

# ***EDUCATING ERNIE***

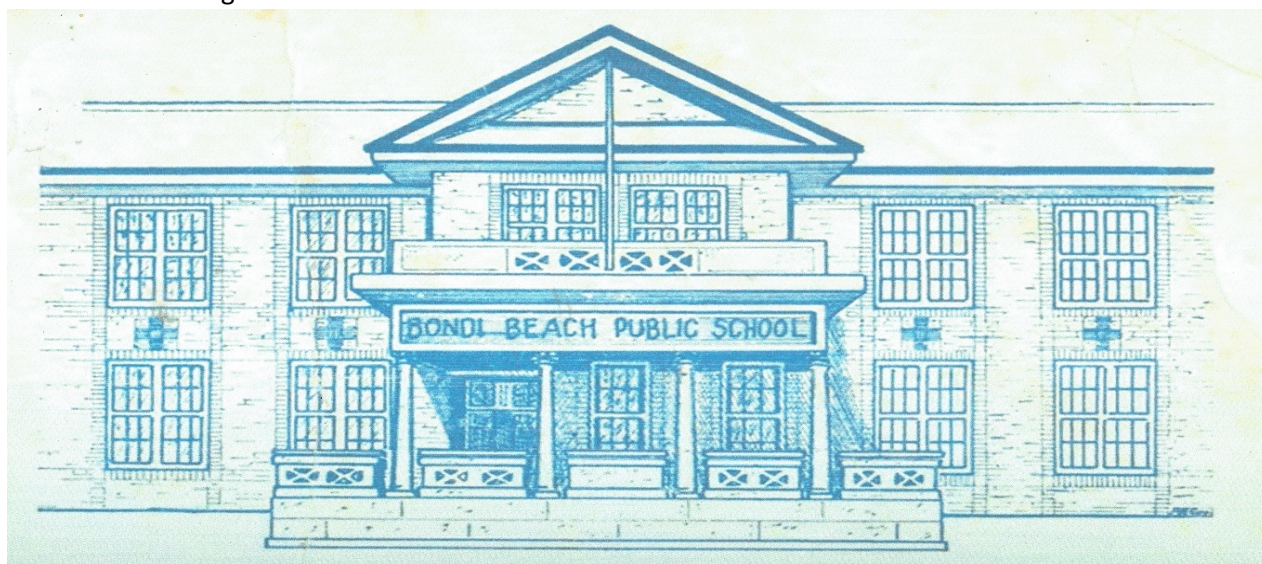
## ***Senior Primary School at Bondi Beach Public School - 1951 to 1954***

The Monday of the long weekend at the end of January each year carried, for me, mixed emotions. It was the Australia Day holiday. Back then, this holiday was not celebrated on 26<sup>th</sup> January but, to meet union demands for a three-day weekend, simply held on the last weekend of January, whatever the date actually was. (In 1951 it was Monday 29<sup>th</sup> January). This public holiday always coincided with end of Christmas School holidays and was used by our family as a final day at the beach for my brother Kerry and me. Hence, today we were at Clovelly Beach with Mum and our Aunty Connie. We were having fun playing in the gentle waves protected by the rocky breakwater.

But it also carried with it for me the anticipation of a return to school the following day after six weeks of blissful holiday, which included ten days family camping at The Entrance. Tomorrow meant not only school, but the new experience of entering the senior primary class for the first time – the “Big School”. I anticipated the challenge with some misgivings. Aunty Connie emphasised the fun that awaited me when I greeted my many friends again in Third Class, but I could not share her cheerful anticipation.

### **Third Class – Mrs Flannery - 1951**

Monday rolled into Tuesday and Mum drove me to Bondi Beach Public School to line up with the boys who aspired to third class primary, in the section of the asphalt playground reserved as the “boys’ playground”. School was no longer to be co-ed for me.



*Front elevation of Bondi Beach Public School from the eastern or beach side. The central columns mark the main entrance (only used for official visits) and the headmaster’s office. Downstairs windows to the right show the 3rd Class boys’ classrooms and to the left are the 4<sup>th</sup> Class boys’ rooms. Senior Primary Girls rooms were on the upper floor.*

We were ushered into a new classroom on the ground floor of the double story brick building. Inside the corridors the walls were painted a cream and pale green colour with cream woodwork and lashings of brown.

We were surprised by some things:

- We had a lady teacher instead of the expected male. Mrs Flannery was middle-aged and rather dowdily dressed (to my young and impressionable eyes),
- There were no ink wells – just holes in the desk. We would still be writing in pencil,
- A thick, newly printed textbook which was called our “Social Studies” book was distributed. This formed a large part of our learning - excluding writing, spelling and arithmetic. It contained many historical accounts of Australian discovery and explorers with information on rural industries, concentrating on wool and wheat growing and secondary industries. It also contained British colonial history mainly to do with the discovery and settlement of Australia.

While most of the boys joked about Mrs Flannery, deriding her for being a female teacher, I quite liked her because she was knowledgeable and intelligent. And she could command the attention of the class with her sharp voice.

