

# 52 Ancestors 2023 - Week 4 - Education

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## 52 Ancestors 2023 – Week 4 – Education

This prompt seems like an opportunity to write about the “great Gowrie school feud” of 1886, recorded in a series of letters now held in the State Archives of NSW.

The small file containing copies of these letters came to me on my mother’s death in 2018, and I found them fascinating.

Gowrie was a small school attended at the time by about 30 children, including the family of Henry and Eliza Whitten (nee Mason) whose property, “Spring Creek” was in the Gowrie area.

The first letter in the file is dated 14 May 1886 and it comes from John Riely, teacher at Gowrie School. It’s addressed to the District Inspector of Schools at Tamworth.

In beautiful handwriting, it describes an enclosed letter, from “Mr H Whitten” as “insulting and libellous”, strenuously denies the allegations it contains, and requests an impartial investigation. He notes that Mr Whitten has never visited the school to “enquire into the truth or otherwise expressed dissatisfaction.”

Henry Whitten’s letter begins, “Sir it has come to my knowledge yesterday the way you have been teaching my children at school lately. It seems you blame our child Annie for not working her sum herself in her Book and abused and terrified the child with threats of dismissal from the school and other punishment...you have marked her a liar.”

Riely’s reply states that he “never wronged a child” and suggests that the proper course of action might have been for Henry to come to the school to discuss the matter. He also suggests that Henry has been misled.

On 15 May, a letter to the Inspector, written by Henry, was signed by 7 parents, who accounted for 25 of the pupils at the school. It was accompanied by another letter from Henry which accuses Mr Riely of “immorality”

The situation worsened on 25 May when there was another letter from Mr Riely to the District Inspector to advise him that he had that day suspended two pupils – John Whitten, aged 16 and Roland Richard Whitten aged 14, pending an investigation.

He writes, “R. R. Whitten has been convicted of pouring into the ears of the younger children the vilest obscenity. **Mr Whitten senior only sent these boys for a day or two, to create mischief**” \*

He goes on to say this:

*“I have grave reasons to suspect that hostile ecclesiastical influence is at the bottom of the whole affair.”*

(I suspect he might be right. Mr Riely was a Catholic. Henry, like all the Whittens was a Methodist of the most earnest kind – non-drinking, non-dancing, non-gambling and probably anti-Catholic)

In his letter about the suspension to Henry, Mr Riely accuses him of encouraging the boys to rebel against his discipline and says that they have been guilty of “repeated breaches of Regulation 125 viz: gross insolence, persistent disobedience and profanity”.

The report of the Inspector deals with Mr Riely’s alleged “uncouth language”. This seems to consist of the use of two nicknames – “long legged kangaroo” (of John Whitten) and “Billy the Bullock” (of Richard Rowland Whitten). He also used the expletive “By thunder”.

Several children were called as witnesses and their evidence is included in the file. Most say they have heard the teacher use the nicknames for the boys, but none make any complaints and there is no other incriminating evidence. One boy, Michael Hough, whose father signed the petition, concludes his statement with:

Spring Creek  
15th May 1886  
Gowrie

We the Parents of Children attending the school at Gowrie do hereby protest against Mr John Riely as a fit and proper person to have charge of our children and...

Henry Whitten 5  
Patrick Hough 5  
John M. Whitten 4  
Edward Hough 1  
William Moore 3  
J. Wilson 2  
John Mc Namara 3

*"By Mr Riely I have never been punished unless I deserved it, and not always then."*

Even John Whitten, who complains of the nickname, says, *"I have never heard Mr Riely say or do anything worse than what I have heard"*.

It was enough for the Chief Inspector. He wrote to the District Inspector on 28 May to advise that John and Richard Rowland had been hastily dismissed and should be reinstated.

And then on 15 June a final judgement delivered to the District Inspector:

*"Mr Riely has been informed that his conduct in calling pupils by such names as "Kangaroo" and "Billy the Bullock" is highly objectionable and unjustifiable and must not be repeated.*

*In view of Mr Riely's unpopularity with a large section of the parents the Minister deems it desirable in the interests of the school to remove him to another locality. It is accordingly requested that you will submit arrangements for his removal as soon as practicable."*

*Signed: J.C Maynard*

*Chief Inspector*

All of this seems like a storm in a teacup now, but it nevertheless galvanised this small community to the point where a teacher was removed from his position and made to relocate. We don't know whether this was a welcome intervention or not, or the affect it had on his family. Perhaps he was relieved to be quit of them all.

One of the great ironies in all this is that John Whitten was actually known as "Long John" within the family and is recorded that way in numerous family histories. It's hard to see why he and his father regarded the teacher's nickname for him as such an insult.

# Henry was the brother of my Great grandfather, Anthony Whitten. His wife Eliza was the sister of Anthony's wife, Charlotte. Their children at the school were John (16), Roland Richard (14), Annie (12), Fanny (10) and Henry (8)

\*My italics. It does seem to me that both of these boys are of an age when they would normally be working on the farm and not at school.