

The Australian Trotting Club

After the demise of the Croxton Park Racing Club, there is little trace of any branch of "The Sport of Kings" in Northcote.

And when there was an inkling of a revival, probably very few of the locals probably knew of it.

Nothing of the proposed new venture was ever mentioned by the Collingwood Mercury or Observer weekly newspapers that served as Northcote's "local" and only sharp-eyed observers would have up on the first (and only) advertisement for the sale of shares in the Australian Trotting Club in August, 1880.

Trotting races are recorded as being held in Melbourne from around 1860, but were usually just contests between horses used for pulling carts or carriages rather than the specialised standardbred breed of today.

The sport at the time was very much a poor cousin of thoroughbred racing, even more so than today. There were no trotting meetings *per se* – the most owners and fans could hope for was a match race or an occasional event stage at a "gallops" by way of variety (usually with stake-levels of around 25% - but interest was rising after the import of a number of American standardbreds to Sydney early in 1860.

The Croxton Park club followed the tradition of match races, most of which turned out to be something of a debacle with no vetting of the competitors and some hopelessly one-sided contests.

The office-bearers of the venture suggest that it was a Melbourne-wide consortium.

Law Oldfield was one of Melbourne's largest builders; although he does not seem to have any direct contact with the Northcote area, the company did have branches in later years in Preston of the southern side of the Bell and High Street intersections.

Samuel Willis was a prominent building contractor based in Prahran, William Reynolds was the incumbent Mayor of Hotham (North Melbourne) and owner of the local Meat Market (the building still operating today as an arts and craft market).

K. Wood was never identified by given name, but the family operated the Yorkshire Brewery, one of Melbourne's largest in Wellington Street, Collingwood,

Prendergast operated an employment agency in Bourke-street east and Beaumont a boot manufacturing factory in Flinders-lane west.

James Currie was a partner in Taylor and Currie, operators of a wool scouring and fellmongering plant on the Saltwater (Maribyrnong) River, Alfred Nation was a prominent Melbourne auctioneer, and little is known of John Pritchard.

Dr. Adams

PROSPECTUS

Of the

AUSTRALIAN TROTTING CLUB (Limited)

Capital, £5,000

In 1000 Shares, £5 per Share; £1 on allotment, and

£1 10s to be called up within six months

PROVISIONAL DIRECTORS

Law Oldfield, Esq., J.P., Nicholson-street (Messrs Oldfield and Lindley)

Samuel Willis, Esq., J. P. (Messrs Willis Bros)

William Reynolds, Esq., J.P., Hotham

K. Wood, Esq., (Messrs J. Wood and Sons)

Wm. Watson, Esq., (Messrs Watson and Paterson)

P. J. Prendergast, Esq., Bourke and Elizabeth streets,

J. Beaumont, Esq., (Messrs Beaumont and Spier)

James Currie, Esq., (Messrs Taylor and Currie)

Alfred Nation, Esq., (Messrs Nation and Co.)

Dr. Adams, Northcote

John Pritchard, Esq., Collingwood.

(With power to add to their number).

SOLICITORS

Messrs Duffy and Wilkinson, 69 Chancery-lane

BANKERS

Commercial Bank of Australia

OBJECTS

This club is to be formed for the purpose of purchasing a property at Northcote which is particularly well situated for the purpose of making a trotting course.

Full particulars and prospectus can be obtained from the agents,

STRATFORD STRETTLE & Co.,

45 Bourke-street west.

(The Argus, 5 August, 1880)

Dr. Adams

The other local was William Watson, one of the founders with fellow Scot William Paterson of Watson and Paterson Limited, operators of Preston's first factories, a ham and bacon plant on the corner of Plenty Road and Raglan Street, the company operating until the early 1950s before it was taken over by Otto Wurth Ltd.

Watson was well-known in greyhound coursing circles, one of his charges, *Miss Keller* winning the first Waterloo Cup to be held in Victoria in 1876, but the prospectus is the first indication of any involvement in equine sports.

The Cup was raced over several heats at Sunbury, the dog believed to have been trained on the Pender's Grove Estate when Watson was living next the factory

After the advertised prospectus, there was little mention of the club other than a meeting of shareholders held on November, 1880, but by February of the following, there was at last some activity.

Late in February – just a few days after a notice suggesting “some shares” were still available – The Argus started carrying advertisements :

“Tenders invited for erection of over one mile 7ft high of fencing and one mile one-rail fencing, Northcote, for the Australian Trotting Club. M. Egan, architect, 28 William-street”.

