

OPENING OF THE NEW PUBLIC SCHOOL AT PYRMONT.

Daily Telegraph, 8 November 1884

With a wise discernment, the powers that be have not been unmindful of the principles of health, and whilst the newest additions to our schools have been architecturally elegant and attractive, a due regard has been paid to the more useful requirements of light and air.

Mindful of the old proverb, “*Mens sana in corpore sano*”, three important matters should always be religiously observed in the construction of our Public schools — plenty of light, good ventilation, and all necessary sanitary surroundings. These have been amply fulfilled in the new school at Pyrmont which was formally opened yesterday. For a long time the necessity of a larger school has been felt in this populous and rapidly-extending suburb, but a difficulty was in procuring a site which would be at once healthy and central. In John-street, there were rookeries tenanted by the most undesirable of citizens, and after some little trouble the Government managed to secure the land, and in their place to-day there stands a handsome and in every respect suitable, public school.

The building is a remarkably handsome one. In the centre there rises a lofty tower flanked by the main school rooms, the girls to the west and the boys to the east. The internal arrangements are on the most approved modern principles. The classrooms are lofty, well-lighted and ventilated, and furnished with every requisite; whilst the lavatories, outbuildings, playgrounds and general surroundings reflect the highest credit upon Mr Kemp. Yesterday was looked forward to as a high-day and a holiday by the public and children of Pyrmont, who, heretofore, have had to put up with inadequate accommodation and many inconveniences.

Several untoward circumstances contributed to militate against the success of the opening. Imprimis the weather was detestable, and then the Minister for Education (Hon. W.J. Trickett), did not put in an appearance. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the affair passed off most pleasantly thanks, in a great measure, to the admirable tact and management of the head teacher, Mr DeBelle, a rare manager of men, as well as children. Long before the appointed hour, the girls' schoolroom was filled with bright, well-trained orderly youngsters and their parents and friends, and even standing room was at a premium. Flowers brightened the scene, and all wore a holiday aspect, teachers and scholars alike looking bright and happy. Certainly the most attractive feature of the whole gathering was the singing of the children, who rendered a number of songs with taste, precision, and clear enunciation and due regard to the lights and shades of the compositions. The gem of the musical programme was the musical setting of the Laureate's poem “*The Brook*”, in which the children showed not only careful and appreciative training, but a skill which would have done infinite credit to more pretentious organisations.

The formal proceedings were opened at 3 o'clock, by Mr Edwin Johnson, Chief-inspector of Schools. He was peculiarly qualified to speak, as it was 17 years since he had taken charge of the City and Pyrmont school district. There were then three schools, none of which were in any respect adapted for the uses to which they were put. There was the public school in Mount-street, the Church of England school, and the Roman Catholic school, and each and all were unsuitable and badly managed, for though the teachers did good work, they were unable, on account of their surroundings, to do either themselves or their pupils full justice. This state of things continued until the Public Instruction Act, when the Church of England, wise in their generation, handed over their building to the Government. During the years 1871-2-3, he and other Inspectors tried to obtain a site for a new school, and after some trouble one was secured in Ultimo from the Messrs Harris. This, however, though central and valuable, did not meet the requirements of Pyrmont: though the school was built to accommodate 500 children, the average attendance mounted up to 671. The new buildings were erected to take the place of the old Church of England schoolroom, which had done duty for so many years, and which was tender to the memories of many of those present. The new building was one of the finest, most commodious, and best finished in the colonies, and reflected the highest credit on the architect, Mr Kemp, who had paid particular attention to lighting, ventilation, and general sanitary arrangements. There were two boys' rooms, each 45 x 25 feet to accommodate 285 boys, and two classrooms 20 x 16 feet to hold 80. The girls' room was 63 x 25 feet to hold 197 girls, and there was also a girls' classroom 26 x 15 feet for 60, whilst the two infants' rooms, each 45 x 25 feet, would hold 285 making a total accommodation for 907 children.

The speaker reminded the parents of their duty, paid a high eulogium to the teachers, and concluded by declaring the school open.

Dr Evans spoke of the wonderful strides education had made during the past 30 years: [previous] teachers were mere hangers-on, under the thumb of the clergy. The new Public Schools Act had put the keys of knowledge into the hands of the young. The speaker scathingly denounced the denominational system as propounded by the clerics.

A very interesting ceremony followed. On behalf of the scholars, Master Samuel Ogg and Miss Lily Williams presented their teacher, Mr Debelle, with a handsome silver salver, claret jug and cups and a well-worded, brilliantly illuminated address.

Mr Debelle gratefully and feelingly returned thanks, and the proceedings wound up with the singing of the National Anthem, and ringing cheers for Her Majesty, the guests, and the teachers.