

JANE ISLA ASHBURY

by Sally Herzfeld 2000

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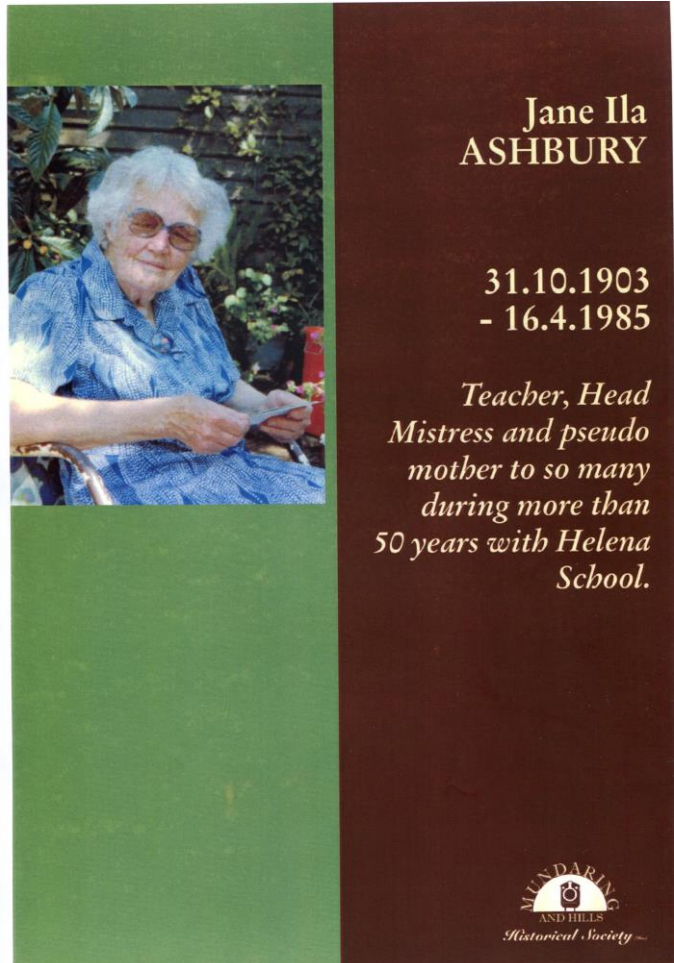
Jane Isla Ashbury was born on the 31st of October 1904, in Lawlers, (now a ghost town in the goldfields, between Sandstone & Laverton). Her parents were Albert Eaton (Ned) Ashbury from Penrith, NSW, and Rose nee McInerney from Ballarat, Victoria. They were in Lawlers for the gold rush but not much is known about this part of their lives. On electoral roll data, Ned is recorded as 'mine owner' and Rose as 'barmaid'.

The family lived in Lawlers from about 1904 until about 1911, then moved to Ardath, where they started farming. Jane was the eldest of four. Her brother, John (Jack) was born in 1906 in Ballarat, Albert Ernest (Ernie) was born in Lawlers in 1907 and Amy was born in North Perth in 1912. From these records, of travelling from Lawlers in WA to Ballarat in Victoria and then to Ardath and Perth, while having young children, it can be assumed that her parents were adventurous types, who would have faced many hardships. It is also known that they were visiting Ned's parents in Penrith, NSW in about 1909. Records show that Albert Eaton Ashbury selected 1348 acres of land South of Ardath in about 1910. (This farm was passed on to Albert who bought some neighboring property which included salt lake country.)

The Ashbury homestead was essentially the four room bungalow style built from mud bricks made on site in 1920. It is not known what style of home Jane would have lived in during her early childhood there. Jane and Ernie were christened in the Roman Catholic faith (their mother being a Catholic) in Lawlers, Jane on 29.9.1908. Her Godmother was Julia McCarthy.

Sadly, Rose died only three days after giving birth to Amy. As far as can be ascertained from stories heard from the Ashbury and Jones families, the boys were sent to Hale School, Amy was fostered out to Amy and Albert Maddocks who lived on a farm near Babakin and Jane went to Jessy Jones' School, which had just shifted from Perth to Claremont.

