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Cobbitty Sports Day benefited the war effort

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Cobbitty Sports Day benefited the war effort

Abstract

major event on the social calendar of a number of picturesque villages in the Camden district was the annual New Year's Day Sports Carnivals. They were part of the English traditions brought to the area by colonial immigrants, and in 1915 they were held in the villages of Cobbitty and The Oaks. Sports carnivals were wonderful community events that included all classes of villagers regardless of their station in life and during the First World War they held special appeal for patriotic fundraising. These social and cultural traditions were not isolated to the Camden district and have been held in many other parts of Australia.

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Cobbitty Sports Day benefited the war effort

By Dr Ian Willis

A major event on the social calendar of a number of picturesque villages in the Camden district was the annual New Year's Day Sports Carnivals.

They were part of the English traditions brought to the area by colonial immigrants, and in 1915 they were held in the villages of Cobbitty and The Oaks. Sports carnivals were wonderful community events that included all classes of villagers regardless of their station in life and during the First World War they held special appeal for patriotic fundraising.

These social and cultural traditions were not isolated to the Camden district and have been held in many other parts of Australia. They are still carried on today in some areas - Glenlyon in Victoria (started in 1857) and Perlicup Beach in South Australia (started in 1914).

The origins of these festivals, according to Peter Hampson Ditchfield's *Old English Sports* (2007), lies in ancient Saxon customs, particularly in Devonshire and Sussex, associated with 'wassailing' (carousing and health-drinking) to ensure the thriving of orchard trees (mainly apples) and exchanging presents. On New Year's Day village youths undertook indoor and outdoor sport to keep out the cold by 'wholesome exercise and recreative games'. Sports included bat-and-ball, wrestling, skittles, blind-man's-bluff, hunt the slipper, sword dancing and mumming (play acting).

The New Year Sports Day in the village of Cobbitty was a hallowed community event which started in 1866. The day included a variety of athletic and novelty events and finished with a gala concert in the evening. It was one of the premier events on the social calendar, and local resident Donald Howard, maintains in his 'Cobbitty's Finest Hour (2010)' that spectators and participants came in their "droves from miles around".

The Camden News reported that there was a ten event programme starting with the major event of the day the "Narellan and Cobbitty Handicap Footrace" over 125 yards for male competitors. The running track, according to Donald Howard, was on the village green between the parish hall and St Paul's Church. Entries had to be in by Boxing Day with an entry fee of 1/- and an acceptance fee of 1/6. There was fierce competition from the young men of the village for the handsome first prize of £5, which was twice the weekly wage for a rural labourer. Quite an amount for any villager, and first place



Cobbitty's St Paul's Anglican Church 1910 (Camden Images)

attracted quite a bit of status and prestige for the winner. Even the second prize was a respectable 25/- and third prize 5/-.

Dress regulations for competitors in the 'Handicap' were strictly enforced with 'trousers to the knee, or amateur trunks and singlets' that had to be approved by two male members of the local gentry, Mr F.W.A.Downes of Brownlow Hill and Mr T.C.Barker of Maryland. Race organisers conveniently started the programme of events after lunch for competitors, which allowed village revellers to recover from the New Year's celebrations. The 'Handicap' was put in the hands of the starters at 2.00pm.

Village youth were not left out of the story and were able to get a feel for the main event by entering their own footraces, one for youths (14-18 years) and another for boys (under 14). Here they rehearsed the tactics that they might employ in main event when they were old enough.

Other events on the programme catered for those locals not able to qualify for the footraces, and included high jump, 'stepping', and 'throwing at wickets', while the village women were allowed to take part in 'nail driving'.

Village elders held positions of importance as starters, judges and referees and supported their social status by donating appropriate cash prize for races. The Camden Brass Band was located in the 'grounds' and provided rousing patriotic tunes throughout the day.

These tunes were enjoyed by the village ladies who entertained themselves during the day with tea in the parish hall.

Village women sold their cooking, sewing, knitting and other 'fancies' at the sports day bazaar. The bazaar raised significant amounts of money for village causes, particularly the St Paul's Church missions. The bazaar auxiliary was made up of village women who were good organizers, but never sort the limelight that was bestowed on the male race organizers. During the First World War the village women's fundraising efforts, which were considerable, were directed to patriotic purposes, including the local branches of the Red Cross.

The sport's day festivities were closed in the evening with the Grand Concert held in the parish hall. The concert started at 8.00pm and the front seats were sold for 2/- while those less financially able bought seats at the back of the hall for 1/-. Local personalities and school children performed a variety of musical items for the entertainment of the assembly, and occasionally a 'big name celebrity' was hired from the city. Donald Howard sadly recalls that the last Cobbitty Sports Day was held in 1941, due to a combination of petrol rationing, material costs and a general pre-occupation by villagers with the war effort.

To find out more visit camdenhistorynotes.wordpress.com

New Year's Day, 1915 COBBITTY

- ATHLETIC SPORTS PROGRAMME:**
- 1.—Narellan and Cobbitty Handicap Footrace, about 125 yards; prizes: £5, 25s, 10s, and 5s; entrance 1s; acceptance 1/6. N.B.—Competitors must be dressed in trousers to the knee, or amateur trunks and singlets to the approval of Messrs. F. W. A. Downes, or T. C. Barker, J.P. This rule must be strictly observed. To start at 2 p.m.
 - 2.—Handicap Footrace for Youths, 14 to 18 years; about 100yds., post entry 6d. Prizes trophy 10/6, by Mr. Edgar Downes
 - 3.—Handicap Footrace for Boys, 14 years and under, about 75yds; post entry 6d. Prizes, trophies, 7/6 by Mr. Nott, and 2/6 by Mr. F. E. Fuchs.
 - 4.—Throwing at Wicket, prize £1, ent. 1/-
 - 5.—Throwing at Wicket for Ladies, entry 6d; Prizes by Messrs. E. Cross and C. Wheeler.
 - 6.—Nail Driving for Ladies, entry 6d; Prize by Mr. Jack Morrow, 7/6.
 - 7.—Handicap Footrace for Girls, 14 years and under; prizes 5s and 2s 6d by Messrs. Williams, Kitching and Rudd.
 - 8.—Stepping 100 Yards, entry 6d; prize 10s by Mr. Sidney Smith; second prize 5s by Mr. John Dowle.
 - 9.—Nail Driving for Girls, 14 years and under; prize 5s by Mr. G. Fryer.
 - 10.—Handicap High Jump, entry 6d; prize 10s by Canon Allnutt.
- Narellan and Cobbitty Handicap, entries close on Boxing Day. Three last performances to accompany entrance.
- Starter, Mr. Sheil; Judges, Messrs. D. Nott, and Stanley Moore; Referee, Mr. E. Cross; Handicappers, Messrs. M. Young, W. Vicary and R. Young.
- TEA MEETING** in the Parish Room. Tickets 1s; Children 6d.
- BAZAAR**—Entrance Free.
- THE CAMDEN BAND** will be on Ground.
- GRAND CONCERT** in the Parish Room at 8 p.m. Chairs 2/-; back seats 1/-.
- W. WILLIAMS,
R. KITCHING,
Hon. Secretaries.

1915 Cobbitty Sports Day Schedule (Camden News)

The Camden Historical Society

meets for lively discussions and guest speakers on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30pm at the Camden Museum on John Street Camden. Interested persons and new members are most welcome. For further information call John on 4655 9210.



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