

The Croxton Park Racing Club

[William Charles Hitchen](#)

“Since the recent changes in the yearly programme of the Victoria Racing Club, and in expectation of the abolition of New Year's Day racing, the establishment of a private racecourse has been mooted, not, it may be presumed, in rivalry with the premier racing club, but in order to provide a sort of miniature Flemington racecourse, at which private matches can come off easily, and lovers of racing can get a "by-day" without too much trouble”.

“The proposition is to enclose the paddocks surrounding the Red House at Northcote, so as to give a mile-and-a-half course fenced and railed, and provide a grand stand, saddling-paddock, &c. We may go so far as to say that the arrangements are in fact made, and that a second racecourse for Melbourne is a thing accomplished”.

“The promoters of this enterprise have obtained the promises of some of the gentlemen holding the highest position in the racing world to officiate as stewards. The names of the handicappers are to be published before the entries for races are made, and if the lovers of the turf give their support, some very pleasant little race meetings may be looked for. The scheme is to be carried out by a company, the secretary of which is Mr. W. C. Hitchen”.

The Argus, Tuesday, 9 February, 1869

"There is one thing, however, on which the success of the thing will mainly depend, that is by making the public understand by the arrangements that it has no connection with the public house".

"The house may stand there with an advantage to the weary traveller and be of some outside use to the visitors, but the further the stand and saddling paddock are removed the better".

"If once it should wear the appearance of a public house meeting that portion of the people who would have materially assisted to make it successful will desert it".

"Beacon", the Melbourne Leader's racing writer, became a keen supporter of the plans, but saw fit to issue a stern and in time, prophetic warning.

Although racing was already controlled by the Victoria Racing Club at Flemington, the club, with the exception of a spring and autumn carnival, only ran a meeting about every third week, leaving small courses, of which there were several dotted around Melbourne to fill in the empty Saturdays.'

Early in 1869, it was announced that a syndicate of "four gentlemen" had formed a company to lease the Red-House and the grounds with a view to establishing a second permanent course in Melbourne with eight to ten meetings per year.

Leader of the syndicate was Mr. William Charles Hitchen, well known in Melbourne as a champion billiards player.

The 1869 directories, compiled some six months beforehand, show Hitchen as "c-o billiards room, Scott's Hotel, 107 Collins-street, East" and with his private residence as Powlett-street, East Melbourne.

The other three members of the syndicate were never revealed – but there is a strong chance that two were William L. Sayer, originally a wholesale fruiterer, and Frederick C. Goyder, well-known as the manager of Melbourne's leading horse and cattle auctioneers and owner of the leading betting rooms.

Hitchen had arrived in Australia in the middle of 1867 with a reputation of being the second player in England "behind the champion, Roberts".

John Roberts (senior) was also well known in the colonies, having visited on a promotional

tour sponsored by the local billiard table manufacture, Henry Alcock in 1864.

His son, John junior also was a champion player and is credited with introducing the variation of snooker into England in 1885 after a visit to India where the game originated amongst British Army officers around ten years earlier - "snooker" originally being a term used for first year military cadets.

Hitchen wasted little time proving his superiority over the locals, giving a 300 point start to the best players in Melbourne, winning his first match 1000 to 813, and then extending the handicap to 400, but still winning 1000 to 791.

Most of the major billiards tournaments were held at the Albion Hotel in Great Bourke Street, the home of the Melbourne racing set and next door to the Cobb and Co. Coach office and stables.

"Great Bourke Street" denotes the hotel as being at the eastern end. In the days before the Yarra was deepened and Melbourne's drainage improved, the area around Elizabeth Street became a swamp in winter, effectively dividing "Great Bourke Street" and "Bourke Street West".

"During winter the streets were chains of waterholes, and the traffic had to be suspended in places - Elizabeth Street and Swanston Street were shallow gullies, with deep and dangerous ruts every twenty yards; Flinders Street was a swamp".

Garryowen, "Chronicles of Early Melbourne"

The Albion was a home of the racing set and the site for the "calling of the card" for betting on most major races, so Hitchen's interest was hardly surprising.

Most other existing tracks were controlled by clubs subservient to the V.R.C and more often than not were on Crown land; hence it was no surprise that the racing writers of the day warmly embraced the syndicate's plan for monthly meetings.

The syndicate formed the Croxton-park Racing Club to control the course and the proposed meetings and adopted the Victoria Racing Club's rules.

The club, and ultimately the surrounding district, took its name from the Croxton-park Jockey Club in England that began in the early 19th century and remained a permanent fixture in the hunting calendar until the First World War.

The English club was credited with holding the first Grand National Hunt Steeplechase in 1846, and supporters hoped to make it a permanent racing fixture but despite their best

efforts, the Grand National never returned to their course.

The "park" at the time extended from the rear of the hotel through to St. George's Road, then little more than above ground pipes and a disused tram track originally built to transport materials to the Yan Yean construction site in the early 1850s.

The new course built by the syndicate extended the track to twelve furlongs, about the same size as Flemington. One 20th century report suggests a special six-furlong run with just one turn to minimise the risk to unseasoned two year olds – in reality, very few horses raced as two-year olds in those days and there was never an event restricted to either two or three-years at Croxton..

Other improvements included a grandstand to seat around 400 people in two compartments, one for members and stewards, and the other for the paying spectators, public and private refreshment rooms, a saddling enclosure for competitors and visitors, and a carriage paddock to accommodate over 100 vehicles.

Tenders for various construction works started to appear in February, the first for 1,000 yards of post-and-rail fencing, and then again for a "race-stand" but Hitchen set to work to build various other sources of income, advertising for sale at various times pure-bred Toulouse geese, sow pigs and dairy cows.

"The improvements and additions now being made at Northcote are such that the old *habitué* of the old Red-house will scarcely recognize it in its new garb. The ugly old red-brick building has given way to a substantial house, and an air of comfort and respectability pervades the spot".

The brief update on the development in The Australasian suggests that contrary to a number of claims that Joseph Goyder painted the Pilgrim-Inn red – and the name came from the brickwork.

Although hundreds of pigeons, possibly thousands met an untimely fate at the shooting meetings, other feathered breeds thrived at the park with Hitchen appearing to something of a connoisseur of poultry, his geese joined later in the year by 15 birds of various species from England, "all of which are really noted prize-takers in some of the chief poultry shows the old country - their cost in England was round 100 guineas".

Hitchen made a strong effort to upgrade the quality of horse appearing, and for his first meeting most of the races were advertised with £50 prize money, a substantial increase over Goyder's offerings.

By comparison, the New Year's Day Meeting at Flemington had two races with 100 and two with 150 sovereigns in prize money.

Grand Opening Day

"The inauguration of Croxton-park Races takes places to-day, and, judging from the numerous entries, the sport will be of a very superior character. Mr. Hitchen, the proprietor of the grounds, has spared neither trouble nor expense in providing everything that will tend to make Croxton-park one of the most popular places of resort in the colony. A new stand has been erected, and all the appurtenances essential to a first-class racecourse have been provided".

The day was cold and wet but according to The Australasian ...

