

Mount Barker Waldorf School

A Historical Perspective of the Founding Years

Alduino Mazzone

The Adelaide Waldorf School, as it was initially called, opened on 11th February 1979 in Beulah Road, Norwood, an inner city suburb east of Adelaide. Classes began with 37 children in Kindergarten and Classes 1, 2 and 3, and five teachers¹, including a eurythmist. The school's first home was an Anglican Church hall which had previously been the venue for one of a number of alternative schools which had sprung up during the liberal "Dunstan Decade"²

The hall, though central from the point of view of transport, was clearly a temporary venue, lacking sufficient playing space or room to grow. In the following year the Waldorf school found itself located under a stand of old blue gums on twenty acres of gently-sloping farmland on the outskirts of the small, sleepy and conservative country town of Mount Barker, about 40 kilometres to the south-east of Adelaide. The Anthroposophical Society was instrumental in bringing this school into being. The land, on the southern outskirts of Mount Barker, was donated by one of its members³ and the money to buy the first portable buildings came from a group of Anthroposophists⁴. After the initial three classes, the school grew by one class each year until Class Ten in 1986 when a pause was made for two years, to consolidate the work in the high school, before adding the final two classes and establishing in 1990 a full twelve year programme.⁵ There are currently about 350 students in the school receiving a single-stream comprehensive Waldorf education from Kindergarten to Year Twelve.

Early steps in the founding

Apart from the financial support by anthroposophists it was also a group of members of the Anthroposophical Society who were convinced of the need to establish a school based on Steiner's indications in Adelaide⁶. Most of them were teachers already and some had young children. This initiative group, which first met 29th July 1977, became the steering committee whose foresight and dedicated work led to the founding of the Adelaide Waldorf School eighteen months later.

The key role played by Francis Edmunds, an internationally known figure in Waldorf education, must be acknowledged. From June 20-24, 1978 Mr. Edmunds was invited to come to

¹ The founding teachers were Milton Mellor (K), Jennifer Bunday (Class 1), Jennifer West (Class 2), Alduino Mazzone (Class 3), and Thomas Ludescher (ex-Lorien Novalis class teacher and recently trained Eurythmist), and some part-time teachers such as Doreen Mellor (Painting and Craft), and Eva Tolstoshev (Violin).

² The period in which Mr. Don Dunstan was the Labour Premier of South Australia was noted for its innovative government policies and support of alternatives in all fields.

³ The donor, Mr. George Sickel, was by marriage a member of Mount Barker's German community of established land owners. In the 1960s he was instrumental in the founding of Saint Mark's Lutheran Church in Mount Barker. He became a member of the Anthroposophical Society in the 1970s and responded to the requests for support of the school venture with his generous donation of twenty acres of land.

⁴ The Michael Group, led by Mrs. Eva Tolstoshev, began a fund to support Steiner education and this work was carried on by the Novalis Group, under the leadership of Mrs. Charlotte Schwenczner, whose donation of \$15,000 made possible the purchase and transportation of the first three buildings.

⁵ In 1984, Peter Glasby, a high school Science teacher joined the staff and was a key figure in the formation of the high school. Already with a degree in Biochemistry and training in Curative education, Peter had only recently completed a Steiner High School Science Teacher Training in Kassel, Germany, before joining the staff.

⁶ The initiative group comprised Paul Rubens, Alduino Mazzone, Sue Laing, Caroline Verco, Patricia Sutcliffe, David and June Kew, Ron Savage, Sylvia Debski and a visiting Dutch anthroposophist, Coenrad van Houten, who chaired the meeting. (From minutes of first meeting 29th July, 1977.) Some other Society members of the Anthroposophical Society joined the group later.

Adelaide by the Waldorf school steering committee and the Anthroposophical Society. The committee's media campaign, including newspaper reports and radio and television interviews with Edmunds, publicised the intention to start a Waldorf school in Adelaide. Edmunds delivered three public lectures at Ashford House (later called Ashford Special School), each attracting over 100 people⁷. Names were taken of those interested in supporting the venture and a total of 113 were collected.⁸ These prospective parents and friends formed the Waldorf School Association. With this step taken, the original steering group of anthroposophists disbanded and became members of the larger newly formed Association, which divided into three broad interest groups - educational, social and financial. Steiner's ideas on the Threefold Social Order, which had influenced the steering committee, now became incorporated in the threefold structure of the Waldorf School Association.

