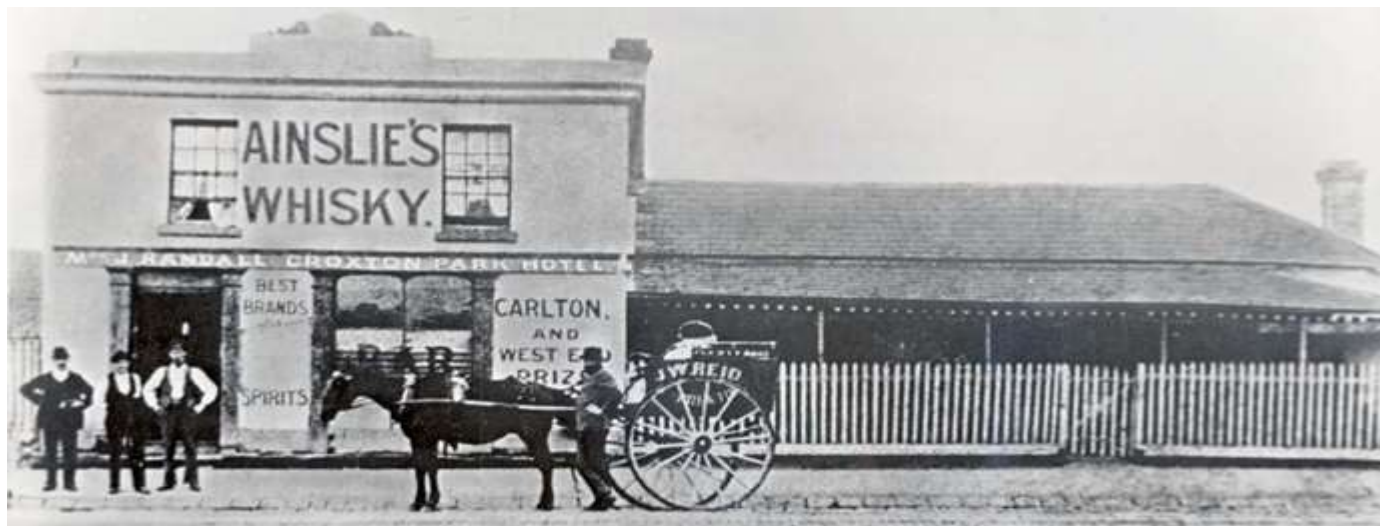


Our Stories

Northcote Snippets – a series of historical glimpses into Northcote's past

Sports at Northcote – Part 2

Conclusion of the letter sent by 'Pike' to the Australasian newspaper on 28 July 1866. He describes the 'Amateur Sports Meet' and happenings at the *Red House Inn* (later to be known as the *Croxton Park Hotel*). This part includes more bar games and the seven mile walking race. Unusual words are explained at end.



Croxton Park Hotel 1880s. Source: Darebin Heritage

Between the races the course had a very knotty appearance, if I may be allowed to say so. Instead of the company moving about to see what they could see, they were all in little tufts. Curiosity being a strong weakness of mine, of course I wanted to know, you know. The first bunch which I came to had for a centre-piece an empty gin-case turned on its end; but though the juniper juice was gone the demon was alongside of it, in the shape of a thimbligger - I really beg his pardon; that is the old name, the game must have a new name, for I took notice that the word "thimble" was never mentioned. "Cover" is the latest. Lady readers, make a note of that, for the old name for that very useful help in sewing on buttons must soon become obsolete. In the old country, sixpence, or at most a shilling, was the usual stake; but here the professors seemed to be suffering from a plethora of wealth, for nothing less than a note, and sometimes a "fiver", would go down.

The presiding genius over the "covers" and ball was not what you would have called a prepossessing person. He was rather short in stature, but with plenty of breadth; a bullet head, in which were set very close together a pair of restless, bloodshot eyes, which had a sort of furtive look with them, such as you would never see in the face of an honest man. He did not seem to be quite at home where he was. Cracking a rib or a skull (immaterial which) would have been much more in his line. I left this artist's studio with a quiet chuckle, thinking that he had been pretty nearly cleaned out, as I saw one or two very respectable looking men, whom I have seen about town for years, and always thought they were what they looked to be; but before I left the ground, I found out that they were just a parcel of - well, they were not a bit better than they ought to be. (I have been up to this time a firm disciple of Lavater*, but from henceforth I place no faith in facial expression.)

The next place of business was a top-coat on the ground, on which reposed three cards with their faces downwards. One of the children of Israel seemed to be the owner of this unpretending arrangement. He was the victim of a very knowing looking butcher and a well-to-do publican. This fellow caught a fiat or two, but I began to find out that they were not doing so much business as would appear at first. I suspected nearly every one I saw round them, and I was not far out, for the really respectable portion gave the vagabonds a very wide berth.

The next performance, on the card, was a hurdle race, for which there was a good entry. It may have been very good, but all that I saw of it (not being in the front rank) was four or five heads bobbing up and down. They might have been playing at leap-frog for all I could see.

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About four o'clock there seemed to be a little crowd at one particular spot on the course. I made a rush to see what was the matter. I could see nothing out of the usual. "What's the row?" said I to a person who was beside me. "Oh," said he, "that's the Melbourne man." I thanked him for the information, and had a look at the champion, and I certainly did not think much of his appearance. He was busily engaged in fitting on a pair of shoes, and if the fate of nations hung on the issue he could not have been more particular about their adjustment. He first stamped one foot, then the other, looked closely at the ties, and then strolled down to the starting-point. I had just a squint at the Ballarat man, or rather youth, and it struck me from what I saw that he was a determined young dog, and would take a deal of licking.

