

Reminiscences of Northcote – From 1872 by F H M

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Edited by P Michell. 2015.

Editor's note:

These reminiscences seem to take place when FHM was at the old Wesleyan Schoolroom and Helen St School. The period is before mass industrialisation as the Merri Ck water was drinkable. Nil trains mentioned.

Square brackets used for clarification. Footnotes give more information.

Author may be Northcote councillor H F Mitchell.

I think that the most trying time of a boy's life is the first day he goes to school. At all events it appeared so to me when my brother Tom took me to the late Mr Tobin's school (which was then where Mr French's shop is now in High St)¹. My sister, Polly, was then a pupil-teacher. I would persist in calling her by her Christian name, when Mr Tobin would give me a serious lecture for doing so. But it was no use, I kept on and eventually had to be taken from her class to another one.

Somehow the boys seemed to me to be very much bigger than as there were fellows up to 15 and 16 years of age attending. It was then called a 'Common School' and you had to pay 1/- per week for each child. The main feature of the school seemed to be the drilling exercises as Mr Tobin was very partial to that part of our education. I fancy I can hear him saying, "Now left, left", and so on. He used to take us up and down High St and seemed to be very proud of the marching ability of the boys. There would only be about a couple of hundred scholars all told.

At the school speech days I think almost every person in the district turned out to hear the boys and girls recite and sing. It appeared to be wonderful – how they remembered all they knew. How proud was Mr Tobin! But few of those (now old men and women) are alive today. If there are any they would surely recall the practicing, the finishing touches, and the ultimate success of their efforts. And weren't the mothers proud too!

I was only a little fellow then, but what impressions those early events make on youthful minds. Then there were the exams. I recollect t on one occasion the inspector (Mr Perriton) was riding his pony. (They had to ride in those days, as there was no other way of getting to the school except walking.) One of the boys (Arthur Johnson) called out 'look behind you !'. It was the first of April and let me tell you, he got something from Mr Tobin for daring to say such things to one so high in the Education Department! Often on a Friday afternoon – the day for extra drill – when we were supposed to march in the back door, two or three boys would drop out from the end of the line and cut for their lives. But woe betide them should they be

¹ 248-50 High St. Wesleyan School Room. Former church. Now café.

missed. And the fine stories Mr Tobin would tell us on Fridays. We thought they were simply wonderful. He had a nice way of telling them. Don't I remember the day we left our school and marched over to the Helen St State School², where there was plenty of room for Mr Tobin to display his prowess as a drill instructor.

Those who went over, were looked upon as paupers – I did not remain long at this school, leaving to go to Carlton College. I remember Mr Tobin would often say that he wouldn't be surprised to seem some of the boys Members of Parliament – especially Jimmy Glew³. There were plenty of the fellows who became professional men – Dave Herald, Alf Demaine and others I can't think of. Lots of others, too have made good as business men.

In Northcote in those days there were some strange odd characters, both men and women. Of course everybody knew everybody else and all seemed to be one large family, besides there was no hustling or hurrying as there is now. If a customer came into a shop, he or she (especially children) might have to wait until the shopkeeper finished his yarn with anybody he was talking to and that might take about a quarter of an hour or so. There were only two butcher shops in those days – Olivers and Mitchell's and about three grocers, who were also the bakers – Bastings', McIntosh's and Weaver's. Mr Bastings old shop is still in existence (where Mr Shewan grocer, is now)⁴.

We, as boys, (girls were not allowed out much then) used to play at night time by tapping people's windows with a piece of cotton and a button. It was great fun to us to see the old man or his wife come out to see who was knocking. We would be hiding and then when they went in again more knocking occurred until we got tired of it. But it was all innocent fun. Mr Hellwig (Herman's father) kept a boot-repairing shop in High St (It is still there next to be Gribbles)⁵. He had his gas meter under his counter and it was reckoned a great trick among the boys to turn off the gas and watch the fun from the other side of the street. Mr Hellwig used to work up till 11 o'clock at night. Most shops remained open 10 or 11 pm, and on Saturday nights till 12 o'clock. Many other innocent boyish tricks were played. There was no fear of policemen as they were conspicuous by their absence at night time.

There was a toll gate at Westgarth St, kept by Mr Maher.⁶ You had to pay 1/- to go through with a vehicle, or 6d on horseback. After school we would go down to Saunders (near Westgarth Picture Theatre) to ride their donkey which would buck you off. That used to be great fun.