"some 300 people paid their four shillings for a seat in the stands, another 1,500 paid a shilling to stand on the unfinished lawns, and about 500 of the *hoi polloi* preferred a view of the sport gratis from the roadway".

Northcote's population around the time numbered less than six hundred, and with the total crowd estimated at around 2,500, the locals must have feasted on the sight of the carriages, omnibuses, jigs and coaches travelling the rough bullock tracks and struggling up Rucker's Hill.

And it was not only the numbers. The syndicate for the early meetings at Croxton managed to attract patronage from some of the leading civic and sporting circles in Melbourne. Typically of officials attending each meeting were those listed for the Queen's Birthday meeting in 1870 :

"Patron; His Excellency the Right Hon. the Viscount Canterbury, K.C.B., Stewards Major-General Sir T. Chute, Colonel Page, Major Baker, Dr. L. O. Patterson, Captain Standish, Mr. R. Power, Mr. Hurtle Fisher, Mr. G. Watson. Starter - Mr. G. Watson.. Judge - Mr. John Cleeland. Clerk of the Course - Mr. R. Hamilton"

The Viscount Canterbury was the Governor of Victoria, appointed 1866. Christened originally John Henry Thomas Manners-Sutton, he became the third Viscount Canterbury on the death of his elder brother in 1869.

Most of the lesser visitors from Melbourne and Fitzroy also had the "privilege" of passing through and paying at a toll gate on the Merri Creek which operated until 1878

.After the relative success of the first, "Beacon" lamented that no other meeting had been scheduled and managed a subtle reference to Hitchen's prowess at billiards.

"What is the use of having such a convenient little spot if we do not make use of it? Mr. Hitchen must keep the ball rolling as he has been accustomed to do all his life".

There was a break of about six weeks until the next race meeting on July 10, but the syndicate kept the grounds busy, reviving the pedestrian meetings of days gone by, and more significantly, inaugurating the Croxton-park Shooting Club.

Again pigeon-shooting matches and open competitions became a regular events, and the Club became so well-respected that the "Croxton-park Rules" became the *de facto* standard across Melbourne and for most intercolonial matches.

The Attack of the Velocipedes

For twelve months or more, both the sporting section and what we may think of today as "lifestyle" columns of Melbourne's papers had carried stories from London and Paris of the latest craze sweeping Europe, the velocipede.

Lest anyone rushes for the insect repellent, "velocipede" - literally, "swiftness of foot" - was the earlier name given to today's bicycle.

The first contraptions came where crude wooden affairs with pedals on the front wheels, the rather more elegant and faster "penny farthing" style not being introduced until 1877.

Europeans had adopted the velocipede with a passion; the English for social recreation, and the French for racing.

The first appearance of the new contraption was to be at an athletics meeting organised by the Melbourne Cricket Club for July 1869, "that is, if three of these contraptions can be brought together on the occasion" according to the *Melbourne Leader*.

Hitchen wasted little time in organising the velocipedes at Croxton-park for his second meeting in conjunction with the normal racing of an equine nature

But to what must have been Hitchen's dismay, rain washed out the original program at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the M.C.C. rescheduled it on the same day as the meeting at Croxton.

The M.C.C. in announcing the rescheduling claimed that the club had considered the impact on other scheduled events but reluctantly were forced to go ahead, but in the same breath announced an increase £5 to £25 in prize money for their race.

Despite the club's cries of innocence, *The Australasian* placed the blame firmly on the M.C.C. for the clash and "the latest mania of the change-loving Parisians",

The *Melbourne Leader* also chimed in noting the crowd at Croxton-park was a little over 1,000 and suggested that "the competition was

not of biped versus quadruped, but simple curiosity in the new iron steeds" and at the same time "the velocipede display, it must be said, was on the whole disappointing".

These early velocipede races were an odd mixture of bicycles and tricycles with the machines being given names by which the "starters" were known rather than those of their riders.

What was even odder is that there were usually separate heats for each model, but with the two variations being combined for the final.

If the meeting at the M.C.G. struggled to find the new machines and those who had actually mastered the art of riding them, then Croxton battled even more so,

The bicycle heat at Croxton-park attracted just three entries and "although owners managed to keep their seats the only one who succeeded at going at any speed was the rider of the one called Eureka".

The *Daily Telegraph* also noted the tricycle heat was a walkover:

"... for an unwieldy machine called *Tommy Dodd* ... being of such a size that once first, it would have been almost impossible for another tricycle to pass him on the Croxton track and even a bicycle would have had considerable difficulty".

Perhaps it was the Parisian influence that eventually won out, the Telegraph suggesting that the winning bicycle built and ridden by Mr. Robson of Ballarat was "noticeably the most elegant machine of those competing".

The athletic carnival attracted a crowd at the M.C.G. estimated at between 10,000 and 12,000.

Their velocipede event turned out to be another odd combination of bicycles and tricycles, a series of mixed heats being run and the three top contenders from each style matched in the final.

Competitors on two wheels "despite the considerable amount of balancing skill required to guide them" took out the first two prizes.

The Croxton meeting attracted the usual dignitaries, but also problems inherent with gatherings of all sorts where there was a gambling element, The Argus noting :

"Detective Mackay pounced upon two worthies at the Croxton-park races on Saturday, who were endeavouring to while away the time and win a little money between the events on the card. A man named Charles Miller was caught at three-card *monté*, but as this was his first appearance before the Court, and he promised faithfully not to offend again, he was cautioned and let off. Christopher Mall affected a game called "under and over." As he was an old offender, the Bench

took no notice of his promises of amendment for the future, and sent him to gaol for seven days”.

Race-days at Croxton-park continued along the lines of the planned schedule of eight to ten meetings per year, or around every six weeks, the Saturdays in-between liberally interspersed with all manner of pedestrian competitions, wrestling and pigeon-shooting.

The Racing Club may not have been an great success for its promoters, but it have a side-benefit for local residents with real estate advertisements latching onto the course as a new landmark.

Properties previously listed as "on the outskirts of Northcote" suddenly were being designated as "opposite" or "adjoining" Croxton-park", although by stark contrast, Hitchen in the 1870 Sands and MacDougall Directory is listed as under "Croxton-park Hotel, South Preston".

Perhaps it was coincidental, but perhaps the return of the sport also had another brief return for the district :

“The imported thoroughbred horse Talk o' the Hill, just arrived from Adelaide, is at pre- sent quartered at Messrs. Goyder and Co.'s bazaar. A large number of gentlemen interested in horse breeding paid a visit to these stables yesterday, for the purpose of seeing the horse, whose price in England as a yearling was £1,700. Talk o' the Hill is a handsome rich bay horse, standing about 16 hands 2 inches high, and of great power. He only appeared once in public, when, through an accident, he went lame. This horse is to be stationed for the ensuing season near Croxton park”.

Undaunted by a few initial setbacks, Hitchen continued to promote the course, introducing trotting races as regular parts of the program and by definition, his hotel, but some of his innovations and a lack of control of the events attracted criticism.

