

## Plod Essay

### Greyhound Racing in Wonthaggi (Part 1)

#### *The Sports Paradise*

Visitors to Wonthaggi or residents who have been here less than 25 years, when they drive past or stop to shop at Bunnings, will have no recollections of the time when the Miners Rest Hotel Motel on the site was one of the most popular music venues outside the metropolitan area. From the 1970s through to the 1980s and the early 1990s, local and visiting bands such as INXS<sup>1</sup> would come regularly to the Miners Rest Motel function room and perform to full houses. The large dining room was also the venue where functions were catered for by renowned chefs. The squash courts on the site were the heart and soul of the extremely popular competitions where local and visiting champions would compete, as well as the place where people who wanted to keep fit or have some fun would go to play. The caravan park was a haven for many visitors and residents who could not afford alternative accommodation.

Not many now elderly Wonthaggians remember it as the site where the visiting circuses would erect their tents in the late 1950s and hardly anybody remembers the time when, from 1938 until 1954, on Saturday night, hundreds, at times thousands of people from Wonthaggi and much further afield would go there, to 'The Sports Paradise', the home of the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club racing track to 'watch the dogs' and more than likely have a bet on the side. It was opposite where I lived as a child. I played in it when it was winding down. I remember the sand tracks, the starting boxes, the grandstand, the gum trees and the high fence. I can vaguely remember the lights at night, the barking of dogs, the cheering of spectators, but I am too young to remember the 'dog course' when it was one of the most active in Victoria, if not in Australia.

#### Greyhound Racing in Early Wonthaggi

The headline in the November 22, 1938, edition of the *Sporting Globe* stated that 'Coursing tradition was well-established in Wonthaggi' even before 'The Sports Paradise' was established and that, 'In the "good old days" of coursing, Wonthaggi was a popular venue for leashmen, who retain vivid recollections of the famous Dalyston Plumpton'<sup>2</sup>, located on land owned by Mr J.P. Daly. It functioned from 1913 until the early 1930s.

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<sup>1</sup> Other bands and singers included Joe Calameri and the Black Sorrows, Mental as Anything, Men at Work, Brian Cadd, Johnny O'Keefe, Hunters and Collectors, Gonna, Kamahl, and The Chamtoosies.

<sup>2</sup> Plumpton refers to the enclosed field in which coursing was held. Beginning in the 1880s, plumptons replaced the traditional open field competitions. The enclosed field had a starting area with enclosures for the hares and the dogs and holes in the fence at the end of the racing area through which the hares could escape into safety pens.

Many of the men who came to Wonthaggi from November 1909 must have been previously involved in greyhound coursing, often called the working man's sport because of its affordability, since in March 1911 the Wonthaggi Coursing Club was formed with Mr Albert C. Warren, as secretary. Negotiations with Mr Heslop to have a coursing enclosure on his racecourse, after initial enthusiasm also on the part of Mr Heslop, broke down. Already at this time, according to an article in the December 9, 1911, edition of *The Leader*, there were 'greyhounds everywhere' in Wonthaggi. After more fruitful negotiations with Mr P.J. Daly, the Wonthaggi and Dalyston Coursing Club was formed. The plumpton was built at a 'heavy cost' on 'ground suitable for coursing' with beautiful views of the surrounding countryside. The last major race was held there in 1929. Attempts to keep the plumpton running continued until 1932. As was the case with so many other businesses and institutions, the demise of the Wonthaggi plumpton was largely due to the Great Depression. Despite its closure, the greyhound tradition in the town continued throughout this dark period and those who could afford it took their dogs to courses mainly in the Melbourne metropolitan area but also as far away as Sale, Benalla and Narrandera. The desire, never dead, to erect an up-to-date, state of the art greyhound coursing facilities in the town itself, grew in intensity as Wonthaggi and the rest of the world recovered from the dark and troubled years of the depression.

### **The Sports' Paradise, The Vision**

The following headline in the November 30, 1938, edition of the *Sporting Globe* announced the imminent opening of the Wonthaggi track to the coursing community.

#### ***£ 8000<sup>3</sup> Sports Arena From Patch of Waste Land***

##### ***Facilities For a Great Range of Sports***

Mostly wasteland - a veritable rubbish tip - only a few months ago is now a commodious and well-appointed sports arena, comprising 13 acres, such is the magic transformation effected to make the new headquarters of the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club one of the best in the Commonwealth. The facilities are such that it will be possible to stage coursing, foot running, cycling, tennis, and even night football. Today, with improvements, the land is worth more than £8000 and when the curtain goes up next Saturday night for the official opening by Mr. W.G. McKenzie, M.L.A. on the initial speed coursing carnival at the famous coal-mining town, visitors and others will receive a pleasant surprise.