We sat two to a double desk as we had in second class. Third Class wasn't so bad after all. Many new class events were to be revealed:

- On Fridays we were taken to Bondi Baths at the southern end of the beach. At this stage I could not swim, and we splashed around in the kids 'pool. Mum arranged for swimming lessons for me. I disliked the swim teacher, a World War I veteran with only one leg, who sat on the white painted rocks directing swim classes for children. His preferred way of teaching pupils to swim was to push their heads under water “until they get used to it”. I was frightened by him. After one lesson I screamed enough to dissuade mum from engaging him again. At the following summer holidays, I joined the “School Learn to Swim” classes, and soon I learned to dog paddle and then swim overarm. The swim teachers were very child-aware and caring and did nothing to frighten me.
- We were told we would have a mid-year history test. I could never seem to remember when Captain Cook “discovered” Australia, so, believing that it would be a test question, I scratched “1770” into my desktop. I suffered immediate remorse for doing this. When the exam question asked for the date, I quite easily but guiltily recalled it, not having to look at my desk. I had already regretted what I had done, many times over.
- During the year a school doctor and a dentist visited, and we had to take turns to see them. I didn't want to see the dentist – rumour went around that he had brought some type of drill contraption with him, and the other children said he “hurts”. I had already had four teeth out at age four, and still went to my family dentist regularly, so with my parents' permission I was excused from seeing him this time.



*Front of the school in more recent times. I used these gates when dropped or picked up by Mum or Dad to/from school. Lower story is 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class boys with senior girls classes on the first floor above.*

What did catch me was the eye test. I read the test chart, and nothing was said. But two weeks later a letter came to my parents from the Dept. of Education medical service saying that I appeared to have acute myopia - (meaning I was very short-sighted). The letter recommended I attend an optometrist for testing and correction.

Mum duly made an appointment with the Eye Clinic at the Community Hospital at Moore Park. A grossly obese optometrist asked me to read the eye chart starting from the top. I called the biggest letter "H" - but it was really "E". Mum gasped and he exclaimed "Well, you certainly need glasses". Within three weeks I had my first pair of horn-rimmed children's spectacles. When I put them on everything was blurry – worse than before - but eventually, when I was at home, I began to see clearly. In fact, I was surprised that when I looked from our house to the northern end of Gould Street, I could see the red and yellow building of the pre-school kindergarten at the intersection with Murrivierie Road. And everything looked shiny! "Why does everything look so shiny without the fur on it?" I asked. Of course, what I had perceived as fur was simply the indefinite "blur" due to my poor eyesight. Now everything was crystal and shiny clear.

At school, I was expertly derided by my school-mates – they called me "four-eyes" for a long time and made jokes at my expense. But at last, I could see the blackboard after four years of squinting!

- I particularly remember the School Magazine which was distributed to each Primary year student about four times a year. The magazine was a monochrome publication on glossy white paper, and included interesting stories written to suit our level of reading skills and relating to our studies. It also included some comical short stories, puzzles, and poetry. We particularly loved the fresh smell of the printer's ink on the shiny paper when Mrs Flannery broke open the parcel of magazines and distributed them to us. The magazines were used as a teaching aid, and I recall having to read at home a story on the life of a starfish and summarise. This was perhaps my first piece of homework at school – but more would follow in this and future years.
- One thing I do remember from third class was the use of an atlas which our parents were required to buy from the nearby school shop – the "Boomerang" in Wairoa Avenue. I was astonished by the large number of countries that were coloured in red. This denoted the British Empire – "on which the sun never sets". We had been told we were all British subjects first and foremost even though we called ourselves Australians. I was impressed that Britain's political control stretched all around the world, and we, in Australia, were part of that empire. Little did I know that at precisely that time, Britain was giving up control of many of these countries, as its former colonies sought independence to determine their own political destinies. The world atlas looks much different today.
- However, I was interested to see where some of the countries of which I had heard were located in the world – even though I believed it was unlikely I would ever travel to them. Steamship travel was slow and expensive and would take many days or weeks to get there. When I was in Third Class, fast jet airliners just did not exist. But change would come in within the next ten years.
- Composition of our class was mainly white children of Australian birth, but a few of our number were the sons of immigrants (called refugees then) from European countries following the recent World War II. This was still the era of the "White Australia Policy", so there were few children borne of Asian parents (in my whole time at BBPS I had only one Chinese student and one Indonesian student in my class). However, perhaps ten percent or more were of Jewish extraction. Apart from

this, most students were either Protestant Christians by birth or a lesser number of Roman Catholic Christians (lesser because of the substantial Roman Catholic schools already established in the area).

- One day, Mrs Flannery was away. Mr Bennett, a trainee teacher, stepped in to mind us. Without obviously having prepared a lesson for us, he talked about the beach and how, because the pine trees in the park had been allowed to grow without proper staking when they were young, the regular “southerly busters” had caused them to all lean in one direction.

He drew a parallel between the trees and the lives of us in the class. He said that we need good “staking” when we are young to guide our direction and to set us on the way to grow true and straight. He said that this was especially relevant to our views of God, and we should try find out what God might mean to directing our lives along proper paths. He surprised me, because he was just a new Year 3 teacher who had never mentioned God before. It implanted in me a desire to learn a little more about his advice.

Mr Bennet became a permanent teacher at the school for the next year or so. We liked him. Because he was young, sporty, and single, the boys contrived a romance between him and Miss Fletcher, a single teacher from the girls’ school upstairs. Word got around the boys’ school lightning fast whenever these two teachers were seen to innocently chat while on playground duty at the same time.

At the end of the year, we had the usual class party, and all looked forward to the six weeks Christmas holidays. Next year I would be in Fourth Class, and we would write with ink. We said a sad goodbye to Mrs Flannery - she had been a good teacher.

