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Steve Rollinson, Secretary, 10 Dec 2023

FORMATION OF THE WOODEND CRICKET CLUB in 1861

Special thanks to assistance provided by the Woodend & District Heritage Society.

Research has been carried out at the State Library Melbourne through the avenues of the early Kyneton Newspapers and some early editions of the Gisborne Express.

The formation of a Woodend Cricket Club in January 1861, attracted significant excitement and pride within the fledgling township, as indeed each new step towards a credible community, was greeted in those creative times. It was the year of the arrival of the railway to Woodend, a cause for substantial celebration, since the original plan was to ignore Woodend and head directly to Kyneton. But for the persuasive submissions of prominent Woodend farmer, horse breeder, and hotel-keeper, Joseph HARPER, the township may well have suffered the fate of other towns within the area, whose development at that time, was halted, when ignored by authorities in Melbourne.

In the late 1800s there were, at one stage, three Kyneton newspapers, published three times a week. They tended to ignore Woodend occurrences, preferring to report on areas to the north of Kyneton. Woodend after all, was little better than a camp. On reading these early Kyneton papers, the reader is left in no doubt that the inhabitants were very much tied to "mother England", battling for respectability, and still struggling with the "convict and bushranger" tag. There is little doubt that it was a particularly snobby place, regarding Woodend as a bit daggy and beneath them. Such scant reports published were derogatory of the Woodend Club, referring to them as Woodendites, whilst the Kyneton Cricket Club were Kynetonians; as in Etonians perhaps!? An advertisement in the Kyneton Observer 1/4/1856 for the Kyneton Cricket Club Annual Ball, proclaimed 'tickets were on sale at One Pound Ten Shillings (a guinea) and ladies were admitted by invitation of the stewards only". In the same paper there is a report of a milk maid, come cow-hand who was paid Two Pounds and Fifty Shillings for a months' wages. Clearly, you couldn't attend the ball if you were on wages. A subsequent report on the ball stated that it was quite a lavish affair, which all of the "elite of the town and surrounding country attended."

Woodend, on the other hand, existed as a place to rest up, feed the horses, and replenish water at the five mile creek, after running the gauntlet of weather, tree stumps, bushrangers and thieves in the Black Forest. Mount Alexander Road, as it was known at the time, would have been a busy track to the north, used not only by diggers on their way to the goldfields, but also those in business transporting goods, livestock and people inland from Melbourne. I have no doubt that the area around the creek was a particularly violent and unseemly place, as thieves, prostitutes, drunkards and the like, would prey on the travellers, the railway workers and farm hands, and relieve them of their belongings. Several hotels sprang up in this location, to cater for the travellers, (or cash in on the passing trade); one of the earliest being Harper's Woodend Inn.

Joseph HARPER was born in Newcastle N.S.W. in 1819, the second son of a convict from England. He was a wheelwright by trade and travelled over-land from Sydney to Melbourne to set up business in Melbourne. (Imagine travelling from Sydney to Melbourne in those times!) In 1852, Joseph, with his wife, purchased land in the area, then built, and operated the Woodend Inn, which was located at the corner of High Street and Forest Street. Opposite this, in the current Johnson's car park, the

London and Liverpool Hotel was built in 1853, suggesting that this was the area where it all happened in bustling Woodend. Where the current Community Centre is located, was the area of the police paddocks, where the trooper's horses were kept, and also, the strays, stolen, and impounded livestock of the area. This originally would have been where travellers pitched their tents, on the way to the goldfields at Castlemaine and Bendigo.....a journey which could take several weeks.

Joseph HARPER at the time of his death in 1884, was described as the founder of Woodend. He was the first Mayor and was a Magistrate in the local court. He owned a large settlement of land out near Harper's Bridge on the Woodend/Tylden Road where he bred and trained horses. Joseph HARPER really put Woodend on the map when one of his horses, "Banker" won the third Melbourne cup in 1863. Imagine the euphoria in Woodend on that day! Later a large dinner was held in Woodend to honour Joseph HARPER, at which many state dignities attended (much to the chagrin, no doubt, of the 'Kynetonians"). A report on this dinner credits the caterer as John HARPER of the Woodend Hotel. Research reveals that this was Joseph's elder brother who had been a publican in Melbourne, and who took over the Woodend Inn around 1858 with his wife, herself a licensee of the Duke of Kent Hotel in Melbourne, and a former widow. Mr & Mrs John HARPER later moved to Daylesford, where they operated the Daylesford Hotel.

