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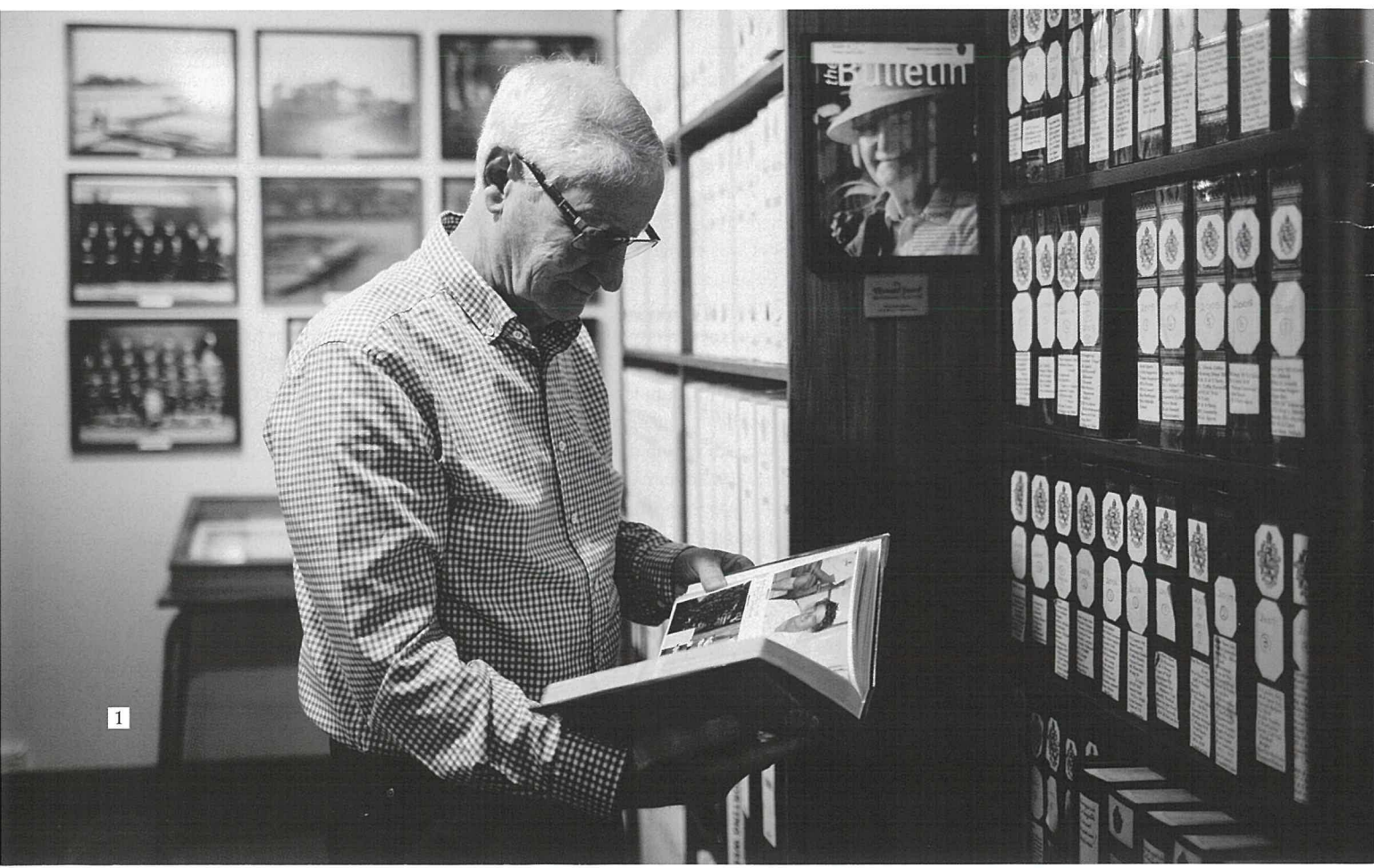
The huge collection of carefully curated artefacts, memorabilia and archives housed at Whanganui Collegiate School is preserving a slice of New Zealand's history; now a major digitisation project will enable worldwide remote access

It sounds like the beginning of a joke: what do an All Blacks captain, a Formula 1 and Le Mans driver and a pioneering plastic surgeon have in common?

