

## **1857 Northcote Tour – D Medhurst**

### **Early Northcote Reminiscences**

Leader Jubilee Edition – 19 May 1933

Edited and end notes - P. Michell, 2004, 2016

Printed in the Leader newspaper as part of Northcote's Jubilee celebrations.

The author David Medhurst lived in Whittlesea and seems rather knowledgeable on Northcote. He wrote a number of articles on Northcote's past for the Leader newspaper around the time of Northcote's Jubilee.

Editorial markings in square brackets and end notes have been added to aid interpretation.

The journey begins in Bourke Street, Melbourne, and ends at the newly completed Yan Yean Reservoir. In Northcote the direction travelled is north along High St, then heads east along Plenty Rd,

Most of the end notes refer to the Northcote section only.

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In Australia transport is the controlling factor in the start and developments of new settlement. The very birth of the now enterprising and populous city of Northcote may be attributed in some measure to the decision of the authorities responsible for Melbourne's water supply to construct a reservoir at Yan Yean.

As far as Northcote is concerned it is a mystery why the route now known as High Street, Northcote, was selected as a highway when it is remembered that apart from Sydney Road, Brunswick Street was the main outlet north of the city and that an easy grade via what is now known as St Georges Road was available. The road was surveyed in 1854 and the wonder is that the early road users put up with the drag up Rucker's Hill instead of seeking an easier route. The hill has since been cut down and the grade eased. The transportation of huge quantities of material for the construction of the Yan Yean Reservoir gave an impetus to business enterprise along the route with the result that the inevitable public house, blacksmith's shop, general stores & (et)c. were soon established along the route and formed a nucleus for future settlement.

In a short time wood carting to the rapidly developing City of Melbourne and suburbs became an important industry. Gradually as the forest was cleared off and the country opened up, farms were established and business centres came into being. The two cities of Northcote and Preston began on the same lines and at this juncture it may be interesting to briefly refer to a few of the first pioneers of these two cities.

The great reservoir scheme was inaugurated, a toll gate was established near the creek in the 'fifties and was later removed to a point about where Westgarth street now intersects High St. The embankment now known as Rucker's Hill was formed. The hill was cut through to continue the road, the gravel from the excavations being utilised to form the approach there to and from the following description the reader may visualise the road as it appeared in 1857 viewed from the box seat of a Cobb and Co's coach carrying passengers and Her Majesty's mails, en route to Yan Yean and intermediate settlements.

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Starting one Saturday morning from the "Bull and Mouth" Hotel in Bourke street about 7 o'clock on a beautiful spring morning we pass the old "Paddy's Market" in full activity. The shed full and the open gutter in Bourke street from Russell street to the White Hart corner in Spring street lined with vehicles and vegetables, fruit, eggs poultry - in fact all the products of the farm, orchard and garden - spread out for inspection and sale along the pathway. Proceeding we turn the corner round the Halfway House Hotel to the top of Brunswick street with the Belvedere Hotel and a biscuit factory on either corner. Just opposite about where the Eye and Ear Hospital now stands, was an immense iron tank with a capacity of 150,000 gallons, supplied by a pump on the Yarra bank - a decided improvement on the old water cart, and prior to the completion of the Yan Yean reservoir this constituted Melbourne's water supply conveyed from the tank by mains which were afterwards utilised when the larger scheme was finished (1).

Down Brunswick street, at that time well supplied with business places, past the Labor in Vain Hotel with its high brick wall in protection from surprise attacks by the natives; on past Kimpton's flour mill and across the open Reilly street drain [Alexander Pde] into Heidelberg road and along past gas works and the rifle butts at the end of Smith street; post and rail fences at each side of the road.