The reporter, Mr J. J. Maher then goes on to describe how the project was realised in such a short time and the vision the creators of the greyhound racing track had for the future of the site.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Measuring Worth website £1 in 1938 for a project undertaking corresponds to \$124 in 2024, or to \$208 when the national minimal wage is considered as the base in the calculations. The value above does not include the land, which was leased and remained crown land.

In March of this year two of Wonthaggi's popular citizens and sportsmen, Joe Winslett and Jack Williamson approached Tom Gannon, well-known editor and proprietor of that widely read newspaper the Powlett Express and discussed the prospects of his being associated with the construction of a new speed coursing track in Wonthaggi. To Joe Winslett he said: "Surely you are not serious. I'm fond of the dogs all right but ... to become a director of speed coursing ... that's a bit too big for me".

Undaunted, the pair renewed their overtures two weeks later, with the result that Tom Gannon yielded so far as to go to Sale and Traralgon speed coursing grounds to get a "closeup" of the sport.

"Boys, I'm a hundred per cent with you: the "big job" is on", Tom Gannon said after the visits. The seed sown quickly germinated, with the result that the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club came into being in May. The genial Tom Gannon was the unanimous choice of president, Jack Williamson as organizing secretary, and Joe Winslett, Dave Hade and Bert Banks as members of the executive.

In order to create a state-of-the-art course, Tom Gannon and his colleagues were determined to seek expert advice. As Mr Maher states in his article, they 'made frequent visits to leading metropolitan and several provincial coursing tracks, even as far away as Albury and Shepparton'. The club was fortunate since the project had the support of men who had 'an eye for business,'<sup>4</sup> and of the general public, so much so that they more or less became their own 'architects and contractors.' A small 'army of workers' led by Alf Keighley, who acted as overseer, was employed to turn the 13 acre 'eyesore' at the entrance of the town into the Sports Paradise that would not only cater for greyhound coursing:

Provision also is being made to put in grassed tennis courts for day and night, while the ground will also be made available for drilling<sup>5</sup> and other useful purposes on special occasions. Lighting of the straight and circular dog tracks will be by opal reflector globes imported from England by the British General Electric Company, and which it is claimed will give a daylight effect.<sup>6</sup>

A sort of park was to be established with an avenue of flowering gums, cypress trees for shade in the spectator area, lawns and flower beds at suitable places around the tracks.

When the work on the grounds has been completed, it is proposed to open the gates to the public on Sundays, but the tracks will be closed against training. The reserve at the Northern end of the ground, which has been set aside for a children's playground, is to have swings and see-saws erected when the other portion of the ground has been completed.

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<sup>4</sup> The Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club had to raise the money to finance the project. Using facts and figures provided by other clubs, they convinced investors that greyhound racing was a worthwhile investment and would provide entertainment and positive publicity for the town.

<sup>5</sup> Drilling here refers to the practice of the Citizens Military Force to meet and rehearse military movements such as marching, forming battle formations and becoming familiar with weapons.

<sup>6</sup> The lighting was to be the same as the one in White City London and would cost more than £600.

## Selection of the Site

Initially the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club had intended to purchase land to establish the track. However, after negotiations with the Wonthaggi Recreation

Reserve Committee, the Wonthaggi Borough Council, and the positive results of a petition of residents 'within a barking distance' of the reserve along Korumburra Road, the Council and the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club agreed to the conditions to establish the track there.<sup>7</sup> The economic and social benefits to the town and district were emphasised throughout the negotiations. Impatient to have the track ready for racing by the end of the year, the WSCC club organized men and materials even before a formal agreement had been drafted let alone signed. Mr Jim Churchill of Kilcunda was awarded the contract to erect the track and fencing. Materials and infrastructure were ordered. On June 17 work on the Wonthaggi track started. Three weeks later the works were halted, blocked by the 'noisy killjoy influence' in the town led by Councillors Easton, Fincher and Evans.<sup>8</sup> Undaunted, as Mr Maher states in the above-mentioned article, and perhaps anticipating the opposition, the WSCC club with the support of the local MLA and Wonthaggi Borough Councillor, Mr W.G. McKenzie, quickly agreed on an alternative solution. On July 11, 1938, Mr Gannon, on behalf of the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club, applied for a seven-year lease with the option of renewal for the vacant crown land abutting McKenzie Street.<sup>9</sup> The obstacle of the blocks along McKenzie Street being reserved for housing purposes was soon overcome.<sup>10</sup> A provisional lease was granted to the club on July 22. So sure was the club of being granted the lease that work on the site once again started before they received official notification.<sup>11</sup> Mr Churchill and his team carried out the works of clearing the land for the laying of the track. The public was invited to go and watch the ploughing being carried out by newly developed rotary hoes, promoted as the latest in farm machinery.

