Perhaps the most remarkable thing about PHS when you look back over its 100 years of history is that it really hasn’t changed much. Its role in society is as relevant today as it was 100 years ago, maybe even more so.

Over 100 years of evolution at the hands of the 15,000 or so students who have attended it over 3 or 4 generations, the several hundred teachers who’ve taught those students and the 20 or so headmasters and single headmistress and deputies who’ve run the show, our school’s character, culture and the legacy it passes down from generation to generation has been pretty much constant. And that is through I might add, a couple of world wars, the great depression and god knows how many recessions, technological revolutions, communication revolutions, and constant, rapid and often radical social change, reflective in the last 20 years in particular of the challenges posed by our embracing of multiculturalism.

For the first two years of its existence PHS was housed in the Macquarie Hall, on Macquarie Street, which had been leased from the Methodist Church. It moved to its place on May’s Hill a couple of years later.

There was no playground, no washroom. Toilet facilities were dreadful. Students marched at recess (that marching tradition started early didn’t it,) to the Parramatta South School and at lunchtime marched again from the school this time to Parramatta Park under the Pavilion which they used as a playground.

Official records show that the school started with enrolments of 136 students, 73 boys and 63 girls, and despite its appalling facilities, Sydney’s first ever co-educational high school was off and running.

“In this environment”, wrote Eunice Davies a student from in 1913 and 1914 in the 1963 Phoenix, “staff faced the task of inculcating a school spirit, and creating an attitude of study which would overcome the obstacles. It is sometimes true, and I think in the case of Parramatta High School this was exemplified, that difficult conditions and adversity give a challenge which calls for more loyalty and co-operation than would softer conditions, where routine is already well ordered.”

All the readings of the school’s early history leave you with the clear impression that if PHS could survive its early days it was always going to be a bit special. Not only was it the only co-ed high school in Sydney it was also set up to be a place in those days of relatively higher learning – students would now be able to continue their studies beyond the intermediate without having to undertake the long trip to Sydney.

It was to be only the fourth High School in the state after Sydney, Fort Street and Maitland. And somewhere I’ve seen it expressed that the vision for PHS was to become the “Oxford of Australia”, a vision reflected in the fact that the two blues of the school’s colours were apparently adopted from the colours of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The first dux of the school was also a sign of things to come – she was Miss Lilian Whiteoak who came back to the school in 1917 as a junior teacher and went on to become Headmistress of Fort Street Girls School, one of an incredible number of future school heads produced by PHS.

But most importantly the school from day 1 was headed by a remarkable bloke by the name of William Thomas Atkins (known to his students as “Tommy), a fine scholar who’d gained first class honours in French, English and Latin with his B.A. At the time I’d have thought
quite an achievement. Tommy went on to preside over the school for its first 20 years and in his time without question laid all of the foundations, and created the character and spirit of the wonderful school we all got to share in subsequent years, and a blueprint for future heads of school which was just too good to be messed with.

Tommy Atkins did the lot. He fought for the right to open the school, he advertised for customers to enrol at the school, he came up with the motto – Faxmentis Incendium Gloriae – oversaw the design of the badge and decided on the school colours.

And Tommy was apparently by no means just a scholar. He was quite a colourful character, in his striped dress trousers, swallow-tail coat and bowler hat. His usual form of transport was a well known sight in Parramatta – a Phaeton, a sporty open carriage drawn by a single horse. It is reported that dear old Tommy also had a fondness for lunch at the Woolpack Hotel and that on important matters it was best to speak to him before lunch. But that couldn’t be right could it?

In the 1963 Phoenix magazine celebrating the school’s 50th anniversary there are some wonderful recollections from students in the early years. Let me share a couple with you.

MR. JUSTICE C.A. WALSH (1922-26) wrote that, “I do not recall that in those days we talked or thought much about juvenile delinquency. No doubt there was as much of it then as there is said to be now. But I have have no recollections of encountering any serious manifestations of it or any of the evils which do sometimes flow from the close association of boys and girls in the same classes. I think the boys were the better for the company of the girls.”

He also mentioned his English teacher, Mr. Killip who went on to be headmaster of Sydney High, his class mate, Bob Mobbs, who went on to be headmaster of Matraville High, his older brother who spent most of his school days at PHS and went on to be Headmaster of Casino High School and was in the same year as Louis Benaud father of the great Richie Benaud, possibly our most famous old boy and his brother John

And Justice Walsh finished by saying “It is my earnest hope that the school which served us so well in more leisurely days will continue to provide for its students, as it did for us, a first rate preparation and training for meeting the challenges of life.”