'There is now a perfect babel among the book-makers. I suppose they understood one another, but as far as I individually was concerned, they might just as well have been speaking in Hebrew or Irish. The old man is ringing away at the bell to warn spectators from the gravel path; Mr. Levey is sitting calmly on his horse, the centre of an admiring audience; and the noble Hammersley is standing pistol in hand, like a modern Claud Duval. The athletes "peel," and, at the signal off they went, but how it happened that the Melbourne man went away with a lead of about ten yards bothered me entirely.

The verb {active} to walk, according to Walker** (and he ought to know), is to move by leisurely steps, and if that is correct, then was it not a walking match at all, for as the foremost man passed me, his "drumsticks" were flying in and out in a most mysterious and certainly inelegant manner, and his arms were swinging about as if he was pounding someone over his shoulder. His teeth were set, and, on the whole, he did not at all look amiable. The other seemed to be getting along at a slower pace, by spasmodic jerks of the left leg. This peculiarity soon brought down a few of the backers of Melbourne on him. One very small man with a very big moustache was making himself very conspicuous, and for his pains he got one for his nob. A free fight then ensued, which was what put a stop to it by the playful way in which a mounted trooper's horse threw his feet about. The going round the same until about the fifth mile, when the youngster began to forge a little ahead. Said a corpulent party to me, "I say, I think the long one has got bellows to mend."

I fully acquiesced in the repairs being highly necessary, as wind was beginning to tell on limb. About the sixth mile it was all over with him professionally. The fighting and swearing was now at its height, and the field at this time presented a very animated appearance. Just before the wind-up of the contest I saw the Melbourne chicken first roll into a drunken butcher, and then polish off a well-known bookmaker. From this time till the departure of our cab the place was just like Pandemonium on a holiday.

I have gained something by my trip to Northcote, anyhow - I know the exact measure of half-a-hundred of the greatest blacks in Melbourne, and that's worth something.

I am & c, Pike

From **Another Point of View** by Pike at Goyder's Red House, 1866, transcribed & edited by P. Michell, 2021.

Course – entire race-course including the public open area with tents.

Thimblig/ger/cover/shell game – Pea hidden under a thimble/cover and swapped around very quickly.

Gambling Wager – note or 'pound' one pound bet, 'fiver' – five pounds.

**Lavater* – Swiss author's work linking physiognomy and character traits.

Fiat – an order, command or act done immediately

Melbourne man/ George Moore /Favourite (Melbourne) – Professional since at least 1858 and champion walker of Australia who was still competing in 1879. He punched a number of people as described and was charged.

7 Mile Walk - Competitor was the youth, William Payne, who won by at least 50 yards in a time of 63 minutes over eighteen circuits of the field. Prize was 100 sovereigns / 100 pounds.

Mr (William) Levey – the Race Judge, who was the publisher of the important *Victorian Stud Book* with Yuille.

(William J) Hammersley – Race Starter, a cricketer and sports journalist of The Australasian newspaper. Friends with Thomas Wills of Lucerne & Willsmere; together they formed the first Australian Rules football club & codified rules.

Claud Duval – French 'romantic' highwayman who helped exiled royalists during the French revolution.

***Walker* – John 'Elocution' Walker's *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791) illustrated how to speak correctly in a 'cultured' London accent, which he described as 'undoubtedly the best', with 40 editions!

Drumsticks – thighs; *Nob* – head/smart arse; *Bellows to Mend* – lungs/getting tired

Half-a-hundred of greatest blacks – likely he was describing the con-men/charlatans.

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A few years later, advertisements for a grand stand construction appeared and the course was renamed *Croxton Park Racecourse*, with Goyder's Red Inn replaced by the 'new Croxton Park Club' by 1869.

SATURDAY, 27th OCTOBER.
GOYDER'S RED HOUSE, NORTHCOTE.
The Proprietors of the Cremorne Brewery having won the
TRAVELLERS' CUP,
Have given it to be run for by Licensed Victuallers.
Conditions.—Open to all horses, but to be ridden by licensed victuallers. Welter weights for age; twice round the course. Post entry, 1 sov.
The above cup can be seen at the Hunt Club Hotel, Little Collins street.
HANDICAP TROT,
Four miles. Five sovs. with a sweep of 1 sov added.
HACK RACE,
For a purse. Post entry, 8s. Once round and a distance
J. GOYDER.

Traveller's Cup. Bells, Life & Sports, 27 Oct 1866. TROVE

TENDERS REQUIRED for PUTTING UP about 1000 yards POSTS and RAILS. Labour only. Apply Croxton Park (late Red House), Northcote.
TENDERS REQUIRED for BUILDING RACE-STAND. For specifications, &c., apply Croxton Park (late Red House), Northcote.

Ads for building Race-stand and fence. Argus, 20 Feb 1869.

THE CROXTON PARK RACES.
(FROM OUR MELBOURNE CORRESPONDENT.)
The first race meeting of the new Croxton Park Club took place to-day, at the spot formerly known as Goyder's Red House, Northcote, and a very capital afternoon's sport was afforded. The arrangements did much credit to Mr W. C. Hitchen, the enterprising secretary of the club, and although there was a small charge for admission to the ground, there must have been fully three thousand visitors present. All the events were well contested, but the recent rains had made the course very heavy, and in some instances no doubt materially altered the fortune of the day. Great interest was excited by the Trotting Handicap, the two principal competi-

First Croxton Park race meeting.

Mt Alexander Mail, 25 May 1869. Source: TROVE

P. Michell 2021