



## ACT Heritage Council

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION GIBRALTAR SCHOOL AND TENNIS COURT (BLOCK 240, PADDYS RIVER)**

At its meeting of 4 April 2019 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Gibraltar School and Tennis Court was not eligible for provisional registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Gibraltar School and Tennis Court against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

### **HISTORY**

#### **History of the Tidbinbilla Valley**

The Gibraltar School and Tennis Court is on block 240 Paddys River district within Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, which is managed by ACT Parks and Conservation Service (ACT PCS). Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve (55,000 hectares) and adjacent Namadgi National Park (106,000 hectares) fall within the Commonwealth heritage listed landscape of the Australian Alps National Parks and Reserves; a landscape extending across 1.6 million hectares of the ACT, New South Wales and Victoria. The Alps are protected for diverse natural and cultural values and for their rarity within the context of the hot, dry and relative low relief of the rest of the Australian continent. (Higgins 2009; Australian Heritage Database 2008)

While this assessment is focussed on European settlement it is important to note that the Tidbinbilla valley has high cultural significance for Aboriginal people. The valley is thought to have been occupied year round and within it are many important cultural sites. Tidbinbilla Mountain, is significant as a site for male initiation, indeed the name 'Tidbinbilla' is considered derived from 'Jedbinbilla' meaning 'where boys became men'. Billy Billy Rocks in the Gibraltar Range are also important and are known to have been ascended in the summer months to harvest Bogong moths. The intensively studied Birrigai Rock Shelter, is the oldest documented Aboriginal site in the ACT, dating occupation back to the last ice age approximately 25,000 years ago. The Gibraltar School and Tennis Court is located within proximity to the rock shelter and both sites are interpreted on the 'Birrigai Time Trail'. (ACT Government 2012)

European settlement of Tidbinbilla and Namadgi commenced with the exploration and settlement of the Limestone Plains – the area later to become Canberra – in the 1820s. In 1821 the Murrumbidgee River was sighted. By the late 1820s settlers were moving south into the Tuggeranong area and had crossed the Murrumbidgee, even though for the government, the river delineated the western extent of settlement. The flow of settlers across the Murrumbidgee continued and in response, the government in 1836, permitted settlement beyond the river with the purchase of a licence. (Higgins 2009)

On the Limestone Plains in 1824, Joshua John Moore took up the first land grant – Canberry – and Robert Campbell the second, at Duntroon. West of the Murrumbidgee in 1839 George and Sarah Webb took up the Tidbinbilly run, becoming the first Europeans to reside in Tidbinbilla valley. In 1866, Webb's run at Tidbinbilla was acquired by Andrew Cunningham, one of the most influential landowners in the region. Also influential were Scottish emigrants Charles and Elizabeth McKeahnne, who owned much land including at Booroomba directly south of the Tidbinbilla valley (Higgins 2009; ACT Heritage Council 2015).

Between 1860 and 1861, the short but frenetic Kiandra gold rush drew a wave of people through Tharwa, near Tidbinbilla, to sub-alpine Kiandra. In 1861 the Government passed the Land Selection Acts. A part aim of these was to settle the people mobilised by the rush in less populous areas by making available forty-acre blocks for purchase. The

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1884 Land Act brought additional changes that were intended to continue closer settlement. (Gillespie 1991; Higgins 2009)

Through the Land Acts, the hold of the squatters was reduced and Cunningham's ownership of Tidbinbilla was slowly lessened as selectors started moving in. Two settlers who took up land at Tidbinbilla in 1886 were friends – George Hatcliff and George Green. The two men laboured to improve their selections and earned off-farm income working for the Cunningham and McKeanhie families. They are responsible for constructing many pise and other buildings in the Tidbinbilla valley. In addition to the Greens and Hatcliffs at Tidbinbilla in this period, were the Sheedy, Staunton, Noone, Woods and Maloney families and their children. (Higgins 2009)

