

Vince Symons

My most vivid memory of St Patrick's is getting whacked in the backside with a squash racket in the handball courts in a friendly game with "Jack the Man" (alias Father John Drury)! He reckoned I was standing in the way and wouldn't move – probably right!

It was a very pleasant surprise when out of the blue Peter Gaffney contacted me a few years ago and asked me what I had been up to since I left St. Pat's. Now he has dobbed me in to put it in writing for the Old Boys' magazine. Although officially I am not an 'Old Boy', I guess I qualify as an 'old boy' as I turned 80 last year. Old Father Maloney at St. Pat's used to say that you "do not know what life is all about until you turn 80" – you "are only a teenager till then" – probably right!

Those, and other memories about St. Pat's, especially the friendliness of the students, are very special to me, and reminders of what a unique place the school was. It was sad to hear that it was closing down not long after I was privileged to teach there. As their old teacher, I would much prefer to be hearing what all the boys there in my time ('61-'63) have done with their lives since, rather than telling them about mine. But Peter and Gavin Wayland and Paul Buttigieg have been very persuasive, so here goes.

Growing up at Ryde in Sydney, I received most of my schooling at Marist Brothers Eastwood, and entered the Jesuit Novitiate at Loyola College Watsonia in 1956. After two years as a Novice and three studying Philosophy came the posting to St. Pat's as a Junior Secondary Teacher and then Sportsmaster. The Jesuit staff there at the time, including Fathers Drury and Frank Gorman (the bosses!), Maloney, Hudspeth, Quigley, etc, plus Scholastics Des Walker and Justin King (to name a few), were great companions to work with, and the students friendly and cooperative.

Next were three years living at Champion College Kew and attending Melbourne University for an Arts Degree, but probably what I enjoyed most there was 'going AWOL' on Saturdays to play Aussie Rules with the St. Pat's Old Boys team in the Amateur Competition! Bernie Power or Marty Ryan used to pick me up 'around the corner' from the College and return me after the game (probably without knowing I was AWOL)!

After Champion I moved on to begin Theology leading up to ordination at Canisius College Pymble, but it only took a few months there to realise that the priestly life was not for me - my loss. Leaving there, I worked for the Sydney Catholic Diocese and a Sydney Barrister (who had been a Jesuit Novice with me!) for a few months helping to gather information suitable for the fight in those days against militant and Communist Unions. This was followed by a couple of years studying Law while working for the Commonwealth Public Service, before an old friend in the Jesuits, Father Bob Bruce, asked me if I would like to continue teaching with them at St. Aloysius College Milsons's Point, which I did for two years.

During that time, I returned to an old love, playing Rugby for Sydney University and then the Western Suburbs team in the Sydney competition. This had begun when I was at Canisius College, once again 'going AWOL' to play on Saturday afternoons, and I enjoyed playing top level rugby for another four years after that, including two years as captain of First Grade. One afternoon during this time, sunning myself by the pool at my sister's place, I was suddenly drenched in cold water from a hose turned on me. The culprit turned out to be Debbie Hill, country girl, expert horsewoman and mothercraft nurse to my sister's children, who became my wife near the end of 1971.

After the wedding, performed by Fr. Bob Bruce S.J., we decided to move to the country, choosing the Tamworth area as our destination. We were lucky to be able to put a deposit on a 720 acre farm 30 kilometres north of Tamworth, and we still live there today in semi retirement. Interestingly enough, a few years ago, one neighbouring farm was owned by the Drury family, the father being Father John's brother Tom. John and Tom have gone to their rewards, but the rest of Tom's family remain our close friends.

2. For the first three years here 1973-5, I taught at the Christian Brothers' Boys School in Tamworth, and then moved to the new and experimental McCarthy Catholic Senior High School, consisting only of Years 11 and 12 students, mostly from the Christian Brothers and Dominican Convent Junior schools. The day before school started there, the principal, Dominican Sister Diana, asked me if I taught Ancient History, and when I replied that I had never studied it, she said "too bad – you are teaching it tomorrow". I was a page ahead of the class in the text book for that year! Also taught 3 Unit Maths and English, plus 2 Unit Physics, History and French ( for one year only!). As a small school, all teachers had to be versatile, probably to the detriment of the students!

