

# THE DAY THEY CLOSED BARKER COLLEGE



Barker College students standing on Peats Ferry Road (now Pacific Highway) 1919 excursion [Image Courtesy of Morwenna Dixon, Manager of Archives, Barker College]

## The day they closed Barker College: a documentary survey

*This article is an edited extract from Stuart Braga's article in the March 1970 edition of the school's magazine, The College Barker. It is presented with the permission of the school's current Manager of Archives, Morwenna Dixon.*

On 27 January, 1919, proclamations were issued in New South Wales closing libraries, churches, theatres, picture shows and places of indoor entertainment. Racecourses and hotel bars were closed too. Public meetings, either indoors or in the open air were prohibited. Even church services were banned. It was not fear of revolution that produced such drastic measures, nor a threatened invasion, but the discovery of a single case of pneumonic influenza in Sydney.

The city's schools were also summarily closed under the late January regime. Barker College in Hornsby was about to commence operations for the first time under its new Council, as a Church of England school. Although the Honorary Treasurer, Arthur Crane, went to see the authorities of the Board of Health, the regulations proved inflexible. The Council, meeting on 28 January, decided to have the whole staff inoculated in the hope that they would survive until the school could re-open. The Headmaster, William Carter, was instructed to write to parents:

BARKER COLLEGE  
Hornsby  
29<sup>th</sup> January, 1919

Dear .....,

Under the Government Proclamation closing all Schools in the Metropolitan District, I have to inform you that Barker College will not re-open on Thursday, the 30th inst.

It is tentatively suggested by the Authorities that the restriction may be removed not later than 11th February.

All railway certificates will be available for whatever date is decided. The Council considers that every boy should be inoculated immediately, and in the case of all members of the Staff it will be insisted on.

I shall notify you at the earliest opportunity as to the date on which studies may be resumed; that date will also be advertised in the daily papers.

Yours faithfully,  
W.C. Carter

Carter was well aware that a letter of this nature could frighten parents into keeping their sons away from school for longer than necessary, even after the government permitted the school to re-open. Moreover, he realised that parents would be unwilling to pay school fees if their sons were not at school. He was in an unpleasant dilemma, for though the school was fully booked, no money would be coming in.

Meanwhile, the monthly outgoing salaries amounted to £286/7/8, which could be reduced by about £35 a month if domestic staff were laid off. A further economy was envisaged by instructing three single men on the staff that they would be put on half pay from 1 March, if the embargo continued. One of these young men earned the princely sum of £1/10/0 a month; fortunately for him, things did not come to this pass.

Independent schools had toyed for a while with the idea of recasting their school year. Until 1919, there had been four terms, each year, of about ten weeks duration. The proposal now was that three terms of thirteen weeks would be adopted, to reduce the disruption to teaching caused by the frequent holidays. The influenza epidemic forced the issue. The schools had no choice but to wait until they could re-open, and then divide the remainder of the year into three. Until then, they had to hang on grimly, and hope that when the time came, their boys would all return, and that all fees would be paid quickly. Carter had been carried away by the panicky press reports when writing to parents on 29 January. A week later he sought to reassure them by a further letter:

BARKER COLLEGE  
Hornsby  
8<sup>th</sup> February, 1919

Dear Sir,

I am instructed by my Council to inform you that this School, in common with all other Schools in the County of Cumberland, is at present closed by Government Proclamation, but will re-open at the earliest possible moment, due notification of which will be sent you by letter or telegram; it is earnestly requested that you will see that your son returns promptly so that School work may be resumed without further, and unnecessary, delay.

The School grounds are large and open (this week the Council has acquired an additional 5 acres). Therefore, you need be under no anxiety concerning your son, as complete isolation can be obtained. May I add that the School authorities can be greatly helped by parents refraining from having boys home at the weekends.

It has been decided to re-cast the School year in order to make all school terms of equal length under the conditions imposed; thus, the first term will not be a part of the first term as originally planned, but a complete term in itself. Further, by this arrangement, and by some curtailment of the usual vacations, we shall be able to give the full year's work, even if the opening is delayed for several weeks longer. This is of particular importance to those boys who are being prepared for examinations, and to those who are spending their last year at School.

The Railway certificate, already provided, may be used for the return journey, and the usual concessions will be granted.

Feeling sure that we shall have your cordial support in the steps we are taking.

Yours faithfully,

W.C. Carter  
Headmaster

Schools outside the County of Cumberland (i.e., the Sydney Metropolitan area) were not affected by the influenza proclamation; city boys were being sent away to school in order to prevent further interruption to their schooling. At that time, Hornsby was semi-rural, and Barker College was flanked by bush. Carter besieged the Inspector-General of Police, the Director of Public Health, and even gained access to the Minister of Public Health. At the Minister's suggestion, he put his case in writing:

12<sup>th</sup> February, 1919

The Honourable

The Minister for Public Health,

Macquarie Street,

SYDNEY.