Given that it was a private contract, there was obviously no requirement to reveal the tender details, but presumably the fence was erected, and by July, Mr Egan was issuing further invitations :

“Tenders invited for Forming, Draining and Making Australian Trotting Club Course, Northcote. M. Egan, architect, 28 William-street

“

By this time, the “local” group faced stiff competition with the formation around the same time of the Australian Trotting Association (later changed to the Victorian Trotting Club), which wasted no time in applying to Brighton Council for the use of the well-established Elsternwick Park (initially refused by the Council as they did not believe they had the authority, but later granted after the intervention of the Minister for Lands).

The Australasian suggested “the Association will have to amalgamate with the Northcote club, or look out for another spot for a track. Mr. J. J. Miller talks of forming a track on his private property at Dandenong” –

Miller, one of the directors of the Association and importer of some of the first American standardbreds founded his “Miller's Guide” to Melbourne's spring racing carnival in 1860, the publication still immensely popular today..

Elsternwick wasn't available until April, 1882, but the Association started up in the interim at among-forgotten spot in Brighton, the seemingly oddly-named Boccaccio Park – “a piece of ground near Brighton beach”. There was marketing in play here - Boccaccio-park took its name from a trotting stallion “the Grandest that has ever trod Victorian Soil” who arrived in Victoria from the United States and later stood at his owner's stud farm at Caulfield. His owner, Mr. James A. Roberts was a director of the Australian Trotting Club and the land at Brighton was also part of his holdings.

The venture met with limited success at first “... trotting races will have to be carried out in a very different style from that adopted at Boccaccio-park on Saturday before they come into favour with public”, with The Argus report on the meeting, noting among other things that the starter didn't arrive at the course until a half-hour after the scheduled time for the first race!

Any locals that held out prospects of a revival of Northcote as “the second Flemington” had their hopes sadly and quickly dashed not long after tenders were called for draining and forming the track (interestingly enough, the architect Egan was issuing tenders at the same time for construction works including a grandstand at Elsternwick Park).

The last mention of the Australian Trotting Club came late in September when notice of a meeting to be held on October 12 – there was no follow-up report on the meeting, but obviously by the advertisement (right) a little over a month later, the Club had disbanded and the land sold off

Just went wrong with the venture remains a mystery, but like the *Titanic*, perhaps the problem lay just under the surface.

Several other attempts to excavate around the southern base of the hill met with difficulties, ranging from what was thought to be the first Jewish burial in Melbourne, through to the laying of the cable tram tracks in the early 1180's, redevelopment of the paddock around 1904-6 and even as late as the mid-1950's when the electric tramway along High Street was laid all struck problems with a layer of "honeycombed" granite just below the around at the foot of Rucker's Hill (probably in prehistoric times an active volcano).

Although it was never mentioned in any of the press reports, the later sale of "Plant's Paddock" revealed the approximate location - probably to the south of Barry Street., to the south-west of Rucker's-hill, and extending down to the Merri-creek.

But was there a more ulterior motive?

The list of directors of the failed venture seems impressive (Law Oldfield was Melbourne's largest builder), but the whole trotting project in retrospect has a slightly fishy smell to it and smacks of a plot to lift the local property prices.

"Plant's Paddock" as it was known had provided a rough-and-ready sporting venue for some years, but the concept of expending a considerable amount of capital on a trotting track next door seems doubtful given that at least part of the land had been identified at least six years earlier as part of the proposed railway route to Heidelberg (the alternative route through Preston to Whittlesea was planned for the old Yan Yean tramway, or today's St. George's Road through Northcote".

"The Merri-creek is crossed about five chains south of the old tramway bridge, and from there to the Northcote-road, the railway then following the line of fence, separating the properties of Messrs. Plant and Barry" (The Collingwood Mercury discussing the proposed route for the railway to Heidelberg, 8 May, 1875).

The land was bought by the Railways Department, but just whether the trotting track was ever laid down is uncertain.

Andrew Lemon's "Northcote - The Other Side of the River" suggests the Railways in 1904 disposed of the land for £23,000 "after George Plant sold it, along with its trotting track for £4,000 in the early 1880s" without citing a reference.

From the advertisement placing Plant's property "opposite" the trotting club's land, Lemon's reference to the sale appears incorrect. He also goes on to suggest that most of the streets in the subsequent development assumed the names of current and former councillors - but a quick check of a street directory shows this was George's holding on the eastern side of High-street.

Under Instructions from Geo. Plant, Esq.