Despite “Beacon's” promotion of the venture, his co-writer “Falcon” usually took a more objective view, previewing one meeting with criticism of the weights arrangements, the introduction of a “selling” race, and the cost of early nominations as opposed to actual acceptance fees.

His objections reached a peak after a meeting on August 21.

Given there had no meetings in Melbourne for nearly a month, the Croxton-park Club at short notice arranged a series of cross-country events.

Perhaps it was the limited preparation time, but the organisers for some reason opted not to use the usual system of flags hammered into the ground to mark out the course, instead

“McMillan and Another v. Hitchen
NOTICE is hereby given, that the Sheriff of the colony
of Victoria will cause to be SOLD by PUBLIC AUCTION,
at eleven o'clock a.m. on Tuesday, the 5th, land,
at Croxton-park Hotel, South Preston.
Furniture and effects, and also the stock-in-trade of a publican, the property of the above defendant.”

tying trips of ribbon streamers to the branches of trees, much to the indignation of “Falcon” :

“What rider is supposed to be looking up in a tree for his directions when he is riding in a steeplechase?”

"Pickles and nonsense! We object to this primitive custom being resorted to again, and if Croxton-park is to be a model racecourse, these mistakes cannot be allowed to occur. If it was Essendon or Dandenong, perhaps it can be excused!"

Perhaps “Falcon” was right, and the syndicate’s hopes for a model racecourse were already in strife.

The combination of the remoteness from “town” and some unfortunate weather had the management of the hotel in financial trouble.

The Insolvency Act allowed an insolvent person to apply to a Judge of the Supreme Court for their estate to be sequestrated (or legally seized) for the benefit of his or her creditors.

The judge then appointed an officer of the Court of Insolvency (McMillan in this case) as an official assignee to administer the estate with the power to call in all outstanding debts to the estate and to dispose of the assets.

Hitchen declared himself insolvent, the hearing on July 8, 1870 revealing his liabilities £223 and assets of £84.

Within days, the hotel was being advertised along with contents and the stock-in-trade of a publican (hopefully potential purchasers managed to find Croxton Park in South Preston – the 1870 Sands and McDougall directory also listed the hotel there rather than Northcote).

Hitchen’s activities over the next few months are a little unclear.

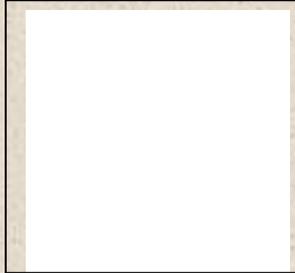
Under the provisions of the Act, when the estate was wound up, the insolvent could apply to the court for a certificate of discharge if he or she had abided by the conditions of the Act and there was no objection by creditors.

Hitchen’s application was rejected, although on what grounds or on whose complaint is not clear.

The rejection seems to have little impact – by early November, Hitchen had taken over as the publican at the Victoria Hotel in St. Kilda, where he boasted "a magnificent billiards room, complete privacy, lessons by appointment".

Although the Croxton Park and the contents thereof appear to have been sold, it seemed the object of Hitchen's other pride and joy were not, the first mention of his name at the Victoria Hotel being advertisements for an auction of :

"A large quantity of purebred imported fowls; stock imported by the celebrated breeder and importer W. Hitchen, comprising true-bred crossings of Brahmans, Dorkings, Cochins, &c., likewise sporting dogs and milch cows &c."



The Brahma chicken is an Asiatic breed of chicken. Although the name "Brahma" comes from the river Brahmaputra in India, it is believed the Brahma Chicken was created in the United States from large feather legged birds known as Shanghais (now known as Cochins), which were imported from China to New York in 1846.

Within a week of moving to the Victoria Hotel, Hitchen found trouble of a different nature when the horse of a vehicle he was driving bolted in Chapel-street, Prahran, and came in contact with a buggy whose driver was thrown out upon his head, the accident leaving him senseless for some hours.

Hitchen was arrested, but the case was dismissed when the injured party, a Mr. W. Cottrell later declined to press charges, suggesting his own horse had been partly at fault and that Hitchen had done all he could to control his horse.

Despite his insolvency and move to a new hotel, Hitchen continued as the secretary of the Racing Club – the regular advertisements for tenders for refreshment booths (later to be sold at auction at Kirk's Bazaar) at the course and for entries at upcoming meetings confirm he remained as secretary of the Racing Club.

(That he was back in business so quickly of being insolvent may seem strange; in all probability he was simply the licensee of the Victoria with no proprietary interest in the freehold, by far the most common business in the 19th century.

Ahead of a planned November meeting, Hitchen announced that he would add 150 sovereigns to a purse if the Club could attract 20 nominations at 10 sovereigns for a mile and a half race, but was forced to withdraw the offer and hold a less pretentious meeting a fortnight later when the entries did not arrive.

The high cost of nominations was criticised in the press, The Argus noting that if the twenty nominations were received, the club was being outlaying less than £30 in prize money.

By this time, the Club had run five meetings, and with an outlay of around 150 guineas in prize money for each, probably only the first event had made money for the syndicate.

"Beacon", whilst noting "a fine days sport including cab fares from town could be had for ten shillings" rued that :

"Mr. Hitchen is working at a loss. This all must regret to hear, and it will probably will shut the mouths of the grumblers who say that a shilling admission and four more for the stand is an extortion".

The Christmas meeting of 1870 saw the first of those controversies which seem to go hand-in-hand with racing.

The first race, a Maiden Plate, attracted just two entries, "Pablo Fanquo" and "Moonbeam".

Just after passing the stand, Pablo Fanquo was observed by many observers as cutting inside a marker post; but the jockey did not pull up in accordance with the rules, and kept his advantage to the winning post.

The runner-up and thus last placegetter, Moonbeam's connections entered a protest which was immediately upheld – but when the jockey of Moonbeam weighed in, he was "short a pound" and in line with the rules and asked for his bridle.

An "unknown person" handed him the heavy bridle of the disqualified Pablo Fanquo The jockey was declared "correct weight", but when he stepped off the scale, the trainer of Pablo Fanquo, realising the mistake, entered a protest against the rider of Moonbeam for weighing with the wrong bridle.

After hearing the evidence of both parties, the stewards appear to implement the "too-hard basket" rule and declared the Plate a "no race" and fined the jockey of Pablo Fanquo £1 for not pulling up when he had gone inside the marking post.

Undeterred, the owner of Moonbeam sent his six-year old gelding back out in the following race which he duly won!

The Club struggled onwards, most meetings failing to attract the level of entries and the patronage to turn a profit.

Perhaps the most successful meeting was on the Queen's Birthday holiday in May, 1870, when a bright autumn day "stand and saddling paddock well-patronised and the other parts of the course fairly attended – The Argus adding "... the industrious gentlemen who travel from one racecourse to another with three cards or three thimbles and one small pea were conspicuous in their absence, and not even an under-or-over man was to be seen".

The New Year's Day meeting of 1871 saw another controversy, this time of a highly unusual nature.

The first race was a Maiden Plate, "open to all horses who have not won an advertised race".

The winner was Mr. Homer's "Warrior", but a protest was lodged that the horse had in fact won a race a fortnight beforehand – it wasn't the win that was in question, rather whether the race was "advertised".

