



Open learning area at Bacchus Marsh Primary School

Victoria's oldest primary school is a winner

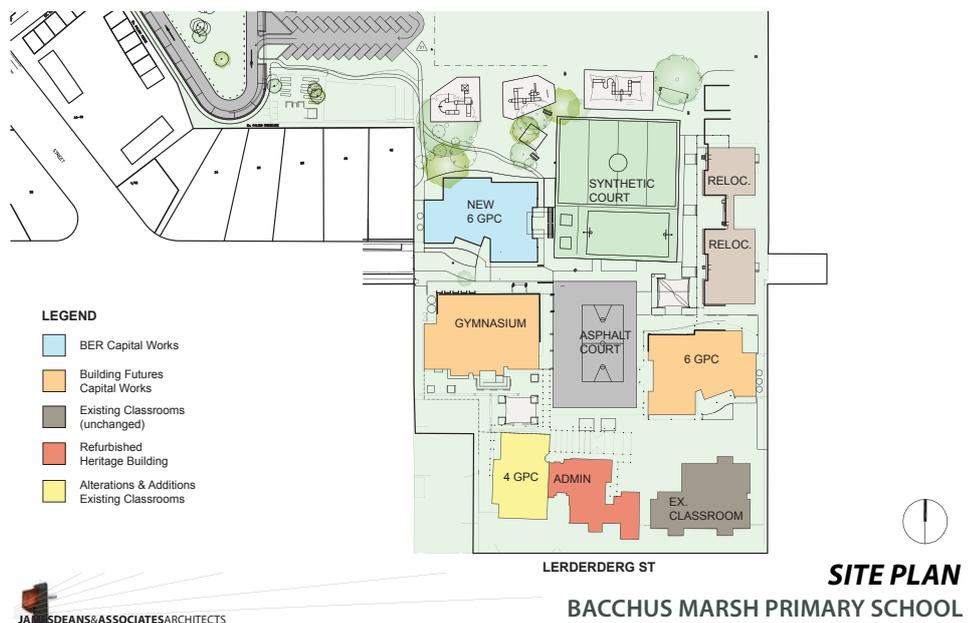
Bill Minnis

Bacchus Marsh (pop. 13,500) is located midway between Melbourne and Ballarat, 54 km west of the capital's CBD. The town was established in the mid 1850s, just before gold was discovered in Ballarat.

Founded as a rural centre for farms, orchards and market gardens in the valley, Bacchus Marsh is experiencing significant growth as young Victorian families, attracted by less expensive real estate and a manageable commute to Melbourne, move into the area.

And Victoria's oldest state primary school is growing too. Bacchus Marsh Primary School began on 13th May 1850 as the Bacchus Marsh National School, a one-teacher school with a voluntary enrolment of 34. In April 1863, it amalgamated with three other small schools in the area to become the Bacchus Marsh Central Common School. The school moved to the Mechanics' Hall in Young Street and in May was given the number 28. Its enrolment, still voluntary, had increased to 100.

John Pascoe Fawkner, by then a respected establishment figure in Melbourne, attended



Bacchus Marsh Primary School site plan. The school is Victoria's oldest state primary, Melbourne founding father John Pascoe Falkner attended its opening in 1865



Clockwise: The new gym with the original 1865 building in the background; Gym interior. Cross flow venting is achieved by opening the floor level windows and the windows high on the opposite wall; Bacchus Marsh Primary has a historic past; Floor to ceiling classroom windows are shaded by deep covered walkways; A curved photomontage wall recalls the history of Bacchus Marsh and encloses the open area of the first general-purpose classrooms building (6 GPC on plan); Entry Collanade to 6 Classroom Block; Four general-purpose classrooms built in the existing multipurpose building share a large common area (4 GPC on plan)

the opening of the new schoolhouse in Lerderberg Street in 1865, where it has been ever since.

Ian Wren, the school's principal since July 2006 moved from the other side of town, where he had been deputy principal at Darley Primary School for six years, to take on a school "... basically that was falling down, an uninspiring classroom block, 13 portables, and the 1865 building."

