggested the establishment of a second school between Brisbane and Nambour and between the two they could keep a domestic instructor fully employed. Answering Tate's continued questioning; Story advised the Directors that tinsmithing and blacksmithing would be handled in the same way with a visiting teacher from the central technical college until a fulltime position was required. Tate again offered Story Victoria's solution: a 'teacher of manual arts'. This, Tate explained, would be a boy of 17 years with excellent school results and who had passed the senior public examination. The boy would then attend a three year course at Melbourne High School, followed by a period at a workman's college, where he would receive an education in each of the manual trades. 'It is a very costly form of training,' Tate added (QSA Item Id. 664470. 'Rural Schools', pp. 33-36). With Nambour set to start in six months the idea of a second Rural School or a 'manual arts teacher' of the Victorian type would be unworkable in both time and money for the cash-strapped Queensland Department of Public Instruction and Story never considered either option (QSA Item Id. 995792. 'Agriculture in Secondary Schools'). More Rural Schools were to come, but Nambour needed to first prove that the experiment was viable.

Story's reluctance to sway to the Victorian Director's approach was justified. Tate was no fan of agricultural education. As Rodney Martin points out, Tate's 'concern for placing a purposeful emphasis upon agricultural education in a State considered to be over-industrialized never really moved him. He [Tate] discarded the agricultural concept in favour of a more general approach in education as soon as the opportunity presented itself.' The 'higher elementary schools' he spoke of, were, according to Martin, Tate's means of circumventing the 'political realities of the day' to build the high schools he desired (Martin, 1979).

The agricultural education schemes from the other states provided no great lessons for Story. Armed with the conclusions of a four week fact finding tour Stubbin had undertaken in the southern states in 1914, and his own tour in April of that year, Story had his mind set on what was required from his Department, for Queensland to achieve agrarian reform – and it was not agricultural high schools for the rich city

boys or the non systemised, haphazard approach taken by the other states (QSA Item Id. 995792. 'Agriculture in Secondary Schools').

Story took the initiative and moved that 'schools be established in rural centres, so as to give, in addition to higher primary work, a direct practical training in subjects specially useful to rural workers'. The motion was carried and a resolution passed by all present (QSA Item Id. 664470. Resolution 44, "Agricultural Education," p. 8). Despite the resolution being passed by all the Directors, the only State to instigate the resolution was Queensland. Similar programs to the Queensland Rural Schools did eventually start in the other states, but not until after the mid-1920s (QSA Item Id. 664472, 995760).

The Rural School Concept

On 29 January 1917, Nambour State Primary School No. 363 became Nambour Rural School. Editor of the *Chronicle*, Andrew Thynne – acting in his capacity as the Secretary of the Nambour State School Committee – recorded that Departmental approaches were made around 18 September, 1915, for approval to instigate a new agrarian based education model (Thynne, 1928). This approval seemed superfluous. The Minister for Public Instruction, Herbert Hardacre had already agreed to the Rural School concept and the intention to establish it at Nambour. The Minister explained the reasons. There were Nambour's 'special advantages' of close proximity to Brisbane, centrality to a number of schools and a wide variety of agricultural pursuits in the surrounding region. Thynne reported this in the *Chronicle* on 3 September 1915 and it was the community's first notice of the proposed school changes. The intention, the article stated, was to add an agricultural high school to the State School. Thynne wrote, 'scholarships may be taken out, enabling children to specialise in agriculture' ("A Rural School," 1915). Further advice about the proposed changes was not forthcoming. However Thynne did glean some information from Brisbane's *Telegraph*. On 29 October 1915, he reported that the Department of Public Instruction's actual intention was to provide a 'topping' class comprising agricultural and domestic studies to the primary school ("Nambour's Rural School," 1915). Full details of the 'experiment as it is now proposed to try in Nambour' were finally provided by the Head Teacher, T.G. Fisher at a public meeting on 19 November 1915. Fisher's explanatory introduction to the new curriculum intimated ulterior motives behind the agrarian training. 'The ideal community', Fisher announced,

is one in which a proper proportion of the inhabitants are connected with the primary industries. All food and clothing come directly or indirectly from the soil. The congestion of enormous numbers of people in capital cities is neither a benefit nor a blessing to a community; and it is quite certain that the State which most successfully solves the problem of how to keep a due proportion of her people on the land as primary producers, living happy, prosperous and contented lives, is laying with a firm and ample base the foundations of her national existence (Fisher, 1915).



Figure 1. Nambour State School, Mitchell Street Nambour. ca. 1915. The School was located adjacent to the Moreton Sugar Mill. The mill chimney is visible on the far right and the head teacher's residence is pictured on the far left. Negative number: 87491. (Item held by John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, ca. 1915).