"The stewards of the Croxton-park race meeting met at Kirk's Bazaar yesterday, and heard all the evidence brought before them with respect to the protest against Warrior being declared the winner of the Maiden Plate. The only evidence given of the publication of the race previously won by Warrior at Cranbourne was that bills had been posted on trees throughout the district. As the stewards did not consider this constituted advertising; they dismissed the protest".

Five more meetings came and went in 1871 without anything of great import, the most successful on August 5, the four jumps races

being augmented with the novelty of a trotting race. There were just four starters, two driven and two ridden as per the custom of the time, one of each pair falling to complete the four-mile course.

"The greatest draw back to the enjoyment of a day's steeple chasing on this course is the extremely dangerous description of hurdle in front of the stand. Several of the horses and riders ran great risks of being seriously injured at this leap. This was so evident on Saturday that the proprietors of the course expressed their intention of having a different kind of hurdle at the next races".

"The same difficulty was experienced in getting away from the course as on the last race meeting. The roadway was completely blocked up, so that it was impossible for a considerable time to move one way or another. When races were first held at Croxton-park, the cabmen were kept in check by the police, but now there seems to be not the slightest attempt to maintain order. The farmers and market-gardeners, who have a long way to go, naturally enough complain at being detained for over an hour in passing the Croxton-park gates".

Following another meeting in September, the October fixture was run under the auspices of the Victorian Hunt Club, and featured five races (open to registered members of hunt clubs) plus a walking match, a match race, and a real novelty as advertisements for entries revealed :

"The Cheroot Race. Welter handicap of 15 sovs. Entrance, 1 sov. To be ridden by members or honorary members of any hunt club. Each horse to jump a flight of hurdles before starting (allowed three trials), the winner to bring his cigar alight to scale. Distance, once round the course".

The Argus racing writer thought little of the novelty "... to one at all practised, it is not a very difficult thing".

The next meeting was scheduled for Boxing Day, 1872, and although there was nothing announced in the general press, Hitchen was no longer secretary of the Croxton-park club.

The racing venture (although seemingly not the hotel itself) passed into the hands of Messrs John Kerr and W. M. Sayers.

Of Kerr, little is known. Sayer, however, was previously noted secretary of the Victorian Amateur Turf Club and assumed the same role at Croxton with entries being taken at his Prince of Wales Hotel, Bourke Street.

(Hitchen was also noted later as publican at the Prince of Wales, suggesting that Sayer may well have of been one of the other "three gentlemen" involved in the lease of Croxton-park.

The pair declared they would run six meetings per year at the Park and at the same time introduced the concept of an annual ticket at two guineas allowing admission at the meetings and "other entertainments that are planned".

Sayer was also secretary of the Croxton Park Shooting Club and regularly featured amongst the winners of the sweepstakes.

Three meetings were held under Sayer's secretaryship, the first on Boxing Day causing one of the sensational incidents of the turf, the latter two rather less spectacular.

Sayer's last meeting smacked of desperation – the June 15, 1872 events featuring a trotting race for which were entered two ponies "under 13 hands", who under conditions of the race "were to carry (or pull) one stone less and to receive 900 yards start.

At last some fine weather, and Croxton Park hosted a crowd of 1200 to 1300 – one of the ponies did not arrive, the other, "Crotty" pulled out "... the little pony having given up the contest after going a little over half of the distance" of four miles".

This was to be the last under the stewardship of Sayer and his apparently silent partner Kerr.

The following week, The Australasian revealed that Sayer was stepping down as secretary, quoting increased business at his Prince of Wales as the sole reason, while glossing over the obvious, suggesting that Croxton-park was still a viable concern "and to an energetic man with a knowledge of racing matters, I know of no better speculation, for there can be no doubt that under proper management, the venture would prove successful".

A second Winter Meeting had been scheduled for July 27, and a real surprise came when the entries were advertised under the name of Frederick C. Goyder.

Given his intense involvement in many ventures revolving around the racing scene, Frederick's involvement in what proved to be the last fling at Croxton-park is probably no great surprise, but it raises at least three questions that sadly remain unanswered :

- Was F. C. related to Joseph/Josiah?
- Was he one of the unnamed syndicate members of 1869 when the club was formed?, and
- Did the Goyder family, either through Joseph or Frederick actually own the Croxton-park site leased by the Racing Club.

Regardless of the answer(s), Goyder did manage, with several badly-timed but unavoidable interruptions through weather, to eventually stage perhaps the most bizarre

promotion ever of a race meeting in Melbourne, or perhaps anywhere in the world!

The Tale (or Tail) of a Hairless Horse

Many, many decades before the introduction of moving pictures and yet more before any of the electronic media starting with the introduction of radio in the 1920's, virtually all of the entertainments were "live" – variety shows, plays, pantomimes, concerts, amateur and professional and a range of other diversions ranging from the mundane to the somewhat bizarre.

"The Hairless Horse – Caoutchouc"
"108 Bourke Street
"Opposite the Theatre Royal"

"This beautiful and curious equine animal is now on exhibition at 190 Bourke-street east, opposite Theatre Royal. His skin is a beautiful black, totally devoid of hair. Ladies can stroke him without soiling the most delicate kid glove. To children he is a peculiarly welcome sight and no fond parents will ever regret giving their little ones a Bight of Caoutchouc. Opposite Theatre Royal. Admission-with photograph of horse - 1s., children 6d".

Race-callers of today would love the name, but despite it appearing to be an almost random jumble of letters, the better dictionaries list the word as an 18th century French word originally derived from Spanish and an alternative for "latex", "rubber", or "india-rubber", in particular that derived from the botanical genus *Hevea* of *Ficus* – the pronunciation is roughly "koochak".

The Theatre Royal was Melbourne's leading theatre and just what the attractions were at 108 Bourke Street other than the "hairless horse" remains unknown.

But the venue was not too far from both Goyder's hotel and the livestock saleyards he operated in conjunction with a Mr. McCaughey (the hotel at 35 Bourke Street, and the yards believed to have been on the corner of Bourke and what is now Exhibition Street.

The existence of this wonder of nature was first revealed to the general public by the Illustrated Australian News of July 16

The News was published as equally for readers in the "olde country" as locally and never hesitated to feature an antipodean marvel of either natural or man-made origin.

The News illustrations were based on woodcuts, and the accompanying article on Caoutchouc suggested he had been captured by stockmen near the Balonne River in

Queensland after they tried to isolate him from a mob of wild horses for nearly six months.

The story was perhaps "sexed-up" a little (to use a modern term) with the News suggesting that the locality also was home "to a tribe of hairless men".

According to the News, our hero was a six-year old gelding with a beautiful glossy black coat "as if cast from india-rubber", hence the horse's new name – just how "wild" he may have been is perhaps open to question given that he was gelded, hardly a natural occurrence amongst wild horses.

Given the standards of journalism of the time (and perhaps ever more), the Illustrated News went on to quote an unnamed Sydney "professor" who in one sentence managed to confirm that the horse "had by some natural oddity had not a single capillary" while at the same time reinforcing the idea of the hairless men of the Balonne River region.

