



Some Reflections on Kostka Hall between 1964 and 1970

By Jim Downey (OX 1970)

I arrived at Kostka Hall a few months into the Grade 2 year as our family had moved from Deepdene to East Malvern. My older brothers had attended Burke Hall, so the prospect of going to Brighton was a little concerning for me. Still, with the East Bus winding its way through the streets of East Malvern and almost past our door, the argument for going to Brighton was compelling. The other bus, the Beach Bus, brought boys from Sandringham, Beaumaris, Black Rock and Hampton.

I am quite sure I didn't have to sit an entrance exam. I think my father completed it with Father Keaney on my behalf !

And so I was introduced to the Grade 2 class which was under the control of Ms Mary Sambell. Within a short time, Father Fitzgibbon, an elderly priest who wore a biretta, led us all to the old chapel where he handed out scapulas to each boy to wear around our necks under our shirts. The scapula was a kind of necklace made of string with two brown cloth tags the size of a large postage stamp and the image of a saint on each stamp. We were also inducted into the Crusaders with a small pale blue metal badge. (I'm not quite sure what Crusaders did, but they were some sort of hangover from many centuries past). My father had quietly warned me that I might also be induced to "*take the pledge*" which would involve a promise not to touch alcohol until a certain age. Without saying so, he said it was a matter for me, but perhaps it was unwise to make a promise I was unlikely to keep. I think I followed that advice.

The Jesuits there at Kostka comprised Father Keaney as Head Master, Father Fitzgibbon and Father Craig. I think the latter two died in office and were replaced. Father Keaney left at the end of 1964 to take up office as Head Master at Burke Hall. His replacement was Father F A B ("Freddie") Brown sj, who was a rather more kindly and approachable man with a love of English and poetry. Brother Ron Reynolds also arrived and he took up quarters behind the Tuck Shop well away from the other Jesuits who lived in the main "Maritima" building. Ron was a character and took on a lot of the disciplinary obligations, and his face would glow red when his temper was up. In later years he became far less of a tyrant.

At a later stage, Father Bert Balding joined the school as a French teacher, and Father Lawrence O'Neil arrived for a while to coach us on the "Facts of Life". Fr O'Neil was rumoured to have had one lung removed which gave him the disadvantage of speaking in a whisper and then gasping with a long breath at the end of a sentence. This made his lecture on sex education rather like listening to a dirty story – unhelped by his propensity of gently slapping his thigh with his strap as he filled us in with a series of rather roundabout implications and inuendos which we were left to interpret for ourselves. Anyway, he had some books for us to borrow if we needed any further details explained.

Miss Mitchell commanded Grade 3. She was all of 4 feet tall in high heels and was inevitably referred to as "Miss Titchell". She kept order with a knuckle-duster which was a red oversized wooden pencil without the lead. If that was not handy when needed, she would grab the nearest ruler as a substitute. On one occasion, she unfortunately grabbed a ruler which had a steel blade for use with a fountain pen, and the poor lad being punished came up bleeding rather badly. I think she was a bit horrified at what she had done because she tempered her tantrums somewhat after that.

Mondays were Tuck Shop days, and one would come to school armed with a brown paper bag on which you wrote your name and your order – for example, a pie with sauce and a coffee scroll. You would put enough coin money in the bag to pay for the order and any change would come back in the bag with the lunch. On one occasion, the lunches arrived a few minutes before the lunch bell, courtesy of the lunch monitor, and Miss Mitchell called out each name in turn so they could be collected. On this particularly hot day, she called out my name but immediately needed to call the rowdy class to order. She put my lunch under her arm so she could clap her hands. I then collected my now squished lunch from her, now garnished with an armpit infusion. I have never been able to face a vanilla slice since that day.

Kevin Casey took us for Grade 4. He was also the head of music for the school and played the organ in the Chapel whenever we were assembled for Mass for a variety of occasions. Kevin decided to form the National Boys Choir to rival the Australian Boys Choir, and those of us who were deemed to have a voice would attend his home in Chadstone on Saturdays to hone our skills. The new school Chapel was built sometime about then and there was great excitement at having this very large building capable of housing the entire school at one time. Mr Casey was in his element.

Another discipline given some importance was Speech or Elocution lessons. These were given for about an hour each month when Miss Mercovich came to school. She was a

very theatrical lady with permed hair and a lot of costume jewellery. "Good morning, boys!" she would bellow. "Good morning Miss Mercovich!!" would come the reply. Sometimes this would be repeated several times until we all responded with suitable gusto. This would be followed by each boy having to recite a prepared poem or read a passage from a book. For some reason, most boys chose the same poem, "Someone" by Walter De La Mere as it was easy to remember and offered plenty of opportunity for exaggeration with pitch and pause. The more you overdid it, the more pleased she seemed. They need to re-introduce Elocution to Australian schools in my view.

Grade 5 was headed by the much-liked Peter Riordan. Peter's other talent was art, so if you had any talent in that direction you were given due encouragement. He also took charge of producing the scenery for the Xavier Opera at the Senior School, and would enlist the more talented boys to help him paint the sets and piece them together on wooden frames. He was particularly good at reading us stories such as "The Wind in the Willows" where he would adopt the voices of the characters and bring the story to life.

Grade 6 was taken by Bob Menner, a 6ft 3in man with a slicked down hair-do and a prominent chin. The bane of his existence was one student, John Pitt, who had a degenerative bone disease and was totally disruptive in his behaviour to the point of being uncontrollable. At the same time, he was hilariously funny, and poor Bob was often left exasperated when he would order Pitt to report to the Head Master. Even on departure, John would poke his head in a window and hurl some abuse at a fellow student, such as "Doughty, you owe me a Bob!" [a "bob" was a shilling in the old pre-decimal currency].

Sport was a feature at Kostka, and football was the other religion. During our era, the school cut down a forest of pine trees on South Road to form a second "Front Oval" as an alternative to the "Back Oval". A major draw-back from doing sport was the necessity to get changed in the antiquarian change-rooms that dated back to the Roman Empire, complete with cold showers and a permanent smell of sweaty clothes and muddy boots. Sports masters included the since disgraced Willy Kovacs, "Basher" Tilly, "Prince" Planink and "Larry" [whose surname escapes me]. Larry had a turned eye-ball, and it was difficult to guess whether he was talking to you or the fellow to your right. At assemblies, he would stand up the front with a loud-hailer and call for some student who was playing up to come forward. Confused boys would hesitantly come forward from both directions while he yelled: "You, not you...yes you, no, not you – you with the concertina socks! Come here!"

If you were no good at footy or cricket, there was basketball or tennis available, and for a couple of weeks there was athletics which culminated in a Sports Day when each of the school Houses, Campion, Claver and Regis, played off against each other and a variety of sprints, hurdles, high jump, long jump, shot put and distance events.

Form 1 (never called Grade 7) was under the control of Mr Hans Enter, a lovable Dutchman with a strong Dooch accent. He empathised with the poorer students and would say "Ve haf to look afta za veeker vuns".

Form 2 made you the big fish in the small pond, and Mr Brian McCarthy had his job cut out in containing some of the egos. Still, he was a kindly fellow from memory, and treated us almost as adults in preparation for the transition to the big school at Xavier College.

I have many fond memories of my days at Kostka, and it is sad to learn that this Xavier campus is to be abandoned, yet I can well understand the reasons for taking this decision. Unlike the accounts of contemporaries who attended Burke Hall, Kostka was well regarded by its students as being a small, family-oriented, rather intimate school with a good community spirit.

Vale the School By The Sea.

