

# A RURAL COMMUNITY AND ITS SCHOOL: CONTEMPORARY INSIGHTS THROUGH HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Dr Keith Moore  
Queensland University of Technology

## ABSTRACT

The experiences of two schoolmasters in the small isolated Western Port Bay fishing community of Hastings last century are relevant for today's practising teachers. Like present day teachers, they lacked the independence that could only be acquired by wealth, but were afforded a degree of status locally through their positions. Moreover, their successes and disappointments were largely dependent upon the opinions and evaluations of others. The first head teacher was a stately old gentleman, but he was unable to command respect from some parents and his authority was tested. His successor was young, confident and outgoing. Within a short time he had transformed the school. Under him, it occupied a prominent cultural and social position in the village.

## INTRODUCTION

A heightened understanding of the role of contemporary rural school teachers can be obtained through examining the experiences of teachers living in the past. Case studies are particularly worthwhile because circumstances can be discussed in detail and the implications of decisions and behaviour revealed. John Bettesworth Flemyng and his successor, Josiah Ingamells, who both taught in the small Western Port Bay fishing village of Hastings last century are particularly useful exemplars. An investigation of the social and educational functions of the pair enable contrasts to be made and conclusions to be reached about their behaviour under the circumstances that each was placed in. Picnics, concerts, balls and sporting functions were found to enhance public regard for the school whereas inflexibility and aloofness generated parental disaffection and complaints. A heightened awareness of the concerns and responsibilities of present day rural school teachers can be acquired through examining the experiences of rural school teachers in the past.

### John Bettesworth Flemyng

Captain James Hall was prominent in his support for a school at Hastings. His 1866 sketch of the village reveals that it consisted of about nine small cottages clustered around a pier. Hall's meticulous drawing reveals that he had a deep affection for the inhabitants. He decided that lives of the children living in this isolated fishing settlement should be enhanced by the provision of schooling. (*Australian News for Home Readers*, 23 February 1866)

A visiting school inspector, Gilbert Wilson Brown, initiated the commencement of a common school at Hastings. He called a public meeting. A local board was elected, and Hall was appointed correspondent. (V.P.R.S. 795. Unit 567, 71/13084)

James Hall found that prospective applicants were not attracted to Hastings because teachers' salaries were dependent upon their students' examination results, and numerous children in the village had been denied access to schooling. However John Bettesworth Flemyng of Sunbury visited and accepted Hall's offer of employment. (V.P.R.S. 795. Unit 567, 71/5904, 71/18335, 72/3849)

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Flemyng was born in Dublin in 1817. He had attended Trinity College where he gained a Bachelor of Arts. He was then appointed School Inspector under the Church Education Society that administered Anglican denominational schooling in Ireland. He inspected and *'examined upwards of one hundred and ten thousand children'*, over the next eleven years, but was dismissed when his managers found that he suffered from epilepsy. (V.P.R.S. 794. 74/937; 880. Unit 61, 58/745; C.E.S.R. 154/1.1/Vol. 4: 110, 122; D.S.E. Record: Flemyng)

In 1854, thirty-six-year-old Flemyng arrived in Melbourne. Within two years he had become an inspector of schools under Victoria's Denominational Board of Education. He was again persecuted when his supervisors found that he suffered from epilepsy. He forfeited his position and his marriage failed. (V.P.R.S. 1189. 283F, 58/632; Shipping Records – Unassisted Passages)

Employment in small, often unviable, rural schools followed. He taught at Whim Holes and at McCallum's Creek near Ballarat, as well as at Maryborough, Faraday and Aitken's Gap. His experiences varied. The unfloored weatherboard schoolhouse at McCallum's Creek had *'miserable forms and desks, no maps nor blackboards [and] scarcely any books or slates'*, but the headteacher had a granite schoolhouse built at Faraday and at Aitken's Gap Inspector Harry Sasse acknowledged his earnestness and ability. (V.P.R.S. 61. 60/393, 60/2036, 60/2696; 794. 74/937; D.S.E. Record: Flemyng)

In November 1871 Flemyng married Jessie Strachan, a domestic servant, at the Sunbury Presbyterian Church. (Marriage Certificate: 1871) Upon his departure the local board correspondent at Aitken's Gap acknowledged his excellent contribution to the school.