Jane stayed with that school through its many changes for almost 70 years. It shifted to East Fremantle, (one record tells of a short time in Lesmurdie too) and then to McNeill



Street in Cottesloe. Here, it was named Helena School after The Princess Helena College in Horsham, England. Jessy Jones had attended this school as a child. It was named after Princess Helena of Greece and the fact that Miss Jones' Helena School finally shifted to Darlington near the Helena River is only a happy coincidence. Jane was a star pupil and after completing her schooling, stayed on as a monitor and then became the main teacher. There is little doubt that Jessy Jones would have acted as a mother to Jane, which probably explains why the future Jones relatives have called her 'Aunty Jane'. An ex-student of 1925, Beatrice Criddle, remembers walking in 'crocodile' fashion around Peppermint Grove with Miss Ashbury. Isobel Anderson (Ferguson) an ex-student of the 1930s remembers being at school with Sir James Mitchell's grand daughter, and with Mary Roe whose grandfather founded Roeburne. Mary Slingsby (Buegge) remembers being taken to the opening of London Court and Miss Ashbury's lovely knitting. It was in 1941 during the Second World War, when people were evacuating from the coast that Helena School with Miss Jessy Jones as Principal and Miss Jane Ashbury as teacher shifted to a big house on the corner of Ryecroft and Leithdale Roads in Darlington.

Very early after that, they built a classroom near the house and enclosed parts of the verandahs. Miss Jones died in about 1943 and one of her nieces, Mary, came from the family station near Kalgoorlie to help Jane run the school. Mary became the Business Manager and ran the boarding section while Jane Ashbury became Head Mistress, looked after the educational aspect and helped with the boarders.

The Gare family settled in Darlington just after this and in an interview taped in 1984 between Elsie Gare, Miss Ashbury and Miss Jones, the three reminisced about the beauty and challenges of living in the hills in those days. Most of the boarders were from country towns or Malaysia, so it was impossible to get parental help in case of emergency. Medical attention was hard to get quickly and Miss Ashbury had to use her own intuitive First Aid methods. One young fellow, Barry, put a gramophone needle in his ear and in trying to get it out, only pushed it in further until it hurt. Jane took him outside, tilted his head to the light and could just see it but couldn't reach it with tweezers. She remembered picking up a toy magnet and putting it in her sewing drawer a few days previously, so thinking it was worth a try, she put it in his ear. Out popped the needle! Another time, Tony split his lip open and no doctor was available so she rang Miss Dale Smith who then took them in her horse and cart to Mrs Head, a nurse who lived at the bottom of Orange Road. She put him on the kitchen table and stitched the lip. The same Tony, one day swallowed a piece of Meccano and screamed very loudly. Miss Ashbury said, "If you can scream that loudly, you'll be all right." Sure enough, "It came to pass, and he was all right." The author of this biography (one of the Gare family) remembers having a cut knee stitched without anesthetic, in the army camp near Greenmount, so often thinks, with great admiration, what it must have been like for Miss Ashbury having the responsibility of 25-30 children during those difficult years.

Jane was very keen on literature. She taught reading, writing and grammar with great determination. There are early photos of her in the front garden with lots of children sitting in the sun, reading. She liked being outside and often took the students for bush walks making sure that each one carried home some firewood or sticks for the chip heater. Many of the students of those years remember the walks and Miss Ashbury's interest in the wildflowers and the 'Gnamma hole' in the rocks near the creek. Music, ballet, elocution and sewing were also high on her priority list of subjects to be taught. She spoke

about the difficulty in getting teachers to such an out of the way place but found locals who imparted their love for their subject to the students and also helped to make Helena School be a part of the community. Mrs Bovell taught piano, Mrs Ashton, speech, Mrs Napier, English and so on. Jane taught the sewing herself and several girls remember that because their mothers were far away, or in some cases had died, she made them beautifully smocked white dresses for Church or for the end of the year concert. She and Mary Jones acted as mothers to so many children. They often had children to look after during the holidays because homes were too far away. The amount of time, energy and concern that they put in to caring for them, meant that there was no time left for themselves except for one week during the Christmas period, when they went to Albany or some other seaside town.