#### **Fourth Class – Mr Baker - 1952**

We started at the end of January 1952 with a male teacher for the first time. Most of my mates from 3<sup>rd</sup> class joined me in a classroom where Mr Baker ruled. He was middle aged, sandy-haired with a stern look on his face and was probably not many years from retiring. He always wore a double-breasted black suit with shirt and tie. He often scanned around the class, peering over the top of his spectacles. He was certainly a teacher from the “old school”.

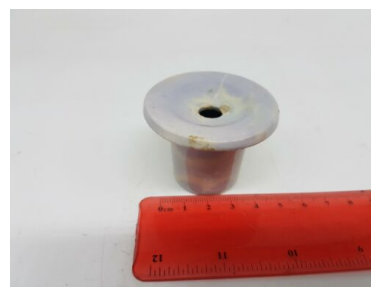
He taught us all our subjects, with emphasis on arithmetic and “times tables”, writing, reading, compositions and some elementary geometry which required us to have a ruler, compass, protractor, and right-angle triangle – generally made from pressed metal or wood. None of these tools were plastic in those days. I liked using them for drawing. We also received a new Social Studies book which added to our knowledge of Australian history and commerce. I liked these subjects.

As a supplement to our class training, we were assigned to do special “Projects”. In third class we had already done a project on spices and where they came from, highlighting their origin in Southeast Asia. I recall that I rifled my Aunt Ruby’s pantry for nutmeg, spice, cloves, pepper, tabasco, and curry powder and stuck little brown-paper bags of these products in my project book (there were no plastic bags then). My school bag and my playlunch smelled of exotic spices.

In later years I did projects on Australian wool - collecting wool samples from the Royal Easter Show - and on garment manufacture - when dad and Mum helped me to write to Stamina woollen mills to ask for woven woollen material samples to complete the picture. I recall that later in Fifth or Six Class, to complete a

project on radio in Australia, I wrote to Amalgamated Wireless Australia (AWA) and prepared a project on Sir Ernest Fisk, one of Australia's foremost radio pioneers. All the companies I contacted wrote back and responded generously with brochures, samples, and histories.

As the year progressed and our writing disciplines improved, Mr Baker appointed "Ink Monitors" to join the "Blackboard Monitors" to prepare the classroom for teaching each day. I wanted to be an Ink Monitor (as did everyone) but I missed out. Their job was to ensure that all the ink wells were filled each morning before class. The messy task of mixing the dry ink powder and water in the larger ink supply bottle was the job of the teacher, but even then, some of my mates misbehaved when filling the ink wells and their hands (and more) were often covered in blue ink. One boy also accepted a dare to drink the blue fluid – and he ended up with a blue face, tongue, and shirt. Mr Baker was not amused but the boy showed no ill effects.



*Ceramic ink well sat in a hole in the front edge of the desk between the two pupils who shared the desk. - filled each day by the ink monitors*

On the appointed day we brought along our first wooden pens – wooden holders with a metal clasp that accepted a standard "Post Office" metal nib. As lessons settled in, we were instructed how to mimic our former pencil writing using the pens and their nibs, with ink gained by dipping the nib in the desk ink wells. At first it was very difficult but slowly we got the knack of "pressure on the down stroke, lighter and finer on the up stroke" as we followed the letter guides on our slope cards.



*Wooden pen holder with nib as used in Primary School. Initially nibs were stubbier to make writing easier.*

In the fifties all handwriting was by either pencil or ink pens dipped into ink wells. Only important executives (and no doubt the headmaster himself), could afford a fountain pen in which ink was supplied to the nib from a refillable bladder inside the pen. But even then, it often ran out and had to be refilled from a bottle anyway. It also often leaked. I used a fountain pen in High School, but ballpoint pens were not introduced until my final years at high school. Felt tipped coloured markers were much later. We laboured with ink pens with wooden handles and ceramic ink wells in our desks through the second half of Fourth Class with growing success.

We also learned to use blotting paper – this was absorbent paper that we padded onto the wet ink after writing – It absorbed the surplus ink in our writings so the words would not smudge after we had written. It was very effective in keeping our page clean and neat.

Wednesday afternoons were a highlight.

When we returned from lunch on Wednesdays, the whole boys' primary school were marched into the assembly hall which ran on the western side of the third- and fourth-class schoolrooms and the headmaster's office. The school owned a 16 mm sound movie projector, so the tall windows on the side of the assembly hall had tar-paper blinds that were pulled down to seal off most, but not all, the outside light.

Craning over the heads of those in front for a view of the screen from the wooden collapsible seats on a flat floor, we watched educational films on history, health, sports, explorers, industry, and any topic suitable for children of our age – all in black and white. The projector worked OK between its many breakdowns, and then the assigned teacher/operator sweated to get the program back to plan. We didn't care if we had



already seen the movie before, because this was great – movies at school -wow!! The girls from upstairs enjoyed the same movie show at an alternate time during the week.

About seven to ten years later, just as I left high school, television was starting to make inroads into the classrooms – but by then I was heading for night-time university and missed its introduction to school.

Friday afternoon was sports afternoon.

In summer we could elect to play cricket or swim at the sea-baths at South Bondi. I always chose swimming and marched along the beach promenade in a contingent to the Bondi Baths. I had only just learnt to swim during the previous Christmas, so I decided to finesse my swimming in deep water “over my head”. I chose to swim from the water steps at the diving board in the “big pool” to the outer nor-western wall of the baths – perhaps only eight to ten meters, but in water where I could not touch the bottom of the pool. I succeeded each time, and my confidence grew. I couldn’t wait to tell my parents when I got home.