On the surface of it, not much at all. But in the cases of David Kirk, Chris Amon and Sir Harold Gillies, each attended Whanganui Collegiate School (WCS). Look closely at the wall in the WCS Museum and Archives and you'll spot their photos hanging side by side.

It's hard to miss WCS, a state-integrated, co-educational day and boarding school a few blocks from the river that cleaves Whanganui in two.

The grand old school, believed to be the third oldest in New Zealand and the second-oldest high school, sprawls across 24 hectares of manicured lawns and sports fields. Its Category 1-listed campus features a range of 20th-century architectural styles and includes a chapel, dining hall, classrooms, auditorium, gymnasium, principal's accommodation and boarding houses.





2

A quick history lesson: WCS was established in 1854 when Governor Sir George Grey granted a land endowment to the Anglican Church to set up what was then called the Native Industrial School. That school was originally built on swampy land a few streets away, but by 1911 its reputation and roll had grown to the extent that the school rebranded and moved to its current location on Liverpool Street.

Since then many of Aotearoa's most prominent politicians, governors-general, architects, farmers, sportspeople, doctors and lawyers have passed through WCS's doors. Even, famously, royalty: HRH Prince Edward spent a year there as a house tutor from 1982 to 1983 (the auditorium bears his name).

In 1991 the formerly all-male school opened its doors to female students, and today the 475+ student body comprises around 54 percent males and 46 percent females.

"Unsurprisingly, the school's rich background has brought with it a huge quantity of historical artefacts," says Richard Bourne, one of the founders and now director of the WCS Museum and Archives.

Today that collection extends to around 45,000 carefully curated artefacts, memorabilia and archives, from photos to trophies and uniforms. However, initial attempts to corral the collection were far more basic.

"The story goes that items such as *The Collegian* [the school magazine] and old trophies were stored in various locations around the school, including in cupboards under stairs."

It wasn't until 1987 that Peter MacKay, a WCS teacher and second-generation Old Boy, decided to gather the artefacts, boxing them for storage in a couple of spare rooms in the main building. But it would be another few years before a dedicated central repository was created.

"I was President of the Old Boys & Girls Association leading up to the school's 150th anniversary in 2004, and a group of us decided to make the museum the Old Boys' project for that," says Richard.

Handily, in the mid-1990s, a newly built music suite rendered the former music block surplus to requirements. That 14-room, two-storey building was ideally suited to house what would become the WCS Museum and Archives.

The Association refurbished the former music building, including blocking the second-floor windows to prevent light damaging the collection.

"That's when the enormous task of sorting, recording and storing the vast amount of material began."

The newly opened museum was one of the highlights of the anniversary celebrations and eventually led to the establishment of the WCS Museum Trust, aimed at "governing and administering the museum to ensure that the collection is protected for future generations".

As news of the museum has grown, so a trickle of items sent in by former students and their families has turned into a flood. It's not unusual for Richard to receive several contributions a week.

1. WCS Museum Trust Chair Richard Bourne with an album from the school's extensive collection.

2. Photos line the downstairs hallway while the wall of WCS Honour Tie holders, which features the ties of some of the school's most prominent students, is on the left.



