

Ruth Burnet Tozer



Ruth Burnet Tozer was Teacher, Vice-Principal, and Principal of St Albans East Primary School in the 1970s. She was born in 1928 in Ballarat, Victoria, to Thomas Henry Tozer and Ruby Pearl Carnegie. Ruth was the only surviving child in the family, as the first daughter Eleanor was born in 1922 and died in 1923.

The Tozer heritage goes back to 1742 in Stithians, Cornwall, England; Henry Tozer emigrated to Ballarat in the early 1860s and married Caroline Benjamin. The Carnegie heritage goes back to 1747 in Brechin, Angus, Scotland; George Carnegie emigrated to Ballarat in the 1850s and married Jean Dunn Alexander.



Thomas Henry Tozer and family at Ballarat

The Tozer home was in East Street, Ballarat. Ruth's father, Thomas Tozer junior, was a fireman and worked at the fire station across the road from home, and as a child Ruth loved exploring the fire station and the firetrucks.



Ruth started her education at the Ballarat kindergarten and attended Humphry Street Primary School between 1932 and 1939. She learnt to play the piano, took elocution lessons, and enjoyed singing. (She must have had a good voice as in later life she was invited to sing at several wedding ceremonies.) She was a scholarly person who started at Ballarat High School at age 11.

She earned credits to enter Melbourne University but was too young to enroll there. She had been recommended for infant teacher training and studied at the Ballarat and Melbourne Teachers Colleges and in 1949 was assigned to the Golden Point Primary School in Ballarat. 1950 was her first teaching position at Golden Point and the start of her teaching career. In 1954 the Queen was visiting Ballarat, and Ruth Tozer took her class in the back of a furniture van to see the Queen. Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, visited Ballarat during their first tour of Australia as a reigning monarch. Ballarat's Begonia Festival was in full swing at the time and the whole town came out to welcome its new regent.

As was the norm at the time, teachers moved between schools to obtain promotion. In 1955 Tozer was at Urquhart Street Primary School, Ballarat, and in 1960 she was infant mistress at Ballarat Primary School. After 15 years of teaching at Ballarat, she moved to Melbourne and bought a house in North Sunshine, but Ballarat was always her home. She would stay in town during the week and return home on the weekends.

Between 1965 and 1968 Ruth Tozer was infant mistress at Deer Park Primary School. In 1969 she was appointed infant mistress at St Albans East Primary School. She was a good piano player and her students enjoyed her musical talents. She brought her class into her office to watch the moon landing on a little black and white television.

In 1970 she was promoted to Vice Principal at St Albans. At the time it was unusual for women to be in this senior position, even though in 1972 80% of the teaching staff at St Albans East were women (24 women, 6 men). Tozer would later state: "In the 1970s it was quite rare to have a female as principal, I was probably one of the first group, but now it's just part of the process of advancing a career within the education department."



Ruth Tozer (front, left of centre) Vice Principal St Albans East Primary School 1972

Apparently her first recommended promotion to Principal was an anti-climax, as the offer was withdrawn because a male applicant for the position had challenged the appointment. Nevertheless, several of her former colleagues and students remember her as Principal at St Albans East.



Ruth Tozer was appointed Principal of the St Albans North Primary School and served there between 1974 and 1978. She introduced initiatives such as a creche at school and supported part-time employment, paving the way for more flexible work opportunities for female teachers.

She progressed to appointments as Principal at Oak Park, Sebastopol and Langwarrin. In 1987 she retired from teaching after a 40-year career with the education department.

Ruth had connections with the Methodist and the Uniting churches. In the 1970s she was involved with the ministry of John and Val Blacker at the Moonee Ponds Uniting Church. She would play the piano and organ and lead the choir.

In retirement she worked as a volunteer, combining music and singing in celebration of life and religion. During the 1990s she was volunteering at the Seniors Drop In Centre at Crossways.

In 2018 Tozer came back for a visit to St Albans North Primary School where she was Principal in the 1970s. The impromptu reunion was reported in the local paper Brimbank North West Star Weekly:

“Although more than four decades have gone by, Ms Tozer said much of the school is how she remembered it.

‘It’s quite nostalgic to be back here and seeing it all,” she said. “There’s been quite a few changes, but the basic thing is the same – the corridor, the classrooms, the staff rooms. It certainly brings the memories flooding back.’

Ms Tozer was a trail blazer for women in the education department and said she hoped to see more females on the board. ... Ms Tozer said the most rewarding part of her career was the memories forged. ‘We’ve had an interesting time recalling some of the fun things that used to happen in the past. You always remember the good things.’¹



Ruth Tozer at St Albans North Primary 2018 (Brimbank and North West Star Weekly)



Ruth Burnet Tozer passed away in June 2025 at age 97 years. The celebration of Ruth's life was held at the Crossway Chapel in Burwood East. Her remains were buried at the Ballarat New Cemetery and Crematorium:

“Loving daughter of Thomas Henry and Ruby Pearl. Respected, kind and generous leader, educator, principal, musician, pianist and friend. Our Ballarat and Melbourne churches, schools and local communities felt her positive impact and faithful heart. Beloved friend and chosen family of Carson and Blacker families. Now at peace, with Jesus.”

Written by Joseph Ribarow January 2026

Ref: Bethel Funerals website, <https://www.youtube.com/live/-roC5CXsljw>

¹ Tate Papworth, Brimbank and North West Star Weekly 3 April 2018