Flemyng commenced duties at Hastings in April 1872. He conducted his lessons in a little chapel, while James Hall and his wife, Elizabeth, solicited contributions for a new school building. (V.P.R.S. 794. 73/8499; D.S.E. Record: Flemyng) The villagers' average earnings were approximately £100 per year and there were no wealthy benefactors from whom the pair could obtain a large contribution. (V.P.R.S. 795. Unit 567, 73/7498)

Inspector Brown found that Flemyng was *'vigorous and able'*, and had good discipline. Jessie Flemyng provided needlework lessons gratuitously and she later completed an examination that entitled her to a salary of thirty pounds per year. (V.P.R.S. 794. 73/2791, 74/937; 903. 72/19812)

Flemyng commenced teaching in a new brick schoolhouse in February 1873. Elizabeth Hall had laid the foundation stone. Eighty-five pounds of the £210 cost had been raised locally. (V.P.R.S. 795. Unit 567, 73/4032, 73/7498, 73/15817)

An aggressively secular education bill had been passed by this time. At the beginning of 1873 education was made free, secular, and compulsory under a system of State Schools. Regional Boards of Advice replaced the local boards. Denominational schools were to forfeit state aid from the beginning of 1874.

Flemyng was proud of his new schoolhouse. He had a cupboard installed for a *'small juvenile lending library'* shortly after occupying the building, and he had a 400 gallon tank supplied to provide the children with drinking water four months later. (V.P.R.S. 795. Unit 567, 74/1645, 74/3932, 74/4504)

In October 1873 Joseph Baldwin reported that Flemyng was vigorous, able and hard working, but over age children reduced his examination percentage to forty. The schoolmaster unselfishly remained at the school. Later his results were irretrievably jeopardised by the enrolment of a

seventeen-year-old boy and a sixteen-year-old retarded girl. (V.P.R.S. 794. 77/13681; D.S.E. Record: Flemyng)

Flemyng was involved in numerous altercations with the high-spirited village youth. In 1877 the school's privies were '*completely upset*' and in the same year furniture was damaged during a concert and ball conducted by the local cricket club. Flemyng designated the offenders '*larrikins*' after undertaking the repairs. (V.P.R.S. 794. 75/29468, 75/36919; 795. Unit 567, 77/32027, 77/32825)

The former inspector had rejected parental involvement in his school's management. Some resented his independence. Flemyng's attire of a black coat and top hat, his connections with people in high office, his academic qualifications and the judgements he daily made upon the behaviour of his pupils, caused him to become alienated from some villagers.

The first of a succession of encounters that was to affect Flemyng's health commenced in 1875. A student refused to answer questions that the schoolmaster asked. On one of these occasions the boy gave the correct reply after receiving '*nineteen severe strokes*' with a cane. The boy's father claimed that Flemyng '*punished his son excessively*'. The Department determined that the punishment was justly inflicted, but that nineteen cuts may have been unreasonable. (V.P.R.S. 794. 75/23085, 75/24476)

The behaviour of the boy and his brother continued to anger Flemyng. They were frequently late for classes and sometimes left early. When Flemyng punished the boys for '*pelting and covering*' a disabled girl with mud, their father came to the school interrupted the teaching, and warned Flemyng that if his boys were again chastised he would '*hammer*' him. (V.P.R.S. 794. 76/23445)

The relationship between the family and Flemyng remained acrimonious. In 1878, after the boy's caning for vandalising a school desk, the father and several other parents drew up a petition stating that the school was dirty and that the academic standards were low. Inspector Andrew Loughrey inquired. He exonerated Flemyng from the charge of having a dirty school, but cautioned that '*strenuous efforts*' to improve the students academically were needed. A counter petition, signed by thirty parents, expressing satisfaction with the progress of their children, was later presented to Flemyng. (V.P.R.S. 640. Unit 869, 78/37580, 78/39761, 78/42451, 79/3016)

By late 1879 the numbers in the Hastings school entitled Flemyng to the assistance of a pupil teacher. Amelia Hall, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Captain Hall, was appointed over fifteen-year-old Eliza Lewis. Lewis was considered '*bright and intelligent*,' but Hall's examination results were superior. (V.P.R.S. 640, Unit 869. Unit 79/39340, 80/7522, 80/25410)

