

Northcote Cricket Club

A few name changes, and several venue changes aside; the Northcote Cricket Club can trace its history back to the mid 1870s. The club's first recorded meeting was on July 17th 1875 and was organised by Northcote pioneer George Plant. The club played its matches at Plant's Paddock in its early years, a field that sat at the base of Rucker's Hill in what is now the Westgarth precinct, where the pitch conditions made batting extremely difficult. A score in double figures was quite an achievement for any batsman padding up at Plant's Paddock!

In 1878 the club changed its name to Northcote Star Cricket Club but continued to play its home matches at Plant's Paddock. At this same time, another team playing at Northcote Park, in Westgarth St, and called the Northcote Park Cricket Club had emerged and would no doubt have been the chief rival to the Northcote Star Cricket Club. In addition a club based near the old asylum at Yarra Bend, several other 'social' teams based around Northcote and a few clubs from rural but growing Preston provided ample local opposition in addition to matches that could be arranged against clubs further a field.

During the 1870s and into the 1880s, Northcote Star established itself as the leading cricket club in the area. One of its notable early achievements was dismissing an entire team from Preston for just one run. This one run came courtesy of a bye from the first ball of the innings. The bowler was McIntosh, and he proceeded to clean bowl the next five batsmen with five consecutive deliveries. He finished with seven wickets, while team mate Morris collected the other three. The innings was over in fewer than three overs.

Having been runner up to Collingwood based club 'Capulet' for the Armfield Brothers Cup after a narrow defeat in the final match, Northcote Star eventually did capture the fledgling township's first sporting trophy in 1890, winning the Alliance Cup. The final was played at Sumner's Paddock, in St Georges Rd, which is now Merri Park. The opposition was Fitzroy Imperial and the 104 run victory was achieved without the aid of star batsman H. Brice, who had earned a prize as the competition's leading run scorer. Brice had scored 148 in an earlier match against Clifton Hill, quite possibly the first century by a cricketer in Darebin. The club's prize was not a cup, but a marble clock, valued at 10 guineas.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the club's breakthrough had come in its first season playing on the privately owned ground at the Croxton Park Hotel. The move to the Hotel's ground would provide a boost to Northcote Star in membership, but would also become a source of controversy in later years. The move had been instigated by the president of the club Walter Stott, a prominent local estate agent who would remain as club president with virtually no interruption, until his death in 1938. Stott's influence on the club cannot be underestimated, he remains one of the key figures in the club's history.

In 1892 Northcote Star changed its name to Northcote. Throughout the decade of the 1890s, a trying one economically for all of Melbourne with the

end of the land boom, Northcote Cricket Club remained strong. Northcote Park Cricket Club would be wound up during this time, as were many other sporting clubs in Darebin.

The club enjoyed success in the junior competitions around Melbourne. These were not age specific, but rather implied a lower standard than that set by the elite clubs of Melbourne like the Melbourne Cricket Club. One of the highlights of this era was the club's victory in the prestigious Sports Depot Trophy in 1894, which was their debut season in the competition. A seven-match season saw Northcote hosting the final against Richmond City at Croxton Park. Over four Saturdays in May and June Northcote terrorised Richmond City. Having dismissed the visitors for 152, Northcote batsmen piled on 468, a record for a junior competition in Melbourne. Two batsman, Lansdowne and Coomber, made centuries. In their second innings, Richmond City were dismissed for just 47, leaving Northcote victors by a massive margin of an innings and 269 runs.

In 1903 the Northcote Council appointed a part-time gardener to Northcote Park in Westgarth Street. This was well overdue, as the park had been neglected for many years. It wasn't long before the oval was significantly improved with the grass being well tended and a new fence built around the oval. As such the council offered Northcote Cricket Club use of the newly improved Northcote Park. This proved to be opportune timing as there was increasing opposition to the presence of sport at Croxton Park. The temperance unions in particular were not happy with the association of sport and drinking, and while this was more of a problem in football season, the cricket club could also sense the wisdom of moving from Croxton Park where unruly crowd elements, with nothing to do with either the Northcote Cricket or Football Clubs, were causing great disturbance.

