

PERCY EVERETT'S SMALL SCHOOLS

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UPPER:
Newfield, showing higher
roof, corner windows
and integrated water
tanks – rear view

LOWER:
Marshall (near Geelong)
built 1941 to replace one
destroyed by fire. No
longer extant
Images: PROV

Percy Everett was appointed the Chief Architect of the Victorian Public Works Department in 1934 and introduced the then new modern styles of Art Deco, Streamlined Moderne, and even Expressionism to public buildings across the state. While doing some research into his output, I recently came across the huge resource of photographs made available online by the Public Records Office Victoria (PROV). When I searched a type of public building, for instance 'schools', the photographs were mostly taken between the 1930s and the 1960s, including many projects I knew were by Percy Everett. In fact, many of the photos show those ones under construction or just completed, so it's probable that he commissioned them.

Scattered amongst his better-known designs, such as the Russell Street Police Station, Essendon Technical School and the Zoo Entrance, were many smaller, less well known, or long demolished projects. Amongst the schools there are some very small ones indeed, namely one room schools, and the 17 examples available online at PROV show that even on such modest projects Everett managed to incorporate some distinctive modern features, making them easy to spot.

One in particular stood out, documented with six photos rather than the usual one, namely Newfield State School, a district inland from Port Campbell, built in 1938. Everett packed in a range of very modern features, including flat roofs, corner windows, and streamlined styling. The roof is the most striking element. Not only is it flat with wide eaves, but the central third is a higher section, adding a level of complexity, and allowing for what look like ventilation panels.

At Newfield he clearly made an effort to provide a high level of even light, and a whole wall is given over to windows, turning one corner as well, with another corner window beyond this, thus allowing light from three sides. These windows have streamlined horizontal divisions, with each window section openable as well, allowing for controlled ventilation.

There's also a pair of water tanks integrated into the design, with their rounded corrugated iron ends made to continue as the walls of the entry lobby. This, along with the curved corners of their lower flat roof adds another streamlined note. The walling also enhanced the composition, with the 'shiplap' boards creating long grooves, horizontal on the lower sides, and vertical on the taller wall sections.

They were painted dark brown, while other elements were painted cream, adding to the stylish effects.

This little country school made quite a splash at the time, with *The Age* noting "Its streamlined shape has led to many people mistaking it for an ultra-modern home." They also noted the many innovative features, such as "...wall space, with the exception of what is used for a blackboard, is taken up entirely with cupboards.", "The long cupboard in which children will hang wet goloshes and coats has a wired floor, which will allow drips of water to fall outside.", and "Cool water will always be assured, because of the placing of the tanks under the roof."¹

The school was also featured in the *Sun News-Pictorial*, though with just as a pair of photos and a short description. So many unusual features were used at Newfield, they would have added to the cost, so it's no surprise that this design does not appear to have been repeated.

Everett had already designed a standard one-room school, which must have been one of his first tasks. In September 1935, tenders for three single room schools went out, anticipating completion in time for the next school year, making these his first completed buildings, and indeed the first state government buildings in Victoria influenced by the 'modern' styles of the 1930s.

The schools were widely located, one way out in Watchupga in the Mallee, past Birchip, another at Cobram East on the Murray and one for the still rural Mooroolbark. They are all of a similar design, dubbed the 'Watchupga type'², and have a very distinctive look. They feature an almost pyramidal roof, with two corner windows, one with a longer bank, the other one or two bays each side. The streamlined horizontal divisions make their first appearance, although on ordinary double-hung windows, as does the entry placed between the school room and the attached water tanks.

The interior arrangements noted at Newfield were likely already in place, with built-in blackboards, and cupboards on every wall, including the drip cupboard for galoshes.³ Surprisingly the 'original' at Watchupga still exists; it closed in 1974, but looks rather abandoned in Google Maps Streetview from last year. Another example of the type can be found at Lah Arum (near Horsham), built 1939 to replace a school that had been destroyed by fire. 'Replaced' again and enlarged, the school still exists but has had no pupils since 2022.

At least 31 of this particular type were built, but there was another type that was probably for more common, one with gable roofs that create a more traditional effect, but with the same layouts. The windows also feature an extra highlight pane, up to the eave, throwing more light inside; the smaller ones have one whole wall of windows. The boards are painted one colour, with panels above and the windows frames in a lighter colour, creating an attractive effect.

One that survives is at Steels Creek, near Kinglake. It was built in 1945 and is reused as a community centre after its closure as a school in 1992.⁴ There are also some schools that look to be two single room designs put together to make a two-room school. They repeat the window arrangements and have a larger attached porch with a lower roof and yet more banks of windows.