Of the depression years E. Brown (1927-31) reflected in the 1963 magazine, “More pupils were going on to fifth year as there were no positions open to them – some even spent three years in fifth year waiting for the depression to cease”

……and how “ Tommy Atkins in his usual Monday morning address never failed to remind the boys that they must not behave like a ‘lot of yahoos’ “

DULCIE MORTIER (1933-37) wrote that “We are all scattered but each of us is bound by the deep love we all felt for Parramatta High, truly an Alma Mater. On the rare occasions I pass the old school on the hill with my own children, I am seized with irrepressible longing and appreciation. Good luck to today’s students – they are sharing a privilege and will, I know, try always to bring honour to the school which has meant so much to us all as a training ground for life.”
MRS. GWENDOLINE HANSEN M.B.E. (1913 -15) recalled of the war years, “my most vivid memory while I was at the western High School is of the boys marching from Gilgandra to Sydney picking up recruits for the 1914-18 War. We pupils handed out oranges to them as they sang and marched along the western Road.” Just picture that.

And also writing in the 1963 Phoenix was a MISS MACKANESS – who taught at the school over 32 years, from 1925 to her retirement in 1957

“….On the first day of school in 1925”, she wrote, “I travelled by steam train the 15 miles from Central to Parramatta and walked the mile up the hill to the High School……..The school was eleven years old when I joined the staff and at that time it had already developed the character and spirit which was the ideal of…. Tommy Atkins.”

“I think the tone of the School has always been remarkable, and …………………would like to mention the remark made to me by a member of the Teachers’ College staff. He said: ‘I can always tell a student of PHS. There’s something about them that makes them stand out’, and this I think is a very fine tribute to the efforts of the staff and the pupils themselves. My sincere wish for the school is that the next fifty years will be as rewarding as the first and that the school will follow in the high ideals with which it began”

The post-war 50’s were of course a great time of optimism in Australia and it appears also a great time to be attending the school on the hill. Jean Bull says of the school at that time, “It was a place we were all proud to attend. There was certainly good school spirit – we felt special and privileged to be there.”

John Coombes wrote “The school engendered a sense of innovation, even perhaps radicalism, with a strong school spirit and an equally strong larrikin element” wrote John Coombes

The 50’s also saw the start of immigrants arriving from Europe and this had a huge impact on PHS. For the first time students were meeting people from the Ukraine, Russia, China, and refugees from Eastern Europe including the remarkable Gil Dryza who, as well as being an outstanding water polo player and exceptional footballer who captained the CHS first XV, went on to marry another 1955 prefect Sue Loughry. Many students came to PHS from migrant hostels at Ermington, Dundas and Villawood and from nearby childrens’ homes. This was almost certainly the starting point for a great new of PHS and which has never been more evident than today - its encouragement and promotion of cultural diversity and social justice.

An unattributed quote from a student said of the 50’s, “there was a naïve innocence – we were 14-17 year olds – supporting a strong tradition of the only ‘mixed’ High School in the metropolitan area – we felt secure and trusted our teachers and peers.”

Into the 60’s Mr Forster retired after 10 years as headmaster, replaced by Jack Hensley.

I did not know Mr Forster at all well but have seen him described as cerebral and somewhat benign. This is not I can assure you a description one would use for his successor who was described rather by one future school captain (not me) as a “tyrant who ran a tight ship”. Mr. Hensley was my headmaster as school captain and we got on reasonably well. He had the huge job of managing the school’s transition into the Wyndham Scheme which started in 1962 and I understand did a great job.
The 60’s and early 70’s were also great times in Australia. It was as Paul Taylor described it, the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, but as you might expect, this great school which was in 1963 celebrating its 50th anniversary was not about to tip too much of its tradition on its head.

In fact while the spirit of quiet and considered progress was always evident within the school, the spirit of protest was far less welcome, if at all. I think it is fair to say that PHS always was a relatively conservative school and Jack Hensley wasn’t about to change that. In his 1963 Golden Jubilee message Mr. Hensley said;

“Today the tempo of events seems to be ever quickening. Social attitudes and modes of living have altered, but this fact does not mean that the enduring values of tolerance, charity and industry are less needed. In fact, we can face the future with hope of success only if we cling to, and carry with us, the institutions and traditions that have served so well in the past.”

When I first walked into Parramatta High in 1960, all of 11 years of age, I knew that my selection for the school was a privilege. I must say I wasn’t really sure why, but then again I suppose I wasn’t sure about very much at all at that stage and I certainly was not ready for the Age of Aquarius. I do remember the excitement of my introduction to PHS and being pretty overwhelmed by it all. This special place, so big, so old, the teachers so stern, also so old, the history writ large on honour boards, and big Bob Porter, the school captain, dux of 4th year, a debater and CHS rep in footy, and Bob Grace, vice-captain of the school, captain of the 1st XV and CHS rep in cricket and footy, 4th in 4th year 1959 and the coolest haircut ever. These two blokes even wrote poems for the 1960 Phoenix! I am sure the girls were equally impressive but at 11 I wasn’t yet all that interested.

