

Mr Robert Mewburn

Schoolmaster (1872-1891)

Robert Mewburn was born in 1827 at Stockdale-on-Tees, Durham, UK. His occupation in England was as a printer and clerk.

Robert Mewburn was transported to Western Australia aboard the *Pyrenees*, Voyage 2, after being convicted of 'stealing boots and larceny' and sentenced to 7 years' transportation. Larceny was a crime of unlawfully taking property of another with no intention of replacing it.

Robert was one of the convicts specially selected for WA. Unlike NSW, WA got to choose their convicts. They chose people with useful skills, like...forgery.

The appointment of large numbers of ex-convicts as school teachers was largely due to the poor levels of education in the generation of Western Australians who had been children when the Swan River Colony was first settled. Many of them were illiterate or barely literate, and were unsuitable for appointment as school teachers.

Those settlers that did have a good education were in high demand, and were not attracted to the low wages offered to teachers. On the other hand, educated convicts had little prospect of obtaining better wages or conditions than those available to teachers, and the position offered a chance to overcome the social stigma of conviction and obtain a respectable position in society.

Although some settlers considered ex-convicts unfit to become teachers, most parents preferred that their children be educated by ex-convicts than not at all. Consequently, a total of 37 convicts were appointed school teachers in Western Australia between 1853 and 1900. Robert Mewburn was one of those.

On arrival in Western Australia in 1853 he was granted a 'Ticket of Leave', and a year later, a 'Conditional Pardon'.

It is not known when he first came to Mandurah, however it is believed he first worked for Thomas Peel, then went on to run a general store and also acted as a lay preacher. It is thought that he also acted as an informal schoolteacher. Later Robert Mewburn married a student, Emma Eacott, aged 15, in 1870. The couple had 7 children.

In 1872 he organized a petition for a regular teacher in the Mandurah area, and this resulted in him being appointed government schoolmaster. The appointment of Mewburn was perhaps due to the introduction of the Elementary Education Act, which made school attendance compulsory for children aged between six and fourteen.

Mewburn built his own wattle and daub (slurry mud) home to which he added a school room. The school was centrally situated between the families on the south (ferry end) and the north (village end) of Mandurah. There were thirteen boys and three girls attending.

This remained the official school, where he taught with his daughter until he died in 1891. His grave is in the Christ's Church Cemetery.

He was a very dedicated and capable teacher and the official report for 1876 noted that:

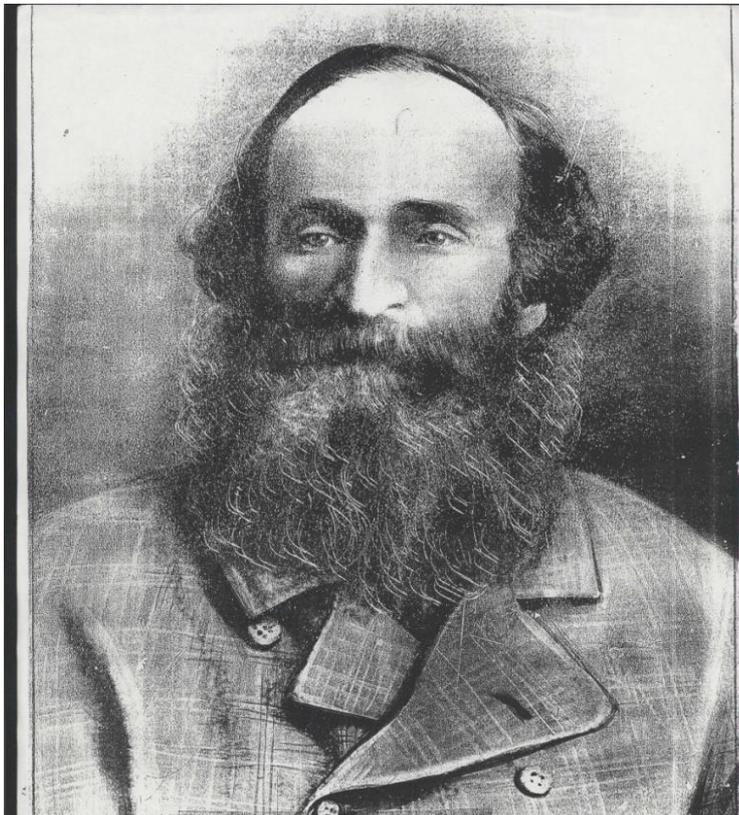


Mr Robert Mewburn cont'd

“This is a most successful country school. The Master is very attentive to his duties, and seems to be much appreciated by the parents of the scholars. With over 20 children divided into six classes, he yet manages so to distribute his attention over the whole school as to prepare the infants at their seventh year for the Second Standard.”

Violet Sutton said, “he was a very good writer and every one of his pupils wrote in beautiful hands, he was quite a good old chap, and used to tell students, no good teaching them geography and that, they'd only be chasing cows, all the time...”

Today Mandurah still remembers Robert Mewburn's efforts; the Mewburn Centre in Sholl Street is named after him. His home and school building were near where the Mewburn centre is now.



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Miss Mary Ann Mewburn

School teacher (1872-1895)

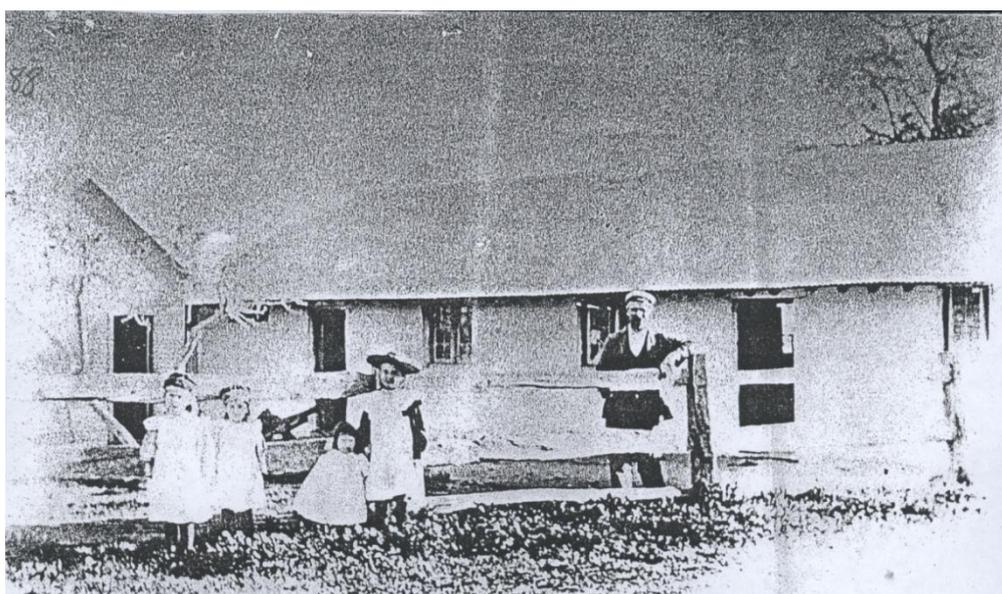
Miss Mary Ann Mewburn, Robert Mewburn's daughter, continued to teach in her father's house until 1894. The facilities offered at the house were insufficient for the needs of the children and the school was moved to the old Police Barracks which were located on Pinjarra Road near the traffic bridge. Mary Ann Mewburn taught and lived in the Police Barracks premises until 1895, when she resigned due to ill health.

Miss Ellen Mulrooney

School teacher (1896-1898)

Miss Mary Ann Mewburn was replaced by Miss Ellen Mulrooney until 1898. The majority of the children attending school in Mandurah were Protestants. When parents found out that Ellen Mulrooney was Roman Catholic some objected quite strenuously. However, Miss Mulrooney remained at the school for three years before leaving to teach in other towns in the south west. She later married a member of one of Mandurah's pioneering families.

Mr William Dalrymple was appointed Headmaster at the Mandurah School in 1899.



Old Police Barracks premises used as a school.

