

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR CLUBROOMS

In the early days of the club, VAWC used various raceday venues, including the YMCA boatshed on the Yarra, the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds and Olympic Park. With the move of most club races to Albert Park in the 1940's, the need for our own clubrooms took on a higher focus and, over a 15 year period starting in 1948, this need was translated into action and our very own clubrooms were built.

The following 'Heel and Toe' article, published on 28 April 1962 to coincide with the official opening of these new clubrooms in Lakeside Drive in Albert Park, explains how it all happened.

OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY, 28 APRIL 1962

A Social Committee was formed in October 1948 and decided at its inaugural meeting to raise sufficient money to build a clubroom.

Albert Park was felt to be the ideal venue to build, in view of its sporting atmosphere and central position.

Application made to Albert Park Committee of Management in 1949 for a site was unsuccessful. The reason for rejecting our application was given as that we were not an aquatic sport.

Interest lapsed for a period but the Social Committee were still busy raising funds for the day when we would be granted a site on which to build. Further applications for other sites within the Albert park area were made, all of which were unsuccessful.

However, the Chairman Senator P. J. Kennelly was interested in us and eventually asked to meet our trustees, Messrs. Robinson, Theobald and Goble in the winter of 1958. The result of this meeting was that the present site was granted to us. At that time we had approximately £2000 available for the building.

Conditions as to what type of building were laid down by the Albert Park Committee of Management. No second hand bricks were to be used – only cream bricks were allowed for the exterior. Second-hand bricks could be used for the interior walls only. The Albert Park Committee of Management were also against volunteer labour for the shell construction because of the time it would take to complete.

As a result of these stipulations, Frank Doran, a former Club member, was hired to build the shell. Geoff Hall, also a club member, assumed the responsibility of constructing the roof. These tasks were carried out in fine style, but their completion sadly depleted our funds and work came to a halt.

Application to the Commonwealth Bank of Australia resulted in us being granted a loan of £2,000. A condition of the loan was that we find a guarantor for the sum. Accordingly, we applied to the Albert Park Committee of Management to guarantee for us, but our application was unsuccessful and no reason was given for this refusal. An application to Committee of Management for a further loan of £2,000 was also unsuccessful owing to their lack of funds.

Despite these disappointments, functions to raise funds of our own were still being held, and the hopes of our Social Committee were as high as ever.

In January 1961, a scheme suggested by Club member Tom Kelly to launch a Debenture Fund was put into operation and the Fund had reached £1500 by January 1962; 450 short of the £2,000 target. The total number of £10 debentures subscribed was 1455. Of these, Club members purchases 136 while the remaining 17 were purchased by supporters of the club.

Building operations actually commenced in earnest in September 1958, when club members wrecked a former dairy at Kew (with due authority!) Life Member Jim Gaylor supervised the wrecking and loading of trucks with 18,000 second-hand bricks. These were all cleaned by Club members during the summer of 1958-59. Trenches for the foundations were next completed and pouring of concrete was carried out in February 1959. The temperature on that famous day was 108° but 18 members, wearing only shorts and a smile, poured concrete in the 75' x 55' trenches (18" deep, 12" wide) in 3 ½ hours – a wonderful team effort.

All our remaining funds were devoted to constructing the shell and roof, and the building was at last at 'lock-up' stage.

Our tireless Social Committee redoubled their efforts and following the successful response to the Debenture Fund, work was again recommenced on May 14th 1961. All interior work has been carried out through working bees each Sunday since that date. The chief toilers in these working parties were the Club President, Mr. A.E. Robinson and Life Members Messrs. Jacobson, Theobold and Goble. Others who contributed many hours to the construction were Messrs. R. Goulding, T. Daintry, T. Kelly, A. Hancock, G. Breen, R. Gardiner, E. Allsopp, K. Inifer, A. Pomeroy, C. Fraser and L. Fortune. Many other members contributed even as much as one hours work – all of which brought the finished product much closer.

It is of some interest that since work commenced on the final stage of our Club rooms, Messrs. Robinson, Jacobson, Theobold and Goble have not missed a Sunday from their allotted task. These members all have the distinction of being Life Members of the Club and have been an inspiration to younger members.

The work is not as yet completed but we are grateful to ex-Club member Laurie Mack for his supervision and help in arranging for the plumbing to the present stage.

We are proud of what we have achieved and trust that the sport of walking will flourish in the future because of the efforts of the hard-working members.

(Information for this article was kindly produced by Mr. N.L. Goble, our Club Secretary.)

At the official opening, on 28th April 1962, before an attendance of two hundred members, officials, supporters and friends, Mr Ray Meagher, M.L.A., officially opened the clubrooms, which were called Robinson Hall, in recognition of long term club president Alf Robinson. The various speakers praised the work on the committee and workers who were responsible for the building and the Social Committee which had worked tirelessly since it was formed in 1948.

Luckily, some of these speakers were captured for posterity by a young Gary Field in a series of photos which were recently passed onto us by Gary.