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Fisher explained to the assembled group of Nambour's citizens that upon completing the ordinary fourth year of schooling, a branch in the educational path was to be chosen. Children could continue their schooling along the traditional path leading to scholarship, or they could enter the new option offered by the Rural School. This branch directed those choosing the agrarian based curriculum away from the possibility of a state scholarship. Originally the concept called for a transition to the Rural School curriculum to occur on completion of the fifth year of schooling – so as not to disadvantage any child from having the opportunity of progressing to higher education. This option disappeared in the final design of the school's curriculum, and by association, ensured those taking the Rural School option remained in the bush. Surprisingly, this change was at the request of a

Deputation from the North Coast School Committee Association who felt that 'a great deal hinges on the fact that a lot of our country children are behind in their education. They are physically strong but not up to the fifth class standard set down for admission to special subjects' (QPP, 1915, 1917).

Under the Rural School curriculum, both boys and girls were expected to devote 6½ hours per week to English, including history and geography; 5 hours of the week were spent on arithmetic, mensuration and simple accounts; 1 hour for drawing; 2 hours on science; and 2½ on drill and recreation. Boys would then dedicate 4 hours to woodwork; 2 hours to blacksmithing and tinsmithing; with the remaining 2 hours set aside for practical agriculture. The Rural School girls spent 3 hours learning sewing; 2 hours on cookery; a further 2 hours on fruit-preserving and laundry work; with the final hour training in housekeeping. In addition to the subjects with an obvious orientation towards farm life, the traditional topics taken by all Rural School students were tailored to have an agrarian aspect. Geography, for example, concentrated on the commercial geography of both Australia and the British Empire, whilst the mathematics covered the 'recording of simple transactions such as occur in household and farm management'. In the science classes the students learnt local geology, physics, biology, botany and chemistry pertinent to farming and farm life. This science was complemented with lessons in the composition and testing of milk, herd testing, and the manufacturing of butter and cheese. Rounding out this science was instruction in human physiology, covering all systems of the human body, along with how to treat injuries resulting from accidents like fractures, bleeding, poisoning, or shock (QSA Item Id. 16777. "Rural Secondary School Nambour: Subjects of Instruction").

Outfitting and Upgrading the School

In 1915, Edward Alder, the Inspector of Works, reviewed the infrastructure at Nambour State School in anticipation of its use as the first Rural School. His initial cost estimate to make the changes proposed by Head Teacher T.G. Fisher was £1250. Minister Hardacre advised; this experiment into agricultural education was to be done in 'the cheapest way possible'. He amplified the point stating;

This does not mean the establishment of a new school: it does not even mean a special enlargement of the existing school: it merely means making the necessary additions a little larger, utilising the space underneath the addition, and putting up an inexpensive workshop.

Hardacre approved £185 for the renovations (QSA Item Id. 16777. 15/11374). Despite the Minister's initial objections he authorised the more extensive renovations on 10 February, 1916. Once the cost of the new tools, materials and consumables for the vocational classes were added the Department of Public Instruction had invested almost £1800 to start their experiment in agricultural education. Despite the vast improvements made to the school it still had a major deficiency. The school, at Mitchell Street, was hampered by confined land space with no room to expand due

to the sugar mill next door. There was simply not enough room to accommodate any serious practical agricultural on the school site. Given the considerable investment that had been made in renovating the school it is surprising the land required for practical agriculture was not purchased (QSA Item Id. 16777. "Proposed Rural School and Technical Workshops, State School Nambour: Revised Estimate of Costs"). A suitable site had been located by Head Teacher Fisher, and after being valued, receiving a thorough inspection and soil testing by the Land Commissioner, the Director of Fruit Culture, and the Department of Public Lands respectively. The purchase was recommended by all concerned. The Lands Department report had even included the caveat 'in the event of the farm side of the school failing, Mitchell's land must in the future become valuable for cutting up purposes for town allotments' (QSA Item Id. 16777 "Confidential report on farm school land at Nambour", 15/44037, 15/44038, Res 23712, Res 237 N). Following three weeks of waiting for a decision, the lands owner contacted the Department of Public Instruction to seek an answer. Story responded, writing to Mitchell that he had been directed to inform him that 'the Department does not intend to purchase a site for Rural School purposes at Nambour at present' (QSA Item Id. 16777, 16/684). No reason was provided, however it seems most likely to be an objection over the discrepancy between the asking price of £600 and the valuation of £525. This, no doubt, compounded the Minister's fears of over expenditure on what was, at this stage, still an experiment in education. The Minister made this clear, stating in a memo to Story;

In view of the state of the fund I think that it would be best on the whole to see how the new school succeeds on the purely educational and science side before large expenditure is involved in buying land for practical agricultural purposes (QSA Item Id. 16777, Hardacre to Story).

Stubbin pleaded to have land purchased as an agricultural plot again in 1919, but he was unsuccessful and it would not be until 1931, after years of insistence from Stubbin, the successive Head Teachers, and the school community, that Nambour Rural School relocated to the Carroll Street site and sufficient land was available for serious practical agriculture lessons within the school grounds (QSA Item Id. 16778).