McCarthy was an interesting school, experimental in the sense that it began without requiring any school uniform, attendance at class was not compulsory, and the students were allowed to smoke. These allowances only lasted a couple of years, as the students were not mature enough as a group to handle the situation at that age, and they were generally happy to do without the extra freedoms. Unfortunately, it has been recombined now with the junior schools mainly because of the cost to the Diocese of running the separate campuses.

Soon after we arrived in Tamworth, the President of the local Rugby Club, the Tamworth Magpies, contacted me and talked me into playing Rugby again. This was a good way to get accepted into the local community, and I enjoyed playing first and then reserve grade for the next few years. My Aussie Rules background was always a big help in Rugby, as I mostly played fullback where kicking and catching the footy was an important skill. Am still on the Committee at the Club, these days looking after Caravan Camping at the ground during the January Country Music Festival – a great income for the amateur club. Was President of the Club for four years, and it was a big honour in 2007 when the new Clubhouse/Grandstand was named the Vince Symons Stand.

In 1984, after teaching at McCarthy fulltime for eight years, I decided it was time for a change (as I had never really intended to be a school teacher!) and began my own business selling the (then) new fangled cast iron and steel wood heaters. It was named North West Heating and Cooling, and I continued to teach part time as well for two years. As wood heaters did not sell very well in summer, we also sold and installed whole-of-house Evaporative Coolers which work very well (and cheaply), in the North West NSW climate. The business soon expanded into selling wood cooking stoves and parts, gas heaters and central heating, reverse cycle air conditioning, solar hot water systems and pool heating, and solar power systems. Ran the business for 20 years employing a secretary/saleswoman and Installation Tradesman full time and Subbies part-time, then sold it in 2003, and it is still operating at the present time.

Having dealt with the retail public for 20 years, wholesaling sounded attractive, so I purchased a small business importing good quality glass and silver giftware from Italy. However, I learnt a tough lesson in business when I visited the factory in Italy – the owner was mortified to hear that I had paid twice the price that I should have for the goods! I enjoyed travelling all over New South Wales, Victoria and southern Queensland selling the giftware, but with the bad start and competition from cheap copies from China, the business never really took off. My Dad was a successful salesman all his life, but I don't think I inherited those skills from him.

My next venture was to buy a small business from a Rugby mate, Tamworth Custom Lattice, in order to make up for some of the losses with the giftware! Ran this for about five years, and started another business to run in conjunction with it, Dampier Street Used Furniture. I had learnt a bit about Used Furniture from my brother with whom I worked for a while in his business, Manly Furniture Auctions, after leaving the Jesuits. The businesses went OK, but sold them after about five years when Debbie convinced me to 'retire to the farm' in 2013, where we run a small herd of cattle and flock of sheep in our retirement.

I turned eighty last year, and enjoy good health, but unfortunately Debbie has had a tough battle with cancer in recent years, but she is a survivor. Our only child, Mark is a police detective in nearby Armidale, and has presented us with three grandchildren Alex 17, Tom 14 and Caitie 8, who attend Catholic schools in Armidale. They all enjoy visiting 'the Oldies' at the farm.

Received these photos from Michael Head (S.J.) and Peter Gaffney.

First two of them were sent to me recently by Michael Head (S.J.) who took them as a boy on the SPC Excursion to Harrietville and Mt. Feathertop (1963). The first one is Michael Sutton SJ, a Jesuit Scholastic teaching at St. Pat's at the time, and the other one is (a young!) me on the same excursion).

These other three I sent to Peter.

The 'horse' one is Debbie and self in our farm stockyard with Debbie's horse Arnie (a year or so ago)!

The 'Vince Symons Stand' one shows (l. to r.) Mark (my son – now a Police Detective), Vince (now old!) and Alex (eldest grandson) Symons in front of the clubhouse/stand at the Tamworth Rugby Club;

The 'Dinner Suit one' is myself and wife Debbie with the Captain of the Queen Mary in February this year;