*Bondi Baths in the 1950s. I learned to swim in the small pool, and by 4th grade I was venturing into the "Big Pool" to swim in deep water diagonally across its' nearest corner from the steps near the diving board to the end wall, repeating the feat many times.*

In winter I started to play soccer, and in fourth or fifth class we often marched from school to Barracluff Park at the western end of Warners Avenue. Mum purchased a set of soccer boots for me, but I didn’t do well. Being youngest in the class, I received a hammering and frankly didn’t like the bruises on my shins and the rough and tumble that often saw me sprawled on the ground. I did like it in winter when teachers turned the boys’ playground into a series of activity stations at which teams each could try our best – throwing medicine balls, tunnel-ball, hop-step and jump, in team games. These sports afternoons I loved.

In February 1952 King George VI died and the newspapers were draped in black. We were told in class that a new young Queen, Elizabeth II, now sat on the throne in England and would probably come to Australia after next year’s coronation. Australians clearly saw they were British subjects. Some cars at Bondi initially carried black ribbons but later displayed the British flag and pictures of the new monarch.

With the same patriotism, we celebrated Empire Day each 24<sup>th</sup> May. This was an adaptation of the celebrations held annually in Britain for Guy Fawkes Day – the celebration of the foiling of the plans of Fawkes to blow up the British Houses of Parliament in London in 1605. For Fawkes, it meant conviction, jail and sentencing to be “drawn and quartered”. For us, it meant the making of loyal gestures to the “motherland” at school, and marching to the marching song:

*“It’s the 24<sup>th</sup> of May!  
It’s Empire Day!  
With banners true,  
Red, White, and Blue,  
We’ll march, so gay”.*

This was followed by an early exit for a half-day holiday. We headed home to get our fireworks ready for lighting at an evening bonfire on a nearby vacant lot or at the beach. This celebration was later discontinued because of the gradual contraction of the British Empire and for safety concerns because of the number of firework injuries to children.

It was at the start of fourth class that I insisted on walking to and from school instead of being driven, despite a lengthy walk. It was good to walk except when I was tired. Coming home I had to carefully pick those with whom I walked. Some of the youngsters used to gang up to seek retribution on solitary walkers for whatever reason they could dream up. I never found myself in trouble, but I was cautious to avoid the class bullies when walking home alone.

One item that was often in trouble was my new horn-rimmed spectacles. Both at school and at play I managed to break their main frame twice as well as tear off the side arms more than four times. This necessitated repairs and a new arm to be installed at cost to my parents. It got to be such a regular occurrence that the optometrist, D N Alexander in Oxford Street in the city, replaced the third and fourth arms for free!

One day we were employed on a different task. A low door in the hallway wall outside our room concealed an under-stair cupboard. The door was too low for teachers to stoop and explore the room, much less clear it out, as was intended. Three of us were detailed to do just that and remove dust-laden and smelly boxes, brooms, mops, cleaning materials and tins of something called "Phenol".

We had great fun doing this instead of lessons, but when I told mum that night she exploded. "Phenol is a poison" she said, "I don't want you to do that again tomorrow". I don't know if she rang the school to complain, but the following day our trio was relieved of its cleaning duties and our adventure under the stairs. Having long since learnt about the potential effects of skin burns from contact with this substance, as well as lung and brain damage from inhaling its vapours, I can now understand. In the dusty cupboard the air sure smelt like the toilets – perhaps they used the phenol to disinfect them. It may have been a near miss – certainly something unlikely to be permitted today.

The year eventually drew to a close and we sat for our final exam. I did better at the end of year exams than in June, recording all A or A+ marks and one B+ mark. For the first time my parents had to sign the report and return it to the teacher to prove that I had shown it to them.

Next year was fifth class, where things would start to get even more serious!

**Bondi Beach Public School**  
**Half-Yearly Report**

Name E. Kulmar  
Class 4.A.

	Marks	Comments
Reading	A	Very good
Composition	A	Very good
Spelling	A+	Excellent
Writing	A+	Excellent
Arithmetic	A	Very good
English	B+	Good
Social Studies	A	Very good

Remarks Has worked consistently  
Progress satisfactory

Class Teacher J. Baker  
Principal D. W. & L. L. L.  
Parent E. S. Kulmar

E. Kulmar  
June, 1952.

Public School  
Bondi Beach.

Term Half-Yearly  
Class 4.A.  
Number in Class 14

Reading B  
Writing A  
Spelling B  
Composition B, Exa, C  
Arithmetic A  
History B  
Geography C

Total 14  
Position 14  
Teacher J. Baker

## A New Headmaster

This year, the former Headmaster, Mr Hunt, a quiet leader of whom we had not seen much, had been replaced by Mr Doug McQualter, who was much more visible.

He portrayed a “no nonsense” attitude and had quickly gained a reputation as a disciplinarian. Gossip had it that he loved rugby league and was partial to an occasional “sherbet” at the Bondi Hotel after school – but what’s wrong with that? He was outspoken at Parents and Citizens meetings at the school and was quite progressive in his thinking. My bother tells me that Douggie McQualter always carried a pocket-full of scorched peanuts into which he dipped during the proceedings of any meeting.



That year he installed a loudspeaker intercom system connecting each classroom to his office, where a radio and record player were connected. This allowed educational radio broadcasts to be relayed to selective classrooms as they became available on air.