The coincidence of a "freak" horse and an upcoming meeting at Croxton-park presented a unique marketing opportunity.

After the original meeting was postponed and on the eve of the rescheduled events, The Argus carried a brief but prominent report noting Caoutchouc appearing on a private trial at Croxton-park in preparation for "his racing debut" the following day.

That his appearance was quite as "private" as The Argus suggested seems unlikely given Goyder's penchant for publicity regardless of the cost, but "he jumps in fine style" was perhaps somewhat tempered by a later comment "... if he is as comical in the race as in his private trial, he will furnish amusement enough to repay a visit to the course".

By this time, Goyder's modest advertisements suggested "the hairless horse will run in the hurdle race" and the Winter Meeting finally took place after three postponements on August 17.

It must be said that being a capacity to jump is a necessary asset for a horse entered in a hurdle race, regardless of hair length, but another useful talent is to be able to run to the next obstacle and repeat the feat.

Sadly, our equine hero seems to have lacked the latter.

The Australasian after noting a beautifully fine day noted "the celebrated Caoutchouc as the centre of attention" in a hurdle that boasted just four starters, but perhaps provided a more realistic assessment of both his racing ability and pedigree "... the little fellow could not gallop a yard, but like all stock horses gets over hurdles with the greatest of ease".

The report (perhaps exaggerating a little) suggested the much publicized horse was “three quarters of a mile behind the others after the first round” before his jockey mercifully pulled the pin and retired from the contest.

Although Caoutchouc never quite made it into racing history, his brief moments of fame resulted an unknown artist producing a wood engraving of him and his groom dated July 16 1872 and still held in the vaults of the State Library of Victoria.



The meeting threw up little else of interest other than a later case in East Collingwood Court where Samuel Waldock, the master of the Flemington Hounds was summoned for assaulting Mr. W. Veach, the starter at the meeting, after an argument over Veach's handling of the start of the Flying Handicap. Veach arrived at the Court too late to give evidence and was fined 10/- with 20/- costs.

There were further meetings in October and late in December, the latter poorly patronised but producing one of the sensations of the time.

The Croxton-park Case

The meeting on December 28, 1872 had serious repercussions for one bookmaker in what became known to the public as "The Croxton-park Case"

Croxton-park Racing Club stewards met some three weeks later at Goyder's Hotel (a.k.a the Victoria Hotel) in Bourke Street to bring a charge against a prominent bookie, J. B. Wallis "for attempting to bribe the jockey of *Whitefoot* to "blue" the last heat of the trotting race".

Another bookmaker, James J. Miller, the referee at the centre of a walking controversy at Croxton in 1866, and William Hammersley, then the sporting editor of *The Argus*, had obtained a statement to that effect in somewhat doubtful circumstances from a jockey, Leonard Grimwood.

As well as being a prominent journalist, Hammersley was well known to the Victorian public as one of the four men who drew up the first rules for Australian football in 1859 and as a leading cricketer in the 1860s.

Grimwood's father, Thomas, claimed Wallis that had approached his son while he was weighing out for the race, and while assisting him to put lead in the saddlebag, had offered him £50 to "blue" the race.

Thomas Grimwood was well known at Croxton-park, being a regular competitor in shooting matches as well as prominent Collingwood publican, having at one stage hosted the Victoria Hotel in Hoddle Street, Collingwood, "home of a First Class English Skittle Alley". He was also a prominent member of the Licensed Victuallers' Association of Victoria and served as President on occasions.

Wallis denied the claim, saying the race was a walkover for another horse he had already backed; that Miller and Hammersley had gotten Grimwood drunk before he made the statement and further alleged that Miller had offered to set Grimwood up as a bookmaker with backing of £500 if he concocted the charge.

However, he refused to repeat the claims under oath and the stewards ultimately ruled that the

evidence of other witnesses corroborated that of Grimwood and "warned off" Wallis from Croxton-park for life.

The Victorian Tattersall's Club, the controlling body for bookmakers, also heard the charges and confirmed the steward's decision on a life suspension, but the Victorian Racing Club's delay in reviewing the case, holding their enquiry in the absence of the press, and their ultimate two-year suspension.

The *Argus* wasted little space in expressing their opinion of Wallis, describing him as 'notorious' and, adding, after he had been suspended by the Croxton stewards and the Tatts Club, but not by the controlling body, the Victorian Racing Club delayed their action and then held their inquiry after banning members of the press :

"It is not so long since the Victoria Racing Club Bill was before the Legislature but that people can recall the high sounding promises that were made about the good the bill would enable the club to do in the way of purifying the turf. A little performance now would not be out of place ... the authorities of the Racing Club should make an example or two without delay. We would suggest that they might appropriately commence with Mr. JOHN B. WALLIS".

The V.R.C banned Wallis for two years, but most of the major country clubs, Ballarat, Bendigo and Wangaratta included, along with the Hobart and Launceston clubs banned Wallis from "entering horses, riding or running a betting book at an advertised meeting" for life.

Sydney's Australian Jockey Club wilted, opting for a three year ban.

Later *The Argus* was forced to defend Hammersley's role in collecting the statement from Grimwood, and two or three months later *The Australasian* was forced to print a retraction after it referred to "an alleged attempt by one of the leading men of the turf to get Leonard Grimwood out of the way".

Grimwood later became the publican at a city hotel called the Rose, Shamrock and Thistle (not be confused with our local Rose, Thistle and Shamrock), which he advertised as the head-quarters of the Metropolitan Pigeon Shooting Club, the organization originally founded at the Peacock Inn as well as "well-trained pointers and best descriptions of double-barrelled guns".

Although they emerged unscathed from "The Croxton-Park Case", the Grimwood family don't seem to have been the innocent bystanders that they may have appeared.

The name of Thomas Grimwood appeared incidentally in a couple of murky betting scandals, but Leonard went one better when he was "warned off" for life from W. S. Cox's Kensington-park course; effectively the

replacement in the local racing scene after the demise of Croxton-park.

April, 1877 saw the younger Grimwood found guilty by the Kensington-park stewards of colluding with a strapper to remove lead from his saddle-bag after he weighed out for a race where he was riding a "hot" favourite – believing if that he could not get the horse beaten "in the run", it would weigh-in under-weight and would automatically be disqualified anyway.

The Beginning of the End

The controversy dominated the press of the day for most of the three weeks leading up to the scheduled meeting on February 8.

Again, the meeting promised much, but for the promoters returned little, As The Argus noted :

"An excellent programme was issued by the proprietors of this course for an afternoon's sport on Saturday, but though the fields were large and the -weather all that could be desired, the attendance was very poor. The course was in bad condition, being so rough that in many places it was extremely dangerous to take a horse over at speed. Before another race meeting takes place the barrows should be freely used, or some bad accidents will be likely to happen".

Was it related? Just a paragraph above the report on the meeting, The Argus reported the death the previous day of John Budd, aged 13, after having been thrown from a horse at Croxton-park Races and being severely injured about the head.

Certainly by this stage, the Croxton-Park venture was providing some advantages to the scattered residents around the course.

