From the Head of Timbertop

The establishment of Timbertop, forty years ago, was without doubt, a bold experiment in education. It provided an opportunity for teenage boys to learn to live together, often under simple and arduous circumstances, to gain self-confidence and to appreciate their immediate natural environment. Even today, we know of no other school where boys and girls spend a full academic year in such an environment and experience such a broad range of challenges and activities. The ordered way of life, hiking, canoeing and skiing in the mountains, caring for each other and the spirit which has developed through the unique Timbertop Chapel are all important ingredients of what most students say is the most memorable year of their school days.

As Hugh Montgomery lined up the first group of boys outside the Timbertop mess tent in February 1953, he could not have envisaged that Sir James Darling’s extraordinary innovation and experiment would grow into such a unique part of education in Australia. The move to establish Timbertop in 1953 was not only courageous but also visionary. The experiment has proved successful and, curiously, the formula for this success, created by Monty and his colleagues, has changed very little in the intervening years.

There are more structures within the programme today, designed primarily to enhance the safety of it. We have now had the girls at Timbertop for nearly 20 years and their presence has greatly enhanced the Timbertop year, providing a delightful blend of humour, a sense of style and positive co-operation as well as substantial individual contribution and talent.

The academic programme is comprehensive and designed to meet the needs of pupils approaching the challenges of their senior school years.

Yet, in spite of these changes, the ‘Tug O’ War, the running programme, the ‘Butler Roads’, the ‘Woodsheds’, the wood-burning ovens and the freedom to hike in the high country with a few close friends and share a camp fire without the presence of adults, still remain.

The Timbertop Appeal is not designed to change the philosophy of the programme in any way or, indeed, to make Timbertop too comfortable! However, there is a need to bring the campus into better shape. We also have to improve our facilities to comply with local government regulations.

I ask, therefore, that you give favourable consideration to supporting the Timbertop Appeal.

Simon Leslie Head of Timbertop

The First 40 Years

1951: Dr J.R. Darling outlines his vision for Timbertop to School Council, announces the plan at Speech Day and says to one of his masters, ‘Montgomery, I want you buy me a mountain.’

1952: Boys build 5 garages (now the Archives Centre) and build Bird’s Nest; two units; E.H. Montgomery takes up residence as Housemaster.

1953: The school begins on Feb 16 with 35 boys living in 8 B C Units; another 73 boys replace them in July; six staff in residence including the Reverend K. Leslie, School Chaplain and residence steward, Mr. Simon Leslie and his family; some 60,000 pounds donated for Timbertop dam filed on July 7.

1954: First full year group (VIII Form, now Year 11); seven units, Senior, Junior and Dining Rooms, Kitchen, Saloon, Morning and Afternoon school, plus community centre, all completed.

1955: All nine units operating; 118 boys in residence, first play held at the Star Theatre in Barnsfield.

1956: All students attend Olympic Games in Melbourne, E.H. Montgomery, master, commended by Timbertop magazine.

1957: 105 types of birds named.

1958: The Chapel of St. John the Baptist, the gift of Miss Margaret McWhinney (to mark the service to Australia of three generations of her family), completed and dedicated (Dec 8), Ken Leslie leaves to be Bishop of Bathurst.

1959: Power House catches fire (Jan 21); Lake Tad Karr (160 miles) first achieved in a four-day hike; new records set in the Round-the-Block Dash (35min 24sec) and the Marathon (2hrs 44min 3sec).

1960: 100 boys in the Marathon, the winner taking 2hrs 49min 2sec.

1961: 115 boys this year; the first year hikers complete the round trip in a weekend, Dr Darling makes a farewell visit as Headmaster (Aug 6) and preaches in chapel.

1962: 1,000 boys have now attended Timbertop; G Unit wins the Inca Race.

1963: Michael Harvey succeeds E.H. Montgomery as Housemaster; in June, 55th of the council.

1964: New road to Howqua opened; severe drought; hot showers banned.

1965: School’s hut on Mt Strirling completed.

1966: H.R.H. Prince Charles attends for two terms; 13 inches of rain falls in December.


1968: (Feb-March) Timbertop Creek dry; swimming abandoned; showers curtained; cross-country shortened. In April, May rain and snow cause the wettest 4-day hike on record.

1969: Arthur Mitchell becomes master; first term (T. Ross) leaves to become a member of staff; Science Laboratory built.

1970: Science lab built; environmental science programme begins, construction by boys of music practice room; Prince Charles visits with Princess Anne.

1971: Hikers achieve Mt Buffle on the 5-day hike; Fred Fry dies.

1972: Robert Drummond produces ‘Murder in the Cathedral’ in Chapel.

1973: Robert Bickerstaff becomes Master; 44 get from Corio visit for one week, start of ski-touring.

1974: 17 paddlers use S-D expedition to follow the Howqua downstream to the Goulburn River, reaching Seymour.

1975: The Reverend Peter Thomson becomes 5th Master of Timbertop; transition period from 1971 to 1979 begins with three two-term intakes; 14 girls become full-time; first 4-day hike to Mt Feathertop undertaken (with the support of buses).

1976: Science Lab built; environmental science programme begins; boys of music practice room; Prince Charles visits with Princess Anne.


1978: Four-year term introduced; chapel closed; memories of E.H. Montgomery opened and new organ (gift of O.G. Robert) commissioned.

1979: Simon Leslie, son of Timbertop’s first chaplain, becomes the 7th Head of Timbertop; V Unit completed - Timbertop now has 8 boys and 5 girls units; 3,000 trees planted.

1980: 100 boys and 15 girls confirmed annually.

1980: Timbertop Murray Grey Stud call among the prize-winners at the Mansfield Show.


1982: 40th Anniversary celebration; Sir James Darling leaves; foundation stone of new Dining Hall complex; Lady Darling opens Darling Huts.

From the Appeal Chairman

If ever there was a project which would lead a community - particularly its past students - to lend their support, surely Timbertop must be it! Those of us who have had the good fortune to be a Timbertop boy or girl know what I mean. For us, Timbertop will always remain one of the most valuable years of our life. Who would ever forget arriving at Timbertop for the first time, only to repeat that final trek along the Butler Road so many times later on foot? Could we ever forget learning to live with thirteen others in our unit; the challenges of hiking and skiing; being a lashie and all those (character-building) after-school jobs? The Marathon? Our lives are so much the richer for having had those experiences.

Yet, after forty years of serving us, Timbertop itself now needs our help - not just because the Health Department tells us that things must be done, but because all of us surely would want to do what we can to uphold the Timbertop tradition and to ensure that children today and tomorrow are able to share this unique experience.

I ask, regardless of whether members of your own family have followed, or will follow you to Timbertop, to reflect on what your experience there means to you and I urge you to help ensure its next fifty years.

Hugh Morgan AO 55 Appeal Chairman