**Boys' Senior Primary School Staff (around the time of my Fourth to Sixth years). Headmaster Doug McQualter dominates the front row at centre with Mr Englert on his left in a dark suit, he is next to Mr Peacock (who then taught 3<sup>rd</sup> Class (after Mrs Flannery left). At rear from left are Messrs Baker (4th Class), Hogg, Witts (6th Class) and Ryder. Names of other teachers in the front row are not known.**

While he was a quite authoritarian figure, I only fell afoul of “Douggie” McQualter once when I was caught talking in class. We were told to leave the class and stand outside the headmaster’s office. This meant he would ask why we were there, requiring our confession and punishment with “one cut” of the cane across our outstretched palm (or extras for more grievous offences). For me this only happened once – the pain was sharp but transitory. The real pain was deciding whether I would tell mum, because she always seemed to have ways of finding out. For her to learn about this event without me telling her would be a serious disappointment for her. That was the gravest form of punishment.

The other form of punishment was being kept in detention after school (very rare – because most teachers liked to get away from school on time anyway) and “lines” – writing the reason for the punishment – for example: “*I will not talk in class*” x 100 times. This was onerous and annoying, and one could be sentenced to complete this chore at home for presentation to the teacher next morning, so parents got to know you were being punished. I think I endured this only once or twice.



### **Fifth Class - Mr Englert – 1953**

I arrived back at school early February 1953 and found I was joining Mr. Englert's fifth class. I had heard that he was a good teacher who believed that "if the students are treated with respect, they will return respect to the teacher". I never did find anyone who confirmed that Mr Englert always received respect from those of his students who were recalcitrant, but I did find that he was true to his philosophy and an easy teacher to follow. He endeavoured to make learning interesting instead of employing rote learning.

The year went on much the same as before. We also had regular assembly gatherings of the entire Boys' Senior Primary school conducted by Mr McQualter to convey details of upcoming events, instructions and for celebrating sporting results. Mr Englert's teaching seemed easier than former years, and he imparted to me a great love of books, reading and history. He deemed it a great sin to damage a book by bending its cover back too far. I still remember his warning, *"If you hear it crack, you've broken its back"*.

During the year, we celebrated the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in England. We learnt much about the Queen and the forthcoming pageantry, and like others, we decorated our cars with Union Jacks and red, white, and blue ribbons on the bumpers and fluttering from the door handles. I designed a cardboard flag and shield that I stuck to the rear windows of the old 1935 Chevvy as a tribute of celebration.

Mum and dad purchased a cardboard diorama of Pall Mall into which my brother Kerry and I positioned flag standards, crowds lining the Mall, grenadier guards, horsemen, bands and the royal coach and horses transferring the Queen to Westminster Abbey. We also had photos of the Beefeater guards who escort royalty and guard the Tower of London.

Sometime later our classes were taken by bus to the movie theatre in Bondi Road to watch the coronation ceremony on the movie screen. I was bored with the whole story by then, even though there was no television to add to the saturation of the event in our minds.

At the same time, we celebrated things of the British Commonwealth again, with the news that the world's tallest mountain had been scaled by an expedition led by Edmund Hillary, a New Zealander, and Tenzing Norgay, a Nepalese Sherpa. I was to learn much more about the fascination of Everest the following year when we were taken to that same Hoyts theatre in Bondi Road to see the colour movie of the lower part of the ascent. It was the start of my fascination with mountaineering and my eventual trekking in Nepal.

After class, we also attended a magic show on at least two occasions held at the upstairs auditorium of the Bondi beach Pavilion. I was enthralled.

An in-school athletic carnival was held at Waverley Oval in Bondi Road which became an ongoing event the following year, followed later by an inter-primary schools' athletic carnival at the Reg Bartley Oval at Rushcutters Bay where other schools competed with our school champions. I only took part in events at the Waverley Oval competitions and could not keep up with the older children in my year. These events were a welcome diversion from regular lessons, but I always found that we seemed to be kept in the hot sun for a long time. We were always thirsty and unable to get a cool drink while we were obliged to watch the events.

Our new Headmaster decided that the School should adopt a ship. It was to be a cargo vessel (which also carried some passengers) and plied ports in the Southern Pacific. A photo was obtained of the ship and hung on the walls of the large indoor assembly room. A map was displayed plotting the course the ship was taking. We began to learn a little about shipping in general, the goods the ship carried and the history of the

ports it visited. The Headmaster announced that the Captain had agreed to visit the school next time his vessel came to Sydney. At the special assembly hosted by Mr McQualter, the Captain told us a little more about the ports visited and the functioning of the vessel. One thing he impressed on us was that we should not call it a "boat" because "boats are things in which people go fishing". Rather, his vessel was a "Ship" and we should always call it by that title. At the end of his address, we all clapped and the Headmaster thanked him for his presentation. In parting, the Headmaster said, "I wish you, Captain and your boat, a safe 'Bon Voyage'". Oops! .... he had used the wrong word to the Captain! The assembled students erupted in laughter. With a bluster Mr McQualter apologised and repeated his wish for a safe Bon Voyage for the Captain "and his Ship".

As part of our curriculum, we were required to act in a class play at a Play Night in the assembly hall attended by our parents. I recall one play where I was to simply learn and deliver one line, and to which I took mock black and white (meat) pudding – a British delicacy at the time.