While obviously having to put up with the inconvenience of the crowds, albeit modest churning up High Street, the venue provided estate and land agents with a focal point for the sub-division of land, the whereabouts of which were previously unknown, but became "adjoining", "opposite" or "near" Croxton-Park.

April, 1873 saw another meeting, still somewhat smothered by the ongoing commentary and letters to and from over Wallis's disqualification.

The final meeting came

21 June twice postponed Three barmaids "from Brown's Terminus Hotel", on the Melbourne side of the bridge over the Merri Creek and stall standing today, the area up to Rushall Crescent at that time considered part of Northcote.

Last 12 July, 1873 three races, but a match race between Charlie and Pretty Boy for \$100 Richest, but given Charlie received 250 yards

But

he could have beaten his opponent without this advantage the lore did not excite much interest

was one of the most melancholy affairs it has been seen at **Croxton park** for many a day, and that is saying a good deal

By 1871, the Croxton-park Hotel had changed hands, the new licensee being a Mr. Turpey, whilst Hitchen had moved again, this time became the publican at the Sir Robert Peel Hotel in Collingwood.

The race meetings continued, and early the following year, Turpey found himself in trouble after three people were charged with selling liquor without a license at the Boxing Day meeting.

The charges were brought by Sergeant Innes, who in court described how he and George Plant had entered three booths under the grandstand, Plant shouting for both, and after being served, demanding to know what license had been issued.

In defence, Mrs Julia Carroll claimed she had bid for the lease of the booths at a public auction at Kirk's Bazaar, a marketplace in Bourke Street that acted as the main centre for the sale of horses and cattle. (Press advertisements confirm the booths were regularly sold on the Tuesday and Wednesday prior to a meeting).

Carroll claimed that Turpey had told those bidding that no licence was needed, as the booths were part of the Croxton-park.

Turpey told the court he always leased the booths under those conditions, but the bench ruled he could not authorise the sales as the stewards (for whom half of the grandstand was reserved) were in control of the meeting.

Carroll was fined five guineas, but an accompanying note to the court proceedings indicates that there may have been a little bitterness between the two publicans.

After the hearing was concluded, an "information" (effectively a complaint brought by a member of the public) against Plant for trading on Sunday was dismissed after Plant paid 10/ into the poor box.

The court report didn't suggest who had made the complaint, but given the timing, perhaps Turpey had decided to return Plant's "favours".

And Final Collapse

Meetings continued on a regular basis in the winter of 1872, but the reports of the proceedings suggested poor crowds despite some novel events to help boost attendances.

The Australasian warned that the venture was about to collapse, criticising the quality of the horses (most of which came from the local

district), the cost of admission and the inadequate transport, although the latter was obviously beyond the syndicate's control.

Perhaps as a precursor to similar problems that saw the park's activities severely restricted some 50 years later, *The Australasian* also deplored the behaviour of some parts of the crowd ...

"... the stand is not fit for ladies, their ears are polluted by vile and obscene language drifting up from the betting ring below".

To make matters worse, the struggling syndicate was hit with one of Melbourne's wettest winters on record in 1872, the June meeting being postponed on no less than three consecutive Saturdays before finally taking place with just a two-horse trotting match, a steeple, a hurdle and a hack race organised amongst the few spectators in attendance.

The July 12 meeting was to be the last.

In August, advertisements appeared in daily newspapers giving preliminary notice of the sale of 33 acres of what the auctioneers, Stubbs and Co, called "the remainder of the well-known Croxton-park Estate".

The Fire Sale

The Croxton-park Racing Club venture collapsed after the second winter meeting on July 12, 1873, described by *The Australasian's* reporter as "one of the worst day's sport ever witnessed".

Auction Sale

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26

Last Public Sale of the Remainder of
GOVERNMENT SUB.ALLOTMENT No 123

Parish Jika Jika, Northcote

Forming Portion of

CROXTON-PARK RACECOURSE

To the Whole of the Inhabitants of Northcote,
Heidelberg, Ivanhoe, Merri and Darebin Creeks,
Preston and Brunswick.

Stubbs and Co. are instructed by the Hon. W.
Highett, M.L.C., agent for the mortgagee, to SELL by
PUBLIC AUCTION, at their rooms, 81 Collins Street
on Thursday, the 25th day of September, at twelve
o'clock precisely.

The remaining portion of the above as judiciously
laid out by Mr. Surveyor Adair, viz-

Lot 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20A
respectively, from 66ft. frontage to the main
road by about 170ft. in depth.

Good business stands for blacksmiths,
wheelwrights, grocers, retail ironmongers, butchers,
bakers, &c.

Lot 9A - 14a. 2r. 32p.

Lot 10A - 14a. 2r. 32p

Terms - 25 per cent. cash deposit and the residue at 6

and 12 months, bearing 7 per cent.
Titles Under the Land Statute

The North Melbourne Advertiser, September 24, 1873

Daily newspapers reported the results on the following Saturday :

Northcote - Croxton-park - 603ft frontage to Whittlesea road, by 185 in depth 19 to 21s per foot, £664 10s, adjoining at £32 5s per acre, £474; adjoining at £36 per acre, £529 4s.

The hotel itself was offered for lease in December, the notices suggesting "6, 20 or 44 acres also available".

A Small Place In History?

The Croxton-park venture was never to make an impact on the rich history of the Australian turf, but just perhaps it did have a minor impact on the "Sport of Kings".

"... Caulfield may soon be our only suburban racecourse ... the fixings on the Croxton-park course are for sale and the trustees of Caulfield it is said will buy them. A grandstand is badly needed on the "heath".

South Bourke Standard, June 20, 1872

Caulfield opened as a small suburban course in 1859, then built on low lying sand hills and scrubland, immediately earning today's nickname of "the heath".

The course hosted a few meetings, but was used more regularly by the Melbourne Hunt Club, and but for their intervention, the racecourse of today may never have survived..

In 1861, a local resident with plans to convert the site into a cemetery raised a petition to revoke a Government order zoning the land for racing and after approaches from the proprietors, the Hunt Club hastily organised a racing program to help quell the revolt.

Caulfield remained a relatively minor part of the racing scene until 1876, when the proprietors were approached by representatives of the newly formed Victorian Amateur Turf Club with a plan for the club to take over the course.

Newminster won the first Caulfield Cup, then run in the autumn, in 1879, but if ever asked to nominate the Caulfield Cup winner of 1881, be wary!

Blue Ribbon won the autumn event, but afterwards the V.A.T.C. decided to make their hallmark race a spring carnival, and another Caulfield Cup was run and won in October by Master Avenel.

Enter the Usurper

The collapse of Croxton-park left a hole in the racing calendar – the V.R.C. did little to upgrade the number of meetings under their patronage, BUT, perhaps as always, where there was an opportunity, there was a newcomer on the block, and led by an ultimately far more significant figure than Hitchen at Croxton.

The “W. C. Hitchen Plate” never ever happened but the W. S. Cox Plate has become, perhaps, depending on whether one is a “traditionalist”, supporting the two-miles/3200 metres of the Melbourne Cup or the helter-skelter of the latter’s Moonee Valley event.