In 1905 Northcote Park had its first turf wicket installed, after years of playing on hard earth and then matting, cementing Northcote Park as the hub of sports in Northcote. At the same time, Victorian cricket was going through a transitional phase. The Victorian Cricket Association (VCA) was in talks with the rival Victorian Cricket League (VCL) with a view of restructuring Melbourne's club competition into a single competition with multiple grades for competing clubs. The VCL agreed to amalgamate with the VCA following their respective 1905/06 seasons with the clubs from both joining the new competition called District Cricket, under the management of the VCA. Northcote was invited to join and were placed in the second division for the inaugural season of 1906/07. As had been agreed, the club winning the second division premiership would be promoted to the first division at the expense of the first division's last placed club. Northcote won the second division premiership in that first season and thus were playing in Melbourne's elite cricket competition in the 1907/08 season. This system of promotion was abandoned by the beginning of the 1908/09 season. Northcote, who had benefited from the system, now benefited from its abandonment as they finished last that season!

By the beginning of the 1911/12 season, Northcote had been showing steady improvement, culminating in a runners-up finish to Prahran in the 1910/11 season. The club had a balanced team, though N. Brown would have a standout season in 1911/12, topping the club's batting averages while placing second in bowling average and wickets taken. The club completed the entire season, 11 matches, without defeat, winning each match. They were declared premiers without the need for a finals series.

By 1914 the Northcote Cricket Club had raised £1,000 to put towards the construction of new stand at Northcote Park, largely through subscriptions. The stand was great contrast to the rustic stand at Croxton Park and further added to the pressure on the Northcote Football Club to rejoin the Cricket Club at Northcote Park, having returned to Croxton Park in 1908. The club opened the stand at its first match of the 1914/15 season in October.

With war having broken out, one of Northcote's young stars, Frank Lugton enlisted. Lugton was only the second Northcote player to be selected for Victoria. Sadly, he would be the first Victorian State Cricketer to perish in the First World War.

After the war, one of Northcote Cricket Club's first Victorian State Representatives, Dr Albert Hartkopf, was promoted to the national team. Hartkopf was one of the great all round sportsman of his generation, having excelled at cricket, football and athletics, as well as achieving a medical degree. He was 35 when he received the call up to the Australian team in 1925 and despite hitting 80 in the side's first innings, he was dropped after one match due to his poor return with the ball. Hartkopf was the first, but not the last Northcote player to be selected to play for Australia.

Northcote qualified for the final of the 1925/26 season, losing to St Kilda. It would be 40 years before the club would make it back to the final game of the season, and it would be the presence of Northcote's greatest ever player, William (Bill) Lawry, that would ensure a remarkable victory. Northcote had by this time established the nickname of the Dragons and they went into the final against Essendon, nicknamed the Bombers, as massive underdogs. The Bombers had been premiers two years earlier and had already claimed the overall VCA championship for the 1965/66 season, awarded to the season's most successful club across all grades. After declaring their innings closed at 9/514, the Bombers appeared to have the First XI Premiership in their grasp, but Lawry, an established member of the national team and enjoying the finest form of his career, had other ideas. Opening the batting with Wayne Robinson, the pair put on 130 before Robinson fell. Unfazed by the loss of his partner, Lawry continued to pound a highly credentialed Essendon bowling attack all over the Albert Ground. Four more Dragon wickets would fall before Lawry reached a massive 282 not out and the Dragons would eclipse the Bombers total to record a famous victory in one of the more memorable District Cricket finals in history. Both Lawry's individual score, and the team total of 5/516 remain Northcote Club records.

In 1973/74, the Northcote Dragons would complete another fairytale, winning the First XI Premiership over Melbourne after finishing last the previous season. Bill Lawry had moved on to a short stint at St. Kilda by this time, after 24 years of service to Northcote. The Dragons of 1973/74 were a young side, with three players, still in their early 20s, who would go on to international careers. Rodney Hogg, Gary Cosier and Richie Robinson, would all play Test cricket and all featured in Northcote's Premiership winning team, with Robinson hitting the final's top score of 93 not out. Neither Cosier nor Hogg stayed long at Northcote, both moved on to South Australia to play Sheffield Shield cricket, but Cosier returned in 1980/81 and was the first Northcote player to win the Jack Ryder medal for outstanding player of the season.

While success has never come easily to Northcote, the club can boast Premierships in each of the last four decades, with wins in 1986/87 and then in 1996/97. The club continues to call Northcote Park home, as it has for more than 100 years. It also continues to uncover new talent, with several Northcote alumni of recent years earning national selection, including Adam Dale and Mick Lewis.

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