I also watched a play presented by our class in which the characters (my school mates) believed that a friend from South America was sending them an animal called a llama. They assemble hay and fodder for the beast and undertake research of what is needed to successfully look after it as a pet. It turns out that the item being sent to them is Ulama – a young Peruvian friend of the sender who subsequently arrives for a holiday. I remember this play because the star actor was classmate Robert Barrett, who had a great appreciation of acting and drama even at the age of eleven, and who later went on to write the Les Norton series of adult action books, which became a TV series of the same name. I met Robert in Wagga Wagga in the 1980s during a book signing there, and we relived some of our adventures at Bondi Beach Public School.

However, my own public presentation skills were not ignored, and I later gave a talk to my classmates one Friday afternoon.

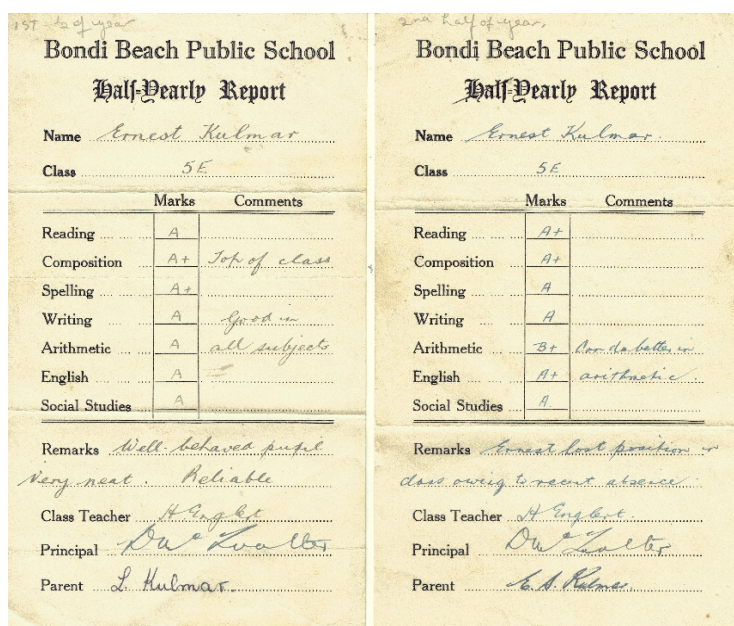
If there was no regular sport organised, Mr Englert generally arranged for two or three students to give a talk of their own choice. Some chose to tell of their annual holidays and one student was appointed recorder to write down who spoke, the title and a short summary of their talk. When it was my turn, I recorded that one of my classmates talked about "Our holiday at **"Success Singlet"**". It was soon clear I had never heard of **"Sussex Inlet"** – a south coast holiday location. My mistake caused plenty of mirth.

When it was my turn to present, I obtained Mr Englert's permission to return to the classroom during the lunch break and make a chalk drawing on the black board of the route of Charles Kingsford Smith's "Southern Cross" aircraft from California to Brisbane, and a large drawing of the aircraft in a storm just above the waves. I told how one of the crew climbed out on to the wing strut to refill an engine with oil while in flight miles out to sea in a storm.

The talk was a success, and I was surprised when I was awarded 10/10 for my efforts. It was the start of my romance with all kinds of aircraft. One day I would learn to fly!

We were now becoming used to half yearly and annual exams and report cards. I was doing well in all the humanities subjects such as Reading, Writing, Composition, English and Social Studies, but with a lesser exam performance in maths in the year-end which was to hound me all the way through High School.

I headed for Sixth Class and was sorry to leave the class of Mr Englert. I had really enjoyed his careful tutelage!



### Sixth Class – Mr Witts - 1954

Long before we knew him, “Wittsy” had a reputation as a disciplinarian who demanded hard work by his pupils. And why not? Next step from sixth class was High School, and how you performed this year would probably decide what high school you would be assigned to for the next three to five years.

Mr Witts was a unique personality who was very keen for his class to excel. He was strict and unforgiving to pupils who didn’t know the answer to his questions. Learning by rote and repetition was his style, and if a student did not know the right answer, or faltered, he received a verbal tirade, calling him an “idiot,” a “dummkopf” or a “ninnyhammer”. These latter two words were German words meaning “simpleton” or “stupid person”. Hardly a day passed without these expletives being propelled across the classroom and we endured his tirades ad infinitum. He often walked amongst the class with a cane in hand, threatening to use it on any miscreant, rapping it on a desk to emphasise the point he was making. He was a perfectionist at heart and demanded perfection from his students in return - mortified if they failed his tests. Despite these daily rantings, he knew his stuff – he was educating us from the ground up.

And learn we did. I think the class was composed of some smart students – guys like Steven Kolowski (later named Steven “Collins”) who became a doctor, Robert Barrett who became a successful author, John Tiernan, who even then was an excellent pianist. We also had some smart sports personnel, including Kerry Owen (who played representative cricket for NSW and Australia) and Peter Simpson who was also a good cricketer. I did not rank among these numbers.

I think I could see what Wittsy was doing and went along with it. He showed me many skills in maths and history, and he took us on adventures into social studies, which seemed to be a topic he loved. He was certainly an “old school” teacher in all respects, but a man who held the objectives of his profession high. He knew he was grooming us for high school.