KENSINGTON PARK RACES.

The opening race meeting of this suburban racecourse passed off very pleasantly on Saturday afternoon Owing to its being so conveniently situated and the fine weather, there was a very good attendance. It was estimated that the number of those present must have considerably exceeded 2,000. The course is very pleasantly situated at the nearest point of the high bank on the north of the North Melbourne swamp. It is barely half a mile from the western limit of Hotham and only a few hundred yards from the junction of the Echuca and Melbourne railway lines, the course being between the two lines. The course is small in extent being under a mile, but there are no sharp, curves in it. The land is very undulating and rises to the centre of the course, thus affording the spectators an excellent view of the racing. The run-in is up a steep incline”.

“The arrangements of the course have been very well planned and when finished this will be a moat complete little racecourse It is immensely superior to Croxton Park as the visitors can get to the course by railway and thus avoid the dust, while it is such a very short distance from town that it is sure to become a very favourite resort with the public. The great drawback on Saturday was the intense heat and the want of any shelter from the sun s rays, but by the next meeting, no doubt the stand will be roofed in when the races can be viewed with comfort”.

Dynon Road skirted the northernmost edge of the “North Melbourne swamp”, generally known as The Lagoon before it was drained an

Cox certainly didn't let the grass grow under his feet.

Football matches between Melbourne and Carlton were the huge drawcard over the winter season, attracting crowds of up to 15,000.

The concept of admission charges was widely unpopular - players were (technically)

amateurs, provided their own gear and paid subscriptions for the occasional new football - so the clubs needed little in the way if finance.

The one exception was a game played between the great rivals, usually the deciding match of three each season.

In 1875, the Carlton and Melbourne match for charity came on August 21 and was eventually played on the usual ground outside the Metropolitan Ground, now the M.C.G.

But a week before the match, Cox cheekily suggested the two teams play at his racecourse at Kensington, with an admission charge and half the proceeds to be retained by him.

No great surprise that the offer was rejected out of hand!

Kensington-park continued as the alternative racing venue to Flemington through to 1882, when Cox bought land at nearby Moonee Valley.

The first meeting at his new course came in September of the following year, and although the Victorian Amateur Turf Club at Caulfield was emerging as another contender,

Cox had the “smarts” to organise regular meetings on the Saturday leading up to the Victoria Derby (then the second most important race on the Victorian calendar), correctly reasoning that both the public anticipation ahead of the Derby and Melbourne Cup combined with top-class horses seeking a final hit-out before Flemington would attract spectators in droves.

Post Pub Boom and Bust

The grounds rarely attracted much publicity after the end of the racing, but continued to provide the major sporting facility in the town for close to another thirty years before Northcote Park was finally developed to a standard commensurate with area's growth,

Just who was in charge of the Croxton-park in 1875 is not known, but the Collingwood Court heard an unusual charge against an unnamed publican of the crime of "allowing dancing on licensed premises".

The charge was dismissed when the defence convinced the bench that “those engaged were members of his family and boarders staying at the hotel”.

It seems certain that the hotel had fallen into something of a decline.

In December 1876, the Collingwood Licensing Court sat to hear applications for renewals of licenses; some 40 were granted, but amongst the two adjourned applications was the Croxton-park, the licensee now being noted as a Mr. Landstaune.

Around the same time, the road around the hotel was metalled.

Whilst the improvement and reduction in dust and mud was welcome by pedestrians and the few local residents, it was unpopular with mounted riders who believed the harder surface was detrimental to the horses.

Several complaints against riders simply using the rudimentary footpaths instead, endangering any passers-by on foot saw the Shire move to build a post and rail fence along the approaches to the hotel to force riders to stick to the roadway.

The metalling of roads around the Shire was one of some controversy and concern for the Shire Council.

One contractor who had tendered on the basis of "breaking metal by the roadside", thus encouraging the use of local labour, was found to be secretly collecting his stone from Pentridge Prison where it had been crushed by inmates.

Most of the tenders for road making specified a maximum size for the stone to be load, normally one to one and quarter inches, but many complaints that contractors ignored the regulations, even up to one suggestion that stone of up to six inches in diameter was being used.

The Gypsies

By the mid-1870s, the recreations offered at both the Peacock Inn and Red-House seem have returned to a rather more routine form of recreation, hosting instead of special events, regular cricket and later football matches.

The Croxton-park grounds appear to have gone into something of a period of decline, but a sporting flavour returned to the grounds in 1876, and the Northcote name was seen on the football field again. .

In June of that year, the Croxton-park passed from the hands of a Mr. Milligan to Mr. L. Biaggi, or to give him the grandeur of his full title, Mr. Citoyen Lorenza Biaggi.

With that name, we can guess that Biaggi was either of Italian descent (a rarity at the time) and like the original Croxton-park syndicate, he chose to introduce a famous sporting name to the Northcote area.

"Zingari" is the Italian word meaning "gypsy", but the term was also commonly used to describe a stylish mode of dressing and had already been adopted by a famous English club.

I Zingari is an [English](#) amateur [cricket](#) club which was formed on [4 July 1845](#) by a group of former students of Harrow school and claims to be of the oldest [cricket clubs](#) still in existence.

The famous cricket publication, [Wisden](#) has included all its matches since 1867 and the club played nineteen First Class matches in the late 19th century, including games against matches against [the touring Australians](#) in 1882 and 1884

A club of the same name was founded in Sydney in 1884 and three years later was recognised by the famous English Club and given permission to wear the English Club's black, red and gold colours "out of darkness, through fire and into light".

The Northcote Zingari

Biaggi advertised the Croxton-park Hotel in the Collingwood Observer, suggesting the "Northcote Zingari Football Club plays at the hotel every Saturday".

Other than the advertisements, little trace of the club remains, although it may well have been alternatively known simply as Northcote [[pError! Bookmark not defined.](#)].

The Zingari name lasted just one year on the football field with a "new" and much more active Northcote club known to have been played at Croxton-park (later at Plant's Paddock) in 1876.

The cricket club managed to attract a little more prominence and certainly a few of the leading players around town, but it too disappeared quickly.

The team was first noted as appearing in the summer of 1876, one match report in the Observer suggesting that the Zingari were "the toffs of the town", perhaps with some justification.

At least three of their early players, Alfred Demaine, David Herald and William Bayliss are known to have taken up professional careers in law and accounting, careers that would have involved tertiary studies; a rarity for young men of the time.

If the Zingari were the "toffs", they had little to brag about after they played Northcote Park on April of 1878.

Being the "local derby", the Collingwood Mercury printed a full scorecard to the embarrassment of the Zingari players.

The Park's 45 (James Harry 18, and W. Murphy batting at number eleven on 10 not out) probably seemed a modest target, but the Zingari managed just five runs in reply!

Chief destroyer for the Park was Fairbank who returned the useful figures of five wickets for one run; for the hapless (and hopeless) Zingari, "extras" and E. Shee sharing top-scoring honours with two apiece!

There seems to have little by way of excuse for the deplorable effort as the Zingari eleven had

most of their regular players including the brothers Edward and Arthur Shee and Morris, Bayliss and Demaine.

