

Carlton Community History Group

Carlton Chronicles

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Cycle racing and the Carlton Cycling Club

In the late 19th and early 20th century, one of the more popular sports in Melbourne was cycle racing. This began as bicycle touring, and there were a number of bicycle touring clubs that organized outings for their male and female bicycle-riding members into the countryside. But out of this grew the sport of cycle racing, which took place either around a circular track or over long distances on roads.

One of the earliest and most successful of the racing clubs was the Carlton Cycling Club, which began in the 1890s. It organized regular races for its members, usually out in the countryside at Campbellfield, and fielded teams in competitions with other clubs. In June 1896, for example, *The Age* newspaper reported that the club organized a race “to the 11-mile post on the Bulla-road and back to Queen's College (22 miles), starting from the corner of Elgin and Lygon streets”. According to a newspaper report: “Great interest was taken in the race, some 300 or 400 people witnessing the start”. It is not clear where in Carlton the cyclists had their club rooms, but wherever they were, they were well equipped and offered members a wide range of sporting and social activities in addition to cycling. A 1909 newspaper report noted that:

Things are in full swing at the rooms of the Carlton Cycling and Social Club. The punching ball, home trainers, and other athletic appliances are in great demand. The new hot and cold showers have proved to be a great boon to the pedal pushers. The rifle range has turned out a great success, and some excellent shooting is witnessed every night.

In the 1890s many of the cycle clubs had a Cycle Polo team. This was a game similar to the horse mounted one but played on bicycles. An 1899 article in the *Ballarat Star* noted that the Carlton Cycling Club's polo team, “reputed to be one of the best teams now playing for the metropolitan premiership”, was coming up to Ballarat to play a local team.



(Photo: Alfred Salvage, Carlton, State Library of Victoria)

In the early 1890s, as cycling sports were taking off in Victoria, a large cycle racing track was constructed on the northern side of the Exhibition Building where the Museum now stands. The track had grandstand seating for about 3,000 people and standing room for thousands more. Arc lights were added in 1905, making it Australia's premier cycle track with international champions regularly competing there. It was a popular attraction for over half a century. Refurbished several times over the years, it was by the 1920s being used for both cycle and low-powered motorcycle races. An oval board track was constructed in 1936 but removed in 1939 after a Supreme Court ruling that it restricted free public access to the grounds. During the Second World War, the Exhibition Building was taken over by the Royal Australian Air Force, and when they moved out in 1946, the track was completely unusable. It was eventually removed to make way for a migrant reception centre, ending nearly sixty years of cycling at the Exhibition Building.



(Photo: State Library of Victoria)

Before, During and After Restoration

The three red-brick houses at 579 to 583 Canning Street, near the Pigdon Street corner, are notable for their distinctive architectural design and decorative brickwork, and show different degrees of restoration. The left-hand house in the terrace has had restorative work done, with new tuckpointing on the entire façade, while the middle house has been partly restored at the ground floor level. The third house still has the original untouched brickwork. Regrettably, the façade of the corner shop has been painted over at some stage and the brickwork would require extensive cleaning



579 to 585 Canning Street, North Carlton. (Photo: CCHG)

before being restored to its former glory. However, some of the advertising signage dating back to its days as a corner shop and milk bar has been retained. The history of the site dates back to 1876, when John Ward became the original crown land owner of the block on the south west corner of Canning and Scotchmer (later Pigdon) streets. After several changes of ownership, Thomas Allison bought the vacant land in 1888. In July 1889, Mr Allison lodged a notice of intent to build "six 2-storey houses" on the corner of Canning and Pigdon streets. Construction work was still in progress in 1890. In the meantime, the building specifications had changed and one of the six houses was built as a shop on the corner. The Melbourne City Council rate books for 1890 listed three houses and a shop as "erecting" in Canning Street (numbers 579 to 585), and two houses around the corner in Pigdon Street (now numbers 75 and 77). The buildings were completed by 1891.

A poignant memorial

The photo at right shows a monument in Royal Parade, Parkville, that was erected in 1925 by monumental mason Morgan Jageurs, of the local firm Jageurs and Sons Ltd. It commemorates those men of the district who died in the First World War, and among the names of those killed is that of Morgan's son, Corporal John Jageurs, who fought at Gallipoli and was killed in 1916 on the western front in France.