22 ACRES LAND

Substantially fenced, on the Plenty-road, with a frontage to Merri Creek, and opposite to the land lately sold by the Australian Trotting Club to the Government for railway station, &c., and would be very valuable if laid out in building allotments, being close to omnibus and intended railway route.

Further particulars can be obtained at the offices of the auctioneers, 45 Bourke-street west, Melbourne.

Seldom, if ever, have such grand properties been submitted to auction, the quality of the soil in each being everything that could be desired, and the improvements good - in some instances, simply perfect.

To trustees, guardians, and others who are desirous of investing safely, the present is an opportunity which should not be lost sight of.

The Argus, 23 November, 1881

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13

At Twelve O'Clock

CLEARING-OUT SALE

At. Mr. George Plant's, NORTHCOTE

Three Miles from Melbourne

STRATFORD STRETTLE & Co. have received instructions from Mr. George Plant (in consequence of his departure for England by the s.s Liguria) to SELL by PUBLIC AUCTION at the yards adjoining the Peacock Hotel, Northcote, on Tuesday, 13th February, commencing at twelve o'clock sharp.

The whole of his stock, consisting of draught mare, 6 yrs old by Nugget (Hon. H. Miller's) stinted to Duke of Edinburgh; draught horse, 4 yrs old; draught colt, 3 yrs old, by Robin Hood, grey horse, 4 yrs old, stands 15 hands 2in., by Steward (imp), a good jumper; grey horse, 4 yrs, fit from brougham or hansom; bay mare, 4 yrs, good to saddle and harness; grey pony, 4 yrs, by Alphonso, fast trotter; bay mare, Dolly, by Snowden, good in any kind of harness, driven by Mr. Plant for the past five yrs, a beautiful goer; 50 head of well-bred cattle, including 25 splendid dairy cows; 4 highly-bred shorthorn pedigree cows; 1200 fat merino wethers; 20 pure Berkshire pigs (Mr. Plant's breed has always held a prominent position in the show-yards and should command the attention of parties desirous of obtaining first-class stock); drays, spring-cart, buggy, light and heavy harness, set of double buggy harness, and sundries.

Also

6 fine building allotments in High, Frederick and Mitchell streets. Omnibuses from town pass door every 15 minutes.

HOTEL to LET after 15th Inst.; PRINCIPALS ONLY

What became then known as the "Railway Reserve" continued to serve as a rough-and-ready recreation ground for nearly twenty years, playing host, strangely enough to the Deaf Mute Society Cricket Club, who for some seasons advertised their matches at "the Railway Reserve, next to Northcote Station". ("Northcote" at the time was today's Merri, our Northcote was officially "Middle Northcote").

"A stranger asked the other day where the Northcote Recreation Ground was, and was answered by one of our celebrities, who stated it was down there, over the railway line near the creek. Is there such a public ground worthy of the name in Northcote?" (Northcote Leader, April 5 1890)

Elsternwick Park

Although the racecourse at Elsternwick Park did not survive for long, it did hold a unique place in Melbourne's sporting history as Victoria's first track dedicated to trotting.

The Australian Trotting Association (later changed to the Victorian Trotting Club) applied in 1881 to Brighton Council for the use of the land at Elsternwick Park, then largely swampland and with little resemblance to the well-preened parklands of today.

The Association was in something of a race with the Australian Trotting Club to establish the first track for trotting, the latter having purchased land in Northcote, the latter's aims target scuttled when the Railways Department compulsorily acquire their land for part of a planned (but never built) line from Spencer Street to Heidelberg.

The application for the land was initially refused by the Council as they did not believe they had the authority, but later granted after the intervention of the Minister for Lands.

This is believed to have been the first more-or-less permanent trotting track in Australia, but squabbles over the rights and wrong of the park being used in part for racing continued for another decade, the Trotting Club being later denied use of the track.

Many commentators lauded the original intention of developing the trotting breed, but the V.T.C. failed to attract sufficient entries to maintain a full programme of trotting races and was forced to stage galloping races and steeplechases, leading to the impression that Elsternwick Park had simply become another proprietary course.

Despite vigorous efforts by the Trotting Club to have the lease extended after it expired in 1891, the committee of management decided that under the Crown grant, the land could be used only as a public park and it refused to allow racing to be continued.

The last meeting was held on 24 September, 1891, after which the Elsternwick Park grandstand was sold to the St. Kilda Cricket Club and re-erected at the St. Kilda Cricket Ground (Junction Oval) where it stood in conjunction with the newer Blackie and Ironmonger stands for more than 50 years.