

THE HISTORY OF THE THORNER SCHOOL IN ADELAIDE

1839 - 1855

Section 236, Hundred of Adelaide, within which the property now known as 37 Thorneb Street, Unley Park is located, was granted to Thomas Whistler by Governor Gawler in 1839¹. Whistler held the land in broadacre form for several years and early in 1855 subdivided Section 236 into 174 residential allotments which he named collectively as 'Unley Park'². Sale of these allotments commenced immediately, with Mrs. Catherine Maria Thorneb, a widow of Lower Mitcham being among the initial purchasers. On 15th May 1855 she acquired Allotments 10, 104, 105, and 106 for a total of 122 pounds³. Allotment 10 was located on Unley Road at the corner of Park Street⁴ (later Gover and subsequently Thorneb Street) and Allotments 104, 105 and 106 were on Park Street. Number 37 Thorneb Street now occupies Allotment 104, part of 105 plus later additions.⁵ The 1855 Assessment Book of the Mitcham Council⁶ records property of 2 acres in Unley Park being owned by the Executors of R. Thorneb, Mrs. Thorneb's late husband.

Mr. Robert Thorneb died at Lower Mitcham early in 1855 after living in the new colony for fifteen years. He brought his family to South Australia on the ship⁷ 'Superb' in 1840 after leaving his family home in Harpurhey, Lancashire, England. The family first settled at Port Adelaide from where they moved to Kensington and subsequently to Mitcham. Mrs. Thorneb commenced a school for girls at Lower Mitcham at a location known as Pellatt Villa⁸ and continued operating the school until the death of her husband. The family which moved to Unley Park comprised Mrs. Thorneb, her 3 daughters and sons.

The first structures on the Thorneb property were constructed late in 1855 or early in 1856, and according to the Assessment Book⁹ for the year 1856/1857 the property, including a house had an annual value of 23 pounds. Examination of the buildings remaining on the property indicates that the original house is contained within the ground floor structure and has been added to substantially.

Increases in the annual value of the property occurred¹⁰ in 1857/1858 (30 pounds); 1860/1861 (36 pounds) and 1867/1868 (40 pounds). The first Assessment Book for the newly proclaimed Town of Unley in 1871 shows an annual value of 48 pounds. These increases can be expected to have occurred through a combination of additional improvements and overall inflation in property values.

Mrs. Thorneb continued to operate her school for young ladies in the new family home and gained increasing assistance from her daughters¹¹. Mrs. Thorneb proved an able and

¹ Lands Titles Office, C.T. 1038/124.

² Lands Titles Office, Plan 36/1855.

³ Lands Titles Office, Indenture of 1855 between Thomas Whistler and Mrs. C.M. Thorneb.

⁴ Name as given on the original deposited subdivision plan 36/1855.

⁵ Part of Allotment 103 and parts of 119 and 120.

⁶ The Mitcham Council area included Unley Park until the designation of the Unley Council area in 1871

⁷ Norman, W.A. *The History of the City of Mitcham* 1953, p. 142.

⁸ *Adelaide Observer*, Sat. May 19, 1894, p. 24.

⁹ Assessment Book, Mitcham for the year 1856/1857.

¹⁰ Assessment Book, Mitcham.

¹¹ *The South Australian Directory for 1865 in The Almanack, 1865*, p. 62.

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successful schoolmistress and was active in local affairs¹². Her contribution to the development of education in this State was well recognized in tributes made following her death in May 1894, at the age of 60 years. A local correspondent wrote:

"Old colonists together with former and latter- day pupils numbering many thousands, will learn with the deepest regrets of the death of Mrs. Thornber who for nearly forty years had been the principal of what is assuredly the best known as well as one of the best conducted ladies' schools in the colony."¹³

In December 1893, several months before her death, Mrs. Thornber transferred the property to her daughters,¹⁴ Catherine, Ellen and Rachel. Miss Catherine Maria Thornber became principal of the school following her mother's death and was assisted in the task of direction by her sister Ellen. Catherine was born in England in 1837 and arrived in South Australia with her parents in 1840. When the Unley Park school was first established, she was engaged as a governess teaching music and other subjects to several families in the district including that of Hon. Edward Stirling, father of Sir Lancelot Stirling.¹⁵ Later, as the school enlarged, Catherine became fully occupied, teaching at her mother's school.