Turning to the left at the junction [Heidelberg Rd. and High St.] we cross the Merri Creek, on through the toll gate (2) [to the foot of Rucker's Hill. At the foot on the west side was a large nursery (3). In those days after rain this climb was an arduous undertaking. Commenting on the holes and ruts made by the heavy traffic the humorist of that generation designated it, embellished with lurid adjectives, [such as] "Mucker's Hill" (4). Arriving on top and through the cutting, we have passed on our right the conspicuous mansion of the day built and occupied by Mr. W.F.A. Rucker, after whom the hill was named (5). We pull up to deliver the mailbag at Bastings' General Store, Post Office and hay and corn store (6). Opposite on the corner of the lane stood the [original] Peacock Inn, kept by George Plant, a true replica of an old-time rural inn-keeper (7). In the upper room of this hostelry was a forum where all the weighty and burning questions concerning the village were ventilated. These two businesses were founded in 1854 and according to custom the post office was also the debating ground for all local municipal and social questions.

After this breathing spell for the horses we proceed merrily down the hill, passing Mitchell's butcher's shop [cnr Mitchell St] with several carcasses of sheep and sides of

beef hanging on hooks under the verandah (8). An ironmongery store, kept by F G Smith (9), the McIntosh's bakery and general store on the present site of the E S & A Bank (10). Old records state that McIntosh's business premises were the first in Northcote to be illuminated with gas from the Collingwood Gas Works. We also passed the old Wesleyan Church (11), opposite the larger present [bluestone] church, built in 1869 (12).

[Note: The above part of the tour is interesting as it makes no mention of the activities east-side between Bastings & Mitchell Sts.]

On the corner of Separation and High streets was a chemist's shop "Turner's". There was also a public house on the present site of the "Leader" Office (13). At the foot of the hill we stopped to get a horseshoe tightened at Watson's blacksmith and wheelwright. This establishment adjoined a large bush paddock owned by Pender Brothers (14). Then some years after Penders planted a grove of wattle trees along the full distance in High street and this was known as Pender's Grove. As the reader can see for himself all this area now known as Penders Grove with its modern up-to-date streets, paths, drainage and sewerage, electric light system, schools, institutions and business places of every description and a large population housed in modern dwellings, is in itself a very striking commentary on the wonderful development of Northcote.

On the opposite side from Watson's we observe a small blue-stone shop and dwelling and there being no pathway the path ending at Arthurton road the dwelling lay embowered in climbing roses and other greenery. This has lately been demolished to make room for shops (15). Further on, about where Moran and Cato's shop now stands (16), was a set of slip-rails, leading into Job Smith's dairy farm. The post and rail fence continued right up to another famous hostelry. Originally it was known as the Pilgrim's Inn. A weather-beaten signboard, depicted a very dejected looking old wayfarer leaning heavily on a stout staff. Later this business was sold and renovated and a race-course laid out. The hotel was painted vermilion and was known for many years as the "Red House" and later still the Croxton Park Hunt club made this their headquarters and meeting place. As settlement rapidly increased the title was again changed to the Croxton Hotel (17).

I must again apologise. The present has so crowded in on the past that it is difficult to place events in their proper sequence. Continuing our journey we pass the entrance, to Pritchard's slaughter yards (18), used in conjunction with his wholesale and retail butchering business in the early days of Smith street, Collingwood. We have now reached the northern boundary of Northcote and at the junction of the Plenty and Epping [High St] Roads is the Junction Hotel (19). On the opposite corner of Plenty road was a long wooden structure, Watson and Paterson's bacon factory. Under a verandah running the full length of the building, suspended on hooks were hanging scores and scores of pigs recently slaughtered (20). At little lower down on the corner of a lane was a small brick grocery store run by a Mr. Mitchell.(21)

We are now in the bush proper with small clearings here and there with cultivation right up to the post and rail fences. On down a steep hill and across the Darebin Creek. On the

left a dairy farm and then on both sides of the road huge paddocks, that on the right now known as Mont Park , that on the left became the property of Mr. J. B. Smith, race-horse breeder (22) . We are now at the village of Bundoora, with the inevitable blacksmith's shop. Brown's post office and store (“Emms”); a small Wesleyan Chapel opposite and several old pioneer homesteads along the Greensborough lane. On the west side of the Plenty road a large black-soil paddock extended right across to Thomastown, destined in later years to become the site of one of the many failures in Government village settlement schemes. Up the hill we arrive at Janefield, the paddock on the right known as Harper's. Eventually the site of the Janefield sanatorium.