*An amateur shot of the Queen and Prince Phillip travelling down Blair Street, Bondi where we watched them go by.*

The big event this year was to be the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Sydney. We followed the preparations that were being made in the city for her arrival on the radio news and in the Women's Weekly (which was an actual **weekly** magazine then). A special wharf/pontoon was installed on the eastern shore of Farm Cove with a stylised curved sunshade roof where the Queen would first set foot on Australia. The Queen would arrive in the royal barge, which transported her from her yacht "Britannia" moored in the harbour. The whole city was being decorated with arches over the main city intersections and streets with a riot of Union Jack flags and profusion of Red, White, and Blue. Many family cars were also decorated with crowns, flags, and streamers.

We learned she would be travelling to a surf carnival at Bondi Beach because we noted that public buildings (such as the Pavilion on the beach Esplanade and the Bondi Surf Club) were being repainted, parts of the roads she would travel on were being resealed, and the Council erected a tall fence around an overgrown corner allotment in Blair Street so that her eyes would not be offended as she returned to Government House from the beach.

At school, our preparation in class was to learn more about Elizabeth II being "Australia's Queen" - and our class was to attend a school-children's reception for the royal couple at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

On the appointed day we were bussed to the SCG from school, all wearing our best white shirts. We sat in the arena in the hot sun awaiting her arrival. She and her husband stood in an open-top British Land Rover as they drove past, waving to us, as we all cheered.



*Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh are greeted by thousands of school children at the Sydney Cricket Ground and Showground on a hot February day. We waited for hours to catch a glimpse of the royal couple as they passed by.*

Our parents took Kerry and me into the city one night to see the Queen travel to a ball at Sydney Town Hall, and when she eventually came to Bondi Beach for the surf carnival, we waited in Blair Street near the new fence for two hours for a quick glimpse of her. The royal couple had delayed their return to Government House because they were enjoying the carnival. Unfortunately, our school, not far away, did not secure a visit. However, Bondi was graced when the Esplanade that bordered the beach was renamed "Queen Elizabeth Drive".



During the year the senior primary school one evening presented a series of short plays and musical items. I recall watching John Tiernan presenting a piano recital but faltering about one third of the way through. As he stumbled, his father stood up in the audience and shouted, "Start again John". My friend John did so and completed the piece to the acclaim of all those present. I learnt a lesson that day – if you don't succeed at first attempt at an endeavour, then don't crumble. Simply start again and do it all properly. More than sixty-five years later I still remember this lesson.

Because the school had no food canteen facility, and because we were now the school seniors, we were permitted to leave the school precinct and walk to the shops along the beachfront to buy lunch. I loved walking along to my favourite hamburger seller who cooked on a hot plate in the front window of his Campbell Parade shop, wafting wonderful hamburger smells out to the street through an open window in the glass. I would order a hamburger and sixpence worth of hot chips – Yum!

I also recall one time when I made four separate trips from the school to a milk bar about two blocks away in Curlewis Street because the manufacturer was offering a prize to ice block eaters who found a key word printed on the wooden stick. I drew a blank with the first ice block, so I returned to buy another. This happened four times – four trips, four ice blocks - no prize. The lunch break ended with me back at school, having spent my entire lunch money on ice blocks – penniless and with a sugar-induced belly ache.

Sometimes Mr Witts would select one of us to buy his lunch sandwich for him. One day he chose me to buy him a ham, cheese and mustard sandwich but gave me strict instructions to only to buy it from a special shop he knew in Curlewis Street. I didn't know any "Ham and Beef" shops (now known as delicatessens) in that street, but I knew where the street was, so I thought I would find the shop when I got there. When I arrived, I could see no shop that even remotely looked like it could sell me a ham and cheese sandwich. I walked around the block and down to Roscoe Street and then to Hall Street. The only sandwich shop I could find was the one to which he particularly said I should not go.

I was running out of ideas and getting very stressed – I couldn't return without Witts's special sandwich. I scouted up Gould Street still without luck and then remembered that Mum was at the junior primary school today in a Mothers' Club meeting. (My brother Kerry was in second class then). Almost in tears, I ran to where she was meeting and found her in the playground. Seeing I was distressed she took me back to the shopping area, but she also could not find the shop I was looking for. To solve the problem, she bought the special sandwich from the shop to which Mr Witts had told me not to go. I ran back to the staff luncheon room just before the bell for classes was due to sound. Mr Witts gruffly asked, "What happened to you?" and I stumbled out an apology about not being able to find the shop. He wolfed down his sandwich without asking what shop it had come from, but he never asked me to shop for his lunch again.



*The gate onto Campbell Parade from school - Photo was taken before 1950. The structures in front of the lower windows were likely blast walls from WWII protecting schoolrooms, removed after the War. The boys, dressed as I was, carry rigid suitcases – no modern day back packs. The old wooden fence has now been replaced by the standard Education Dept green steel fence – durable & secure against intruders during school hours.*

It was during sixth class that the school chose to improve its image and fall in with other primary schools by requesting parents to provide a school uniform. For boys this was to be a blue cotton shirt and grey trousers and socks. This task was a little difficult for our family because new shirts and trousers, and a jumper for winter were really beyond our financial means at the time.

The school also chose school colours – blue and gold – for wearing at functions like sports carnivals, and a school badge that we could wear. We also learnt a school song to sing (which I have completely forgotten).

Our year with Mr Witts passed very quickly – we seemed to work so hard that the time sped past.

