

# Birkenhead Centenary

From NZ Farmer

In looking back up to 58 years ago, ones thoughts are crowded with many mental pictures of life as it was in those days. Predominantly a juvenile world perhaps but fringed with colour from a not so juvenile environment.

The predominant sphere of interests were no doubt centred round the home, the school, and other closely allied interests - recreational, religious and instructive.

Although Birkdale School had been opened in 1894 the writer's knowledge of it is mainly confined to it as a pupil during the years from 1911 to 1918. The crowded state of the lower classes is well remembered with three to a desk and some sitting on the floor. Miss Foster was the Infant Mistress in those days and later Miss McCowan and Miss Nora Bell. Later a third room was added and this provided considerable relief to the overcrowding. One remembers Miss Wylie and Miss Rose in Standard 1 and 2 room and Mr. Julian Brook in the higher standards. There are many like myself who will never forget that disciplinarian of the old school - "Old Brookie". Woe betide any who misbehaved or slacked. That personification of Nemesis would boom out "You do cubes". A cube consisted of a multiplication sum cubing three figures. The standard punishment was three of these sums for Standard 3, five for Standard 4, eight for Standard 5 and ten for Standard 6. A bad lapse into juvenile delinquency sometimes earned us twenty or even thirty cubes. How good we got at tables, because one cube wrong carried a penalty of two more to do. Punishment did not necessarily end here. A wicked looking cane often took its toll and boys would proudly display the marks for days. There are many that would not approve of this today, but I doubt if any of the old pupils who now respect the memory of "Old Brookie" would say that it did not do us good.

**Birkdale Primary 1894**

Out of school there was plenty of fun in the playground without much sporting apparatus; in fact the only thing I remember of a permanent nature was a Maypole for swinging on. We made up our own games though and football and cricket in season (and I don't think we worried much about the season either) were played. Not 15 or 11 a side but two big boys would pick sides and everyone who wanted to had a game. Then there was King



O'Seeny (spelling doubtful), marbles (always called alleys), tops, hopscotch for girls, and puss in the corner in the shelter shed on wet days.

I remember that Miss Ada Wylie, fresh from Training College and representative hockey player introduced the game and a cheap line of sticks for just a few shillings each which caused a lot of fun for a few years. Many had just titree sticks. There was no such thing as inter school competitions on account of lack of transport no doubt. We did however, on some years have a school picnic. On one or two occasions the school committee hired a Ferry Boat and we all went to Brown's Island for the day with transport to and from Birkdale wharf by Shank's pony. At the ripe old age of thirteen or fourteen we passed through the sixth standard and for most, that was it. Only a few in those days were able to go on to a Secondary school where I may say there was no need for remedial reading classes.

### THE THREE R'S

I don't want to get into any controversy regarding methods in the schoolroom - present day versus fifty old years ago. All I want to do is to state a few facts and that we did learn and we did qualify and pass Proficiency Certificate before passing out of Std. 6.

Early reading was on the look and say principle. Reading exercises were in the reading book with sentences of two letter words first, then three letter words and so on. E.g. first exercise "I am up. He is up. Look I am up on my ox". "The cat sat on the mat". etc. with a few illustrations such as a magnificent cat sitting on a pretty lurid mat. Homework was part of the deal and starting with spelling to learn in the lower classes right up to Arithmetic, Geography, History, Essays, etc. in the upper standards. The old "Pacific" readers had reading exercises with meanings taken from the text to be learned for homework. Also Latin roots appropriate to the days reading lesson. For most children, in fact I would say for all, the homework was done at a disadvantage on account of poor lighting. I remember that writing done at night appeared passable but in daylight it looked terrible and many a subsequent "bad writing, repeat the page" was due to this. However, one had to stay in and do the repeat and it looked much better when one had natural light to do it by.

The continual grind of parrot-like repetition instilled most of the facts in our juvenile minds even with History and Geography and we will never forget 1066 and all that and Hull will forever and irrevocably be on the Humber.

### FIRST WORLD WAR

I was 9 years old when the First World War broke out and in Std. 6 when it finished. Although we were remote from the seat of the conflict it all seemed so much part of our

lives. So many old boys of the school went and so many were killed. Each casualty list seemed to be our personal affair even as children. We were part of the Great British Empire and do doubt there was much jingoism preached but we lovingly lapped it up and were so proud of it all. We raised funds for patriotic purposes and the girls brought their knitting to school - scarves for the soldiers. We planted pohutukawa trees in memory of the boys who had died.

## SHOWS

The Birkdale Fruitgrower's Association was a very progressive body and many of us remember the magnificent shows they staged at the school. Wonderful fruit, vegetables and flower, to say nothing of the rows and rows of bottles of preserved fruit and jam plus all the cooking exhibits. Then there were the outside activities with coconut shies, nail driving competition, guessing competitions etc. in fact all the fun of the fair.