### History of schooling on the Limestone Plains and region, including Tidbinbilla

In the three decades following settlement on the Limestone Plains, the expanding population centred on the large properties of Duntroon, Yarralumla, Lanyon and Palmerville. It was around these properties that the numbers of children slowly increased to warrant the first attempts at formal schooling – usually supported in supply of building and teachers by property owners, the church and state. In these early years, the government welcomed the activities of the church in education as government resources could stretch only so far. In 1844 the first school on the Limestone Plains opened at Palmerville; in 1845 a second opened on the Duntroon property of Robert Campbell; a third was opened at Yarralumla in 1850. (Gillespie 1991)

Following many attempts at educational reform thwarted by sectarian differences, 1866 and 1880 witnessed the passage of legislation – championed by Sir Henry Parkes – leading to significant reform. The *Public Schools Act 1866* introduced oversight to church schools in receipt of government funding and increased schooling in more remote areas by lowering the minimum attendance for public schools and permitting the establishment of small schools with varying status. The *Public Instruction Act 1880*, introduced compulsory free education and severed the connection between the church and public schools; the stated aim of this reform was 'the best primary education to all children without sectarian or class distinction.' (Gillespie 1991)

Legislative reforms, especially those lowering enrolment numbers and enabling schools with varying status – for example 'house to house', 'half time' and 'provisional' – ensured education could extend into areas with small and fluctuating student numbers. Tidbinbilla was one of the areas to benefit from this. While the reforms aimed to reach all primary students, the challenge of keeping small schools open in the sparsely populated areas is evidenced in the ongoing opening, closing and changing status of many schools in the last two decades of the nineteenth century; a pattern especially prevalent in the schools in the mountain areas west of the Murrumbidgee River. (Gillespie 1991)

Higgins (2009) illuminates the situation; 'After the Public Instruction Act was passed in 1880, little schools began popping up along the eastern fringe of the mountain country, at Uriarra, Barnes Creek, Church Rock Valley, Gibraltar, Tharwa, Naas, Naas Upper, Bobeyan (or Tin Dish) and Shannons Flat. Usually the parents had to build the first little schoolhouse themselves, which was often just a simple slab room. If the school survived long enough, a more permanent structure was provided by the government. Some schools operated on a half time basis, sharing a teacher with another school; others were house to house, where a teacher would teach at various homes on a rotational basis; others were provisional [15 to 20 students were in attendance with the building and furniture supplied by parents] and some became full public schools. Invariably the schools were single roomed and the teacher boarded with a local family'. The Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre website states the 'bush schools are located where the settlers were most closely gathered - along the rivers and creeks, and on the better agricultural land' (Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre 2017)

### History of schooling at Tidbinbilla

#### 1886 to 1891 a first school at Gibraltar

By 1885 the Tidbinbilla Valley had six families and by 1895 this had grown to eleven. Opening in 1886, the house to house schools at Gibraltar and Naas were the first schools west of the Murrumbidgee River (Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre, Naas School 2017). For the school-aged students of Tidbinbilla, the Gibraltar school was their first chance at a formal education. Of the Gibraltar and Naas schools; 'The teacher taught in a room at a homestead or in a specially built room for one week and then rode the fifteen miles to the other school and again taught for a week there. The heavily-timbered, mountainous and isolated country was not for the faint hearted' (Fisher 1986). In 1889,

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an additional school, this time at Barnes Creek, was opened and the teacher subsequently shared across the three schools, two days per week at each (Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre, Gibraltar School 2017). In 1891, Gibraltar and Naas were closed due to low student numbers, and Barnes Creek upgraded to Provisional status (Fisher 1986). The closure of the Gibraltar school and prohibitive distance to Barnes Creek, 10km or more, prompted the lobbying of Tidbinbilla parents for a half time school at Rock Valley. (Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre, Church Rock Valley School 2017; Bulbeck & Boot 1991)

In 1898, the advocacy of parents paid off and the Church Rock Valley School was built by George Green and George Hatfield on Portion 5, Booroomba. This block was originally owned by George Sheedy whose house was knocked down to build the pise and timber school. At this time the block was owned by the Cunningham's who agreed to a land swap enabling gazettal of 4 acres as school reserve (Bulbeck & Boot 1991). In 1904, the school was closed due to low student numbers. This school site is now interpreted on the 'Church Rock Heritage Loop' in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and is commemorated with a stone cairn (Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre, Church Rock Valley School 2017).