Dear Sir,

In accordance with the request made by you this morning for information regarding my application for permission to re-open Barker College for Boarders, I beg to supply the following particulars.

1. Barker College is situated on the outskirts of Hornsby and occupies an area of 16 acres. The grounds are large and open and not near any other buildings; the whole of the Western side is bounded by the Newcastle-Strathfield Railway Line, and the whole of the Eastern side by unoccupied bush.
2. Ample facilities exist for all healthy sports and exercises. There are four (4) cricket pitches, four (4) Tennis Courts, a large Gymnasium, etc.
3. The class rooms are large and well ventilated. Open air classes are already provided for and arrangements can be made for more.
4. Barker College has 100 Boarders enrolled; in normal times 40 sleep in the open air, the others sleep in well ventilated dormitories in numbers from six (6) to eight (8).
5. The School has a Trained Nurse on its permanent resident staff, and a Hospital quite apart from all other buildings, affording complete isolation.
6. In fine weather the boys always lead what is practically an open air life. In wet weather the large Gym, enclosed on three sides only, used in conjunction with other buildings prevents any congestion.
7. The School Dining Hall is very spacious and extremely well ventilated, not

only with windows, but also with large air funnels.

8. I may also point out the remarkably fine health record which Barker College has always held.

I earnestly request that parents be allowed to send their sons back, whether from City or Country. City boys are going in large numbers to country Schools, and there should be infinitely less risk to the community in country boys, with proper safeguards, coming to Hornsby.

Finally, whatever restriction you may impose I shall loyally observe. Asking for the favour of an early reply.

Yours faithfully,  
W.C. Carter

The dreaded visitation did not prove nearly as disastrous as had been feared. During the whole month of February, the number of deaths in New South Wales was 15. Gradually, the strict regulations were relaxed: church services were permitted in the open air, the wearing of masks in the open air was no longer required. Meetings held in the open air were once more allowed, but all public assemblies under cover were still proscribed, including schools.

As panic gradually waned, the Health Department made relaxations in its attitude, and on 17 February gave permission for boarding schools to re-open. Carter wrote at once to parents of boarders, doing his best to cajole them into sending their boys back. He promised a virtual quarantine of the school, and arranged an inhalation chamber in keeping with the vogue.

BARKER COLLEGE  
Hornsby  
18<sup>th</sup> February, 1919

Dear Sir,

In accordance with my promise of the 8<sup>th</sup> inst., I have pleasure in notifying you that, by permission of the Health Authorities, School will re-open, for New Boys on Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> February at 11 a.m. and for the rest of the School, on Tuesday, 25<sup>th</sup> February. It is earnestly requested that all boys return promptly.

At a meeting of Head Masters and Head Mistresses of non-Government Schools held yesterday it was unanimously decided that this School year should (following the English and Victorian practice) consist of three terms of 13 weeks each with a fortnight's vacation at the end of each term. This will provide the same full year as under the old four quarter system. Three accounts will be rendered, so that the aggregate amount of fees for the year, instead of being divided into four as hitherto will be divided into three [The fee per term for boys under 12 years was £8-8-0; for boys over 12 years it was £9/16/0].

Under direction of the Board of Health our premises were thoroughly inspected last week, and a recommendation was made to permit of re-opening, apart from the above permission granted yesterday.

I wish to draw attention to the fact that the Authorities will not allow boys to go home for week-ends at present.

Need I assure you that every precaution will be taken; a special inhalator will be installed this week for the daily use of every person on the premises.

With our large grounds and with all the facilities which they offer for a healthy country life, I am of opinion that our boys can resume their studies, and their normal school life, not only without the slightest cause of apprehension on your part, but also with the utmost benefit of the boys themselves.

Relying upon your cordial co-operation.

Yours faithfully,  
W.C. Carter

Not for many years had Barker accepted day boys when Carter was proprietor as well as Headmaster. One of the first decisions of the Council when the school was acquired by the Church of England in 1918 was that day boys would now be taken. Few enrolments were actually made, and those few were still unable to attend school.

Carter was well aware that the boarders would not all return; though the school had been permitted to re-open, the number of deaths from influenza was actually rising week by week. It seemed that the best way to fill the boarding accommodation was to persuade the day boys to become boarders pro tem. That way some of the financial losses could be recouped. Accordingly, a second circular was sent to the fathers of day boys offering temporary boarding accommodation at special rates. What success this approach met with is not known.

BARKER COLLEGE  
Hornsby  
18<sup>th</sup> February, 1919

Dear Sir,

Although the Minister for Health has granted us permission to receive Boarders he will not allow us to take Day Boys. The date on which the embargo will be lifted is very uncertain, and the continued enforced idleness of your son must be most unsatisfactory.

We do not expect that all our Boarders will return at present, therefore I am prepared to take your son as a Boarder, until conditions are normal at a Boarding Fee of 30s. 0d. per week, without the payment of any entrance fee. Of course, this is exclusive of Tuition Fees already provided for.