The school curriculum was very advanced for its time with regard to the fields of study. During the 1890's serious studies were undertaken in the sciences, particularly in geology, chemistry and physiology and the school established a reputation in the study of botany, in particular of native Australian flowers.¹⁶

The colleagues of Miss Thornber during the 1890s were held in high regard as educators. Miss Jacob took French classes; Miss Allen, English; Miss Overbury, art; Monsieur Calais, spoken French; Mr. Edward Reeves, elocution; Mr. C.O. Stevens, music; Mr. E.E. Mitchell, pianoforte and Mr. E. Bennett, the violin. These three music and instrument teachers were prominent Adelaide musicians.¹⁷

The school report of 1895 gives an indication of the growth of the school at the time:

"Next year we intend to separate the Kindergarten from the general school and are now preparing a spacious class-room ... under the shade of some of our beautiful old trees and surrounded by grassy lawns ...

Our increasing boarding school has for some time been demanding more space, and so we have added a second storey to our dear old home. Under the able management of Mr. Davies the old place has been transformed into a handsome and commodious house, replete with every modern convenience. The work will be finished by Christmas and next year we hope to enjoy many increased comforts and luxuries."¹⁸

By 1895 the school had an active group of old scholars, some of whom continued a close association with the school by attending the Home-Reading Union and the French

¹² *Adelaide Observer*, Saturday December 6, 1884, p. 29.

¹³ *Adelaide Observer*, Saturday May 19, 1894, p. 24.

¹⁴ Lands Titles Office, C.T. 318/177.

¹⁵ *Adelaide Advertiser*, Saturday October 4, 1924, p. 17.

¹⁶ *Adelaide Observer*, Saturday December 21, 1895, p. 32.

¹⁷ Nicholas R.J. *Private and denominational secondary schools of South Australia*, 1953, p. 213.

¹⁸ *Adelaide Observer*, Saturday December 21, 1895, p. 32.

conversation class.

The 1896 school year opened on 29th January with new classrooms (on what is now 31 Thornber Street) and with additional accommodation for boarders¹⁹ (at 37 Thornber Street). By 1898 the enrolment had reached 125 of which 25 were boarders and 10 were Kindergarten pupils. The educational standards achieved were recognized widely. Bishop Harmer said of the school in 1898 that he wished to

“congratulate the Misses Thornber on the condition of the Unley Park School and on the success which the institution had achieved this year. For a long time it had been by far the best School of its kind in Adelaide.”²⁰

He emphasized, in particular, the work of the school in teaching the natural sciences - botany, physiology and geology.

Some indication of the layout of the school at the time has been provided by surviving old scholars. Mrs. J. Welsh (nee Boucaut) wrote of the school:

“As we lived in Jamestown, when we were old enough we were sent to Adelaide to attend Miss Thornber's School for Girls, as boarders. There was a single house in Thornber Street, Unley, where the school was conducted and next door was a two-storey house for boarders, who had to pass through the fruit garden as they went to and from.”²¹

The classrooms during the later 1890's were, therefore, separate from the existing boarding house. The boarding house, gardens and Kindergarten were on Allotments 104 and 105. Mrs. Welsh²² also recalls the existence of a tennis court in the school grounds. This court still remains.

At the end of the 1899 school year, a Christmas break-up celebration was held in the grounds of the school.

“Harpurhey which is so picturesquely and healthily situated in the street in Unley Park which was named after the Thornber family, has grown out of all recognition and “old-girls” stand surprised at the transformation that has taken place in the scene of their happy school days. At six o'clock the visitors adjourned to the spacious playground, ornamented here and there with the gum, the olive and the pine.”²³

During the 1899 school year, there were 112 pupils on the roll of which 26 to 30 were boarders and 7 to 10 were in the Kindergarten.²⁴ A school magazine was published in 1900 by Miss Allen, and both Miss Thornber and Miss Allen made trips to Europe to study new techniques in teaching.

¹⁹ *Adelaide Observer*, Saturday January 11, 1896, p. 2.

²⁰ *Adelaide Observer*, Saturday December 24, 1898.

²¹ Welsh, J. Mrs. *Boarding School, 1894* in *Senior Citizens News* June 1974, p 17. The date of 1894 stated in the title is not correct as the second storey of the boarding house was constructed in 1895.

²² Welsh, J. Mrs. Reference as in footnote 21.

²³ *Adelaide Observer*, Saturday December 23, 1899, p. 44.

²⁴ As footnote 23.

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The school continued to flourish under the direction of Misses Catherine and Ellen Thornber. At the annual distribution of prizes held in the Unley Town Hall on December 15, 1904, Archdeacon Samwell praised highly the achievements of the 'Unley Park School.'

