

GWEN BOWLES: HEADMISTRESS, MUSIC TEACHER, 1958-1962



Gweneth "Gwen" Mabel Bowles was born in 1925 in Bendigo, to Owen Vivian "Viv" Bowles and Martha Somerville. The Bowles ancestry goes back to James Alfred Bowles in 1827 in East Sussex, England. He arrived in Port Phillip Bay (Victoria) in 1853 and married Mary Ann Lamperd in 1857; they settled in Sailors Gully, Bendigo, and raised twelve children. The Somerville ancestry is traced back to William Somerville and Kate Griffin in Strathfieldsaye, Bendigo, where their daughter Martha was born in 1889.

Viv was born in 1893 in Locksley via Nagambie, Victoria, and became a butcher. In 1914 at age 21 he enlisted, served in France with the AIF 7th Battalion and was wounded in action. He was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. Viv Bowles married Martha Somerville in 1921 and they had five children: Jean Somerville, Alfred William, Gweneth Mabel, Stanley Vivian, and Lily.

The Bowles' girls must have inherited some musical talents as they mastered piano playing in their pre-teens. In 1933 Jean Bowles (age 11) and Gwen (age 8) passed their Primary First Class examination piano playing through the London College of Music (Bendigo Centre). In 1934 Gwen won an award in the Bendigo musical and elocutionary competitions for her piano solo in the under-ten section.

Gwen attended Bendigo High School from 1939 to 1941. In 1945 at age 20 she obtained her first year Mus. Bac. (Musicae Baccalaureus or Bachelor of Music) with Second Class Honors and also gaining an Ormond Exhibition. Presumably this meant that she continued her education at Melbourne University through Ormond College. She qualified as a Bachelor of Music and with a Diploma of Education. In 1945 she was part of a students' concert at Melba Hall with Thelma Moore and Valerio Fawcett performing a Schumann trio for clarinet, horn, and piano, "which was played with musical unity."



In 1949 she returned to her old school, Bendigo High, and taught recorder classes, trained successful choirs, and helped establish a strong music program at the school. Her other community activities included being Vice-President the Bendigo Club and the Conductor of the Bendigo Concert Orchestra. Bowles left Bendigo High at the end of 1957 and was remembered as the teacher who wrote the school song, the Bendigo High School Anthem, which was sung at each assembly accompanied by Miss Bowles on piano:

"Miss Bowles was an integral part of the Bendigo High School community throughout the 1950s, which is evident when you look through the editions of Old Gold magazine from that era," he said.

"She clearly had a great influence on a generation of young musicians in Bendigo during that time."

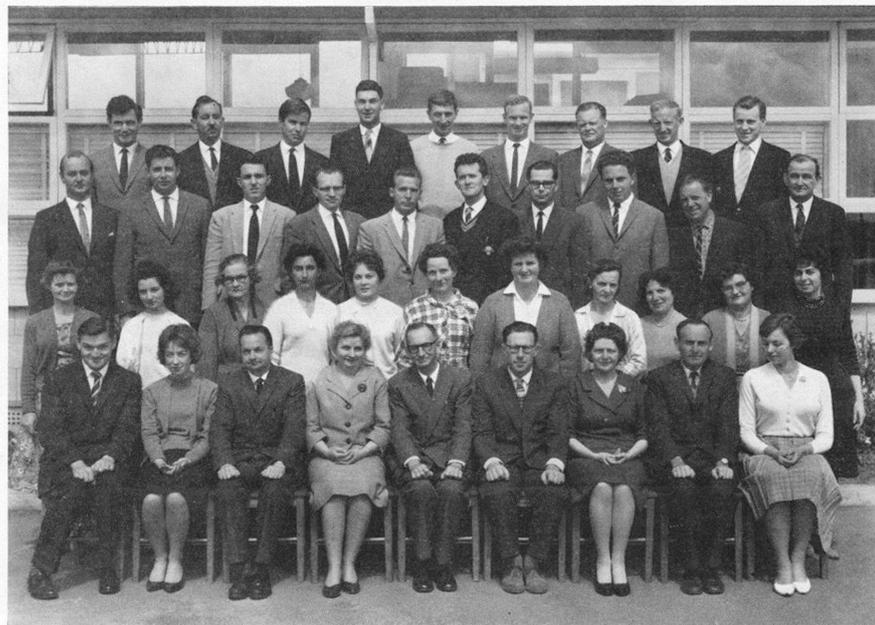
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Gwen Bowles with students from Bendigo High School.

Gwen Bowles started as the music teacher at St Albans High in 1958. Bruce Alcorn states in his Silver Jubilee Review (1958-1981) that she was the Senior Mistress, though that accolade was not included in the Alba school magazine. Bowles is not listed in the 1959 Alba because she took a year's study leave and travelled to England, returning in 1960. At this stage she was living in the western suburbs, in Queensville Street, Kingsville (West Footscray). Bowles left St Albans High School at the end of 1962 and appears to have joined her parents in Balaclava, Brighton. Her replacement at St Albans High was Miss Annie Gibson, who continued in the now-established practice of training students to sing in choirs.



