

Ned Kelly's Avenel School Days – Dr. Stuart E. Dawson – Revised Final Version¹

It has long been held that Ned Kelly and his sisters Annie and Margaret attended Avenel Common School once the family moved from Beveridge to Avenel in January 1864.² A Ned Kelly Touring Route sign marks the site of the old Common School between Shelton and Livingstone Streets near the school crossing opposite the current Avenel Primary School in Livingstone Street.³ Yet the Kelly children never attended Avenel Common School. Rather, they attended Avenel's first small timber slab and bark roof school near the old stone bridge; at least half a kilometre from the north-east town block on which Avenel Common School (also made of slabs with a bark roof) was built later.

Three successive schools at Avenel

Amelia Burgoyne (*Memories of Avenel*, 1955) wrote, "The first school in Avenel was built of bark, on the hill close to the bridge, in 1856. It was an 'undenominational' school established by the Church of England. The first teacher was Mr Richardson, and so it was known as 'Richardson's School.' He was succeeded by Mr Irvine. Among the pupils were ... Annie, Maggie and Edward Kelly".⁴ This will prove to be more or less correct: two Kelly children (Ned and Maggie) attended Richardson's school.

Confusion has resulted from Burgoyne's subsequent statement that, "About 1863, a Common School was built at Avenel, made of slabs, as a successor to Richardson's bark-walled school." As the Kellys arrived in Avenel from Beveridge in January 1864, it has been incorrectly surmised by most commentary, including the Strathbogie Shire Heritage Study (based on Burgoyne's approximate dating of 1863), that three Kelly children attended the Avenel Common School. Yet as will be seen from this account of the successive schools and locations, the latter had not yet been built.

There are two Strathbogie Shire heritage listings that bear on the history of the Avenel schools.⁵ These overlap but neither contains a single clear exposition of the three locations and buildings that successively served as schools in Avenel. The following exposition is drawn from these two listings except where otherwise referenced, and endeavours to clarify and correct the historical record.

'Richardson's School' (1856)

The first school in Avenel was established by the Church of England in May 1856 in a small bark hut located on the hill close to the stone bridge. Its first ongoing teacher,⁶ Edwin Richardson, was born in Ireland and worked as a teacher in Liverpool before coming to Australia where he took various jobs before being appointed teacher at Avenel. The building measured 26 x 15 x 9 feet (roughly 8 x 4.5 x 2.75 metres, or the floor area of a large 6 x 6 metre double carport⁷). It had slab sides, a bark roof, a boarded floor, and was lined with calico.⁸ "In 1858, it was transferred to the non-denominational

¹ Final revision published 5 May 2024 on <https://nedkellyunmasked.com>. Citation details at end of article.

² E.g., Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life*, 2008: 20, 22; Keith McMenemy, *Ned Kelly: The Authentic Illustrated History*, [1984] 2001: 13, 17; VicGov, <https://www.vic.gov.au/150-years-avenel-primary-school> (accessed 3 March 2024); Strathbogie Shire Heritage Study Stage 2, Volume 3, Part 1 (2013), 5, 'Avenel Primary School'.

³ 'Lost Avenel', <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10232621453465319&set=pcb.1530822044385347>.

⁴ Amelia Burgoyne, *Memories of Avenel*, 2nd edn., 1955, p. 37.

⁵ Strathbogie Shire Heritage Study Stage 2, Volume 3 - Part 1 (A to K) Heritage Place Citations (RBA, September 2013): 2-3, 'Osage trees', 34 Livingstone Street; and 4-5, 'Avenel Primary School', 39 Livingstone Street.

⁶ L.J. Blake, *Vision and Realisation: A Centenary History of State Education in Victoria* (1973), Vol 3, 635, held that William Jessop taught at Avenel in the early 1850s and was "summarily" dismissed by 2 May 1856 "when the Church of England school commenced"; but neither the Strathbogie Shire Study nor any Avenel historians report any school prior to 1856. It seems likely that the summary dismissal was from the new 1856 school.

⁷ 'Average Room Sizes (An Australian Guide)', <https://buildsearch.com.au/average-room-size>, accessed 3/4/24.

⁸ School Inspector's Notebooks (G.W. Brown), VPRS 9684, Con. P0001, Box 2, 01-March-1864 to 11-April-1864, 'Avenel School'.