"Those who had watched the progress of this, one of the great educational institutions of the State, could not fail to have noticed how, first under the late revered Mrs. Thornber, and then under the present lady principals, the highest interests and noblest ideals of education had always been the great aim of that school. It had been recently stated that the best test of the success of a school was to be found in the pupils themselves. Judged also by that standard, Unley Park School would have a remarkably high record."²⁵

A scholarship was provided by the Thornber family for daughters of Anglican clergymen which included free tuition at the school. (See Appendix C)

The Thornber sisters, because of advancing years, relinquished control of the school in 1906. The contributions of the Thornber family and their school to the development of education in the State both by pioneering education for girls and by introducing new teaching methods has been apparent from the commendations already mentioned. Other recollections of the district make particular reference to the work of the school. Rev. J. Blacket in his recollections of Unley and Goodwood writes of the "first class" boarding school for young ladies conducted by Mrs. Thornber and her daughters. He also refers to parts of Unley Park being a veritable forest, at the time²⁶.

Further tribute was paid to the work of Miss Catherine Thornber at the time of her death in 1924. She was acknowledged as having developed and maintained the leading girls' academy in South Australia²⁷, and was influential in promoting the establishment of the Kindergarten Union of South Australia²⁸. To perpetuate her memory, the old scholars of Unley Park School, subscribed 450 pounds for the purpose of founding a bursary in memory of the late Catherine Maria Thornber (Calender of the University of Adelaide, Statute 50)²⁹. Additional commendations by Mr. E. Whittington a journalist with the Adelaide Advertiser and a resident of Unley Park, were made on the occasion³⁰ of Miss Ellen Thornber's 80th birthday in 1931.

1907 - Present

The 1907 school year commenced under the direction of Miss Caroline Jacob who proceeded to run Unley Park School in conjunction with Tormore School at North Adelaide. On several days a week she rode her bicycle between the two schools and interchanged students for various classes. However, the task of co-ordinating the two schools proved difficult and demanding and following increased competition from other schools, both State and private, Miss Jacob was forced to close the school³¹ in 1910. The Unley Park School ceased to

²⁵ *Adelaide Observer*, Saturday December 24, 1904, p. 48.

²⁶ Blacket, J. Rev. *The History of Unley and Goodwood*, Pamphlet, Unley: 1916, p. 106.

²⁷ *Adelaide Advertiser*, Saturday October 4, 1924, p. 17 and *The Register*, Sat. October 4, 1924, p. 10.

²⁸ Payne, G.B. and Cosh E. *History of Unley 1871-1971*, City of Unley, 1971, p. 173.

²⁹ Nicholas R.J. *Private and denominational Secondary Schools of South Australia*, University of Melbourne: 1953, p. 214.

³⁰ *Adelaide Advertiser*, Monday September 7, 1931, page 8 and Friday September 11, 1931, p. 20.

³¹ Angove, Dorothy, *A Tribute to Caroline Jacob*, Pamphlet p. 12.

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function at the conclusion of the 1910 school year and senior students transferred to Tormore School.

In the meantime, the Thornber sisters moved to a house built for them next door to the school, at the corner of Thornber and Grove Streets.

In August 1915 part of the school property (Allotment 104 and a portion of Allotment 105) was sold to Mrs. Julia Whittle³² and included the substantial building which had served as the Thornber family home and the school boarding house and a cottage building which served as the original school building and later housed domestic assistants³³. The school laundry still exists in the iron buildings to the rear of the main building. In September 1915, a new Certificate of Title was issued³⁴ to Mrs. Whittle comprising Allotment 104 and portions of Allotments 103 and 105. The property was extended again in July 1924 when Mrs. Whittle acquired an area³⁵ at the rear of Allotments 104 and 105. This made the total area of the property now known as 37 Thornber Street, one acre and sixteen perches.

By 1920, alteration to the boarding house had been made by Mrs. Whittle thereby converting the building into 12 flats. The complex then became known as Mayfair Flats³⁶ and has provided accommodation for a large number of residents over the years. Use of the building as residential flat accommodation is still continuing.

³² Lands Titles Office, C.T. 318/177.

³³ Mrs. J.C. Ingoldby speaks of a Mrs. Palmer and 3 daughter living in a cottage at the rear of the main building.

³⁴ Lands Titles Office, C.T. 1038/124.

³⁵ Lands Titles Office, C.T. 1335/158.

³⁶ Sands & McDougall, *South Australian Directory for 1920*, p. 118.