² Helen St school opened in 1874.

³ Glew's brickworks in Brunswick was very successful.

⁴ Demolished in 1968.

⁵ Gribble & Hellwig shared same address – 332 High St in 1930.

⁶ The toll gate was duly removed and for many years was located near Darebin Parklands. Fell into disrepair and demolished late 1980s.

There was a circus where the ES&A Bank stands now and when it came to riding the donkey by anyone in the audience the proprietor was willing to give £1. Mick Pender⁷, who was along-legged lad and a great rider, stuck to the donkey. But the donkey, when he found her could not get Mick off, lay down and rolled on top of him and that was the trick. We thought Mick had earned the £1 but it was claimed that he had not ridden the donkey, so he got nothing. The next item on the programme was Dick Turpin's ride to York on Black Bess. Oh the excitement when the mare cleared the hurdles and rushed through gates and jumped the toll gate. Then Black Bess knocked up and lay down. Dick pleaded to her and kissed her but she could not rise. We all cried and went home delighted. After going to a Blondin (tight-rope walking) exhibition one of the lads, in turning a somersault, strained his back, and I think died. This happened at the old hay and corn store kept by Mr Bastings – where the stall is now, near F W Stott & Son's.

In High St the dust was terrific. The shops would have to close their doors. It was caused by the wood drays and paling carters. Sometimes the line of carts would reach from Elm St to past the Town Hall [not built until 1888] without a break. I don't remember any water carts; in fact they would have been useless to keep the dust down. When Davey Marks, Senior Constable, came to Northcote it was funny to see him chasing the carters for being on their wrong side. He was considered the terror of the district. Being known from Whittlesea tot eh sea-shore with his 'Keep to your right-side'. One could scarcely venture out at night after nine o'clock without him being after you saying 'Go home: it is time you were in bed'. He lived at the back of Stott and Bastings [Sts].

At the corner of Robbs Pde there was a slip panel [of a fence] and the Pender boys would jump their horse over the fences to their home on the Darebin Creek near Dundas St [Penders Grove farm]. In the coaching days to Whittlesea from Melbourne it was good to see the old coach with four horses and little Williams and McMillan with their long whips going at a fast trot. They changed horses at the Junction Hotel, starting from Bourke St (The Albion Hotel).

In those days the boys used to be great swimmers in the Merri Ck (down under Sumners⁸) and the old log hole below St Georges Rd bridge. The creek was always running then and the water was fit to drink. My brother Charley and I often went fishing for eels in the creek. It was a very pretty spot with the willows and high banks.

There used to be some good racing at the hotel grounds (now the Croxton Park Hotel) but it was called the Red House then and afterwards the Pilgrim. On one occasion when a horse known as 'Canary' had got over a stiff steeple it was seen she had a broken fetlock and had to be destroyed. She must have gone fully a hundred yards with her foot hanging by a bit of skin.

⁷ Michael Lord Pender, first son of William Pender, of Penders Grove.

⁸ Theodotus Sumner residence was on Brunswick side of Merri Ck.

Traffic consisting of handsome buggies, and carts of all descriptions and men on horseback created quite a stir. The track ran across Woolton Ave over the hill to the west near to St Georges Rd. Then there some great pigeon matches, shooting from the traps. Of course there was no tote then but lots of bookies and plenty of money. The little 'pill box' buses which operated in the district were one horse affairs and very rough to ride in. They started from the bridge⁹ and went as far as Elm St every hour. You could almost race them to the bridge. We then caught a two-horse 'bus which went by the way of Brunswick St to Spencer St, changing horses at the corner of Johnson and Brunswick Sts. Here were the 'bus stables. Can't I hear Paddy Moylan and his 'Get up Mary Ann'. It took over half an hour to go to the city. There was no stoppages except to pick up and let down passengers. If you missed one you had to wait about 15 minutes for the next. The women then wore crinolines and it was funny to see how they manipulated them in the 'bus. The greatest trouble they had was when they had to walk up Rucker's Hill, when the wind was blowing from the west. It was very awkward to keep their dresses from blowing up. Besides they had to stick tight to their hats.