In October 1880 Inspector Charles Tynan examined the students after they had been subjected to typhoid in June, measles in August and bronchitis in September. A payment by results percentage of forty was again awarded, when the average throughout Victoria was seventy-three. Flemyng's request for special consideration was disallowed. (V.P.R.S. 640. Unit 869, 80/37937, *South Bourke and Mornington Journal* 2 March 1881)

There were frequently '*upward*' of 100 children in a classroom designed to cater for less than seventy during 1880. Flemyng and the Board of Advice successfully gained the Department's approval for a brick addition to the original schoolhouse. It was completed in April 1881. (V.P.R.S. 795, 567, 80/26519, 81/13737)

Inspector Tynan had reported that Flemyng was '*apparently a worthy old gentleman but really out of place in this school*' in May 1880. The following year he observed that the schoolmaster was '*becoming quite feeble and past work*'. (D.S.E. Record: Flemyng) Flemyng ceased duty on 23 April 1882. The *South Bourke and Mornington Journal* (13 December 1882) later stated that it was generally felt that the

*late headmaster J.B. Flemyng Esq. ... [was] a rare ould Irish gentleman [and] a profound scholar of the good old school, [but that] owing to the infirmities of old age, [his teaching had] been lacking that energy and force and animal spirits possessed only by those who [had] youth on their side.*

### **Josiah Ingamells**

Flemyng's successor, twenty-eight-year-old Josiah Ingamells, was capable. In 1875, respected educationalist George Link attributed the success of his Geelong school to Ingamells's '*untiring diligence*'. He elaborated upon Ingamells's ability:

*He is a thorough educator ... careful in the preparation of his lessons, unwearied in teaching and [he maintains] a firm discipline without fuss in the management of his class while he also succeeds in gaining the affections of his scholars.* (V.P.R.S. 794, 77/32268)

Upon his arrival Ingamells was dismayed to find that the annual examination for results was due in six weeks. The children were months over age, there were no First Royal Readers, the number of slates was inadequate and the easels were broken. The schoolmaster and his young pupil teacher assistant crammed the students with facts, figures and knowledge, and created a sense of apprehension in every child's home. (V.P.R.S. 640. Unit 869, 82/14831, 82/16995, 82/16381, 82/18029)

Inspector Tynan awarded the school a pass rate of 80% but over-age pupils reduced this to sixty. Tynan recommended that an assistant teacher be appointed, based upon the averages of 118 and 104 in the two weeks preceding the examination. Consequently, in August, Rosina North was appointed. (V.P.R.S. 640. Unit 869, 82/22616, 82/24951, 82/26869)

The young teachers transformed the school and the community's perceptions of it. Ingamells had found it '*in a wretched state*' but it soon stood '*high in the estimation of inspectors*' and parents through the teachers' hard work and enthusiasm. (V.P.R.S. 640 Unit 869, 85/968) The over age reduction of the examination percentage was soon lessened. In 1884 Inspectors Robert Craig and John Carmichael awarded the very high percentage of ninety-three which was only decreased to eighty-nine. (*Report of the Minister of Public Instruction*, 1884/5: 37; *Dandenong Advertiser*, 30 October 1884)

Parental involvement in school activities heightened public regard for the teachers. At the first concert in the school parents and visitors found the children's singing to be '*a very pleasing surprise*'. North '*acted as musical conductor*', played the piano accompaniment, and sang several songs. Ingamells later announced that the proceeds of the concert were to be devoted to a school picnic. He added that school concerts and picnics were to be conducted annually. (*South Bourke and Mornington Journal*, 13 December 1882; *Dandenong Advertiser*, 15 November 1882)

The picnic was equally successful. More than 300 parents and children attended. The abundance of cakes and fruit as well as favourable weather contributed to the day being '*one of the brightest*

*and happiest known in the quiet village of Hastings'. (South Bourke and Mornington Journal, 13 December 1882; Dandenong Advertiser, 29 November 1882)*

The parents and the community were lavish in their praise of the young teachers following the concert and picnic. They generally agreed that *'since the infusion of new and young blood into the teaching staff of [the] state school marvellous improvements and giant strides [had] taken place, both in discipline and learning'. (South Bourke and Mornington Journal, 13 December 1882)*