VAWC President Alf Robinson speaks to the assembled crowds



Stuart Embling speaks on behalf of V.A.A.A. Social Committee members Elsie Jacobson and Lil Neville are in the background.



Mr Ray Meagher M.L.A. Cuts the ribbons to officially open the clubrooms

The clubrooms were used continuously for the next 22 years until their untimely demise in 1995. But more of that later.



The clubrooms – summer race day, early 1980s.

Although the new clubrooms had opened in April 1962, work on the building was by no means complete. The porch at the entrance to the clubrooms was completed in 1964. In 1967, Tom Daintry erected partitioning to extend the male change-rooms. In the early 1970s, remedial work was done on the sanitary system. When major renovations were done in 1976, it was Tom once again who did the timberwork for an additional dressing room. Charlie Jacobson, treasurer and life member of the club, took on the job of general maintenance man and performed this role extremely well. Regular working bees were scheduled for painting and such like and I remember participating myself as a young club member in the early seventies.

Having the clubrooms meant having a home. It enabled us to conduct races, hold coaching courses and to run social events. Road races could be held on Lakeside Drive on Wednesday nights during the summer and on weekends during the winter, right outside the front door of the clubrooms. Racewalking flourished.



A bbq in the clubrooms, circa 1990

Alas, nothing lasts forever. As the Melbourne love affair with the car intensified in the 1980s, heavier traffic on Lakeside Drive meant that our main road course was no longer safe and races had to be moved to the side road in front of the basketball stadium. This was an inadequate solution as the course there was a maximum of 500m up and 500m back and the road surface was uneven. Very soon, venues like Fisherman's Bend and the Knox Industrial Estate had to be sourced for major races. We had clubrooms but they were no longer ideally situated.

Melbourne's 1988 bid to stage the 1996 Olympic Games prompted a review of the Albert Park Lake area and saw the release of a plan to build a sports and aquatic centre and upgrade other facilities. During consultations with the planners, the club was advised that the V.A.W.C. clubrooms might be either demolished or be required to be renovated and let out for hire and used as a shared facility.

Although the Olympic bid failed, planning continued for the park restructure and the new aquatic centre. With some consultation and submissions from park users, a strategy plan was published and Melbourne Water was appointed by the Labor government as park administrator in 1992.

Following the election of the Kennett Liberal Government, administration of the park was taken over by Melbourne Parks & Waterways (MP&W) and yet another plan for the park redevelopment was released in early December 1993. Two weeks later the Premier announced that the Formula One Grand Prix would be held at Albert Park from 1996 onwards. A dramatically altered plan followed and major works commenced with the re-routing of Aughtie Drive through the sporting ovals and the removal of 1000 trees.

Our club, renamed Victorian Race Walkers Club (V.R.W.C.) at the Annual General Meeting in Nov 1993, joined the Albert Park Users Group to negotiate our future, as all buildings at the north eastern end of the park were to be demolished. Alas, all efforts to negotiate failed and the clubrooms were scheduled for demolition in early 1995.

With the demise of the clubrooms only weeks away, a final wake was held on 4th February 1995. This event attracted many current and past members, including some whose involvement went back 65 years. One final race was held outside Robinson Hall, over a distance of 50 metres, and each attendee was presented with a commemorative certificate.



The final wake – with Lakeside Drive already being demolished – and the clubrooms soon to follow



The wake – one last club photo before the demolition

The following weekend a working bee cleared the clubrooms and stored all our equipment at the Powerhouse clubrooms on Lakeside Drive. M.P.& W. had proposed allowing the club to close two lanes of Lakeside Drive for

racing at weekends but this was not a realistic alternative. During the next twelve months, various options for accommodation and race circuits were offered, including bike paths, but these were rejected due to the narrow width of the paths.

Later developments saw the construction of wide pathways, required for Grand Prix vehicle access, close to the light rail line on the western side of the lake. From the options of accommodation offered by M.P. & W, our committee was attracted to the Middle Park Bowling Club due to their excellent facilities and their proximity to these wider pathways. After several encouraging discussions with the MPBC Executive, our first race meeting was held at this venue on 21st January 1996, followed by a luncheon in the bowling club's function room.

Following the success of that day, formal agreements were drawn up with MPBC and, in March 1996, the former caretaker's residence, now renamed Robinson Hall, became the new headquarters of the V.R.W.C. The Honour boards that had been stored after the demolition of the previous rooms were hung in the main room and our new club headquarters were available for use.

The turmoil of the previous few years and the lack of a viable home course had wreaked havoc with the club and racing numbers were now small. A period of rebuilding was now needed and it was not until some years later that the club regained critical mass. Since then, club numbers have grown steadily year by year as the new clubrooms have delivered over and above expectations. Nothing lasts forever but we are hopeful that, for the foreseeable future, we can continue to use our current clubrooms and can continue to race in the Albert Park area.



The new clubrooms circa 2003 - Kimberley Coltman, Megan Szirom and Simone Wolowiec