Of the early schools at Tidbinbilla and vicinity (Gibraltar, Naas, Barnes Creek and Church Rock Valley), the approximate location is relatively well known, with the exception of the first Gibraltar School. In his research, Fisher (1986) states; 'the exact location [of the first school at Gibraltar] is difficult to determine. No records relating to its location are held on the Archive Office of NSW file'. Fisher's research however, does include sketches and correspondence to and from District Inspector Cooper, which he says; 'throw[s] some light ... but fail[s] to completely pinpoint its exact location.'

Fisher's (1986) research contains a copy of an application for a Provisional School at Barnes Creek dated 8 October 1888, which includes a rough sketch and distances between several schools. The sketch locates the 'Proposed House School at Barnes Creek' and 'Existing Gibraltar House School', with the distance between the two recorded as 6.5 miles (10.4 km). On the sketch, the Gibraltar House School is located adjacent a peak – which could be Mt Eliza. Combining Barnes Creek location information from the sketch with siting from the Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre website, enables determining the approximate location of the Barnes Creek School. Working back 10.4km from the Barnes Creek site towards Mount Eliza locates the school within the vicinity of the later Gibraltar Provisional School. Another clue, from correspondence in Fisher (1986) dated 20 February 1893 requesting the Provisional School at Gibraltar, states 'there had been a school close by but on private property' (Fisher 1986).

In 1904, when Church Rock Valley School closed, the children of Tidbinbilla were without a school. Lobbying by parents for a Provisional School at Gibraltar had commenced in 1893, but it wasn't until 1907 that they finally succeeded. Before the final site of the new Gibraltar Provisional School was determined, a proposed site was flagged by the District Inspector. His preferred site is documented in Fisher's (1986) research and includes a sketch by him dated July 1898, showing the preferred site adjacent Gibraltar Creek. Associated documentation records the site as being owned by Mr Charles McKeanhie who also offered supply of materials for construction of the school. Making note of this site is important as it confusingly re-enters the historical record in Bulbeck & Boot (1991) despite, according to Fisher (1986), having never been constructed. (Fisher 1986; Bulbeck & Boot 1991)

### February 1907 to 1942 Gibraltar Provisional School and Tennis Court

Whilst the siting for the first house to house school at Gibraltar is a mystery, and the school proposed by the District Inspector is recorded by Fisher (1986) as not having been constructed, the location of the hard won provisional school is well-known. It, like the Church Rock Valley School, is interpreted on a heritage trail within Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, the 'Birrigai Time Trail'. While very little remains evident of the school and its yards, the pad for the tennis court remains clearly visible on the ground and in air photos.

In 1907, two years following closure of Church Rock Valley School, the Gibraltar Provisional School was opened. It was on Portion 54, Booroomba, on land owned at that time by George Hatcliff. Located in the north-west corner of the portion, it was adjacent the original Tidbinbilla to Tharwa Road (now an ACT PCS service road). Bulbeck & Boot (1991) note it appears the land around the school was never officially reserved for a public school by the Department of Lands, nor was it ever officially owned by the Department of Education (Bulbeck & Boot 1991).

The origins of the first school building used as the Gibraltar Provisional School are unclear. Fisher's (1986) research includes a copy of a letter dated 9 July 1906 from George Hatcliff outlining the planned relocation of the Barnes Creek School to Gibraltar (Fisher 1986 Appendix 7), whilst Bulbeck & Boot (1991) state George Green and George Hatcliff built the original single-room slab school in 1907 (Bulbeck & Boot 1991). The fate of the original building also differs; Fisher (1986) states it was demolished in 1915 while Bulbeck & Boot (1991) record the original building endured until

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it was demolished following Tidbinbilla's establishment as a nature reserve commencing in 1962 (Bulbeck & Boot 1991). Bulbeck & Boot (1991) speculate that the first building was located near an ill-defined three meter square mound located near the 'former square structure' shown in Image 2.