Ingamells's concern with the appearance of the school grounds had been apparent soon after his arrival. In his first six weeks he had nearly all the stumps and tussocks at the front and back of the school grubbed, and in April 1883, Charles Tynan praised the improved appearance of the playground. Trees were planted the following month. (V.P.R.S. 640. Unit 869, 83/14480; 795. Unit 567, 82/25656, 84/23752)

In his 1883 inspection Tynan found 143 children present in a building designed for 115. The teachers often taught the children outside to avoid the stifling conditions inside on fine days. (V.P.R.S. 795. Unit 567, 83/18734)

The attendance stabilised during 1884 but increased again the following year. In January 1886, the Department revised the allocation of classroom space per child. With an enrolment of 181 and an average attendance of 116, the need to lengthen the new schoolroom could no longer be ignored. (V.P.R.S. 640. Unit 567, 83/18734, 86/1973)

The enlarged school was a source of pride in the village. A reunion of old scholars was held to celebrate its completion. There was a large attendance of young people, who sang songs that they had learnt at school *'followed by dancing kept up until a late hour'. (Dandenong Advertiser, 30 September 1886)*

The construction of a railway line to Hastings transformed the villagers' lives. In 1882, the Railways Minister, Thomas Bent, had explained that the possibility of invasion from Sandy Point necessitated the development of a railway line to Hastings. When Russia attacked Afghanistan three years later many people acknowledged with alarm the vulnerability of Western Port Bay. They feared that a war between England and Russia was imminent and that Australia would be attacked. Senior military officers visited the district, heightening the concern. The threat of invasion subsided but the need for a railway line to the fishing village could no longer be questioned. (South Bourke and Mornington Journal, 2 August 1882, 15 April 1885; Dandenong Advertiser, 2 August 1882)

A local railway line was opened in September 1889. The school students marched to the station and upon the train's arrival sang the national anthem. A party was then attended in the Athenaeum. Sports were conducted later in the day, followed by a school social in the evening. (South Bourke and Mornington Journal, 18 September 1889; Mornington County Herald, 20 September 1889)

The railway transformed the little village. Several new buildings were erected, the most impressive being the Royal Hotel, which was *'a handsome brick structure of two storeys with a grand balcony on two sides'. (South Bourke and Mornington Journal, 23 October 1889, 29 January 1890; Dandenong Advertiser, 23 January 1890)*. There was also *'an air of prosperity noticeable in the well-kept houses and gardens' within the village. (Mornington County Herald, 21 February 1890)*

The boom of the late 1880s was followed by a crash. By mid-1893, Hastings, 'like every other place in Victoria [had] plunge[d] into an abyss of deep depression'. Few fishermen could withstand the low prices received for their produce without depriving their families of the necessities of life. District newspapers acknowledged cases of malnutrition and suicide. (*Dandenong Advertiser*, 4 February 1893; *Mornington Standard*, 4 February 1892; *Cranbourne and County Herald*, 14 July 1893)

Teachers were subjected to a campaign of cost cutting that saw working conditions, security, and educational standards plummet. The Minister of Public Instruction, Alexander Peacock closed and amalgamated numerous schools and enforced a rule that stipulated an average attendance of twenty pupils. The reduction in the number of schools enabled retrenchments to be made. (*Australasian Schoolmaster*, May 1893; Gregory, 1972: 90, 93) In 1892 sexagenarians had been compelled to retire followed two years later by teachers over fifty years of age who had contributed twenty-five years service to their profession. Female teachers who had 'husbands able to provide for them' were also compelled to retire without compensation. Additional economising measures included greatly increasing the proportion of pupil teachers in schools and abolishing payments to teachers upon their promotion. Children below the age of six were no longer enrolled and payment for teaching extra subjects and the awarding of scholarships to attend secondary schools was abandoned. In the four years to 1894 retrenchments almost halved the Civil Service and teachers were subjected to the most extensive of these economising measures. Consequently a state of 'unrest and fear' prevailed throughout the State School system. (Gregory, 1972: 22)