As neighbouring blocks of land became available, they bought it to enlarge the playground and make sure that they didn't have close neighbours. During the war and early post war years, the boarding section became very crowded due to evacuees from the North or children whose parents could not leave Malaya. They built a small two-roomed structure, bought the Log Cabin and even slept children on mattresses on the floor to help with accommodation.

Jane's niece, Candy, remembers her as being "a very good teacher, strict and with old fashioned values, but she imparted knowledge, values, morals and the love of knowledge, in a way that few can these days". She loved cats and the twice a day feeding of Polly, Putty, Tigger, Kitty Puss, Simon, Minnie Puss, Henrietta and Whiskers was quite a ritual. If one was missing, it would be a matter of everyone stop, look and call. Patricia Plaisted (Sims), an ex-student of 1948 remembers the school being closed because of the Polio scare and swabs were taken. She also remembers having to speak French at the dinner table and says that Miss Ashbury and Miss Jones were like second family.

In 1948, Miss Ashbury allowed several of the boarders to join the newly formed Guide Company in Darlington. Kathleen Skipsey was the Captain and Sally Gare a patrol leader. This is where the Ashbury-Jones-Skipsey-Gare friendship began. Many years later, John Skipsey married Lucy Jones and Sally became principal of Helena School. By supporting the Guide Company, Jane had made yet another commitment to the community. They were already staunch supporters of St Cuthberts Anglican Church and the long line of beautifully cared for children walking down and up the steep Leithdale hill to and from Church each Sunday was a wonderful sight. Mary or Jane attended Guild Meetings and became members of the local Liberal Party. Marlene Zlatnik, a friend and neighbour, tells how everything they did was connected. She said, "They created a family which extended into the community. The children received an all-round education. They all had their little jobs and helped each other. Helena School was always visible in the village." Sally Herzfeld (nee Gare) remembers being invited to end of year concerts held in the lounge room and later down in the Darlington Hall. These concerts for which the girls wore white dresses and blue sashes and the boys, navy shorts, white shirts and ties represented the old worldly perfection on which Miss Ashbury insisted. Ex-students say that the rehearsals were nightmares but the concerts were worth the trauma.

During the 1960s there were about 35 boarders. Jane was not very keen on boys and after grade three, they were either sent home or stayed at Helena and attended Guildford Grammar School. The high school girls who boarded went to Perth College and she slept in

the Log Cabin with the senior girls. Darlington is noted for the number of artists in residence. Many of these were so impressed with Miss Ashbury's teaching that they sent all their children to Helena School. Creative play equipment was built in the grounds and a Parents and Friends Association formed. The Darlington Arts and Crafts Exhibition became an annual fundraiser for the school. It is now 'The Darlington Arts Festival' and Helena College still plays a very big part in the organisation.

By 1971, the number of boarders had dwindled and Jane and Mary who were both about 70 years old wanted to retire but didn't want to sell the school to developers. Sally Herzfeld had been called to do some relief teaching there in October and stayed on as a teacher for 1972. Later, Jane said how pleased she had been when Sally expressed an interest in buying the school. The Herzfelds bought the block adjoining the boarding section. By then that block also had a classroom on it. A school council was formed, the old classroom rented, Sally Herzfeld became Principal and Misses Jones and Ashbury continued to own and live in the old school house.

