

Northcote's First International Sportsman

The Leader (and Melbourne newspapers) noted the death in a private hospital in Richmond on November 6, 1930 at 78 years of age of George Alexander, "a resident of Northcote for over 60 years" and living at "Terracedale", 3 McLachlan Street at the time of his demise.

Although his on-field career was relatively modest, Alexander can claim to be Northcote's first "international" sportsman, having visited England in 1880 and 1884 as manager of the touring Australian team.

"Manager" and "player" were inter-changeable terms in those times - the players effectively organised the tours, paid their own expenses, and shared the profits accumulating from the tour; hence the manager's role was to organise as many matches as possible. The first match in 1884 was early in May; the last in the middle of November; a schedule that would leave today's players somewhat dizzy.

With only 12 players in the party and a couple of injuries, Alexander was pressed into playing in the first-ever Test match on English soil in October, 1880, and batting at number 10 in the second innings, he along with the number 11, W. H. J. Moule (later Judge Moule and senior partner in the legal firm Moule, Hamilton & Derham) helped his captain W. "Billy" L. Murdoch to carry his score to 153 not out and Australia to avoid an innings defeat. Alexander's contribution was an invaluable 33.

On the tour as a whole, he took 109 wickets at an average of nine runs each.

Alexander also acted as manager in Australia



for the visiting English team led by the Hon. Ivo. Bligh in 1882-83 and played his only other Test at Adelaide in December, 1884 with little success, making 3 (run out) and 10, and bowling 40 deliveries for 24 runs and no wickets.

His skill as a manager was exceptional.

These were days where players paid their own expenses and divided the profits at the end of tour, hence as many games as possible were arranged. Many commentators believed the 1880 venture was doomed after an acrimonious tour of Australia by an Australian team in 1878-79. One obituary following Alexander's passing suggested that the players on the 1880 tour had paid in £50 beforehand – and received £700 at arriving back in Australia!

In later years, Alexander was a keen lawn bowler, and at one time captain of Northcote Bowling Club. In 1922, he had an unexpected reunion with a fellow member of Murdoch's touring team of 1884 in W. (William) H. Cooper. The Victorian Bowling Association final was held at Alphington where Alexander was helping out.

The pair had not seen each other for nearly 40 years, but were suddenly reunited when Cooper arrived as the scorer for Middle Park.

George Alexander

As The Leader noted:

"It was a grand sight to see the light that shone in W. H.'s eyes as he gripped hands with George Alexander - like George, W. H. Cooper carries his cargo of years on an upright keel - may they both knock up another century and still be not out".

The same report revealed that just four of the party that toured England in 1880 were still alive; Cooper, A. J. Jarvis, Judge Moule and "the Prince of Wicketkeepers", Jack Blackham. Cooper died in 1939 at 90 years of age, at the time the oldest living Test player; he was also the great-grandfather of 1970s Australian player and long-time headmaster of Geelong Grammar, Paul Sheahan.

George Alexander was interred in the Melbourne General Cemetery, Blackham and Cooper were amongst the pallbearers at his funeral, another Joe Brown "a well-known Northcote first eleven player who obtained his early tuition in the game from Mr. Alexander".

Strangely, there was never any mention of Alexander's achievements in what served as 'local' papers of the day, those from Collingwood and Fitzroy. He is known to have played with the two leading clubs of his time, East Melbourne and Melbourne and was a regular in Victorian inter-colonial teams.

The Leader obituary on his death also suggested that Alexander played with, and later coached the Northcote Presbyterian Cricket Club, but there is no surviving evidence to confirm at what time this may have been. It also suggested he was still actively involved in the game at sixty years of age.

Alexander at that time of his passing was co-proprietor with his younger brother Alfred of the Preston Abattoirs, then in Oakover Road, midway between Frank Street (later the western carriageway of today's section of St. George's Road between Miller Street and

Murray Road) and Austral Avenue.