In the meantime, negotiations with the National Coursing Council were also fruitful. As the Powlett Express reported:

Four representatives of the Wonthaggi Club waited on the NCC council on Monday [2 May, 1938] Several important and contentious matters were discussed at length. Every courtesy and consideration was given to the deputation, and speaking on behalf of the council, Mr. Roy Maidment, the popular secretary, and the president, Mr C.

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<sup>7</sup> Although unable to find documentary evidence to support my conclusion, I am confident that the site was to be where the Noel West Reserve (Rec 2) is now.

<sup>8</sup> Opposition to greyhound racing was very strong, It came from animal lovers, who argued that the sport was cruel and barbarous, but mostly from the anti-gambling sections of society who emphasised the negative corrupting social and economic effects on families and especially on the young.

<sup>9</sup> In 1929, the Wonthaggi Borough Council had written to the Lands Department to reserve the site 'for aviation purposes' and inquiring as to the feasibility of establishing an airport on the site.

<sup>10</sup> Without the blocks fronting on McKenzie Street the aim of the club to have two tracks, a straight track of 220 yards and a semi-circular track of 440 yards would have been extremely problematic.

<sup>11</sup> The formal lease was only sealed in August 1940, backdated to 1<sup>st</sup> August 1938. Stringent conditions were placed on the lease. The course was to be alcohol-free.

McArthur, gave the assurance that the days applied for would be granted.<sup>12</sup> They also promised the club every assistance, as did the five other members of the council who were present.

The National Coursing Council were very-much involved in the project all through the next six months providing expertise and advice. The majority of the work, however, was carried out by locals, some on a voluntary or semi-voluntary basis.<sup>13</sup>

The men who carried out the work belong to Wonthaggi and District. They all played their respective parts well. It is hard to single out anyone. In the initial stages Mr Neil Hudson, an electrician trained at the State Coal Mine and Mr Alf Keighley were associated with arranging the proposed transformation scene that that has taken place in what was a ti-tree tip. ... as the works proceeded other tradesmen were called in and gave their best. ... They all took a personal interest in the job ... The electrical work, which was completed by the State Coal Mine management under the personal supervision of Mr F. Ashton, the chief electrical engineer, Mr George Beech, electrical foreman and Mr Fosdick will be the admiration of every speed-coursing promotor when they are switched on.

### Promoting the Venture

The Powlett Express published regular weekly updates on the 'splendid progress' being made at the site and took every advantage to publicise the venture including via doggerel poems in 'Strine', most probably penned by Mr Gannon himself. The poet, an imaginary visitor to the town, observed:

Dawgs, dawgs, dawgs, dawgs was all  
I heard from all the fellers there.  
I couldn't make no sense of it and  
scratched me flamin' hair.  
They don't need dawgs for sheep  
down 'ere like in them northern places  
And then it sort of dawned on me -  
they train them for the races.

The concluding verse of the poem published the week before the official opening states:

At last the dawgs are ready: the  
track declared O.K.  
A mob of toffs is with us, and more  
are on the way.  
Reportin' blokes<sup>14</sup> from Melbourne that  
make me feel so small;

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<sup>12</sup> The Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club was granted licence to hold meetings on the prime time of Saturday night and on Tuesdays.

<sup>13</sup> The miners were on strike for six weeks in September and October. Many of the striking miners would almost certainly have been among the tradesmen and labourers who lent a helping hand.

<sup>14</sup> The 'toffs' were VIPs from Melbourne and the 'Reporting blokes', journalists from most of the metropolitan newspapers, in particular the Sporting Globe, which published long articles on the venture, the town and many important Wonthaggi identities of the time.

I wish I hadn't started this or seen  
the town at all.

For rhyming purposes, the poet says that the track had been declared OK. In the main article, Mr Gannon declares with pride that:

They have built their track on the principle of "Nothing but the best" and the result is a 100 per cent track equal to the best in the state. The lighting is the same as that at White City London and the tracks have no peer in Australia. A sawdust and loam compound have made them the fastest thing ever put under the flying feet of a greyhound. Arrangements for signalling the results and facilities for punters are as well-oiled as human ingenuity can make them.