Figure 2. The additions to Nambour in preparation for starting as a Rural School in 1917. Queensland State Archives, Item Id. 16777.



Figure 3. Nambour Rural School, ca 1919. Showing the improvements made to the school when it was upgraded for the new Rural School training. Picture Sunshine Coast M603300.

A Visit by the Inspectors

In February, 1917, District School Inspector, A.S. Kennedy and R. Riddell, Head of the Central Technical College, visited Nambour to inspect and report on the effectiveness of the new school. The Inspectors reported that the rural side of the school had sixty-nine students enrolled, which included twenty-two from the surrounding schools of Cooroy, Yandina, North Arm, Eudlo, Mooloolah, Palmwoods, Bli Bli, Rosemount and Landsborough. The remaining forty-seven students were from Nambour. All students from the district's schools attending the Rural School were provided with free rail passes. Enrolment records show forty-two students were engaged in dressmaking, thirty-five took up cookery, with twenty-seven doing woodwork and sixteen in both the plumbing and leatherwork classes. It was decided to delay the blacksmithing classes until the following year. The dressmaking and cookery classes were held in two rooms which had been built under one of the main school buildings with the Inspectors reporting that the rooms are 'well lighted, well ventilated, and present a very pleasing appearance'. The manual classes of woodwork, tinsmithing and leatherwork used a detached workshop on the school grounds, which proved satisfactory but could benefit through the tarring of the cinder floor. This had been approved, though it was not an immediate option, due to the Commonwealth restrictions on the use of tar. For safety reasons the inspectors suggested that before blacksmithing classes began, the woodwork students, with the help of their instructor, could erect an additional building specifically for these lessons. All classes were attended by a larger number than was originally anticipated and the inspectors organised for more stoves and sewing machines along with a large increase in cooking utensils, woodwork and tinsmith tools. They arranged for the immediate start of evening classes in dressmaking, with acetylene lanterns and the necessary carbide supplied by the Department. Before the Inspectors left they impressed upon the Head Teacher, T.G. Fisher, the importance of 'fostering any apparent demand for evening instruction in any Rural School subject.' The inspectors proposed that the classes for adults be conducted along the same lines as those for the Central Technical College and the plan received Departmental approval on 3 April, 1917 (QSA Item Id. 16777, "A Visit to Nambour Rural School, 15 February, 1917").

With the emphasis on the commercial subjects and only theoretical agriculture being taught at Nambour, criticisms that this was more technical college than agricultural school had some validity; a situation that deepened further with the introduction of typing and accounting to the curriculum in 1918 (QSA Item Id. 16778, 17/22352). To alleviate this problem, Nambour, from its beginning in 1917, used a system of linked-up schools. Agricultural plots were established at Woombye, Yandina and Mapleton. The head teachers at each of these schools were enthusiastic about the Rural School concept and possessed 'considerable knowledge of one or more branches of agriculture'. In addition, the boys occasionally received instruction from the Department of Agriculture and Stock experts. Theoretical agriculture lessons were taught at Nambour Rural School and the boys would then put this theory into practice at the various plots located within the linked-up schools. Although this

system presented some drawbacks, the boys gained invaluable experience testing crops and stock across a diverse range of soils and conditions within the one local environment (QSA Item Id. 16778, "Nambour Rural School-Series of Articles by F.M. Bayley, Esq. M.L.A").



Figure 4. Rural School students leaving Nambour by special train for an excursion to the linked up school at Woombye and receiving expert advice from local pineapple growers on a visit to Woombye State School. Queensland State Archives, Item No. 16780.

Nambour Rural School was the model for a total of thirty similar schools spaced along the Queensland coast as far north as Mossman and south to Stanthorpe and Goondiwindi. The Rural Schools operated for over forty years between 1917 and 1958, with many of the schools still having an agrarian bias to their curriculums as a legacy to their Rural School beginnings. Through this action, the Queensland Department of Public Instruction left no doubt that it intended to provide educational support for agrarian change and development within the State. In effect they had set in motion the creation of a Queensland yeoman class. The Department's intention was to arrest or reverse the trend toward urbanisation, whilst increasing agricultural productivity through the making of a farmer born of the land and accepting of the new scientific advances in agriculture.

Notes

To avoid any possible confusion over the term 'Rural' it has been capitalised when referring to the agricultural primary school scheme that is the focus of this paper.

Bibliography

Ideally primary sources are referenced through a numbered system. After consultation with the Editor it was agreed the best approach would be to adopt the following referencing system and to provide this brief explanation. The references are divided into primary and secondary sources and listed in numeric/alphabetic order. Each reference is to a unique archival file with the dot point providing additional information to assist in finding the specific page/s within that file. In-text references for any primary source lists the unique identifier and if this file is referenced more than once, sufficient information to direct the reader to the appropriate dot pointed reference.

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