National Board. There was a further change in the education system with the introduction of the 1862 Common School Bill, which meant that the rival National and Denominational school boards were abolished and replaced by a secular Board of Education. Richardson taught at the school until 1861, and in the following year (1862) it became a Common School” [at least, on paper]⁹. (Even as late as 1866 a Minister argued in the Church of England Annual Assembly that he “did not conceive that there was any necessary contradiction in supposing that a school under the Common Schools Act, may, to all intents and purposes, be a bona-fide Church of England School”.¹⁰)

The Strathbogie Heritage Study states that in 1863, Richardson sold the site to James Irving. Irving retained it until 1869 when he sold it to Robert Campion. Certainly there was only one school in Avenel that school inspector G.W. Brown visited each year from 1863 through 1866, and it was the old bark Richardson school in which Irving taught throughout those four years as discussed below.

Brown visited the school on 30 September 1863. He listed it as ‘Avenel C.E. School’ and noted “an old timetable (3 years old) is posted up; Irving rather harsh in manner; boxes and pulls ears; carries a tawse”.¹¹ This is the earliest surviving school inspection notebook in the PROV that lists the Avenel school. It confirms that it was the same Church of England Richardson’s school that, from the old timetable on the wall, was running in 1860, with teacher James Irving now in charge in late 1863.

Brown returned on 30 March 1864 and inspected what he then listed as ‘Avenel School’, the change of name likely following on from the abolition of Denominational school boards.¹² He noted amongst other things, “Buildings: Sides slabs, lined with calico; roof bark; floor wood. 26 x 15 x 9 feet. Repair: Roof in very bad order; a new one required. Out-offices [toilet]: Only one; in bad order. Playground: Reserve all round, no fence. Teachers: James Irving; Henrietta Irving. Rules: Building used for service” [=church on Sundays].

Most importantly for this analysis he recorded, “Special: ‘Common School’ is not up.” It is clear from this that the deteriorating school building in which Margaret and Edward Kelly were tested in March 1864 was the same of ex-Church of England school that Brown had visited the previous year, with the Common School not yet built. Brown’s comment further implies that a Common School was intended to have been constructed on a different site as would happen. Brown inspected the Avenel school again on 15 September 1864, listing it as ‘Avenel School No. 8’. In this second half year report there are no comments about the school building itself, only test results for those students present and tested that day.

On 30 March 1865 Brown again inspected ‘Avenel School No. 8’. Margaret and Edward Kelly were present and tested. The same building is described: “Sides slabs, roof bark, lined with calico. Boarded floor. 26 x 15 x 9 feet. b - Roof very bad; c – [Ventilation] Hardly sufficient. d – [Drainage] Hardly sufficient. f – [Out-offices] – Only one; Indecent. g – [Playground] – Open bush; no fence.” The teachers were again James Irving, and for sewing, Henrietta Irving. By 18 October 1865 no Kellys were on the roll; Edward and Margaret had ceased to attend at some point before then.¹³

⁹ Strathbogie Shire Heritage Study, *op. cit.*, 2.

¹⁰ ‘Church of England Annual Assembly’, *Argus*, 2 February 1866, 6, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/5767674>

¹¹ School Inspector’s Notebooks (G.W. Brown), VPRS 9684, Con. P0001, Box 2, 30-November-1863 to 30 September 1873, ‘Avenel School’.

¹² The Avenel school inspection records are in two boxes: School Inspector’s Notebooks (G.W. Brown), VPRS 9684, Con. P0001, Box 1, 01-April-1865 to 12-May-1865; 02-October-1865 to 04-December-1865; 16-April-1866 to 05-June-1866; 18 September 1866 to 17 October 1866; and Box 2, 30-November-1863 to 30 September 1863; 01-March-1864 to 11-April-1864; 04-May-1868 to 30-June-1868.

¹³ School Inspector’s Notebooks (G.W. Brown), *op.cit.*; John Molony, *I am Ned Kelly* (Allen Lane, 1980), 26.

In G.W. Brown's next visit on 17 April 1866 to 'Avenel, No. 8' he recorded: "Sides slabs, lined with calico, shingle roof - calico ceiling; boarded floor. 26 x 15 x 9 feet. - Slabs require fixing; lining repairing; d - [Drainage] Indifferent; sits in a hollow. f - [Out-offices] - A double one; new; in good order. g - [Playground] - Open bush; no fence. 10. [Teachers] - James Irving; Henrietta Irving." Brown visited 'Avenel No. 8' again on 19 September 1866. Along with the test results there is a semi-legible note about "Repairs effected" at the bottom of the page. It reads, "wood lining 3 ft. high; another [?] due; desks have been [?]; the [?]; and [?] being made". The 'repairs' are to an existing building; it is inconceivable that he would not have recorded if this visit was to a newly built school room. In sum, the same aging Richardson's school building dating from 1856 is described from 1863 through to 1866. As John Molony, *I am Ned Kelly*, noted, no Kellys were on the roll in 1866.¹⁴

