Benalla’s story begins with the aborigines who once inhabited the district. There were two main tribes, the Pangerang which was located near the present site of Benalla and the Taungurong situated about the headwaters of the Goulburn. The path to future white settlement was forged in 1824 when Hamilton Hume and William Hovell pushed their way through the area later to be known as Benalla.

It was not until many years later, in 1836, that Major Thomas Mitchell’s expedition camped on the east bank of the Broken River on an aboriginal meeting place on his way back to Sydney. One of the men with him, a former convict James Taylor, was drowned while trying to cross the Broken River. After Mitchell’s journey many settlers arrived with sheep.

According to noted local historian Judy Bassett (Benalla History 1836 – 1991 Volume Two of 3, prepared by Judith Bassett January 1992) Benalla represented a reduction of an Aboriginal name rendered phonetically in English as "Bhrenallar". The Surveyor General requested that names of towns be local Aboriginal place-names. Bhrenallar was the local Aboriginal “tribe” which inhabited the right bank of the Broken River between its upper reaches and Nalinga, and hunted mostly in the “Brhenallar” - “second-class or inferior” - forested hill country.

An alternative view of the origin of the name is that it was Benalta and at some stage an official forgot to cross the “t” although there is no authentic record of the change of name.

It was around this time, 14 April 1838, when the inevitable clash of cultures resulted in the Faithfull Massacre, when aborigines attacked the camp of George and William Faithfull (neither of whom were present at the time of the massacre) who were overlanding sheep and cattle. The police under Captain Lonsdale killed many Taungurong people as punishment.

It was not until 1846 that the town of Benalla was surveyed by Thomas Wedge.
Early Schooling

Before schools were established, squatters and large landowners employed their own tutors or governesses to educate their children. Sometimes the pioneers built their own school and obtained their own teacher. In the Benalla area this was the case at Upotipotpon and Broken Creek.

The first state education was provided in 1850 when Benalla National School opened in Arundel Street with 33 children. It became a Common School in 1851 and State School No. 31 in 1872. By 1873 93 students were on the roll and by 1875 the average attendance had risen to 163 and it was obvious new schools would have to be built. In 1856 the Roman Catholics built a wooden school alongside the National School. It temporarily closed in 1874 and in 1879 St Joseph’s School reopened.

Secondary and technical education did not really exist in the early settlements. As soon as children were physically strong enough, most were put to work. Post elementary schooling at the turn of the century was the domain of an elite few and provided by private schools where curriculum, teaching methods and school organisational culture were understandably ‘grammar school’, having been transplanted from Britain in the 19th century.

In the Benalla district, private schools began to start up from an early date. They appeared to be of varying standards, some lasting only a fairly short time. These private schools persisted long after the 1872 Education act provided for free, secular and compulsory education. By this time, however the schools had to be registered by the Victorian Education Department.

One of the earliest private schools in Benalla was conducted in Nunn Street, at about the site of Cecily Court today, by Miss Simpson, sister of Hector Norman Simpson who was a Tatong squatter. Among the students from that school was Mr George Palmer who went on to play cricket for Australia.

In 1889 the most well known of Benalla’s private schools, Benalla Grammar School, was opened by Mr T R McCristal. The school was first located on the corner of Smythe and Benalla Streets. It later changed its name to North Eastern College and, according to A J Dunlop’s “Benalla Cavalcade”, it did splendid work in providing secondary education. It closed in 1909.

Our Lady of the Angels Convent was founded in 1900 and registered as a Ladies’ College, offering the first catholic secondary education in Benalla. When state secondary education came to Benalla twelve years later, concern was raised as to the future of the Convent but the school adapted and both forms continued to flourish in Benalla as they still do today.