Enrolment when he took over as principal was 530... and falling, and there were some morale and discipline issues.

With the support of "a very good school council headed by an energetic and well connected president," Wren set about obtaining funds to redevelop and expand the school, while fostering a culture of mutual respect and sharing among staff and students.

Finding the funds

A \$6 million grant under the Building Futures Program enabled the first phase to commence. Further grants, worth \$150,000 and \$200,000 respectively, paid for resurfacing the "dust bowl" sports ovals. And last year in June \$3 million in BER funding arrived to pay for a second block of six general-purpose classrooms, including fit-out and equipment, as well as car parking, sewerage, water and power services.

Four architectural practices were interviewed for the project. Geelong-based James Deans & Associates was selected and has undertaken all of the subsequent design development and construction supervision.

Broadly, the design brief was to create a school for up to 650 children from Primary to Year 6 that would sit comfortably in the Victorian streetscape of Bacchus Marsh, would

retain the school's history and provide a state-of-the-art learning environment.

Development of the master plan commenced in 2006 and ground was broken in September 2008; completion of the BER classrooms is scheduled for the end of this year.

How well the relationship between the school and the architects has worked was recognised in September when the school won the 2010 Best Primary School over \$3 million category in the Victorian Department of Education's annual School Design Awards.

Project architect James Deans said: "Three primary schools were short-listed and we were



Clockwise: The students love their Paul Bangay designed veggie garden; Enclosing the areas between the demountables has created useful internal gallery spaces; Bush poles support the curved walkways, recalling Bacchus Marsh' rural heritage

up against much larger Melbourne-based practices... we were pretty chuffed when Bacchus Marsh Primary was announced as the winner."

The school's seven buildings are on a rectangular plot bounded by Lerderderg Street to the south, Masons Lane Reserve to the north and residences on the east and west. A drop off point at the northwest corner of the grounds and staff car park are accessed from McFarlane Street.

The 1865 building faces onto Lerderderg Street, with the refurbished multipurpose hall (4 GPC on plan) on one side and the 1960s classroom block (*ex. classroom* on plan) on the other; the latter is the only part of the school not to have been refurbished or redeveloped.

The buildings are grouped in a U shape around central courts and play areas. The new six-classroom building (6 GPC on plan) and the relocatables are on the eastern side, while the gym and the BER building (*New 6 GPC* on plan) are on the other side of the central courts.

Rural roots

Reflecting the town's rural roots, the colour scheme features earthy orange-browns, yellows and greens on walls and floor coverings and Bush timber poles support the covered walkways that shade the buildings.

The original cement rendered brick school building has been restored to house the principal's office and administration, with one room decorated and furnished as it would have been in 1865. History lessons in the recreated classroom, with students and teachers wearing period costumes, are a popular alternative to everyday lessons.



The buildings

Relocatable classrooms were installed as the first stage of the redevelopment, to accommodate classes while the multipurpose building was divided into the four general-purpose classrooms and shared common area that it now houses.

In the new six-room general-purpose classroom building, a five-metre down-lit curved wall in the foyer is decorated with a photomontage of the school and town dating back to the 1850s.

Behind this wall, there's a generous open plan common area and six classrooms, four on one side and two on the other. At the other end there's a large art room and wet area. Here the floor covering is hardwearing easy cleaned vinyl.

The school has a thriving after hours art program for students and parents and has a steadily growing collection of artworks (more than 200 at the last count), these are hung throughout the school and swapped at regular intervals.

The full-size gym is the tallest building in

the school and features a competition grade hardwood floor. Cross flow ventilation is achieved by opening floor level windows on the north wall and a strip of windows high on the south wall.

The second block of six general-purpose classrooms, funded by the BER, is basically a mirror image of the first six-classroom building and will have an Indigenous theme.

Grow your veggies

A thriving school veggie garden, designed by leading landscape architect Paul Bangay, is popular with the students. Ian Wren credits tending the garden, feeding the chooks, harvesting, cooking and eating the produce with having a tangible effect on self-discipline and understanding.

The school is affiliated with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program and a second garden area is planned. A science sensory garden with a frog bog and adjacent science room now underway.