Front: Mr. G. Reid, Miss V. Fenelon, Mr. J. Everson, Miss E. S. Taylor (Senior Mistress), Mr. M. H. Wilkinson (Head Master), Mr. G. H. Strauss (Senior Master), Miss G. M. Bowles, Mr. L. E. Burchell, Miss R. Meyer (Physc.).
 Second row: Mrs. J. Cox (Sec.), Miss H. Eadie, Mrs. E. Sturesteps, Mrs. L. Pavlova, Miss G. E. Coutts, Mrs. J. Fielder, Mrs. L. Cameron, Mrs. Kriksciunas, Mrs. M. Burden, Mrs. S. Hudson (Sec.), Miss R. Bechler (Psych.).
 Third row: Mr. E. Youd, Mr. J. Morieson, Mr. D. Hill, Mr. F. Schiller, Mr. P. Pavlov, Mr. L. King, Mr. G. Sacharonok, Mr. I. M. Smith, Mr. T. Walsh, Mr. G. Gibson.
 Back: Mr. J. D. Conroy, Mr. N. Bolvari, Mr. J. Mott, Mr. J. Hunt, Mr. T. G. Scarff, Mr. R. Robertson, Mr. K. Chilton, Mr. K. Robertson, Mr. E. Ford. Absent: Miss M. T. O'Connor.

1961 staff - Gwen Bowles is in front row third from right.



Girls choir performing at the Speech Day, 1963.

Gwen's move to be with her parents in Brighton appears to have been to support them, as they were in their seventies, or perhaps they moved in with her to obtain support. It was not a good decade for the family. Martha Bowles nee Somerville died in 1968 at age 79 years. Owen 'Viv' Bowles died in 1969 at age 76 years. They are buried at Springvale.

Gwen's teaching career in the 1970s took a major advance. In 1971 she was the Vice Principal of Mentone Girls' Secondary College. In 1972 she was appointed as Principal of MacRobertson Girls' High School (arguably the most prestigious school in Melbourne for girls' secondary education at the time) and served there for over a decade, from 1972 to 1984. It was said of her that:

"Miss Bowles was innovative during her tenure and was so formidable she could silence a hall by standing up. Miss Bowles rejuvenated the alumni's Palladiums Association, was responsible for the plain clothes policy for year 12 students to help ease them into university. She appointed the first male assistant principal in the school's history. The girls really respected her for her fairness."



MacRob later instituted the Gwen Bowles Award, which was endowed by the School Council to honour the contribution of Gwen Bowles. The award was for outstanding contribution in speech and drama, choral or related areas.

Bowles was also active in the broader education environment but this has not been well documented. She was a member of the Melbourne Graduate, the Graduate Union of the University of Melbourne from the mid 1970s, and was also involved with the Victorian Women's Principals' Association and the Victorian State Secondary Past Principals' Association.

Gweneth Mabel Bowles died in 2017 and was buried at Springvale:

BOWLES Gweneth Mabel Aged 92 Passed away at Cabrini Melbourne. Loved daughter of Vivian and Martha Bowles (deceased). Loved and loving sister of Jane, Alfred, Stan (all deceased) and Lily. A life well lived, fond memories, now in God's loving care.

Remembering Gwen Bowles

Ludmilla Pavlova: The other marvellous teacher was Miss Bowles, who took music classes. She would engage the class very successfully and you certainly had to like Peer Gynt. We always wondered how at the end of the year she could produce a choir that sang like angels.

Yvonne Correlje: We had some very strong female teachers. The headmistress, Miss Taylor ... well, you did not cross her path, or that of her offsider, Miss Bowles, the music teacher. ... Music was part of the school curriculum, and we learnt a lot about music from Miss Bowles. She did give us a very good appreciation and she introduced us to classical music. I loved being in the school choir.

Steve Kozlowski: Miss Bowles was the music teacher who tried to instil a love of music and singing in all her students. She tried to train us for the annual chorus that she featured as part of presentation day but some of us boys were not so keen for the traditional classics. One day she targeted our group for a practice session but we had our own agenda and started singing the chorus from "My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean". That's when she left the room.

Bernie Kokot: Music classes were never looked forward to with our Miss Bowles. A fiery redhead, her school piano was the most sacred object. It was actually an obsession. Before touching the keys, pupils had to wash their hands in the toilets and present them to her. Lord help anyone that touched the ivories otherwise as a hefty smack over your fingers with a ruler was standard disciplinary issue. I think that woman did have some grandiose and probably frustrated ambition and never having made the grade as a concert pianist she took out her wrath on us pupils. Despite my marks in Music then always being under the 50 pass mark, in later years I became a reasonable guitarist and actually came to very much appreciate piano music.

Bob Barker: During our era the newer building on the front was added and that was where the music room and girls' subjects like domestic science were held. I think at that stage Mrs Ludmila Pavlova had started as a craft or needlework teacher and Miss Gwen Bowles did the music classes. Miss Bowles must have come from Brighton because another old classmate told me that she was a member of the Brighton Uniting Church. She left St Albans in the early sixties and ended up as principal of MacRobertson Girls School.

Ref: Chris Pedler "Vale Gwen Bowles Teacher 1949-1957" Bendigo Advertiser 4 December 2017.
School photos from Nick Szwed archives.