Waldorf education was not altogether unknown in South Australia because of the work of Paul Rubens⁹ and Patricia Fuss¹⁰. Rubens and Fuss were lecturers in Education at Torrens College of Advanced Education, at the Underdale Campus (later to become part of the University of South Australia). They conducted elective and special unit courses on the Principles and Practice of Steiner (Waldorf) Education from 1975. When the Education Group of the Waldorf School Association had no success in attracting trained teachers from elsewhere¹¹, it was from some of the teachers who had taken this course that two of the first class teachers were drawn. For example, two recent graduates, Jennifer Bunday¹² and Jennifer West¹³, took classes one and two respectively. Milton Mellor¹⁴, the Kindergarten teacher (the first male to be so in Waldorf schools up to that time) and the eurythmist Thomas Ludescher¹⁵ (also male in a profession over-represented by women) and their families came from interstate. Alduino Mazzone¹⁶ was invited to become one of the pioneer teachers because of his involvement with the Anthroposophical Society and his commitment to the founding initiative. Having moved to the new and permanent site in 1980, the next pioneering teacher to join the group was David Skewes¹⁷. David was the first class-teacher in the school to have received a formal Steiner teacher training. New teachers joined the

⁷See *Newsletter for Members; Anthroposophical Society (S. A. Branch)* "News and Announcements", May 1978, p.1. The lecture titles, from writer's diary entry, were: "Waldorf Education and Your Child", "Education Towards a New Society", and "The Goals of Waldorf Education: A New View of Man". June 21st, 22nd and 23rd, 1978 resp.

⁸Among those present were people who have since become staff members in the school. For example, John and Tina Whisson, Heinz and Marita Huxholl, Mace Boston, Patricia Fuss, and Patricia Sutcliffe (now Cusack).

⁹Mr. Paul Rubens, at that time a Drama lecturer at the Torrens College of Advanced Education (TCAE), had attended high school at the Kings Langley Steiner School in Hertfordshire, England. Taking study leave from the Teachers College, Rubens completed a Masters degree in Steiner Education at Adelphi University, New York.

¹⁰Ms. Patricia Fuss had taken study leave from TCAE in 1973 to do a Waldorf teacher training course at Emerson College with Francis Edmunds.

¹¹During the late 1970s and 1980s the Waldorf school movement was growing rapidly all over the world, and any available teachers soon found employment in more local regions. It appeared that no trained Waldorf teachers were willing to become pioneers of a school in Adelaide!

¹²Jennifer Bunday had recently completed her teacher training and consequently was the youngest member of staff.

¹³Jennifer West was the most senior class teacher, and although had also recently graduated as a teacher, had previously trained and worked in Melbourne where she was an Associate of the Australian Institute of Medical Laboratory Technologists.

¹⁴Milton Mellor was a trained high school teacher from Queensland. He had spent some time observing Ruth Wittig, the Kindergarten teacher of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School, before coming to Adelaide.

¹⁵The eurythmist, Thomas Ludescher, and his wife Gudrun, had been part of the founding group of Lorien Novalis, a school for Rudolf Steiner Education in the north-west of Sydney, and thus brought its influence to the school.

¹⁶Alduino Mazzone was a high school Physical Education and Drama teacher. In 1978 he was a Research Officer, seconded to the Research and Planning Branch of the Education Department of South Australia. It was in this year that he was most active in promoting the formation of the Waldorf School.

¹⁷David Skewes, a locally trained primary school teacher, had gone to Emerson College, England, and returned in time to take the new Class 1 in the new school site at Mount Barker.

school in subsequent years.¹⁸

When the school was "up and running" the Waldorf School Association disbanded and the more active members found new connections to the school.¹⁹ The teaching staff formed the College of Teachers²⁰ and the parents formed a Parent Association. This situation has remained almost the same up to this day, and this structure is generally consistent with other Waldorf schools except for the fact that, although the school does have provision for parent representation on its management committees (except the Education Committee), it is the College of Teachers which is the legal owner of the school and has the constitutional powers to make all decisions.²¹ Of all the Waldorf schools in Australia this situation is unique. Consequences of this arrangement have been mixed, the more positive being direct control by the teachers of the school's educational policy and direction, and the negative being, at times, teacher overload and parent alienation.