Amid these depressed economic circumstances the activities of a local defence unit provided the villagers with a source of pride. In December 1889 Major Alfred Otter, a representative of the Defence Department, announced that he was deputed to organise a local volunteer corps. The young men of the village eagerly enlisted. (*South Bourke and Mornington Journal* 18 December 1889; *Mornington Standard*, 21 December 1889)

They were placed under the local command of Lieutenants George Watson, David Ham and Waldemar Peddle. Two forty pounder Armstrong breechloaders were delivered to the village for training purposes. Some people objected to the noise of the huge guns which were positioned on the foreshore fifty yards from houses, but the competition to sink stationary and moving targets added interest to the villagers' lives. (*Mornington Standard*, 1 February 1890, 3 May 1890)

Ingamells was involved. His interest prompted him to form a cadet corps at his school. In 1891 he acquired a field artillery gun so that his cadets could gain a practical knowledge of gunnery. They also practised rifle shooting on the school range. (*Mornington Standard*, 20 September 1890, 20 August 1891)

The schoolmaster was supervising the target practice of about twelve cadets one Friday in August. A recruit had just fired and Ingamells gave the signal for the markers to examine his score. The headteacher then mentioned to a cadet that it was his turn to shoot next. He fired a bullet. One of the markers was shot. The bullet entered below the young cadet's jaw and exited close to his ear. The lad walked about fifteen yards and fell. (V.P.R.S. 24. Unit 430, 1005/1893)

The distraught schoolteacher sent for a doctor but the cadet died three minutes later. The doctor later found that a blood vessel had been pierced and that the lad could not have possibly survived the injury. (V.P.R.S. 24. Unit 430, 1005/1893; 640 Unit 870, 93/31345)

A magisterial inquiry the next day concluded that no blame could be attributed to anyone. However Ingamells felt that '*as with the Captain of a ship*', the responsibility rested on him. (V.P.R.S. 24. Unit 430, 1005/1893; 640 Unit 870, 93/31849)

The funeral, which was conducted with full military honours, was '*one of the most magnificent displays of the kind yet witnessed*' by the 450 inhabitants of the village. Eighty Victorian Rangers band members headed a procession of 180 soldiers. Lieutenant Ingamells was present and was observed as being '*terribly distressed*'. Four horses with riders drew the dismantled school gun carriage bearing the cadet's coffin that was covered with the Union Jack and wreathed in white flowers. The procession of pedestrians, horsemen and equestrians extended for over three-quarters of a mile and consisted of approximately 2000 people. (*Dandenong Advertiser*, 31 August 1893; *Mornington Standard*, 31 August 1893, *Cranbourne and County Herald*, 1 September 1893)

Two days after the funeral Ingamells confided that '*the onus of the accident [was] almost more than [he could] bear*'. He began suffering from '*severe nervous headaches*' and sought a month's leave. A doctor's statement explained that he was suffering from '*nervous shock*'. On 6 November the schoolmaster resumed teaching. (V.P.R.S. 640. Unit 870, 93/36035, 93/32987, 93/43125)

Tuesday 20 February 1894 was Ingamells's last day at the Hastings school. The following morning he departed to teach at Ballarat's Humffray Street school. The forty-year-old Ballarat appointee departed in a more dispirited frame of mind than when he had entered twelve years previously. In addition to carrying the burden of the shooting accident, Ingamells's enthusiasm had been undermined by a government whose actions were contemptuous of teachers. The departure of this outstanding headteacher was an incalculable loss for the villagers as his exceptional teaching ability and valuable moral and social influence was not emulated by his less capable successors. (D.S.E. Record: Ingamells)

## CONCLUSION

Student teachers and history students often compare the experiences of Flemyng and Ingamells at Hastings. They generally agree that Flemyng was proud and aloof and criticise his shunning of parental involvement in the running of his school. Many regard his age, nationality, and background as contributing to his alienation from many in the village. The low academic standards of his pupils are often seen as an additional cause of local resentment. But Flemyng's difficulties are seen by many as advantaging Ingamells. The young schoolmaster was capable, energetic and confident. His payment by results evaluations impressed parents. The villagers also welcomed his inclusive approach to teaching. His picnics, concerts and excursions generated excitement and parental support for his school. Clearly, the experiences of the teachers at Hastings last century can provide present-day students and teachers with valuable insights into the nature of living and teaching in a rural community.

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