1

1. The building housing the WCS Museum was built in 1921.

2. Richard Bourne with longtime WCS archivist Frances Gibbons.

3. The WWII flying helmet of 1931 student DJ Nilsson.

4. Part of the photo display of Honour Tie holders.

5. The main display room upstairs.

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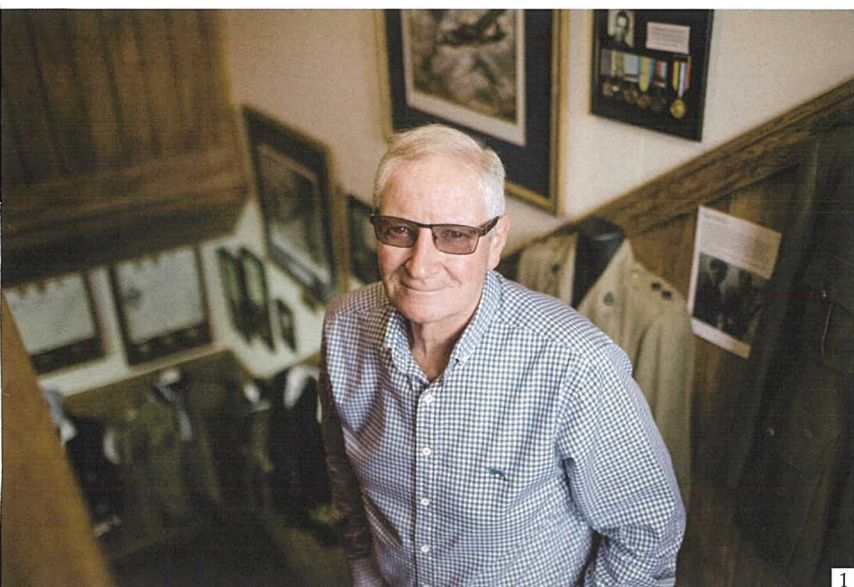
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“People both domestically and overseas have confidence that if they deposit their artefacts with us, they’ll be professionally recorded and stored.”

But as with any museum, it’s the stories behind the items that really connect with people, admits Richard, who attended WCS in the ’60s. One of his favourite items is a pewter tankard sent by an Englishman who’d been a stagehand at Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London.

“The Hamburg Opera Company was performing there in the 1950s and this Englishman saw one of the German stagehands drinking from a tankard. There was still a bit of ill feeling after World War II so he took the tankard off him. Interestingly, the Englishman had spent time building ships for the New Zealand line, so when he saw the word ‘Wanganui’ engraved on the tankard, he sent it to us.”

Also engraved was the name of a former student, Randal von Tempsky Kettle.

“I managed to track Randal down and it turns out he’d left WCS in 1942 to go overseas with the Navy. His family sent him the tankard in a package to England via friends in the Channel Islands, but of course he never received it. He was thrilled for us to keep it.”

Another favourite donation came from former student and retired Army Colonel Howard Jones, who took up photography as a hobby and documented numerous school events.

“Howard said he’d like to donate his collection to the museum. It ended up being 27,000 photos so we had to add 10 metres more shelving to store it all.”

But the jewel in the museum’s tiara is slightly more technologically advanced. The Register is a database that lists every student from the first in 1854 to the most recent. Type in the name of a student and you’ll find information such as the years they attended, the sports teams they represented, titles held, photos, and any information on their whereabouts and careers.

1. Richard Bourne on the stairway where Old Boys’ military medals and uniforms are displayed.

2. A photo of HRH Prince Edward, who tutored at WCS in his gap year in 1982.

“We started digitising our collection onto the Register in 2014. It’s a major ongoing project, but the aim is to have it remotely accessible to the public.”

Key to the process is archivist Frances Gibbons, a retired WCS librarian who works part-time cataloguing and digitising the photographic collection.

“I’ve swapped cataloguing books for cataloguing photos,” laughs Frances. “Having worked at the school, I know the environment and students well. I’ve always loved history and doing this work keeps my brain ticking over.”

Which brings us to a slightly thorny issue: where to display the ever-increasing collection?

Richard says the plan is to eventually increase displays around other school buildings, including the main block, dubbed ‘Big School’, where historic photos already line the walls.

Kerryn Pollock, Area Manager Central Region and Senior Heritage Assessment Advisor for Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, believes the WCS Museum and Archives is one of Aotearoa’s most significant school-based collections.

“A number of schools have items in Archives New Zealand or at local museums, but it’s significant that WCS has an entire building devoted to its archives. That says to me the school really values its history. At the heart of any heritage listing are stories about people, and for a school to have such a rich source of stories about the students, teachers and staff over 170 years is fascinating and, I think, quite brilliant.”

It’s no surprise that Richard, who opens the museum most weekdays and runs tours alongside Frances by arrangement, agrees.

“No other school museum comes close to us in terms of the volume of artefacts and how meticulously we’ve displayed and digitised them. It’s been an honour to be able to preserve this slice of New Zealand’s history.” ■



2