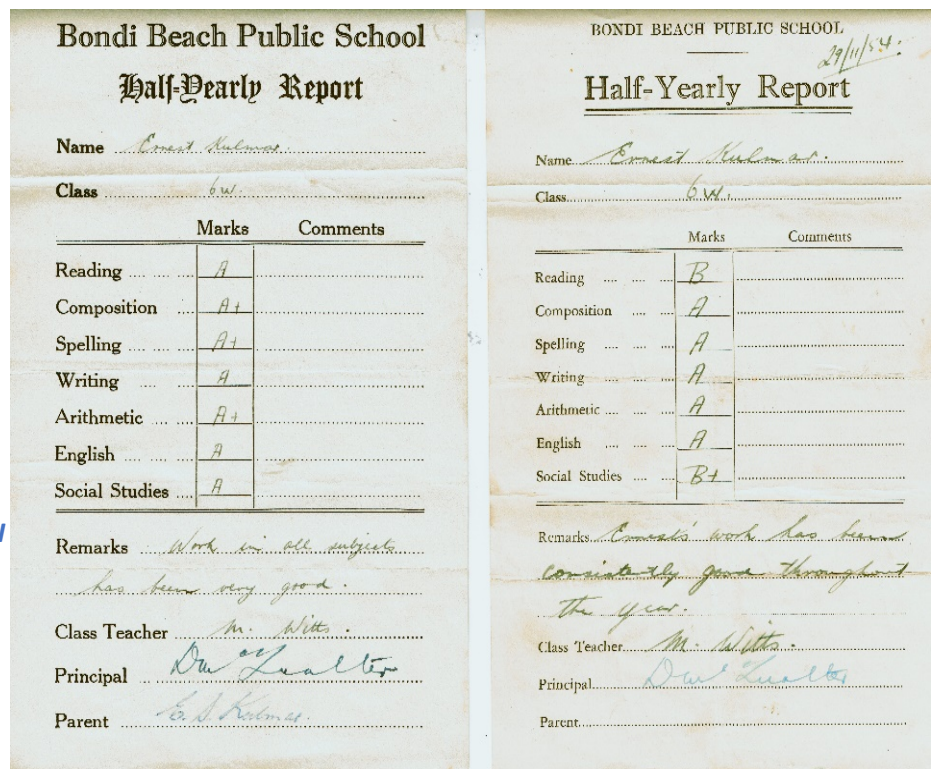
Soon it was the end of the year, and we were asked to nominate which high school we would like to attend. Mum immediately said, “Sydney Boys High School”, with a second choice being Randwick Boys High School. Dad said, “No matter what you get, just go and do your best”. A couple of weeks went by, and our school reports were handed out. I had done reasonably well but I had no idea how I would go in achieving the aims of my parents.

*Half yearly and yearly Report Cards for Sixth Class with Mr Witts.*

*Would they be good enough to get me to the High School of my choice?*

*I didn't think I had done as well as the marks suggest!*

*These were the last A+ marks I was to receive – High School would be much tougher.*



One afternoon in December 1954, an assembly was called for the two sixth-grade classes to advise the High Schools that we would attend the following year. The Headmaster said he would announce the school's name first, and the names of the students assigned to that school. First cab off the rank was “Sydney Boy's High School” and the names were read:

**“Sydney Boys' High School, Moore Park - Geoff Byard, Aaron Govendir, Stephen Kowalski, Ernest Kulmar, William Ling, Kerry Owen, .....”**

I forgot the rest as I realised that my name was on the list that my parents had wanted. I couldn't breathe with delight and excitement. Unfortunately, my best mate at that time was John Moss and he was assigned to Randwick Boys' High School. I was devastated by the possibility of losing him as a friend.

I can't remember if we were given letters to take home, but I rushed home in a dream. "I have made Sydney High", I told Mum and she hugged me and immediately went on the phone to tell Dad and her friends. All year I had a crush on a young girl who was a year behind me at school called Sandra, who was the daughter of Mrs Marsh, one of Mum's friends. I cycled to Sandra's house to tell her mother the news and found that Mum had already beaten me. Mrs Marsh gave me a freshly baked sponge cake with cream and peach slices to celebrate my "victory". I have never forgotten her kindness – it is one of my enduring memories.

We returned to school before it broke up for the year. On the last day of school for sixth class, Doug McQualter organised a series of boxing matches for members of sixth class. Those who were keen were invited to don boxing gloves and fight another sixth-class contender. I was amazed at how many of my class contemporaries were prepared to box. My mate John Moss and I talked about possibly going into the ring together but decided against it – I don't think we liked the idea of shaping up to a mate, apart from the chance of getting our noses bloodied.

The following morning when I awoke, I realised that my days as a pupil of Bondi Beach Public School were over. I was on holidays for now, but these holidays would also be taken up with preparing for my next adventure - getting ready for my first year at High School. Another big challenge ahead of me!

\* \* \* \*

### **Bibliography**

**Photos of school, teachers and old pupils** taken with thanks from the YouTube video:

Bondi Beach Public School Part2

Let's go back from the 30s to the 60s

Bondi Revenant 2026

Story directed by Ben Buckler Barnacle

FOR ALL THE OLD TIMERS OUT THERE

Thanks to Ann Cairns, Mrs Larnach

**Bondi Beach Public School** - BBPS Old class photos #bondihistory - YouTube

**Photos of the Queen's visit to Bondi and the Showground** -Ben Buckler Barnacle posted in Bondi Reunion - Lived it !!  
Let's go!! Old Locals!! on Friday - Facebook [groupupdates@facebookmail.com](mailto:groupupdates@facebookmail.com)

**Copies of Report Cards and class photos** as saved by my mother