During her first years of running Helena School, Sally found Jane to be a great support. After school, Mary would make afternoon tea and the three would sit under the wisteria and talk about the day. Everyone who knew Jane used to remark on her amazing memory. She was very interested in people and their families. As children, many were frightened by her strictness, but after growing up realised the enormity of the task which she had done and how concerned she really had been for their wellbeing. After retiring, she still used to attend all the school functions and would always talk to the children about their families, trying to see if there was any connection with those she used to know. Another fact which children wouldn't have known until they had grown up, was that she had had a mastectomy when she was in her early thirties, when that operation was fairly new. Her upper arm had become very heavy and she often used to support it with the other hand. When speaking to her one day about an elderly lady who had just been diagnosed with cancer, Sally said, "That must be bad enough when one is young, but to have to go through it at 70 must be terrible." She realised what Jane must have been through when she quickly replied, "Don't you believe it! At 70 you've already had your life!"

When the Helena School Council Incorporated, which had been formed in 1973, had been able to purchase the school from the Herzfelds and build sufficient rooms so that the old class room was no longer needed, Miss Ashbury and Miss Jones let it be used by several groups for meetings and so continued with their community involvement until Miss Ashbury became ill. She stayed with her niece, Elizabeth, in South Perth for a while and was eventually admitted to Concord Nursing Home where she died at the age of 82, on the 16th of April in 1985. Her whole life had been spent on devotion to others.

After Mary Jones died in 1992, the old school house and property was bought by Helena College Council, was rented out for a while and then became a place for meetings, music and sewing lessons and Out of School Hours Care. The old classroom became the Music Room and its veranda, the Uniform Shop.

During early 1997, the Herzfelds built a stone walled rose garden in the front garden of the old house. In one place, overnight, while the cement was still wet, a cat left its footprint on the surface. Which ghost of the past feline inhabitants was it?

With many ex-students, old friends of Mary and Jane and the local Anglican parsons in attendance, that rose garden was dedicated on June 22nd 1997, with admiration, to the memory of Miss Jessie Jones, Miss Mary Jones and Miss Jane Ashbury. Many ex-students or their parents then spoke about the two wonderful ladies and then planted the rose bushes which they had donated.

RESOURCES:

1. Taped interview between Elsie Gare, Jane Ashbury and Mary Jones in 1984.
2. Information given by Eileen Dowsett (nee Jones), Candy Gooding (nee Ashbury), Marlene Zlatnik, the Old Helenians Association and Jane Ashbury before she died.

LIAN THURSDAY, MARCH 15 1979

School's history is hard to trace

Darlington's Helena School has its own anniversary to celebrate this year—it's 100th—but old school records have made tracing the history a hard task.

Miss Pam Gethin—the school's honorary historian—wants to hear from anyone who has information about students or happenings related to the school since it started back around 1880.

And most of all, the school wants all past students to return later this month for a "Back to Helena School" reunion.

The reunion on March 24, will be in the form of a barbecue starting at 4.30pm with barbecue packs, salads and refreshments on sale at the school.

Transport can also be arranged by the school.

Some well-known West Australians and overseas identities have been pupils at the school, which was named after the Princess Helena School, in England.

Though Helena School had its beginnings before the turn of the century the first major school was started in the Cottesloe - Peppermint Grove area about 1914 by Miss Jessica Jones.

Then in 1944 the school, which had about 40 boarders, moved out of the city to the foothills because of fears that the Japanese might bomb the city.

Most of the pupils then were from Malaya and other parts of Asia where parents were serving in the forces.

Miss Mary Jones, the niece of Jessica Jones, was a student at the Cottesloe school, then became monitor and eventually took over the running of the school with her friend Miss Ashbury.

Mary Jones and Miss Ashbury both still live in the grounds of Helena School—a school with which they have been connected all their lives and which they ran until 1970.

They hope many of their old students and friends will return for the reunion.

"We hope the 'Back to Helena School' day will bring many past students here and if anyone would like more details or wants to come but has transport difficulties they should contact me on 2996626," said the school principal, Mrs Sally Herzfeld.



Pictured outside the Helena School are the principal of the school, Mrs S. Herzfeld (right), with two of her predecessors, Miss Ashbury (left) and Miss Jones.