An attempt to lower the cost of construction was met by another Everett innovation early in his tenure: a single room school that was prefabricated and portable. The prototype



was built in Melbourne and made the news in October 1936. Designed to accommodate only 22 students, it was constructed with an expressed steel frame and infill panels of asbestos-cement sheet lined with insulating cane-fibre inside.⁵

However, it wasn't till mid 1937 that the first ones were in use. The school at Wabba, near Corryong in the northeast, opened in 1938 and the photo shows it had a similar form as the timber schools, with the frame and panels in different colours. It lacks the corner windows, but all the windows open. It doesn't seem that many of these were built, so perhaps the cost saving wasn't as great as anticipated.

UPPER:
Lah Arum (near Horsham), an example of the 'Watchupga' type (1939) - after fire

CENTRE:
Warrandyte South (Yarra Valley just outside Melbourne), a two-room design built in 1939; still in use as part of a larger school

LOWER:
Wabba (near Corryong) an example of the prefabricated design. Built 1938, closed 1951 and demolished

Images: PROV



UPPER:
Allambee South
(South Gippsland),
an example of the
Watchupga type,
built 1936

*Image: courtesy
Allambee South
Community Centre*

LOWER:
Bridgewater North
(near Corryong),
set up as an historic
school room display,
showing corner
windows, built-in
cupboards, and
school desks

*Image: courtesy Man
from Snowy River
Museum*

The fact that there were so many made me wonder about the whole field of single-room schools. It seems that once primary education became compulsory in 1872, a design for a small weatherboard gable roofed school for 40 students was developed, and hundreds were built to serve farming families in isolated locations.⁶ A similar design continued to be built right into the 1920s.

The schools were usually placed at crossroads and children had to travel some distance, on foot or on their own horses. As the numbers in a district changed, schools went half time, closed, or re-opened, or were moved to a new site. It seems more than a few were built to replace ones lost by fire, notably the Black Friday bushfires of 1939. The little school which might have a few as 15 pupils often became a valued part of the local community, but with the isolation and sometimes long travel required, it was a hard job for the teachers, who were increasingly female. By 1931, there were 300 schools with 12 children or less. If they fell below 10, the school was likely to be closed, a move usually opposed by the local community.⁷

The single room schools were costly to service, and a single teacher could not provide the whole expanding curriculum, so when the provision of buses became feasible, the Education Department began a policy of 'Consolidated Schools', which involved the closure of a number of single room schools, and building a larger campus in a town for 100 pupils or more.⁸ The first of these was Murrayville, in the Mallee near the South Australian border, which was created in 1943 by literally moving four smaller 1920s schools and combining them into one building, given the Everett treatment with corner windows.⁹

I'm not sure if any single room schools were built after that, as the population on farms declined, transport became easier, and more Consolidated Schools were created. Many seem to have closed though the 1970s and 80s, with a few still going into the 1990s. Though some have since become community centres, a new use for an isolated small building would be hard to find, and I think very few single room schools from any period still exist.

And what happened to Newfield, so striking for 1938? It was closed in 1948, along with 15 other single room schools when the Consolidated School at Timboon opened (a very stylish brick Moderne design by Everett). It was moved to the new campus, along with two other small schools, used for various purposes, and then eventually replaced with new buildings.¹⁰

One that survives in good condition is an example of the pyramidal roofed type and is at Allambee South, near Mirboo North in South Gippsland. It replaced a Victorian era school in 1936, and closed in 1992, then becoming a community centre. It is now a place where the locals meet up most Fridays and hold various functions, so remains at the centre of rural life in the district. One of the gable roofed type from near Cudgewa in the northeast was relocated to the 'Man From Snowy River' Museum, where it was set up as a school room, alongside other relocated rural buildings.

Though almost all are now long gone and forgotten, these small schools are an interesting footnote to the architectural history of Victoria where in the 1930s and 40s, Percy Everett endeavoured to bring a note of modernity and thoughtful approaches to even the smallest, most remote projects.

Endnotes

- 1 "The New Bush School", *The Age*, 19 April 1938, p14
- 2 Burchell, LE (1989) 'Survey of One Room State Schools 1900-1940', quoted in *South Gippsland Heritage Study*, David Helms with Trevor Westmore, 2004
- 3 As seen in the interior of the 1936 example at Allambee South
- 4 Steels Creek Primary School No. 2725 (fmr), Yarra Ranges Shire listing, Victorian Heritage Database
- 5 *Portable Education For Country*, *Argus*, 1 October 1936, page 12
- 6 An example survives at Kamarooka Road School, Greater Bendigo Shire, source Victorian Heritage Database
- 7 *Vision and Realisation : a centenary history of state education in Victoria*, Victorian Department of Education, 1973
- 8 *Ibid*
- 9 Former Murrayville Consolidated School, Victorian Heritage Register citation
- 10 Timboon P-12 School, School History [Timboonp12.Vic.Edu.Au/ Page/174/School-History]