Mr Gannon could have and should have begun many of the sentences with 'we' instead of 'they', since he was very much the leader in the project.

Since greyhound speed coursing was different from traditional plumpton coursing, Mr Gannon published the following for the benefit of the uninitiated members of the Wonthaggi public:

#### **Dressed in red guernseys with caps to match**

Nine intelligent boys will lead nine dogs to the front of the judge's box. When the man in the box is satisfied the starters in the first event are right in number, the boys will take them to the starting box.

In the meantime, the hare will be sent along a unique race from the hare paddock to the trap between the pacemaker's box and the eight graded dog boxes.

"There he goes!" will be the first indication that the race has started. Tim Foley will let you know over the amplifiers the moment the hare has been released. When the hare is safely home, the starter will be notified from the judges box by telephone. He will then release the pacemaker, which is used as a decoy to the eight in the graded box to do their best. When the pacemaker has been given a start of about thirty yards, the handle of the graded box will be released and the eight dogs, with coloured saddle cloths numbered from one to eight, will be sent on their way. The number of the first dog past the post will be switched on by the judge. The man on the microphone will give you all the particulars as soon as the judge names his placings. Providing everything is in order with the winner, a white light will be switched on in the scratching board frame.

The articles announcing the opening were published not only in the Powlett Express and the Sporting Globe <sup>15</sup> but in newspapers and magazines all over Victoria.

#### **The Official Opening**

The much-anticipated gala opening was held on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, a beautiful December evening. It had been well-advertised throughout the state. Mr W.G. McKenzie, MLA, was given the honour of officially switching on the seventy arc lights with the result

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<sup>15</sup> The articles and advertisements in the Sporting Globe were extensive during the whole process.

that 'NIGHT TURNED INTO DAY' as the headline stated. 'THOUSANDS THROG WONTHAGGI FOR OPENING OF SPEED COURSING' was the headline in the Powlett Express edition the Friday after the opening. Everything went well. 'New Track Declared Best in Victoria, Brilliant Lighting: splendid Racing', the subheadings declared. There were dogs and hundreds of punters from as far away as New South Wales.

The final verse in the fourth and last of the poems published in the Powlett Express states:

Now dogs have come into their own,  
I'd say they're here to stay.  
And those that lost on Saturday  
Win another day.  
And 'Thaggi's better off for havin'  
met the chaps who came,  
To set the ball a'rollin in the local  
coursin' game.

Greyhound Racing at the 'Dog Course', as it became known once the 'Sports Paradise' vision was abandoned, were an integral part of the Wonthaggi sporting and leisure scene until 1954. Races were held even during the World War 2 years, when restrictions on such activities were in force. The story of the glory years of the 'Dog Course', of the part it played in Wonthaggi's life and of its demise is for another essay.

The 1930s were troubled years in world history and particularly troubled here in Wonthaggi. After the suffering of the early 1930s due to lay-offs at the mine, the cuts in pay, the worsening of working conditions, the 1934 five month strike, the tragedy of the 1937 Twenty Shaft disaster, the strikes of 1937 and 1938, Wonthaggi needed something that would raise the collective morale of the town, provide a positive, progressive image to the rest of Australia, and attract people to visit and invest here. I am convinced that the men behind the 'Sports Paradise' also had these ideals in mind when they invested their time and money to build the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Track, the first step in their vision to create a Sports' Paradise.



*Letterhead of the Wonthaggi Speed Coursing Club  
Courtesy Simon Longstaff*



### *Aerial view of the "Dog Course" in 1951*

The site and the shape of "The Sports Paradise" greyhound racing track can be clearly identified.

On the left is McKenzie St and, on the right, White Rd.

The main entrance and exit are along McKenzie St. There was a smaller entrance along White Rd, opposite Toorak St, where starting boxes were located.

The white patch near the entrance was the pavilion. Note the many buildings at the Wonthaggi end of the track.

At the intersection between White Road, McKenzie St and Griffiths St, now stands a roundabout.

As can be clearly seen, White Rd, the boundary between the Borough of Wonthaggi and the Shire of Bass, had only been made as far as Kingston Rd.

Note the Housing Commission homes along McKenzie Street, and the expanse of bush between White Rd and the then Southern end of the Wonthaggi township.

Between 1938 and 1951, very little changed in this area.

*Image provided by Simon Longstaff.*

### *Aerial view of the "Dog Course" track area in 2023*



*Image provided by Simon Longstaff.*