The first Kyneton paper available, is the Kyneton Guardian 1856, and the Kyneton Cricket Club was already a going concern. A very prominent citizen, Doctor GEARY was the club president and also played in the side. Doctor GEARY was also a Magistrate in the area and was the local coroner, who presided at all Inquests, which were held in local hotels. One can well imagine Joseph HARPER (magistrate) and Doctor GEARY getting together in Harper's Woodend Inn after an Inquest, or a Court Hearing, and GEARY relating to HARPER the progress of the Kyneton Cricket Club. As the hour grew late, perhaps Doctor GEARY stayed the night at the Inn, or at HARPER's, property along the Tylden Road. One could well imagine Dr GEARY, over several drinks, saying to Harper, "Why not form a club in Woodend?" And this is how, (I like to imagine), the Woodend Cricket Club was formed.

EXTRACT FROM KYNETON ADVERTISER 18th January. 1861

WOODEND

Wednesday 16th January 1861

A MEETING WAS HELD LAST EVENING AT HARPER'S HOTEL FOR THE PURPOSE OF ESTABLISHING A CRICKET CLUB HERE. ABOUT THIRTY GENTLEMEN ENTERED THEIR NAMES AS MEMBERS, AND WILL COMMENCE OPERATIONS ON TUESDAY NEXT, AND AS ALL SEEM ANXIOUS FOR ITS SUCCESS, IT IS TO BE HOPED THAT THE WOODEND CRICKET CLUB MAY PROSPER, AND ERE LONG BE IN A POSITION TO COMPETE WITH THE CLUBS OF THE NEIGHBOURING TOWNS.

(SEE ALSO KYNETON OBSERVER 17/1/1861)

Whilst not assuming anything when researching history, I think it reasonable to imagine that Joseph HARPER would have been a major influence in the formation of the Woodend Cricket Club, on that Tuesday evening the 15th of January, 1861, in his hotel, a mere 500 metres from where the club is currently based. Alternatively, it may have been his brother John; but considering the influence

which Joseph had in the township at that time, it is more likely to be the Mayor, Councillor, Magistrate, horse-trainerJoseph.

The next item found relates, I believe, to the first practice session...

EXTRACT FROM KYNETON OBSERVER 26TH JANUARY 1861

WOODEND

Thursday 24th January 1861

THE WOODEND CRICKET CLUB MET FOR THE FIRST TIME YESTERDAY; THE ATTENDANCE OF MEMBERS WAS TOLERABLY NUMEROUS, AND I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT AFTER A LITTLE PRACTICE, WE SHALL BE ABLE TO MUSTER AS GOOD AN ELEVEN AS MOST OF THE NEIGHBOURING CLUBS.

And the first match played by Woodend was at the invitation, or "challenge" of the Malmsbury Club. Malmsbury had been playing for several years, and its players regularly joined forces with Taradale and Kyneton and played hosts to the Victorian XI and England Touring sides, so this first match was always going to be one sided.

THE FIRST MATCH PLAYED BY THE WOODEND CRICKET CLUB WAS ON THE 1ST OF APRIL 1861, WHEN THE WOODEND CLUB ENTERTAINED MALMSBURY. THE MALMSBURY CLUB WERE WELL ESTABLISHED AT THAT STAGE AND SOUNDLY DEFEATED THE WOODEND SIDE BY AN INNINGS.

I have not established exactly where this game was played, but one can imagine, as was the custom of the day, that the two sides would have returned to Harper's Woodend Inn for ample refreshment, before the Malmsbury players and officials mounted their horses and carriages for the long ride back home, in pitch blackness. Many an unfortunate never made it home, as the pages of the papers are littered with reports of horsemen and women, who were found by the side of the tracks with serious injuries, often fatal, as a result of falls from horses and carriages. They would of course lie there without assistance until the next rider came along, perhaps in some areas, days later. Many murders were committed in those times, and who was to tell the difference between a fall from a horse in the darkness, and a savage blow to the head with some blunt instrument. Many an umpire or fast bowler must have dreaded his journey home through the darkness.

When the railway was up and running by the end of 1861, the prices were prohibitive, and were really only used by the wealthy. Perhaps Doctor Geary and the "Kynetonians" used the train to matches, but the reality was that to visit another town to play cricket, was a major event, involving a long trip by horse, and perhaps becoming a two-day event.