## SCOUTS

A Boy Scout troop was inaugurated in Birkdale about 1912 by Mr. Norfolk Salter a young man resident in the district at the time and who became the first Scoutmaster. There were two patrols, the Moreporks and the Cuckoos and the colours were red and green, the scarves being of that colour. The group met regularly for several years in various sheds round the district and held Annual Camps and eventually acquired a building (an old butcher's shop) moved to the J.G. Kay Park adjacent to the reservoir. For a period of about a year the boys had no scoutmaster at all but carried on by themselves, and then Mr. Frank Fisher took over and injected an outstanding "esprit de corps" into the movement. He introduced all sorts of interesting activities and used his own property and bush to teach elementary bushcraft. The annual camp was held there once or twice.



**Children from Frank Fisher's Pioneer Club in his backyard swimming pool, c1920.**

## FISHING

I suppose that most small boys at some time or other want to go fishing. The boys of my generation were no exception. To Birkdale wharf and Island Bay we used to take our lines and try our luck. The first procedure was to procure some small fish for bait and we seemed to aim at catching the small fish round the wharves but sometimes an occasional schnapper or gurnard came our way. When we got a bit older we manufactured lanterns out of kerosene tins and a couple of candles. These were used to hunt flounders with spears at night on the mud flats and many a time we would come home with a dozen or so. The fresh water stream also was a source for eels and those little native brown trout. Using worms for bait I have caught them from the stream which runs into the lagoon particularly in the upper reaches. There was a good place in the branch that came down the hill on the Glenfield side. I wonder if there are any there now. Sweet Nostalgia!



**Birkdale Wharf**



Island Bay

## METHODIST HALL

Although the school was the Community Centre of the Birkdale district, a schoolroom has its limits for Social purposes and entertainment. A project was therefore conceived to build a Hall in association with the Methodist Church. This was to be primarily a Sunday School Hall but to have a stage and dressing rooms and be available for any Community use. It was to be built by voluntary labour and a big one day effort was organised by Mr. F.C. Utting, who supervised the whole thing. When the day eventually arrived all the materials were on the ground ready, but I think Mr. Utting had done some prior work on the foundations. Most of the men and most of the women and most the children for miles around were there. I don't know how many but there were a lot, and timber was flying and much food was being prepared with coppers full of boiling water. By the end of the day the hall was up - not finished but the roof was on, the weatherboards were up, later working bees completed the job and it was a valuable asset to the district for many years.



## SWIMMING

In addition to walking one of the main activities would have been swimming. Of course one had to walk everywhere including to a place to swim. One of the favourite spots was the lagoon - adjacent to Bentley's place in Eskdale Road. In the summer dozens of children would turn up there for fun and games in the water, but it was really no place for

any who could not swim as the water was suddenly quite deep at high tide. Island Bay was another favourite swimming place and also at the beach alongside Birkdale wharf, but anywhere where there was water would do. The mud flats of Hellyer's Creek provided plenty of fun and I well remember sliding flat out on the mud on my stomach having a hilarious time with quite a few longitudinal scratches on my juvenile chest caused by mangrove roots.

I don't think that there is any doubt that the greatest contribution to swimming among the boys was made by Mr. Frank Fisher of Kauri Road. He had a large pool for water conservation purposes for watering his glass houses and this made a great swimming place. Over the summer he would conduct a swimming session for an hour each afternoon for whoever cared to come along. Anyone who could not swim would be given tuition and for this purpose he had a number of home made cork life belts which beginners could wear for gaining confidence. The final test was to swim ten yards unaided. When this was accomplished, the boy stood on a rostrum and Mr. Fisher would shout "Johnnie can swim". Everyone present would give three cheers. What a proud moment that was for all the "Johnnies" who experienced it.

## CONCERTS AND PLAYS

Cultural and entertainment activities were not neglected in the early days at Birkdale. There were school concerts and Dramatic Clubs and Nigger Minstrel Shows. Mr. and Mrs. Frank Finch and Mr. Cotton formed an orchestra which performed on many occasions. Mrs. Finch had a very pleasing soprano voice and Mr. Finch was a bass baritone. I remember a concert in the school where the Dramatic Club of the day put on a play called "Beauty and the Beast". The Beast was a fierce looking bear. At the critical moment a disenchanting spell was broken and the bear skin fell away and out stepped a magnificent looking prince clad in red and gold to claim his princess. I remember that Arthur Beer stole the show as the Prince. A little later Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream" was staged and ran for two or three nights in the Methodist Hall. Other plays followed including "Pygmalion and Galatea", with the late Geoff Bentley as Pygmalion and Mabel Yerex as Galatea.

Allan Brown



*Would-be swimmers at the Fisher pool mid 1920's.*