In 1914 a second school building, a substantial weatherboard (as seen in images 4 and 5), was moved to the site as either an additional or replacement school house. It appears typical of the school building design used in Canberra at this time as it resembles, if not replicates the appearance of the registered Tharwa School (ACT Heritage 2018). Indeed, the relocated building was formerly the Canberra Public School adjacent St John's Church. This building is considered to have remained onsite until 1942 when it was returned to Canberra for use at Canberra Girls Grammar (Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre, Gibraltar School 2017).

In addition to the two school buildings, other documented site elements associated with the Gibraltar Provisional School include external pit toilets, a fence around the two acres of the ground that had been cleared of timber (Fisher 1986). Other plantings included a hedge of cyprus which grew to a large size, and a garden of vegetables, flowers and bushes such as roses, may, lilac, and rosemary. Other trees included cedar, lucerne and almond (Fisher 1986). *The Queanbeyan Age and Queanbeyan Observer*, Tuesday 29 April 1924, recounts the planting by children and parents of sixty ornamental trees in the playground on Arbour Day coordinated by the much loved teacher Miss Sackett. At the 14 February 2019 site visit, the ACT PCS Ranger pointed out the location of the school horse yards.

The tennis court near the school was a later addition. It is not necessarily associated directly with the school, but was possibly located near it as the school seems to have been a meeting place and hub for community social activity. Some interconnection between the school and tennis court is illuminated by Fisher (1986) who cites the June 1928 'Novelty Dance' at the school raised the money for four Spalding greenwood tennis racquets (Fisher 1986). Bulbeck & Boot (1991) document the location of the tennis court in the northeast corner of Portion 48, Booroomba, next to the school on land owned by J.B Maloney (Bulbeck & Boot 1991). The same researchers state that a rectangular wire fenced enclosure was onsite from 1919. The earliest references to tennis at Gibraltar include an image on the Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre website 'Woods family at Gibraltar tennis courts' which is tentatively dated 1922-23 by Vincent Fisher (Hall School Museum and Heritage Centre 2017 Gibraltar School). The same *Queanbeyan Age and Queanbeyan Observer* article documenting the planting of trees on Arbour Day recalls Miss Sackett as being a 'fine tennis player', who will be missed by the local club. Bulbeck & Boot (1991) also note the existence of a shed for shelter at the court and postulate there may have been two tennis courts, located side by side. The construction of the tennis court reflects the widespread fashion for tennis commencing prior to the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in both town and country. The court was used throughout the 1940s but fell into disuse after the Second World War when many young people left Tidbinbilla (Fisher 1986).

## DESCRIPTION

### 1990 Site description

The work of Bulbeck & Boot (1991) includes an archaeological survey and description of the school and tennis court. In 1990 they record the school site as 'an area of thick eucalypt and titree regrowth surrounding ... extensive exotic plantings which include *Pinus radiata*, *Cyprinus sp*, *Photinia robusta* and *Rhus sp*. In the western part of these plantings, south of the hedge of cypresses and near a pear tree, are bricks, cement and other building debris apparently scattered around the site of the 1914 weatherboard building ... 'East of the brick scatter is the former school paddock gate which crosses a track that bisects the cypress-tree hedge. At the eastern end of the hedge ... [are] two strainer posts and some fence posts which represent the corner of the former fence line ... To the south of this area and located on another track intersecting that from the school paddock gate is an ill-defined three metre square mound [which] appears to have been the site of the first slab school building ... Southwest of [this] mound is a group of large mature pines which were probably planted by students of the school, following an apparent regional tradition of planting pines on school grounds. The lines of trees and fence posts on the north and west boundaries of the site delineate the original school paddock area which appears to have measured approximately 70 meters square ... The school grounds are in good condition and demonstrate well the late 19<sup>th</sup>/ early 20<sup>th</sup> century local tradition of planting pine trees around school grounds. However, little else remains of this relatively recent country school. Some of the cypresses have been rather badly damaged by linesmen clearing around powerlines. This ... has damaged the trees to such an extent that remedial work may be required to save them.' (Bulbeck & Boot 1991).