This really was another world and it seems so obvious now as we all look backwards to this period of our my lives, that beyond the obvious imperative of performing as well as possible academically and maximising our future vocational opportunities, it was also the period which would most form and define our characters, our personalities, our values, our self-esteem, our confidence, how we would relate to other people through our adult lives and in very large part what sort of people we would turn out to be.

Jack Hensley again from his 1963 Golden Jubilee message;

“We must never cease to look beyond the present, never allow ourselves to be carried away by any shallow notion that life in the teenage years is an end in itself. We know, or should know, that activity and training in these years are but preparation for full and happy living in the years that follow. We have so much to gain, so much to do, and, aided by enduring values and our strength of purpose, we can proceed with confidence.”

Now I didn’t go quite as far as Jack would have liked by spending every single minute of my high school years focused solely on preparing for “a full and happy future life”. I did occasionally live for the moment.

But regardless of the extent to which I or any of us took up the opportunity, I don’t think that we could have been offered a better foundation and preparation for adulthood than we got from Parramatta High. I have never stopped being proud of my school and I have never stopped being grateful to it for the opportunities it opened up for me. From an academic perspective I did OK through high school - well enough to get to uni, get a degree, a good job etc.
But years after leaving school I realised that what Parramatta High, its teachers, its students, its sporting grounds and its traditions had really taught me was how to learn – not just the stuff you get out of a lecture or a text book, but how to learn by seeking out and listening to others, by searching for the best solutions not just acceptable solutions, and by respecting experience, the past and points of view which might be at odds with mine. In teaching me how to learn it had also taught me how to set an example for others.

And the wonderful thing is that 50 or so years later it seems our school is still doing what it has done so well for 100 years. Maybe even better.

In March this year I along with other ex captains was invited to the school for the Centenary Prefect Induction Ceremony. Having not visited the school for possibly 20 and probably 30 years I accepted the invitation with some trepidation. I had no idea what impact the massive societal changes we’ve seen over the last 10-20 years may have had on the school. I knew there had been big changes in education policies and systems, and I knew that more than 80% of the students I would pass in the hallways would be from non English speaking backgrounds.

I had no idea what to expect when I walked through the front door to the main building but no more than 10 steps through the door I could have travelled 20 or 30 or 50 years back in time. I really was back in my school. It was like nothing had changed. The faces were different sure, as were the accents, but the sounds, the smells, the history writ even larger now, the ambience, the look, the feel, the pace were exactly as I remembered them. Following the formalities we ex-captains had the opportunity over a cup of tea to the new captains and their families.

I have said to so many people since that day that I cannot remember ever meeting two young people as generally impressive as I found Ali Al Zaidi and Pinar Akin that day. I really was moved, even more so when I talked to their families and sensed the enormous pride they felt. Strangely I also felt pride.

If Ali Al and Pinar are remotely representative of the quality of students our great old school is now producing, it may well be an even better school today than the one we so fondly remember from our days.

In preparing for this talk tonight and to hopefully complete the loop between 1913 and the present I asked Ali Al and Pinar to give me their top of mind perspectives on the school today and what it means to them.

First from Ali;

“Captaincy over the years I think has transformed into something which extends far beyond the walls of the school….as captain you realise just how much impact you can have on both the community and the school. Parramatta High is a beautiful school with such rich diversity and character….it is organic, not robotic. From the students to the teachers everything feels so natural and easy going.”

And from Pinar;
“Personally PHS has allowed me to grow as an individual, and to really find my place in society. I have been provided with so many wonderful opportunities that have allowed me to learn so much more than what the classroom can offer, and I believe that it’s these things that make PHS so much better than any other school in Australia.

PHS is a school that really allows its students to LEARN, in all senses of the word. Programs that promote social justice, leadership, community spirit, fundraising and charity work, all amount to the learning that every student is able to do within PHS……………………..

From the incredible staff, to the teaching styles, to the students, and the initiatives, I think PHS’ ability to stretch the walls of the classroom and to bring the world in. has allowed us to become people that are just more ready for the outside world.

PHS is not a school that takes a chunk out of us when we graduate. It’s a school that allows us to take a golden chunk out when we leave, holding onto it for the rest of our lives………”

Beautiful words from Pinar and a perfect point for me to ask you all to charge your glasses and be upstanding to raise a toast to old Tommy Atkins who created this great school, to Miss Spratt, Mr. Taylor, the current teaching staff and all of their predecessors who have somehow managed over 100 years to keep the school evolving into contemporary relevance without losing its traditions and values, and to the wonderful students of PHS whose collective character, values and achievements are in large part the product of their time at the school on the hill. On you 100th birthday Parramatta High we salute you.