

The boys who "go bush" in the city

THE headmaster put on a school hat with the widest brim imaginable and told the assembled pupils: "This is the ten-thousand-sheep hat."

Then he held up another model with a slightly narrower brim which he described as the "one-thousand-sheep hat" and asked the boys to pick the one they wanted to wear.



No, this didn't happen in the country where schoolboys know almost instinctively how to size up a grazier's social status from the width of the brim.

It happened this week at the James Ruse Agricultural High School at Carlingford where most of the 400 pupils have been raised in clamorous Sydney suburbs.

But their love of nature, agriculture and animals is perhaps greater than many country boys who have not seen Sydney.

Basically, the school exists for the hundreds of Sydney boys who want to go on the land.

It is perhaps the most methodical way of repaying the country for the constant flow of its brilliant young men to the city.

Intermediate student Fred Keers illustrates almost perfectly how boys raised in the shadow of skyscrapers can take the country life to heart.

Fowl Utopia

Fred lives in Macquarie Street, but when he leaves school he wants to work in the cattle industry.

He has made a good start already. He has been visiting friends, who own a farm at Camden, for eight years and now has his own horse and cow there.

From that beginning he has bred four calves and visits them once every two or three weeks, as well as spending every vacation there.

Fred is no exception. A recent survey of first-year boys showed that more than half of them spend their holidays in the country.

Headmaster Mr Jim Hoskin's study in the 76-year-old colonial house, Barrengarry, overlooks the fields which nurtured the first successful wheat crops in Australia.

Mr Hoskin told me that soon new buildings worth £96,000 would allow the school to expand to 540 pupils.

This will make it the

biggest agricultural High school in New South Wales, yet it was opened only three years ago.

The new buildings will include a wool classing-room with 16ft ceilings for plenty of light and loading ramps to receive the bales of wool. When the boys leave school they will have completed about half of their wool classing course at the Technical College.

When the school's "man-proof fence", now being built for £5,500, is finished, the school's first animals will arrive.

Like a modern Noah's Ark, the animals will lead city boys to an existence they dream about. There will be two cows, eight sheep, three pigs and 240 fowls, who will live in a poultry Utopia of automatic feeding, mist cooling and artificial light. The boys will also have a school pony. The Director-General of Education, Mr Harold Wyndham, recommended this when he visited the school. "Every boy should be able to pat a horse," he said.

Mr Hoskin said that the boys at the school came from 108 different railway stations in the metropolitan area, and the vocations they chose were almost as varied.

But one advantage of an agricultural high school was that even if a boy changed his mind about his career halfway through his school life, agriculture could probably help him.

Some of Mr Hoskin's pupils in the past have become doctors and dentists who have been glad of the intensive scientific and biological training they received at this agricultural High school.

Mr Hoskin said an important feature of the school was that boys who came from poultry farms or other rural fringe areas felt -that they were learning a dignified trade.

"There are no feelings of inferiority here," he said. "If anything, the boys are a bit aloof from other schoolboys. Nobody here would think digging was a menial job. They mightn't like the hard work, but they certainly don't look down on it."

"I some-times think that some of them like to get dirty." Mr Hoskin feels that an agricultural High school in the metropolitan area offers city boys a chance to pioneer.

"There are still huge tracts of land to be opened up in Australia, but the job will require men with initiative and knowledge," he said.

To get that knowledge, the city boys go to the country on school trips whenever possible.

Visit farms

They attend local field days and visit pig pens and farms to make contact with farmers.

Orchards fascinate them - but not in the way they do most boys, whose only thought is how to get free fruit.

A panel of local farmers cemented good relations with the school by pruning the fruit trees and looking after the bees.

The boys recently collected 1201b of honey and it was sold in the canteen with vegetables they had grown.

The canteen is staffed by mothers of pupils. - "The mothers sometimes have to travel for hour to get to the school - they regard it as a trip to the country," Mr Hoskin said.

*By Graham Gambie
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