At the same time Bulbeck & Boot (1991) document the adjacent tennis court as follows; 'The court lies immediately west of the school ... It was constructed by levelling a flat pad of crushed Paddys River granite (the local substrate),

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and apparently also by compaction with a roller. The square pad (30 meters x 30 meters) is cut into a gentle slope on the east and south sides and has been built up on the west and north sides. A deep ditch runs around the west, north and east sides. The ditch was designed to drain water away from the court, but as much of it is now filled in, water now sits on the court. Two sawn off circular posts on the western boundary represent a former gateway in the fence around the court. No other remnants of the fence remain. A single sawn off post in the centre of the court may have been part of a fence which separated two courts, but photographs in Flint show only one court. ... No evidence of the shed used for shelter was seen, but it may have been located between the drainage ditch and the road to the east of the court.' (Bulbeck & Boot 1991)

### PHYSICAL CONDITION AND INTEGRITY

#### Current site description and boundary

A site visit on 14 February 2019 considered the fabric and intactness of the Gibraltar School and Tennis Court site. The boundary marked on Image 1 includes school, tennis court and the small paddock in which the students' horses were stabled, which was pointed out by the ACT PCS Ranger during the site visit. Very little fabric remains at the school site which is additionally compromised having been burned in the 2003 Canberra fires. The site is additionally overgrown with Burgan (*Kunzea ericoides*) and cyprus regrowth from those fires and a powerline easement passes through part of it and it is this easement that largely seems to have created the visible pads of the school site and horse yards. As far as extant fabric is concerned what remains is as follows; the base of the hearth from the second school on the site dated 1914 to 1942; the stumps from the cyprus killed in the 2003 fires and subsequently lopped; a burned gate post with attached hardware; the pad on which the school was located remains visible as do the network of paths through the site as drawn by Bulbeck and Boots (1991). A scar delineating the fence line following the Tidbinbilla to Tharwa Road remains in evidence. Of the tennis court, only the cutting into the slope and the pad that was the court surface remains. Of the horse paddock, no yarding or gates remain, it is visible only as a bare pad. The Gibraltar School and Tennis Court site is interpreted on the 'Birrigai Time Trail'.

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SITE PLAN



Image 1 Gibraltar School and Tennis Court site boundary. Running the length of the northern boundary is the original Tidbinbilla to Tharwa Road.

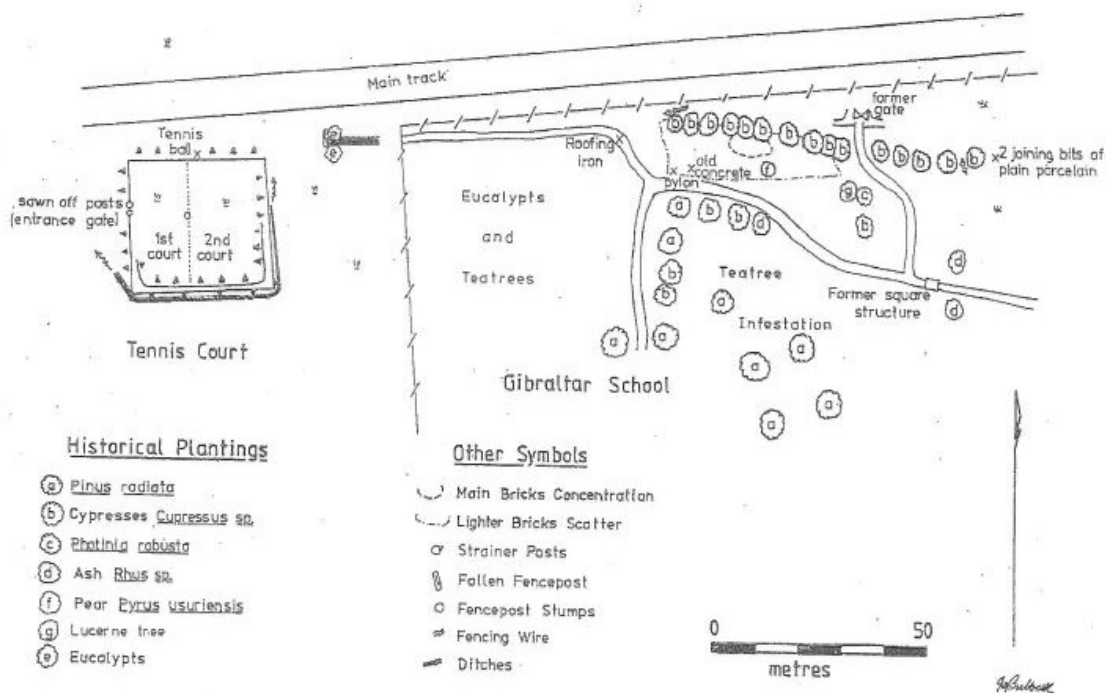


Image 2 A 1990 plan of the Gibraltar School and Tennis Court site from Bulbeck & Boot (1991).

