

# CAMPERDOWN AND ITS CUP

HEART AND SOUL OF COUNTRY RACING

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Ten Bag Press  
120 Victoria Street, Ballarat East  
Victoria 3350, Australia

First published 2013

Photographs © Noel Butcher, Andrew Chapman and Jaime Murcia, 2013  
Foreword © The Hon. Dr Denis Napthine MP, 2013  
Introduction © Adam McNicol, 2013

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National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Butcher, Noel  
Chapman, Andrew  
Murcia, Jaime  
McNicol, Adam  
    Camperdown and its cup: Heart and soul of country racing  
    ISBN 978-0-646-91098-7

1. Australia history
2. Sports

Designed and typeset by Philip Campbell Design  
Printed in China by Australian Book Connection

*Camperdown and its cup: Heart and soul of country racing* was published with support from:  
Dr Adam Testro  
Dr John Daffy  
Mr Graeme Bant (in memory of Bev Bant)  
Mr Geoffrey Daffy

**Opposite** The stables at 'Meningoort', the historic property owned by the McArthur family for more than 170 years. *Jaime Murcia*

**Page 4** Junior fashions on the field. *Noel Butcher*

**Page 7** Racecourse judge Tony Heffernan. *Jaime Murcia*

# CONTENTS

Message	5
Introduction	6
Camperdown: soul of the west	15
The big lead up	47
They're racing!	99
Colourful racing identities	155
Acknowledgements	190





## PREMIER'S MESSAGE

Growing up at Winchelsea and living my life in the Western District I have relished many terrific days at country racecourses - and there is no better place to trek to the turf than Camperdown.

Camperdown racing encompasses all of the values of great country racing. The racecourse is rich with heritage, the Camperdown community is entwined with the local racing industry and the numbers are large when it comes to a roll-up on raceday.

When Cup Day comes around every Summer, the town is abuzz with people and horses alike groomed to their very best. Whether in search of a racing victory, a Fashions on the Field title or a winning flutter, all in attendance at Camperdown races have a great day out.

Racing is of course a fantastic sport and event, but it is also a critical contributor to local economies through breeding of thoroughbreds, racing, training and provision of hospitality and other equine related services. The Camperdown Turf Club and racecourse are the fulcrum of the local industry.

The Camperdown Turf Club, its many workers and volunteers over almost 150 years are to be applauded for their dedication to racing at Camperdown. I wish the Club many more years of success and happy punting!

**Hon. Dr Denis Napthine MP**

Premier of Victoria  
Minister for Racing



# A DAY AT THE CAMPERDOWN RACES

By Adam McNicol

AS THE horses enter the mounting yard in the minutes before the 2013 Camperdown Cup, trainers give some final instructions to their jockeys as racing fans of all ages lean over the rail, trying to find additional justification for why they have backed a particular steed. Legendary bush jockey 'Nifty' Neville Wilson surveys the scene. A man who rode in more Camperdown Cups than he can remember during a riding career that lasted 50 years and yielded more than 2000 winners, Nifty is still getting used to not taking part in the on-track action. Nearby, family groups crowd around large tables packed onto the lawn near the winning post. For many of them, Camperdown's once-a-year race meeting provides the perfect excuse for a gathering of their clans. John and Kevin Daffy are among the people who come 'home' every year to soak up the atmosphere and renew old ties. The Daffy family is steeped in racing. Its silver-haired, yarn-spinning patriarch, Geoff Daffy, is a six-time Camperdown Cup-winning trainer.

Away from the lawn, the betting ring is packed with eager punters. The bookies, some with old leather bags hanging from their shoulders, busily adjust their digital odds boards as money pours in for hot favourite, The Wingman. Not far from the tapping of computer keys and printing of receipts, drinks are being dispensed by smiling volunteers working in the bar, a building clad in rusting corrugated iron. One young lady, dressed in the type of finery that would not be out of place at the Melbourne Cup, shares a small bottle of champagne with a friend. A few metres away, a 'Hen' on her pre-wedding day out with her mates laughs as she wrestles with a piece of slightly lurid paraphernalia that her friends have given her to mark the occasion. A young man wearing a yellow one-day cricket uniform from the 1990s, with "Boon" scrawled across his back, saunters past. Dressed in smarter attire is Geoffrey Faber, one of Camperdown's many notable residents. The Australian representative for Qatari royal Sheik Fahad al-Thani, Faber collected the 2011 Melbourne Cup and 2012 Caulfield Cup after one of the Sheik's horses, Dunaden, won both races.

Camperdown Turf Club president Laurie Hickey surveys the crowd of around 3000 and soaks up the bubbling atmosphere with a smile. There is hardly a cloud in the sky and the temperature has reached the mid-20s. The troubled times of a few years

before, when dwindling attendances ignited fears that the Camperdown racetrack was going to be downgraded to a training facility, seem in the distant past. "This is certainly one of the better crowds we've had," Hickey says. "We're very excited about it."