A significant milestone for secondary education in Victoria was the passing of the Education Act of December 1910 (No 2301). It provided for higher elementary schools, district high schools and technical schools. It also introduced compulsory continued education (secondary). Two years later the Benalla community was approached by Frank Tate, Director of Education who communicated the Minister of Education’s desire for a Higher Elementary School in Benalla and within weeks the first classes were held in makeshift accommodation with a starting enrolment of 55 students. Compulsory and secular it might have been but ‘free’ is hardly an apt description with the school’s future contingent upon the community’s efforts to raise the requisite funds.
In the first few decades of the new century Victoria became a leading site for educational reform and vocational training. Much of this was due to the efforts of Frank Tate, who became the first Director of Education, 1902-1928. This encompassed a period in which he made a major drive (literally hundreds of miles in a turn of the century car on rough and deeply rutted roads) to bring secondary education to country districts, arranging to open classes and meeting with country communities to urge their commitment to local higher elementary education.

It was in early 1912 that he met with the Benalla community, the 15th Victorian centre to be selected. Frank Tate had previously been a teacher, and then an inspector of schools in the Mallee, where he grew increasingly critical of the narrow curriculum offered in state schools. He offered a vision of a liberal curriculum, imaginative and realistic methods, and a gentler and more constructive discipline; he introduced teachers to the ideas of the ‘new education’, a loosely organized reform movement which was gaining popularity in Britain. He showed teachers, as they toiled for meagre salaries in century heat in their tin-roofed schools, that their task, although grossly undervalued by society, was one of importance and dignity. Through them, state-school children, previously offered a narrow and unappealing fare dominated by the three Rs taught rigidly and by rote, could be introduced to the richness and variety of a great culture. As for many of his generation, that culture was best exemplified by English literature and history.

In the first decade of his directorship the introduction of state high schools provided Tate with his greatest challenge. Governments were unwilling to incur additional expense; some church groups were dubious about extending secular education beyond the elementary school. The private schools, recognizing the threat to their own livelihood, fought bitterly against Tate’s plans, denouncing this state intrusion into education as ‘simply Socialism’, arguing that scholarships could provide for the bright child of poor parents. Tate gradually developed the argument that the state should enter secondary education to ensure that it was equally available to all children.

In 1909 Tate persuaded the government to introduce a bill which allowed the open establishment of state high schools. It was redrafted and eventually passed as the 1910 Education Act.

Tate was also impressive in his advocacy for technical education. He flung himself into the war effort. The Education Department’s School Paper brought news of the war into every classroom; state school students raised large sums of money; honour rolls began to record their frightful tally.

Tate wrote in 1919: ‘The State provides education for the well-being of the whole State organisation and not for the benefit of the particular individual who is the subject of the teaching. The justification for this State expenditure is the strengthening of the State itself through more highly developed citizens…It is only an incident that the boy who takes full advantage of the opportunities provided is enabled thereby to better his position in life’ (Vision and Realisation Vol 1 P481)

When Tate retired in 1928 no fewer that 128 higher elementary schools and 36 high schools had been established in Victoria, and there had been an increase of 50 per cent in the number of technical schools.
Dr. James A.D. Nish

Dr. Nish ran a medical practice in Benalla between 1903 and 1927, when he transferred to Melbourne. He became the first Chairman of the Higher Elementary Committee which engrossed itself in the arduous process of ongoing fundraising, lobbying the Department for adequate accommodation and resourcing and negotiating the site and planning of the permanent building. He appears to have been the sole officiator on the opening of the school in the temporary accommodation of St Andrew’s Hall urging the students to high ideals and stressing the importance of the opportunity they were being given.

Dr Nish was later a prominent member of the High School Advisory Council and in 1926, on Rev. McConnan’s retirement, he became President of the Advisory Council. He frequently expressed his pride at the success and the progress of the school.

At a public farewell which was accorded him, he stated that the motto of the school, chosen by Mr. Sebire- Pete Certum Finem or Seek a Definite Aim – had always been his objective.

When the House system was inaugurated at the commencement of 1925 the surnames of the most prominent of the founders of the school – Rev. A.C McConnan and Dr. J.A.D Nish- were taken as House names.