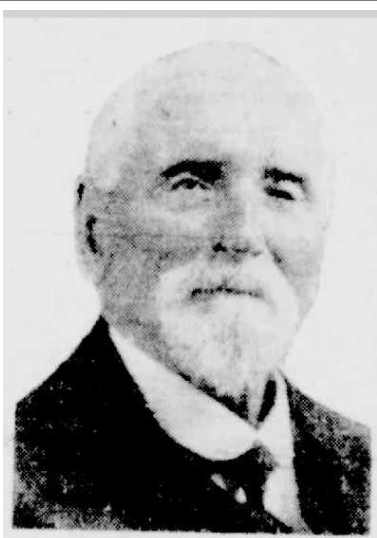
The Jageurs were a prominent family in the Irish Catholic community in Melbourne. Morgan was originally from Ireland and had come to Australia as a child. John was the eldest of his five children. He attended the Christian Brothers' School in North Melbourne and shared his father's deep interest in Ireland and Irish politics. At the outbreak of the First World War, 19-year-old John was working in the Victorian public service, but persuaded his father to allow him to enlist. At Gallipoli he was wounded by a shell blast and evacuated to hospital in Malta. After recuperating in Malta and England, he re-joined his Battalion in Egypt, before sailing to France to fight on the Western Front. On 29 July 1916, his Battalion was in the front line at Pozières in France. John, who had been promoted to corporal, was in an advanced position with his section commander. The two were killed instantly when a German shell exploded nearby. He was 21 years old, and has no known grave.



(Photo: City of Melbourne Collection)

Wine sold on the same site for 150 years

In the 19th century and for most of the 20th century, Australia was a nation of beer drinkers and wine was drunk by very few. Pubs serving beer were everywhere and wine shops were not common. Yet as early as 1875 there was a wine shop in Carlton - on the site now occupied by Jimmy Watson's restaurant in Lygon Street. The original wine shop was established there in 1875 by a Frenchman, Louis Soumprou and run by him and later by members of his family for 60 years. In 1935 the business was sold to Jimmy Watson whose family have now run a wine bar and restaurant there for a further 90 years. So wine has been sold on that site for 150 years – first by the Soumprou family and then by the Watsons.



Louis Soumprou (Photo: Sun News Pictorial)

Louis Soumprou had an interesting background. Born in the Toulouse district of France in 1829, he had as a young man intended to try his fortunes on the goldfields of California. In 1853 he and several companions went to Le Havre to embark for America but to their great disappointment found that they had missed their ship. Not wishing to give up the idea of getting rich from gold, they changed their plans and decided to try their luck on the Australian goldfields. Soumprou ended up on the diggings at Creswick in Central Victoria where he eventually established a general store that he ran for nearly 20 years. In 1875 he moved to Melbourne and opened a wine shop and tobacconist in Lygon Street. Fifteen or so years later, he retired and handed over the running of the shop to younger members of his family. When he celebrated his 100th birthday in May 1929 he had around him five generations of his descendants. Louis Soumprou died at his home in Lygon Street in April 1930, aged 101.

Carlton Personality - Gina Basso

For seven decades, dressmaker and seamstress Gina Basso was a fixture in Rathdowne Village shopping strip in North Carlton. The skills that she had refined over many decades meant that even when she was in her eighties customers were still coming through the door of her unassuming shop. The shop was a very compact space with sewing machines side-by-side, a cutting desk, a small change room, a full-length mirror, and brightly coloured clothes hung ready to be picked up.

Her life as a seamstress had begun when she was a teenager in her village in northern Italy after the Second World War. There she met Giacomo Basso who was training as a tailor after serving as a soldier during the war. The two met and fell in love. Older than Gina, Giacomo decided to escape the hardships of post-war Italy and migrate to Australia. This was in 1951. Two years later, the 21-year-old Gina married her love by proxy while they were apart on opposite sides of the world. Immediately afterwards, she left her family and boarded a ship to meet her new husband in Melbourne. Giacomo put a payment down on a dilapidated former barber's shop on Rathdowne Street, and there the two set up a home and business, working side by side providing the community with well-tailored ladies' and men's garments.

The fashion world however evolved over the years. In a 2015 interview for a magazine Gina said: "We used to make everything by hand in those days, we didn't have machines. Then when the factories opened up, we started losing our jobs. People started buying more ready-made clothes because it was cheaper". However, there were still many who appreciated the expertise, fine tailoring and attention to detail that the Bassos could provide, and they remained busy.



Gina in her shop in Rathdowne Village in 2015.
(Photo: Tom Ross).

When asked about returning to Italy in the 2015 interview Gina said: "My father came out here thirty-five years ago. He just came to visit. I went back just once, forty years ago. My husband never went back. And we've been through some hard times, so there was no money, he was then sick too". In his later years Giacomo suffered two heart attacks and was not able to work. He died in 2014.

Even in her 80s, Gina continued to work four days a week at her century-old Dürkopp Adler sewing machine, often with her granddaughter Emily Basso, a fashion design student, on a modern Janome machine beside her. Gina Basso died on 1 June 2023, aged 90.

This publication, Carlton Chronicles, is produced and distributed four times a year.
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Italian society celebrates its 100th anniversary

In Lygon Street, Carlton, opposite the Melbourne General Cemetery, is a building called the Eolian Hall (see photo) which is the home of the *Società Isole Eolie* (Society of the Aeolian Islands). The Society was founded in Melbourne in 1925, and this year celebrates its 100th anniversary.