Still onward through red gum country, through the scattered settlements of Morang and South Yan Yean chiefly composed of wood carters, and then Yan Yean with its huge reservoir containing 1,350 acres and containing 5 billion 400 million gallons of water. The work was started in December 1853 and was completed with aqueducts and mains and formally opened in December 1857.

In these early days the village of Northcote benefited to the extent of having a standpipe, erected on the edge of the path outside the Peacock Inn, where water could be obtained at so much per barrel. There was another standpipe at the northern end of High street, outside the Junction Hotel. Prior to this the residents used water from tanks and wells, whilst on washing day and in summer there was often a shortage, necessitating periodic visits to the creek.

## NOTES

- 1 This iron tank still exists and is now located at the Werribee sewerage treatment plant. Sighted in 2010. Water from the Yan Yean reservoir went under St Georges Rd then known as the ‘Pipe Track’.
- 2 The Toll Gate was located opposite Urquart St on High St. Later moved to Westgarth St. Then removed. Initially a way of raising revenue for road making and drainage.
- 3 This nursery was probably north of Union St. Likely to be the forerunner of Dysons Nursery located east side of Ross St. More than likely relocated due to permanent water supply.
- 4 One of various name for Northcote hill. Often referring to the difficulty of horses (and carts) traversing the steep incline. Many would have died early in life. Despite various attempts to ease access, was not resolved until the causeway built in 1880s for the cable tram.
- 5 Rucker owned two parcels of land on the top of Northcote Hill but highly likely the now demolished mansion on top of Ruckers Hill was neither built nor lived in by Rucker. He built in Brunswick west side of Merri Creek – Stony Park (Maie Casey grew up there.) The old Northcote mansion was likely built after 1847 when Rucker became bankrupt and land was sold.

- 6 Bastings General store was located at 209-11 High St. A two storey bluestone building with a hay and corn store attached. Demolished in 1968.
- 7 Peacock Hotel has been substantially altered since it opened in 1854. Current building g dates from 1890. Then remodeled in 1897. Current exterior dates from 1932.
- 8 Swift describes Mitchell's Butchery was located corner High & Bastings Sts on the site where the Northcote Picture Theatre is. However this tour suggests cnr Mitchell & High Sts. More logical location.
- 9 Whilst specific unknown location, in 1890 Henry Hansen was an ironmonger at around 324 High St. Probably former Smith's site.
- 10 E S & A bank building was at 342 High St. Between Lawry & Separation Sts.
- 11 Now a café at 248-250 High St. Earliest part dates from 1854.
- 12 Still functioning church at 24-251 High St
- 13 Leader Office was at 309 High St.
- 14 Watsons Blacksmith was little north of the later Carters Arms Hotel (1867-1989) crnr High & Separation Sts. C1906 there was a forge crnr Robbs Pde. This land north may have been an 'extension' of the original Penders Grove (located further north between Mansfield & Dundas Sts).
- 15 Described dwelling would Dr Peter McArthur's house.
- 16 Moran & Cato was at 411 High St.
- 17 Croxton Park Hotel had a grandstand and extensive land both to the north and west where sporting events took place.
- 18 Pritchard's was located on west side of High St crnr Miller St.
- 19 High St leading to Preston was called Epping Rd. The tour heads north-east along Plenty Rd.
- 20 Watson & Patterson would have a significant influence of Australia's smallgoods' manufacturing. Many names later to be associated worked here including JC Hutton of Hutton's Hams. In 1958 Otto Wurth took over the business. By 2010 the site had been abandoned. Most of the site has been demolished and now multistorey apartments with supermarket. One original element along Dundas St remains.
- 21 Likely to be connected with Mitchell Butchers mentioned earlier.
- 22 This still exists in two forms – Bundoora Homestead Art Gallery (Smith's house) and Bundoora Park Children's Farm..