Further confirmation that this school was in a different location to the subsequent Avenel Common School is found in a death notice in the *Age*, 10 September 1926. It states of Mr William Tebble that "in his youth he went to school with Ned Kelly in the old common school, near Hughes Creek, Old Avenel".¹⁵ Corroborating this, Tebble is listed with Edward Kelly among the Grade 3's in Brown's 30 March 1864 'Avenel School' report. This draws a clear distinction between the Richardson school as the "old common school near Hughes Creek" and the later Avenel Common School built on land purchased by Richardson in 1861 and/or 1862 east of Shelton Street and away from the creek.¹⁶

Neither the Strathbogie Heritage Study, Burgoyne, nor any other Avenel historian has provided the location of Richardson's school that all concur was Avenel's first school.¹⁷ Fortunately an anonymous comment on the first draft of this article provided a photograph of a stone marker commemorating the centenary of the first Avenel School (1856-1956) along with its location, which is on the west side of Livingstone Street and south of Henry Street, roughly opposite 83 Livingstone St.¹⁸



It is not possible from Brown's few surviving notebooks that contain inspection pages for Avenel to determine when the Common School on the west side of Livingstone St but north of Watson St was opened, but the fact that Avenel's only school is listed as 'Avenel No. 8' in both his 19 September 1866 and 2 June 1868 inspection reports suggests that the name was simply carried over to the new

¹⁴ School Inspector's Notebooks (G.W. Brown), *op.cit.*; John Molony, *Ned Kelly*, *op.cit.*, 26.

¹⁵ *Age*, 10 September 1926, 12, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/202549192/18731314>, accessed 24 March 2024. I am indebted to Sharon Hollingsworth for finding this notice.

¹⁶ A reduced image of a commercially available vintage map of Avenel showing these blocks can be seen at <https://vintagemaps.com.au/collections/avenel-victoria-vintage-maps/products/avenel-victoria-australia-vintage-map-4-1954> A partial screenshot is attached as Appendix 2.

¹⁷ Strathbogie Heritage Study, 5, citing Olga Harrison, *125th Anniversary of Education in Avenel 1856-1981*, np. Blake, *Vision and Realisation* (Vol 3, 635) incorrectly claimed that Richardson had built a new schoolhouse in 1860 that the Kelly children attended; but Richardson did not acquire his town blocks until 1861/2.

¹⁸ I am very grateful for the comments of 1 May 2024 by Anonymous 101 and permission to use their commemorative marker photo at <http://nedkellyunmasked.com/2024/05/ned-kellys-avenel-school-days/>

location without elaboration. The 1868 report notes, “classes generally quite well employed, and properly supervised”, a marked contrast with his comments on the poor manner of work and supervision under Irving at the first Avenel school from 1863 to 1866. It seems likely from this that Avenel Common School superseded Richardson’s school possibly in 1867 and certainly by 1868. Further investigation of this by the Strathbogie Shire heritage and/or planning division is warranted.

Ned’s oldest sister Annie did not attend Avenel School

Annie Kelly, born 15 November 1853, was 10 when the Kellys moved from Beveridge (of which Ian Jones wrote that together with Ned and Maggie she had attended Beveridge’s Catholic school for 6 months from July to December 1863),¹⁹ to Avenel in January 1864. John McQuilton wrote that at Beveridge Red Kelly worked as a bush carpenter and horse dealer in between trips to the goldfields, and Ian MacFarlane noted that it was Red Kelly’s alcoholism that had forced the family to sell up.²⁰

Nothing records Annie being at Avenel School and, as Education Department historian L.J Blake noted, Mrs Kelly then had 3 children below school age: Jim aged 4½ (born 31 July 1859); Dan aged 2½ (born 1 May 1861); and Kate 6 months (born 12 July 1863). It is obvious that, in addition to the additional weekly school fee that would have been required, Annie stayed home to help her mum and dad with her siblings on their newly rented 40 acre farm.²¹ It is an idle fancy of Kelly enthusiasts to imagine that Annie attended school at Avenel in a family effort to improve her prospects.