Various attempts to involve parents in school decision making have been tried. For example, in recent years a School Council, made up of parents elected from the Parent Association and members of the College of Teachers, was formed.²² This group could influence decisions of the College in a number of policy areas, such as drug policy, by making recommendations which the College of Teachers could act upon as appropriate. Because of duplication of work, the School Council was disbanded by mutual agreement of Parent Association and the College of Teachers.

Source of teachers and educational influences

Largely as a result of being the fourth Waldorf school in Australia, a multiplicity of influences have shaped its curriculum and practices. For example, in the school's first three years, and consistently, though not as intensively in the years that followed, individuals²³ representing, in some cases, contrasting approaches to the Waldorf curriculum contributed to the school through personal advice, lectures, seminars and conferences. The sharing of experiences by visitors coming from different Steiner schools benefited the Mount Barker teachers by providing them with the opportunity to select from a variety of ideas and practices. Such a possibility was clearly denied to the first schools that were largely influenced by one or two key individuals.

This multiplicity of influence was further enhanced by the fact that the Mount Barker School did not have its own teacher training programme, so teachers who later joined the staff

¹⁸ Other pioneer teachers were Maria Melino 1981; Stephen Smith 1982; Craig Taylor 1983; Jeremy Board 1984, and also Damien Gilroy who took over Maria's class; Mark Molloy 1985, and also Catherine Sawkins took over Stephen's class. A new phase began in 1986 when Alduino began a second cycle of class teaching.

¹⁹ Some members, such as Sue Laing and Noela Simpson, in addition to being active parents, later became teachers in the school. Others like Andrew McNicol became very active in the Parent Association.

²⁰ Alduino Mazzone maintained a continuity of presence as a member of the original steering committee, Chairman of the Waldorf School Association, and member of the first College of Teachers.

²¹ Unlike Glenaeon Steiner School (the first school in Australia, founded in 1957), where the Board of Management is made up of teachers and parents, or the Melbourne Steiner School (the third school founded in 1973) which is a Company with Directors. An exception was Lorien Novalis, the second Steiner school founded in 1971, whose Constitution granted substantial powers to the College of Teachers. Certain clauses from Lorien's constitution were used in the framing of the Adelaide school's constitution. Christopher Charles, a solicitor who acted on behalf of the school, worded the final document to the satisfaction of the College.

²² In the minutes of the 22nd January 1979 meeting of the Coordinating Council of the Waldorf School Association, the subject of the need to form a School Council was discussed. It was proposed that members of the School Council comprise some teachers, parents and friends of the school and, since the Coordinating Council met that criteria, it could become the School Council of the school that was to start about three weeks later. This proposal was not taken any further at the time and it is interesting that the idea re-emerged much later in the life of the school.

²³ These include: Paul Rubens (Adelaide), Francis Edmunds (Emerson College, England), Willy Waldijk (Holland), Alan Whitehead (Lorien Novalis), Robert Martin (Melbourne), Dr. William Scherer (Hawaii), Sylvia Brose (Glenaeon), Alex Podolinsky (Melbourne), Konrad Korobacz (Lorien Novalis) and others.

had received their training elsewhere and consequently brought different ideas and emphases.²⁴ Also, unlike the earlier schools, it began with a group of classes, and therefore a group of teachers, rather than growing one class at a time. This necessitated group-working skills from the beginning, and because no one individual dominated by virtue of greater knowledge or experience, a unified social working developed in which teachers adopted different administrative and leadership functions according to their expertise or interests. The generally harmonious working atmosphere, easy acceptance of new people, and strong social life was characteristic of the school community, and was commented upon by many who visited the school in the pioneering years.

