

## CYCLONES

**Cyclone Sigma**, 26 January 1896, was the first cyclone to affect the School. While no meteorological data is available it must have been a nasty cyclone as Townsville was flooded to a five kilometre radius and seventeen people were drowned. Fortunately, the only damage caused to the School was the blowing down of the weather vane on the main building [now School House]. The School authorities at the time were pleased to note that the buildings had stood up to a heavy storm. Unfortunately, it did in some ways lead to a misguided confidence because when **Cyclone Leonta** struck on Monday, 9 March 1903, the School was almost totally destroyed.

The school day had started normally but at 11:30am classes had to be suspended because of the noise generated by the advancing storm. The girls were taken to the Headmaster's house while the boys sheltered in the main building. When the full fury of the cyclone hit Townsville at 1:20pm, every building in the School with the exception of the Headmaster's House was destroyed. It is said that the gymnasium vanished without trace while the laundry and kitchen were totally destroyed. The girls remained safe because the Headmaster's house stood up to the cyclone but the boys had to seek safety as best they could. Queens Park was not an option because of flying debris and corrugated iron so the boys guided by staff members N.W. Jolly, J.G. Leadbeater and A.H. Shuttlewood sought refuge in the creek that runs through the middle of the School. Fortunately this turned out to be a safe place for the duration of the cyclone. That evening the boys were hosted in the homes of a neighbour, Mrs da Costa and the Chairman of Trustees, Mr A.W. McNaughton. Miraculously, apart from some minor scratches, there were no serious injuries.

As a testimony to the wonderful dedication and drive of the then Headmaster, F.T. Miller, and his staff the School reopened on the following Monday. As there was little standing on the main campus the School moved to the old Town Hall in Flinders Street East where it was to remain until mid-winter. For the second half of the year classes were undertaken in the old museum on Stanton Hill. Boarders were housed in the Headmaster's house until such time as the chemistry building was re-built and when completed this room was used as a dormitory for the rest of the year. Meals were cooked and served in the Headmaster's House. In their spare time boarders worked on clearing the debris and re-planting the School grounds. Helped by a substantial loan from the Queensland Government and financial support from the Old Boys' Association the main building was re-built and on 8 February, 1904, eleven months after Leonta the School re-opened on the main campus.



*School House after Cyclone Leonta struck*

Leonta's greatest effect on Grammar was in the economic and physical progress of the School. The debt incurred by Leonta took close to fifty years to repay and its immediate consequence was that it held back the building of much needed facilities. A stroll around the present senior campus will show that facilities, sporting and academic, only started to develop during and after Maurie Blank's time as Headmaster [1948-1965]. The economic problems caused by Leonta had a decided effect on the planning of the School Trustees. Continually aware of the financial issues experienced by the School in the first half of the twentieth century, subsequent Boards trod carefully before committing the School to heavy debt repayments.

**Cyclone Agnes**, 6 March 1956, was the next cyclone to directly hit. On that day students were sent home at noon before the full fury of the storm hit at 1:00pm. All the domestic staff sheltered in the Headmaster's House while the boarders were placed into a classroom in the 1941 building [now the Maurie Blank Building]. Unfortunately, the roof of that building was blown off, as was the roof of the kitchen while the verandah of the dining room collapsed. The boarders were then herded into School House which, fortunately, suffered no damage. No students were injured during the cyclone although it took three weeks to get the School into a reasonable working order again. [As an interesting side note Cyclone Agnes was the first cyclone in Australia to be tracked by radar developed by the Townsville Meteorological Office]

It can be argued that after Leonta, **Cyclone Althea**, 24 December 1971, was the most devastating cyclone to hit Townsville. During the cyclone three people were killed, ninety per cent of the homes on Magnetic Island were destroyed or damaged and ten per cent of homes in the city were damaged. Surprisingly, however, the School suffered very little damage with the exception of the Maurie Blank Building which was again unroofed. The damage bill came to \$40,000 and this amount was covered by insurance. A working group led by Mr Phil Brazier, Chairman of the Trustees and the Deputy Headmaster, Burke von Wald, worked during the January period to get the School back into working order. They were aided by many staff and students. The effort was so successful that there was very little loss of school time once the School year got underway.

**Cyclone Tessi**, 2 April 2000, was a category one storm and caused very little damage to the School. In some respects, it was more of a nuisance storm as power was lost for some time and the catering staff had to look after well over one hundred and fifty boarders. It was a credit to their ability that they were able to cope with the help of two gas barbeques. The boarders were also helpful, clearing up a mass of broken tree branches and other debris left by the cyclone.

**Cyclone Yasi** was a far more serious cyclone than Tessi causing much damage to the School grounds and sail cloths. However, as with the many cyclones that had affected the School, the current staff and students soon rallied around and worked assiduously to put the grounds back into some respectable shape. In doing this they have followed the wonderful spirit and caring of past students who have done the same since the first cyclone hit in 1896.

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School Archivist