

Time did not allow us to dwell on some of the topics discussed on Saturday.

This ‘conversation’ was intended to share and seek information connected with the Omega Retreat National School before and since it began operating in 1860.

An early attempt in 2010 to tell the story Omega Retreat National School is available at Kiama Library in a collection titled ‘*Capturing Kiama Memories*’. The journey becomes more interesting as we trace the origin and subsequent history of the school using technology now available to us and descendants who joined us for the discussion today.

- Omega Retreat was known as Bark Hill when originally granted to Thomas Campbell in 1826 by Sir Ralph Darling. Purchased for £1000 under the Lease and Release System by James Mackay Gray from Thomas Campbell and released in 1836 with the approval of Sir George Gipps according to documents at Kiama Family History Centre. Area described as 1280 acres and called “Bark Hill” or “Omega Retreat”.
- Schooling in the Kiama District: According to Kiama Library website, Daniel Shea, in 1839, opened a Roman Catholic school in Jamberoo. This was followed by Church of England and Presbyterian schools in the district and in Kiama. About 1848 a one room schools near Spring Hill was opened between Jamberoo and Kiama was established and C.W. Craig (Kiama Mayor) attended this school.
- In 1848 the Board of National Education opened its first school; and by 1851 the Board had 37 schools in operation that were attended by over 2,000 pupils. However, in the mid-1850s the growth of the government school system had slowed. Some of the earlier schools stayed open for very short periods of time due to fluctuations in local populations, whilst others were forced to close due to the hostility of individual clergy who saw the national schools as 'godless'
- Eliza Davies arrived in Kiama in 1858 and on arrival by ship from Sydney was greeted by James Mackay Gray who had apparently invited her to visit. This followed a long and frightening voyage from England. Eliza’s story of the event is available in her memoirs titled ‘The Story of an Earnest Life’ published in 1888.  
Ref: <https://archive.org/details/storyofearnestli01davi/page/n8>
- Extracts relating to her Kiama visit and the school she ran on ‘Hurricane Hill’ in a slab hut on Mackay Gray’s Estate are part of the ‘*Capturing Kiama Memories*’ publication in Kiama Library.
- A brief extract from that publication follows in which we are able to learn more about the first teacher and year-end celebration at Christmas 1861.

## **Omega Retreat National School Gerringong.**

The building sits on an acre of land just south of the Lookout at Mount Pleasant. Most people heading south or north would be unaware of its existence.

*The Kiama Examiner* dated December 31, 1861 tells us a little about the school's first year of operation. Mr. Hollands had taken up residence towards the end of 1860 and this report gives a word picture of the last day of school for the year 1861.

'The children of the Omega Retreat National School met on Monday, 23<sup>rd</sup> instant, to enjoy a treat to which they were invited by the teacher, Mr. Hollands. A number of parents and visitors were present. The children met in the morning and enjoyed themselves in the play-ground until one o'clock, when they gathered in the schoolroom, which was decorated with gum boughs, wild creepers and mottos, but the effect of these was destroyed by the ugly appearance of the rough un-plastered walls.

The tables were spread in first-rate style, loaded with cakes in rich variety the centrepiece being an enormous plum pudding ornamented with paper fringes etc. the size and excellence of this pudding reflects great credit on the skill of Mrs Hollands. As was to be expected, the boys, and the girls too, did ample justice to the good things provided for them.'

The report then brings us back to reality with the observation:

'As the harvest is nearly all gathered in, there is many and anxious look at the weather, but no sign of the rain that is so much wanted, the dry winds still prevailing and the paddocks becoming as bare as the roads.'

Earlier in the year, this brief report in the Examiner dated April 2, 1861 tells us:

The Inspector of National Schools examined the children in the Omega Retreat Schools on Thursday, but I was not able to be present as I wished. I am told the result was satisfactory.

One might assume this brief comment would have been from the Editor and reflects general satisfaction with the school, the teacher and the school. Given typical reports by inspectors on file, this was a very satisfactory comment.

September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1862, Mr Hollands seeks '*...removal to another school in the event of a suitable vacancy occurring. I make this application mainly from the fact that I consider the climate of this place prejudicial to my health, being a bleak sea exposure and also from the requirements of a growing family for more roomy premises.*'

Approval is granted swiftly and his response to the Secretary to the Board of National Education, dated October 22<sup>nd</sup> says in part '*in reply to your communication of the beg to state that I shall lose no time proceeding to Carcoar, I cannot be ready by tomorrow morning, but by the next Steamer on Monday next.*

With the benefit of hindsight the reader might wonder if Thomas knows how difficult the journey by sea and primitive overland transport Carcoar with a young family is likely to be. Discussion with the Carcoar Family History was interesting...another story!

Sixty years after the Omega Retreat National School opened a group of students and teachers gathered under the magnificent Moreton Bay Fig tree on the school's southern boundary.

It offers an opportunity to learn something about people who taught, were educated or lived in and around Omega 98 years ago. By chance or design they paused to leave us with an image that triggers this brief attempt to know more about them.



The photograph is orientated so the subjects are facing east. Mr Edward English stands on the far left of the group, behind the bench upon which students are seated for the occasion. His wife is seated, nursing their daughter Mary. Behind the group, we can see the old post and rail fence marking the western boundary and entrance to the old dirt track from Kiama that would eventually form the highway we know today.

Mary English, sitting on her mother's lap is facing the camera in this version of the image. Different prints have circulated over time and it is likely that the reader might have yet another from this day at the school. It is interesting to guess the varying levels of interest on the faces of pupils who would have no way of knowing that we might want to know them.

The school closed on a number of times as local circumstances changed but finally closed in 1941...only to re-open as a subsidised school operating from 1941 to 1945. Peter Quinn was a pupil when it closed.

He was with us today in the group walking down memory lane together with Ken Miller and others who I hope will add to our study of the school and its impact on the district.

The school had a tough time as leading up to its birth in 1860.

It seems to have defied permanent closure as indicated in this advice in the Kiama Reporter and Illawarra Journal, Wed. 7 May 1947...page 6.

## Omega School.

The Omega Public School, which has been closed for several periods during the last few years, was again re-opened on Monday. Miss Mary Harding being in charge. She is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. M. J. Harding, of Croydon, formerly resident in Gerringong.

A Social Hub:

In addition to its role as a centre for education, The Omega School was a social hub providing a scattered community with a place to gather. Roads were nothing more than bush tracks suitable for riders on horseback or wheeled horse-drawn vehicles. The automobile as we know it would not be available or able to traverse the area until the Model T Ford and primitive motor cycles came on the scene.

Any events organised for evening entertainment or local meetings were typically scheduled to fit the cycle of the Full Moon.

This aspect of the school's role is covered in many of the enthusiastic stories available to anyone interested in reading them on Trove.

*The invitation to contribute any additional stories you care to share is open.*

Frank Tynan