Parent population and growth in student numbers

In the first five years, because it was new and offered an alternative programme, the Waldorf School attracted many families whose interest was in non-traditional schooling. It is probable that most of these families supported alternative life styles in general, but since the term "alternative lifestyles" covers a broad range of values and practices, motives for enrolling their children and expectations of the Waldorf School were varied. For those who were instrumental in the founding of the school as "pioneer parents" the desire for an education based on Anthroposophy was the primary motive for attending. For others it was dissatisfaction with what State education or other types of private schools were offering. In time it became clearer where the school stood, along the continuum between form and freedom, and some families with a strong "counter culture" ethos found that Waldorf education was not what they had expected and so moved on to greener pastures. However many stayed and the school grew.

The following table indicates the growth in student numbers in the first six years.²⁵

YEAR	1979 *	1980 *	1981	1982	1983	1984
STUDENTS	28	46	107	127	191	218

With increased numbers came a broader range of values and socio-economic backgrounds in the parent population. A cursory analysis of the "List of Parent Community Skills and Businesses"²⁶ revealed a wide variety of occupations. There was a significant proportion of artists and crafts people, teachers of all types (including tertiary lecturers), consultants, healing professionals (both in conventional and alternative therapies), tradespeople of all sorts, salespersons, farmers and gardeners as well as other professionals such as architects. Another indicator of socio-economic status of the parent population is the relatively high percentage of families (51.8%) eligible for the "School Card"²⁷. This figure has been consistent over the past five years.

The transplantation of the school from a suburban to a rural location in 1980 led to the loss of some parents but the lure of the countryside as well as the accessibility of the school, due to the newly completed South East Freeway, attracted others. The relatively large increase in student numbers from 1980 to 1981 is partly explained by the fact that some families moved to Mount Barker or the nearby hills-towns. While for many years about one third to a half of the

²⁴Whereas the original 1979 class teachers were local and state trained, most of those that followed came from or trained elsewhere. For example, David Skewes, 1980 (Emerson College, England), Craig Taylor 1983 (Curative Education, Melbourne), Jeremy Board 1984 (Taruna, NZ), Damien Gilroy 1984 (Curative Education, Canberra), Mark Molloy 1985 (Taruna, NZ), William Keyte 1987 (Taruna, NZ), Michael Simmons 1992 (Emerson College, UK)

²⁵The asterisk (*) indicates that in 1979 and 1980 census figures only include children from six years of age. From 1981, five year olds are also included.(From Mount. Barker school files.)

²⁶ This is not a comprehensive survey of parental occupations since inclusion of skills and businesses, in the Mount Barker Waldorf School's Parent Information Book - 1994, was optional.

²⁷ This is a S. A. State Government Needs Grant scheme in which families below certain income thresholds receive financial assistance for educational expenses.

students came to school by bus from the city, today more and more families live locally and a sizeable community of "Waldorf Families" live in the new housing developments slowly surrounding the school.

With a community comprising some highly creative artists and craftspeople and a school calendar of events, which includes seasonal festival celebrations, choral and orchestral music, opera, drama, Spring Fair, camps, adult eurythmy and painting classes, and study groups, lectures and workshops, the Waldorf school community has become an "island of culture" in the Mount Barker region. At first the "island" existed in self imposed isolation but with increasing confidence it slowly extended its presence and influence into the broader community.

Photographs and feature articles about the school appeared in the local newspaper, the Mount Barker Courier. These have included reports of successes in State Junior Volleyball, Soccer and Athletics competitions, displays of art work in the local branch of the State bank, public choral, musical and dramatic concerts, regular photographs of players in seasonal festival productions as well as the annual Open Day and Spring Fair.

In addition, a constant reminder of the school's presence is maintained by "All Seasons", the school's whole foods shop in the central business district of Mount Barker. This venture began in 1979 as a school-community Food Cooperative run by volunteers but has since evolved a variety of organisational and management styles. At its height it expanded to employ half a dozen people including a full-time manager.²⁸ Further research on 'All Seasons' would provide a valuable contribution of the active participation of parents in the school's development.

These examples testify to the fact that the Waldorf School has, to a large degree, become a well known and accepted feature of the local community.

²⁸ The shop's modest profits are returned to the school, helping to fund special projects such as features connected with capital works.