Mrs Kelly was pregnant from around mid-November 1864 with her next baby Grace, born 10 August 1865. In late May 1865 Red Kelly was arrested and sentenced to £25 or 6 months gaol for illegal possession of a cow hide from a neighbour’s calf that he had killed for meat, and it is likely that Ned and Maggie abandoned school at this time at latest if not earlier. As the family could not pay the fine, Red was gaoled from late May and released early October. He resumed heavy drinking and was charged with drunk and disorderly on 12 December. He was released on a 5 shilling recognisance which he lost by not appearing in court on 20 December, and died of dropsy on 27 December.²²

Avenel Common School

The Strathbogie Shire Heritage Study states that school teacher Edwin Richardson was the first person to acquire land north of Watson Street. He bought two adjoining allotments in section 20: no. 6 (2 acres) in 1861 and no. 5 (3 acres) in 1862. The allotments extended between Shelton Street (west) and Livingstone Street (east). A steadily growing population in Avenel led to the construction of a new timber slab school building for about £150 ... on land owned by Richardson²³ in Livingstone Street (i.e., the west side of Livingstone Street), who leased the building to the Education Board for £10/year. The Strathbogie Shire Heritage Study accepted a date of “in (about) 1863” for the erection of this building clearly based on Burgoyne’s statement that it was built “about 1863”, but this in turn seems to be based only on the passing of the Common School Bill in 1862. It is not clear when the Common School was built, but as the school inspection reports 1863 to 1866 analysed above relate to Richardson’s old school, Avenel Common School did not commence operation until at least 1867.

A sketch of the building from 17 September 1874, about the time it ceased to be used as a school, shows that it was 40 x 12 x 10 feet high (12 x by 3.65 x 3 metres), of which the classroom area was

¹⁹ Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life* (Sydney: Hachette, 2008), 20.

²⁰ John McQuilton, *The Kelly Outbreak* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1987 [1979]), 74-75; Ian MacFarlane, *The Kelly Gang Unmasked* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31.

²¹ Blake, L.J., ‘Young Ned’, *The Educational Magazine*, 1970: 27(8), 352; Blake, Les J., *Young Ned* (Neptune Press, Belmont: 1980), 10. Blake gave widely incorrect dates for the children’s ages and the move to Avenel.

²² For the gaol dates, likely served in Avenel lock-up, see John McQuilton, *The Kelly Outbreak*, 217, n. 22.

²³ In several places (as here) the Strathbogie Shire Heritage Study has printed Robinson instead of Richardson.

26 x 12 x 10 feet (8 x 3.65 metres) and was said to have a wooden floor and canvas-lined walls.²⁴ This is the school wrongly claimed for the Kelly children by a Ned Kelly Touring Route sign. McMenemy's classroom width measurement of "4.3 metres" (taken from 14½ feet on the sketch) fails to recognise that 2½ feet of the 14½ feet is allowance for the classroom fireplace that extends out from the middle of the rectangular 12 foot (3.65 metre) wide building. As such, the main classroom area was little different to that of the Richardson school. The principal difference is that the 40 feet length of the new building included a 14½ x 12 foot room with a door at the end of the classroom that at least in 1874 was used as a bedroom, plus a separate detached kitchen and second bedroom. As the reason for the new school building was an expanding population in Avenel, it is likely that when the school was in use the 'bedroom' at the end of the classroom was also used as a second classroom.

The new building with its 10 foot ceiling appears to have been built to meet the "regulations recently issued by the Board of Education" for a share of government grants listed in a February 1864 article, "that in all new buildings, the schoolroom shall contain not less than eight square feet for each child in average attendance, and that the walls shall be not less than ten feet high ; that in all cases the school-room shall be sufficiently warmed, ventilated, and drained, with proper offices, play-grounds, apparatus, books, and furniture", and "that the applicants are able to raise, by private contributions, at least one-half of the whole sum necessary for the erection and furnishing of the [school] house".²⁵

Avenel State School (1874)

This was Avenel's third successive school. The Strathbogie Shire Heritage Study states that it was located on a five acre allotment on the east side of Livingstone Street opposite Avenel Common School. The original central section was completed by August 1874. The site is bound by Livingstone Street to the west, Swamp Road to the north, Anderson Street to the east and Watson Street to the south, and it has grown with building additions over time into the current Avenel Primary School.

Conclusion

Avenel School No. 8 up to and including 1866 was a only name variation of the original Richardson's school near Hughes Creek, erected by the Church of England in 1856 and suffering deterioration of its slabs, bark roof and calico lining during the years 1864 and 1865 when Edward and Margaret Kelly – but not Annie - attended. Avenel Common School was built later in a different location, and opened in or after 1867 on a town block roughly opposite the current Avenel Primary School. This in turn partly dates back to 1874. Neither of these latter schools had any connection with the Kellys.