There were only two [sic - three] churches - All Saints and the Wesleyan¹⁰. All Saints having about an average of nine and the Wesleyan about 20 of a congregation. The Presbyterian had a little place somewhere about Cunningham Street¹¹ which was afterwards moved to James Street. The Rev Booth was the minister at All Saints. He and Mrs Booth with very big people and very charitable. Reverend Duncan Fraser was the Scotch minister.¹²

One night my mother took us to a pantomime in Melbourne. We missed the last cab for Preston which started from Lonsdale Street. A stray¹³ cabby said he would not go up Rucker's Hill for £10, but eventually took us to the bottom of the hill for 7/6 after having first demanded 20/-

Land was very cheap at the time Mr Plant (Fred's father) bought Walton's paddock [which went] from the Wesleyan Church to Hawthorn Road and back to Helen Street. About 30/- per foot was wanted for the High Street frontages on the corner of Hawthorne Road with £2/10/- a foot. There were a few buyers and some allotments in Helen St were sold for few shillings.

Among the residents I recollect with Mr Wimble, Secretary for Lands; Mr Bickford, curator of gardens; Mr Stout, secretary for building society; Mr Robinson, shop walker at one of the big city drapers; Mr Fletcher, Walker Street; Job Smith [Thornbury Farm]; Mr Herald, accountant at James Service and Co; J G Johnson and

⁹ High St Bridge over Merri Ck.

¹⁰ 'New' Wesleyan at 249-51 High St, built in 1870.

¹¹ Crnr Cunningham & High Sts, north-west side.

¹² At the Presbyterian.

¹³ Stray - waiting.

Samuel Johnson [Johnson Brothers Fruit Merchants]. Some of the private houses had big pieces of land, some as many 5 to 10 acres.

Separation Street was known as German Lane because of the German settlement there north that was that was there. Northcote was poorly represented in parliament. There was a member named Cook (not Hume Cook) who was in for about 14 years was only known to have seconded a motion once, never having spoken previously. We were linked up with Brunswick and they outvoted us. Northcote and Preston by one shire and used to take all the rates to maintain the main road. Therefore the back roads were almost impassable.

There were bonfires on 5th of November on James' Hill¹⁴. Didn't we put some work getting logs, boughs and all sorts of stuff the would burn. On one occasion we had a very large heap of material, but someone got in the night before and set fire to it! However we went to work with more energy than ever and the bonfire was a great success. The spot was where the Presbyterian school is now.

Owen Burgess ran a gravel pit for a German. They charged 7/6 per load, they picked gravel or you get it yourself for 2/6. Burgess had a little blacksmith shop under the hill on the side of High Street and Rucker's Hill. He also lived there. I can see his sister, Miss Burgess, now doing the striking and holding the horses

The paling carters used to camp around the corner of Bastings St which would be lined with them. Mobs of horses going through sometimes comprised two or three hundred. They grazed for the night in Plant's paddock on either side of High St and Rucker's Hill¹⁵. The horses came down from the Kelly country to be sold in Melbourne.

There are no banks in the district and people have to take their money to Smith St, Fitzroy. The Post Office was where Mr Shewan's grocery store now is.¹⁶ Frank Braiding was the post boy and Mr Bastings kept the shop and Post Office. People usually went for the letters, which were very few. There was a little school in German lane kept by Miss Frizell. It was about 10 by 10 and there were about 20 scholars. You had to pay 1/- per week. The building is still there and stands back from the street. Many the game of marbles we had up against Mitchell's fence in Bastings Street. Charlie Eagles ('Gid') was the most successful player and usually skinned us all. Tops were where the present police station is¹⁷. I can see the old gum trees there now with the old buffers played cricket.

Funniest little shop was Mrs Glew's bookshop on top of the hill, (the hill was about

¹⁴ Guy Fawke's bonfire night was celebrated in Melbourne until the mid 1960s.

¹⁵ Plant's Paddock was in Westgarth on both sides of High St just before the Northcote Hill. Viaduct not built till late 1800s

¹⁶ Shewan's was site of Bastings General Store.

¹⁷ Built 1891.

twice a high as it is now.¹⁸⁾ where Dr Hattam and is now living¹⁹⁾. The shop would be at about 10 x 7 and you had to go up steps on the other side cut out of the bank. Mrs Glew reared [a] family of four in this little place. The old lady had not been dead long. She was 93 and walked up from Robert St to High Street for goods nearly every day.

From Elm St and Robbs Pde were all paddocks and grazing and dairying were the principal callings. We used to catch native cats or shoot possums in the paddocks on moonlight nights.

¹⁸ Cutting down High St height must have taken place between mid 1870s to mid 1880s.

¹⁹ Dr B J Hattam was at 188 High St.