

City life

They stole their school bell in their youth. A eulogy revealed the truth

For decades, a secret was kept between three mischievous schoolboys, bound by a shared revenge plot and the weight of a stolen school bell. They swore to take the secret to their graves, but now, a funeral has finally revealed the truth.

By Hannah Hammoud

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Hundreds gathered at St Andrew's Church in the Melbourne suburb of Brighton on Thursday to say goodbye to Ian Mence. To his family, he was a loving husband and father, but to his alma mater, Wesley College, he was a different kind of legend — a student expelled not once, but twice, who later declared a secret war on the institution.

The centrepiece of that war was a stolen school bell. For decades, the story of the theft was a classic in the Mence family, often told by Ian himself. It was a tale of friendship, mischief and revenge, with Ian and his two friends, Denis Oakley and Robert Ward.





David Mence and his son Leonard at the site of the stolen Wesley College school bell on Church Street, Brighton. EDDIE JIM

“Dad always told the story,” recalled his son, David Mence. “This was one of his classics.”

In the 1950s, Ian and Denis were Wesley College’s resident mischief-makers. After Ian was expelled, he and Denis hatched a plan to steal the bell under the cover of night. Their getaway driver was Robert, the only one of the trio with a car.

Ian told this story countless times, but he always left out one crucial detail: the location of the bell’s hiding spot. He had sworn to keep the secret until every member of the trio had died. With the 88-year-old’s passing, the location of the bell was finally revealed this week – at his funeral.

Delivering the eulogy, David had fun teasing the story out.

Born in 1937, Ian was first a student at Brighton Grammar. But, “against his wishes, his father moved him from Brighton Grammar to Wesley College”, David said. It was a move he never quite came to terms with.



Ian Mence, 88, was farewelled at St Andrew’s Church in Brighton on Thursday.

The trouble followed him to Wesley. “He was expelled for the first time when he called a teacher a ‘poxy-arsed bastard’, which, in those days, was a hanging offence language,” David said with a laugh. “My grandfather, Dudley, got a solicitor and threatened to sue the school, so they took him back.”





A historic photo of 78 Church Street, Brighton, where the stolen school bell is buried. EDDIE JIM

That second chance didn't last long.

"The second time he was expelled, he ordered a fleet of 50 buses to come and arrive at the school gates," David said.

"That number might have gotten taller in the tail-end of his life ... but the whole fleet of buses came and blocked up the school entrance for half a day. It caused huge problems."

Ian was expelled again. The rebellious teenager was finished with Wesley College.

Together with his trusted friends, Denis and Robert, Ian hatched a plan for a night raid to steal the school's bell.

"The three of them drove up to the school in the middle of the night, and they cut down the school bell," David said.

"It took the three of them to carry it back to the car, and they drove the bell back to Brighton and buried the school bell.

"They promised never to tell anybody where they buried the bell until the day they all died."





In his youth, Ian Mence experienced a troubled time at Wesley College. He later sent his children to Brighton Grammar.

In the 1950s, Brighton's Church Street was nothing like the bustling shopping strip it is today. "It was basically just a patch of dirt," David said.

"They dug it up and put the bell in there. And then I remember Dad saying years later, as more and more shops went into Church Street ... that the bell was under the concrete slab at the back of the shop."

Today, the bell remains buried beneath the site of the former fish and chip shop at 78 Church Street, about 8.5 kilometres from its original home at Wesley College's St Kilda Road campus.

When asked about the school's long-lost property, Wesley College principal and alumnus Nick Evans – whose own father attended the school alongside Ian and his friends – had very little to say.

"It might be best after all these years to let sleeping bells lie," he said.

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