Correcting the record:

If the contents of this report are accepted, the following corrections are proposed:

1) **The VicGov website** history of Avenel Primary School <https://www.vic.gov.au/150-years-avenel-primary-school> contains several incorrect statements, including dating APS from 1856. It says, "Richardson built a new schoolhouse in 1860. He rented the building to the Board of Education. Avenel became a common school in 1863. The Kelly family attended the school from 1861 to 1866." This has presumably been taken from Department of Education historian L.J Blake's, 'Young Ned', *The Educational Magazine*, 1970: 27(8), 350-55, or his 1980 updated booklet of the same title. As my above review notes, the Kellys did not move to Avenel until January 1864, but both of Blake's articles have them moving there in 1860 and attending school at Avenel from 1861. Blake also has them attending a new school building built by Richardson in 1860; but Richardson did not acquire his

²⁴ An illustration and floor plan of this school from 17 September 1874 with measurements is in Keith McMenemy, *Ned Kelly: The Authentic Illustrated History*, Melbourne 2001 [1984], 13.

²⁵ *Argus*, 9 February 1864, 4, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/5743873>

Avenel blocks until 1861 and 1862; and Brown's March 1864 inspection report noted that the Common School was "not up". The Kelly children abandoned school at some point in 1865, probably by late May when their father was sentenced to gaol for six months, both to help their mother who then had three pre-school children, and because she would have no money to pay school fees. Blake agreed that the oldest child Annie would not have attended Avenel school in 1864 as she "had to be at home to help her mother with eighteen months [actually 8 months old] Catherine, for Ellen Kelly was expecting again". (Grace was born 10 August 1865 so would have been conceived late 1864.) Despite Blake getting his dates wrong, his general point is correct. It is clear that Annie never attended Avenel school. Even Blake's statement that Avenel became a Common School in 1863 is problematic; regardless of the government's position it was still named 'Avenel C.E. School' in the September 1863 inspection report.

Two obvious corrections needed are (1) that Richardson did not build a new schoolhouse in 1860. Brown's inspection reports confirm the school building was in poor state through 1863-66 with its committee in disarray; and (2) that as the Kellys did not move to Avenel until January 1864, and as only Ned and Maggie attended Avenel School in 1864 to around May 1865, the sentence should read 'Two of the Kelly children (Ned and Maggie) attended the school in 1864 to around May 1865'.

The VicGov website should review its several other pages that mention Ned Kelly and ensure that all mentions of Avenel Common School are removed and replaced with Richardson's 1856 Church of England school. All references to Annie Kelly attending school in Avenel should be removed.

2) **The Ned Kelly Touring Route Sign on the west side of Livingstone Street.** This marks the site of the Avenel Common School that closed in 1874, and contains an illustration and description of the building that includes a chimney and porch. This is the building illustrated in McMenemy's *Ned Kelly: The Authentic Illustrated History* (2001:13). The Kelly children never attended this school. They attended the original Richardson's school south of Henry Street. The sign should be removed.

Further to this, all Ned Kelly Touring Route references to the Avenel school should be reviewed and updated to ensure that they replace Avenel Common School with Richardson's 1856 school.



- 3) **The Strathbogie Shire Heritage office and Tourism office** should update any online mentions of the Kellys and Avenel Common School to either correct the text or add a corrective note.
- 4) **Avenel Primary School** should review all its publications and online media relating to the Kellys and correct as necessary, in particular as regards future statements and content.
- 5) **The Victorian Government tourism website** <https://www.visitvictoria.com/> should review its content to ensure that any mentions of the Kellys attending school in Avenel replace the Avenel Common School with Richardson's 1856 Church of England school, that also accepted Catholics. Any statements that suggest that Annie Kelly attended school in Avenel should be removed.

- 6) **Heritage Victoria** should review all its content relating to the Kellys and correct as necessary.
- 7) **All Government institutions, libraries, tourism and other agencies, and museums** should review all their content relating to the Kellys and correct as necessary.
- 8) **All Councils and authorities involved in the Ned Kelly Touring Route and associated ventures** should review all their content relating to the Kellys and correct as necessary.

Appendices

Photographs of all eight pages of the reports of Avenel School inspections contained in VPRS 9684, School Inspector's Notebooks (G.W. Brown), Con. P0001, Boxes 1 and 2.

In the Ned Kelly: The True Story blog download, this article and its appendix had to be uploaded separately due to WordPress file size restrictions. The Appendix is approximately 4.5MB.

Download the Appendix from <http://nedkellyunmasked.com/2024/05/ned-kellys-avenel-school-days/>

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