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### IMAGES

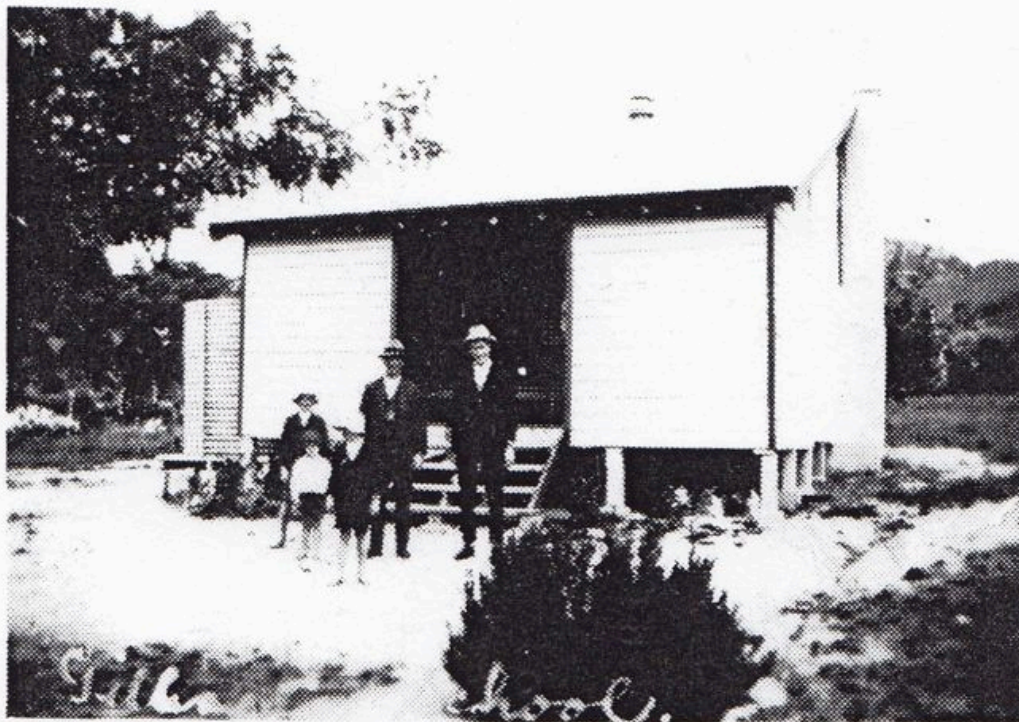


**Image 3** showing the Barnes Creek school, which may have been relocated to Tibdinbilla as the first Gibraltar Provisional School building. Image courtesy of the Hall Museum and Heritage Centre website.



**Image 4** showing the second school building used as Gibraltar Provisional School upon its return to Canberra for use at Canberra Girls Grammar. Image courtesy of the Hall Museum and Heritage Centre website.

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Gibraltar School

**Image 5** showing the school building relocated from Canberra at Tidbinbilla and in use as the Gibraltar Provisional School.



**Image 6** showing the Woods Family at the Gibraltar Tennis Court possibly 1922-23. The images shows the cutting benched into the hill which remains evident. Neither the wire nor post currently exists. The background shows the foothills backing towards Mt Eliza.

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**Image 7** showing the site of the weatherboard school school with hearth from the fireplace. Image taken during site visit 14 February 2019.



**Image 8** showing the tennis court site and remains of benching into the side of the hill. Image taken during site visit 14 February 2019.

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**Image 9** showing the site of the horse yards. Image taken during site visit 14 February 2019

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