This section of Oakover Road was an area designated by the Preston Council in years before as an area where "obnoxious industries" were allowed – the abattoir rubbed shoulders with a tallow manufacturer, a couple of tanneries and the Sterling Soap Works.

One obituary suggests that Alexander during the 1890s operated as a contractor as constructed the cable tramway system along St. Kilda Road, although there has been nothing sighted in contemporary records of his involvement.

Alexander was born at Britwell Salome, Oxfordshire, England on April 22, 1851, the first-born child of Charles and Sophia (nee Hawting) and certainly found his sea-legs at an early stage, the family arriving in Melbourne on the S.S. *Googhly* in November of the same year after a voyage of around seven weeks.

He left a widow Caroline Jane (nee Wollington or Wallington) from a second marriage in 1913.

Caroline was a widow, one of her four children of her earlier marriage to John Timmins being Cr. Clarence Timmins, who at 33 years of age in 1920 became the youngest councillor to be elected as Mayor of the City of Northcote.

Alexander's first marriage was to Jeanette Candy, a daughter of William and Mary Candy of George Street, North Fitzroy in 1876.

Jeanette died on 24 July, 1879, aged 24 years, possibly in child birth. She was not related to later Northcote councillor and Mayor, Ralph Candy, who was born at Hamilton. As well as Albert, his co-partner in the Preston Abattoirs, he was survived by two other younger siblings, Frederick and Susanna. Another brother, Will was noted as being deceased.

The Leader's claim to him being a resident of Northcote for over 60 years may have involved

George Alexander

a little journalistic licence. Directories do not show a Charles or George Alexander in the town until 1879 when George was listed in High Street and shown the following year shown as a butcher.

Charles Alexander was also born in Oxfordshire and on arrival in Australia started for the gold-fields, working there as a digger for eight months, and then returned to Melbourne where he built a shop and dwelling in King William-street, Fitzroy, and commenced business as a family butcher there.

He carried on a successful trade there and later moved into larger premises in Brunswick-street from 1854. Three years later, he bought property in Gertude-street and built a shop and dwelling and carried on a successful business there until 1881 when he relinquished the retail trade.

By this time, he had also established an abattoir on the Saltwater (Maribyrnong) River, and also had a boiling-down and tallow business at Ramsden-street, Collingwood.

By the late 1880s, Charles had also established an extensive poultry farm in Spring-street, Preston, where he then resided (directories however, still showed him as a butcher). The farm housed around 4,000 birds and was a large supplier a large supplier of poultry and eggs to the Melbourne market.

Just where George Alexander received his early education is not known, but it is recorded that he attended Scotch College in 1867, seemingly just for the one year.

Of George's siblings, Susanna (1856), William (1857, died 1904 in the Melbourne Hospital in East Melbourne) and Frederick (1859 were all born in Collingwood, and the youngest, Albert in Fitzroy in 1865.

The 'Bible' of cricket, Wisden's Cricket Almanac has a rare error in suggesting Alexander was

“born in Fitzroy, in Victoria, on April 22, 1851”.

While the date is correct, according to official Victorian records, there was no George Alexander born anywhere in the state in 1851. The mistake appears to have originated from an obituary published in The Sporting Globe which claimed he “was born in Fitzroy 79 years ago”.

Footnote :

The match was played on the 6th, 7th and 8th of September and while it was a minor triumph for Alexander, it was a sad time for English cricket.

The Test was the first played by the great Dr. W. G. Grace; although he was 32 years of age, due to his medical practice he had not toured Australia when earlier Tests were played. He was joined in this match by two of his four brother, Dr. E. M. and G. F. (George Frederick),

Fred, Grace failed to score in either innings and did not take a wicket, but was well remembered for taking a catch at long-on of giant Australian George Bonnor, his slightly mistimed hit going so high that it enabled the batsmen to complete two runs and set out for a third before a nervous Grace took the catch.

Sadly, Grace caught a chill during a club match a day or two later which rapidly turned into a combination of pneumonia and consumption and he died on September 22, just a fortnight after the Test concluded.