An interesting sidelight is that Fairbank in the Park's innings was shown as "thrown out", terminology of the day for "stumped".

The Shee brothers were Edward (born 1859) and Arthur (1861), sons of Edward

The Zingari were competitive at the junior level in the two or three seasons that they played, but they seem to have disappeared soon after the debacle against Northcote Park; the last match of the 1877-78 season.

Biaggi remained as licensee of the hotel until 1882 and the Zingari's demise simply appears to be as a result of the township not being able to support three teams.

Two of the leading players, Morris and McIntosh appeared from that season with Northcote Park and later Northcote. Professional studies may well have impacted the cricketering days of others; although Bayliss later appeared in Northcote, Preston and Coburg sides.

Lorenza Biaggi

The life of a publican in those days was "interesting" to say the least, and by comparison to most licensees, the six years Biaggi spent at the Croxton-park was a long stint..

In June of 1879, Biaggi complained to the Council about the bad state of the road in front of the Croxton-park, and at the same time demanding increased police supervision complaining that firearms had been discharged outside of the hotel, smashing the bar windows and a large number of glasses within

The Council referred the state of the road to the Public Works Committee and suggested to Biaggi that remainder of his complaint was "firmly within the province of the police".

Biaggi may have less enamoured with the province of police on October of the following year when he appeared in Preston Court on a charge of assault, at the same time being sued by one of his barmaids for payment of wages.

Seemingly the police on arrival at the hotel found Biaggi and a man named Morrison in a free fight.

Both men charged each other with assault, but the police also charged Biaggi with "allowing drunken patrons on license premises contrary to the statutes".

That charge was adjourned as some material witnesses were not in court, and at the same hearing, Elizabeth Matthews claimed 15/- due in wages from Biaggi.

Matthews testified she had attempted to assist Morrison who she perceived as the "innocent and weaker party", and on her intervention, Biaggi had allegedly abused her using foul language at which stage Matthews had proffered her final notice.

Biaggi denied the foul language charges, but was ordered to pay Matthews the outstanding 15/- with £1/2/6 costs.

March, 1882 saw Biaggi hand over the licence of the Croxton-park to Mr. John O'Connor ...

George Plant continued as a leading member of the Council, but even his activities were sometimes not beyond reproach.

He bought up many spare lots of land on the slopes of Rucker's Hill and developed an area next to the Paddock as a piggery.

In October, 1876 he became embroiled in a bitter battle with a neighbour, a Mr. C. M. Fleming, who objected to the condition of a piggery that Plant was by this time running on his property in Bastings street.

The Council was already moving to control what it considered objectionable trades, and as well as writing a letter attacking Plant's double standards on the issue, Fleming also launched a broadside in the *Collingwood Mercury*.

The two at one stage fronted each other in the Council meeting, prompting Cr. Paterson to suggest that the two should "step outside and settle the matter".

At one stage, legal action was threatened by both parties before the fire died down, but Fleming may have had the last laugh as around three months later, a severe electrical storm caused the demise of three of Plant's prized sows.

By 1878, he was advertising on a weekly basis in the *Collingwood Mercury* under the heading of "George Plant, Ham and Bacon curer", although his specialised product range was "ox tongues, lard and spiced beef".

In February of the following year, fire destroyed three cottages in Mitchell Street owned by Plant and with the hotel and a busy agenda with the Shire perhaps the workload became a bit too much

In August, the piggery was taken over by Messrs, King, Smith and Kelihan who expanded the business considerably, reaching a weekly output of some 90 pigs per week.

This company, like many others and in fact Plant himself did not survive the economic crash of the early 1890s, although one of the partners, William Smith, an ex-Mayor of Northcote, re-opened the plant in 1902.

George spent much of 1883 on a trip back to the old country, Melbourne's Daily Telegraph noting in their report on the Jika Shire on April

9 that "it is the last meeting that Cr. Plant is to sit before his trip to Europe.

But early in 1884, he was back in the news in ways that perhaps he didn't desire.

After his previous flirtation with the piggery, Plant applied for a slaughtering license for a building he had bought in High Street and fitted out as a butcher's shop.

The Council was actively discouraging what residents regarded as noxious industries from the commercial area, but Plant managed to sway several of his ex-Council comrades, reminding them of all he had done for the town and not too subtly hinting he stood to lose £450 if the license was not approved.

Plant also found himself in unexpected strife in February 1884 when he was brought before the Preston Court charged with offences under the Trade Marks statute.

Inspector Andrews testified that he had visited the Peacock Inn and found "inferior and dirty brandy in a Hennessy's bottle exposed for sale in the public bar", although he also added that all other liquors he had tested were "all first-rate articles".

An expert witness confirmed the brandy was both impure and sub-standard, but Plant through his solicitor William Wilkinson, coincidentally President of the Preston Cricket Club, claimed that the bottle was the dregs of a demijohn cleaned out in another section of the hotel and inadvertently left in the bar.

The bench suggested that there was no evidence to suggest Plant had tried to defraud the public but fined him 10/- for his carelessness with three guineas costs.

Similar penalties were handed down against Aslop Rinson, licensee of the Bridge Inn, and Lewis Wiffin, proprietor of the Prince Alfred Hotel in Preston, a long-forgotten hostelry on the corner of High and Showers Streets. The latter hotel closed in the 1920s but the building remains today

A Day at The Races

Preston, 1870

"Last Saturday being a holiday a large party of the sporting fraternity mustered at Preston, the country folk in that quarter having got up a day's racing".

"The affairs were to have been conducted on the preceding Saturday, but Father Pluvius was having a day out and consequently the residents of Preston wisely decided to have a day in".

"About twelve, preparations were made for a start and "Now then, who's for the races" was reiterated by a host of cabbies outside the Albion, the headquarters of the racing lot".

"The entries as they appeared in the papers were good and turned many heading to the regatta on the Saltwater River to thoughts instead to the Yan Yean, on which road, about seven miles from town the hamlet of Preston is situate ... the well laid course was reached after a drive at about 14 miles per hour"

'Peeping Tom', The Australasian, February 12, 1870

and Croxton-park a week later

"... cool days are the exception this summer and racing with the thermometer at 140 degrees is following amusement under difficulty and the scorching sun rendered Croxton-park decidedly hot".

"The Croxton-park hostelry formerly known as the Red-House lies about four miles out of town on the road to Preston and the racecourse at the back of the premises is in a truly rural part of the country".

"The easy mode of transport by 'bus or cab ought to have made it a favourite resort of the public, but somehow it has not received the patronage which its well-appointed appurtenances and good management desire and I am afraid that the speculation has not turned out sufficiently remunerative to encourage the proprietors to continue their pleasant holiday gatherings".

"... arriving some time before the business of the afternoon, I had a stroll among the Brahma-pootras, Dorking and other game fowls imported by the proprietor and what a fine lot of birds they are".

"I was somewhat astonished at the prices paid for young chicks and imagine fowl breeding is not a bad little game ..."

'Peeping Tom', The Australasian, February 12, 1870