(Photo: Società Isole Eolie)

It was originally founded as a social, cultural and welfare organization offering assistance to migrants from the Aeolian Islands, providing them with a place to meet as well as moral and financial assistance in times of need. The Aeolian Islands are a group of volcanic islands 30 to 80 kilometres off the north coast of Sicily, and in the 19th and 20th centuries, many left the islands seeking a better life in America, Argentina and Australia. Today there is a substantial community of Aeolians (*Eoliani* in Italian) in Melbourne, descendants of those who migrated here. In 1968 the Society acquired the building in Lygon Street, which had been opened in 1933 as a cultural centre for the Yiddish-speaking Jewish community.

The Society's website says: 'Today as times change and a newer generation is stepping forward, we have a more general focus operating within the wider Italian community, to retain traditional links with the Aeolian Islands and their rich ties with the sea, while keeping alive, in an Australian social setting, customs and practices, such as our history, music, arts, Mediterranean cuisine and renowned pastries'.



Members of the *Società Isole Eolie* marching under the flags of Italy and Australia at the Eucharistic Festival in Rupertswood in 1935. The festival was a major annual event for Melbourne's Catholics, and in particular for the Italian communities. (Photo: Società Isole Eolie)

Conflagration on Christmas Day

On Christmas morning in 1927 a pall of oily smoke hung over Carlton. Had someone's Christmas dinner caught fire? The source of the fire was soon traced to a factory in Pitt Street and, much to the consternation of local residents, it was not the first fire incident on the premises. In January 1927 there had been a small fire that was quickly brought under control. However, this time it was a very different fire.

The two-storey building at 20-22 Pitt Street dated back to 1870, when it was first licensed as the Glen Castle Hotel. The hotel was re-named the Newhaven Hotel in June 1896, and the Football Club Hotel in August 1898. The building was damaged in a heavy storm and lightning strike on Christmas

Day in 1893. According to newspaper reports “two chimneys were demolished, and slates were torn from the roof and hurled all over the street”. Fortunately nobody was injured, but two upstairs rooms suffered extensive damage. There was tragic incident at the hotel in July 1909, when a barman, John Ashman, committed suicide on the premises.

Liquor licensing records show regular transfers, with some licences held for less than a year, and several convictions for Sunday trading. The final licence transfer application was advertised in September 1915. The hotel was among several Carlton hotels deprived of their licenses by the Licensers Reduction Board in December 1915.

Alexander Pollock, engineer and oil merchant, bought the former hotel building in 1920. Pollock conducted his business as the Quadrant Oil Company, and he and his wife lived at the rear of the premises. On Christmas Day in 1927 this was no ordinary domestic fire. Highly inflammable drums of oil were stored on the premises and, as the fire brigade soon discovered, tins of petrol. The Eastern Hill fire brigade worked heroically to contain the blaze, at considerable risk to themselves, as drums of oil threatened to explode. The firemen even managed to save Mrs Pollock’s handbag, which contained a large amount of money in notes. Mrs Dobles, who lived next door sustained some damage to her house and, unfortunately, she was not insured. In the aftermath of the fire, questions were asked about why such a high fire-risk business was allowed to operate in a largely residential area.



The Warehouse at 20-22 Pitt Street, Carlton.
(Photo: CCHG)

Alexander Pollock had the factory rebuilt and it took a full year from 28 March 1928, when the plans were first lodged with Melbourne City Council, to 1 April 1929, when construction was completed to the satisfaction of the building inspector. The cost of the rebuild was covered by insurance. However, in the meantime Alexander Pollock’s business lost a year’s income and he had to find alternative accommodation. He was living in Pigdon Street, North Carlton, at the time of application. The new factory housed a less hazardous business, operated by Ted’s Products, manufacturers of nut products and fruit cordials. The nut processors moved out in the mid-1940s and the arc welders moved in. The building was bought by Activarc Pty Ltd in 1957, and the premises were shared with B. & E. Berry, engineers. Nut processing gave way to the nuts and bolts of engineering. A major change occurred in 1973, when the building was acquired by the Housing Commission of Victoria and subsequently renovated to meet conditions for use as a public building. The building later served as a community centre, appropriately named “The Warehouse”. In the 2010s, this warehouse building was redeveloped as a private residence, and it was most recently advertised for sale in May 2021.

Membership fees for 2026 are now due

**Help finance the preservation of Carlton’s history by becoming
a financial member of the Carlton Community History Group**

**The membership fee is \$20 for a calendar year,
and can be paid by cheque, or bank transfer:**

**BSB: 063-014 Account number: 10198637
Name of account: Carlton Community History Group**