I shall be glad to hear from you at your early convenience.

Yours faithfully,  
W.C. Carter

In any case, day boys were shortly afterwards permitted to return. By 11 March, 82 of the 102 boarders on the roll were back, and 14 day boys were attending daily. During March, the government lifted all the prohibitions except that requiring the wearing of masks in public transport. Their optimism proved to be premature. In the last week of March, 141 people died of influenza, all but 8 of them in Sydney, and the scare was on again.

Carter felt constrained to consult Professor Chaffers Welch, a member of the medical faculty at Sydney University, and a parent of a former pupil, as to the best means of allaying the nervousness of boarders' parents. On 28 March he sent the day boys home, and once more reassured parents that everything possible was being done.

BARKER COLLEGE  
Hornsby  
31<sup>st</sup> March, 1919

Dear Sir,

In order to relieve your mind with regard to the influenza epidemic I beg to inform you as follows:

Commencing from today:

1. No day-boys will be in attendance;
2. Parents are requested to defer their visits - should they visit the school, they will be asked to pass through the inhalation chamber, and to converse with their sons in the open air, masked;
3. No boarder will be given an exeat;
4. Each boy passes through the inhalation chamber daily, under supervision;
5. Quarantine restrictions will be imposed upon all members of both teaching and domestic staffs;
6. I have taken the advice of the highest medical authorities in framing these regulations.

I would point out that our school grounds are very large, and that with our time fully occupied with the usual school work and games, boys should find the conditions here less irksome than spending their days in unprofitable and enforced idleness elsewhere.

Yours faithfully,  
W.C. Carter  
Headmaster

P.S. Maids waiting at meals are all masked.

W.C.C.

During April, the full fury of the epidemic broke. By the middle of the month, the average daily death rate reached a peak of 45 a day in the city, and extraordinary restrictions were again imposed. Worshippers in church were to be masked, and a space of three feet had to be kept between individuals. The entire service might last no more than 45 minutes. Theatres and day schools were closed. By 5 May, Carter was so concerned about the situation that he discussed with the Council the advisability of sending the boys home for the holidays a fortnight early.

There was a lull in the epidemic, however, and nothing was done. Second term resumed on 9 June, but within a few days, the deluge burst. Of 98 boarders enrolled for the term, 85 returned, and before the month was out, all but twelve had contracted pneumonic influenza.

At a special meeting of the Council on 19 June, Carter was authorised to spare no expense or effort in dealing with the outbreak. Additional trained nursing staff was secured, and the school doctor was asked to visit daily in order to safeguard against any possible suggestion of neglect. The members of Council knew only too well the high mortality rate for young males. That week the epidemic reached its height. In Sydney, 600 people died, and another 575 the following week.

None of them was a Barker boy. What must have been an intensely worrying three weeks passed without casualty, and by 8 July, the Council could be informed that the school was again clear of influenza. The rest of the term passed without further incident, and in third term, enrolments picked up to 92 boarders and 17 day boys. By the time Speech Day came round in December, the epidemic was over, and the Headmaster was able to treat the episode dispassionately in his Report:

The influenza restrictions, preventing the re-opening of schools until the end of February forced upon us the much debated three-term system. As you know, in New South Wales we have always worked under the four-quarter system, nominally of 10 weeks each. Under the three-term system we have three terms of 13 weeks each. Notwithstanding the abnormal conditions prevailing during the first and part of the second term, the advantages of settling down for the longer period have been apparent, and the forebodings that the poor boys would break down in health from a 13 weeks' term have, fortunately, proved inaccurate. So impressed have the authorities of all schools been with the benefit of the change that at a recent meeting of headmasters it was decided unanimously to continue the three-term system during a normal year (as we hope next year will be), and then in 12 months' time to come to a final decision.

Influenza did not leave us unscathed. We had nearly all the boys and nearly all the staff down in June, but we managed to pull through without any serious results. Apart from this, we have been quite free from sickness.



Our numbers have naturally been affected by these un-toward events. Early in the year many parents in the country were unwilling to allow their sons to travel and in some cases, owing to the general uncertainty, boys who were to have returned for their last year did not return at all.

Barker was fortunate to escape so lightly. The fact that none of the students died is a tribute to the prompt and thorough medical care that was made available. We are fortunate that its only significant legacy of the 'Spanish flu' at Barker College was the three-term school year.

Contributed by Morwenna Dixon

[Editorial note: the New South Wales Parliament passed the *Influenza Epidemic Relief Act* late in 1919, which entitled schools closed during the crisis to claim relief for some expenses incurred. The resultant Royal Commission noted that "the larger schools had some opportunity to recoup themselves, and it is interesting to notice that claims were not submitted by the Sydney Grammar School and the King's School". Barker College submitted a claim of £5/14/6 for rates and taxes, £57/13/9 for interest lost and £82/15/6 for wages. Of the total claim for £146/3/9, the commissioners awarded £62/10/6 or 43%, about three times the average payout].