Amid the hubbub, however, the 110-year-old Federation-style grandstand lies empty. Mesh fences have been placed across its staircases, preventing anyone from sampling the brilliant views of the home straight and surrounding farmland that are visible when sitting on the wooden bench seats. A wave of nostalgia sweeps over lifelong horseman Len Barling as he surveys the back of the building and the tiny windows built into the south wall, where punters once queued to place their bets on the Melbourne and interstate races. In those days the committee room was under the grandstand, and Len remembers being invited there for a drink on a couple of occasions when his horses won races at Camperdown. Peering through the only window not boarded up, Barling sees that the old committee room is thick with dust and pieces of racing detritus that have been left there in the years since it last hosted a function.

Yet the very fact that the grandstand is still standing is a miracle in itself. In the early 2000s, it was condemned after years of neglect and plans were put in place for its demolition. But the very real prospect that a wrecking-ball would be put through one of Camperdown's most famous buildings sparked a passionate reaction in the community. "The yellow sticker went on, it seemed that it was gone, and at the point people were saying, 'That's okay.' But obviously it's far from okay, because without this grandstand, what is this?" asks John Daffy, gazing across the race track. "This grandstand is what the Camperdown Turf Club is all about. The grandstand is the club's ultimate possession. So there were enough people in the town that put their hands up and said, 'That can't be right.'" John's brother Peter, who still lives in Camperdown, was among the people who fought for the old building when it seemed its time was up. The first president of the Grandstand Restoration Committee, he organised for another engineer to give a second opinion. "The guy's name is Peter Yttrup and he's from Geelong," John explains. "He is a world-leading expert in wooden structures. He came along, took the yellow sticker off, and told us we could fix it. That was a great moment. We believed from that point that it was going to be saved, and it is." Confirmation that the grandstand would survive came when Heritage Victoria added the building





to its state register of significant buildings on March 9, 2006. “Heritage Victoria has deemed the grandstand to be of architectural and historical significance to the state because it is the only Federation-style grandstand of its type left in Victoria, and it is one of the largest racecourse grandstands in rural Victoria,” says Grandstand Restoration Committee secretary Mary Hay.

In many ways, the state of the grandstand is a metaphor for the state of racing in Camperdown. In the 1930s, crowds of more than 10,000 turned out for the Camperdown Cup meeting, which was a two-day festival of country sport and hospitality. Countless people travelled by steam train from Melbourne, and a spot in the 1500-seat grandstand was a privilege enjoyed by the most prominent folk in attendance. Back then, the Camperdown Turf Club was home to some of the most influential racing people and some of the most well-known horses in all of Australia.

\* \* \*

HORSE RACES have been held on the site of the Camperdown track since 1867, and relics of the region’s rich racing history are scattered throughout the lush volcanic plains that surround the town. A few kilometres to the south-east is ‘Talindert’, a property made famous by Sir Chester Manifold. A legend of a man, who was the chairman of the Victoria Racing Club in Melbourne between 1951 and ‘62, Sir Chester led the campaign to legalise off-course betting. After much lobbying of government and the churches, he achieved his goal when the Victorian Totalisator Agency Board was created in 1961. Off-course betting was previously run by illegal SP (starting price) bookmakers. “Sir Chester saved racing, in my opinion,” says Camperdown’s encyclopaedia of racing, Jock McArthur. “Racing was going broke, because none of the money gambled through the SP bookies went back into the sport. But the TAB changed all that.”

The first white settlers in the Camperdown area, the Manifold family made its fortune selling wool to England and beef to the gold diggers at Ballarat. Three Manifold brothers once controlled 100,000 acres of prime grazing country; a few slices remain in the family’s hands, of which Talindert is one of them. Behind the imposing two-storey homestead stand Sir Chester’s beautifully crafted stables, with catalogues from a 1965

yearling sale pinned to the wall. The stables have been quiet and empty since his death in 1979. In his day, however, Sir Chester was among the most influential racehorse owners and breeders in the nation. Although his aim was to breed the best flat-racing horses, his best-remembered galloper was a steeple-chaser he named Crisp. So good was Crisp, Sir Chester took him to England where he raced against champion jumper Red Rum, losing the 1973 Grand National at Aintree after leading for much of the race. Sir Chester’s uncle, Edward Manifold, was also a passionate horseman and served as chairman of the VRC. A race named after him – the Group 2 Edward Manifold Stakes – is held at Flemington during the spring carnival each year. “The Manifold family were to racing what the Arabs, the Sheiks, are now,” McArthur adds. “God knows how many races they won.” Right now, however, there are no horses at Talindert. The current generation of Manifolds are not so keen on the sport of kings, so they have leased the grazing land to dairy farmers.

To the north of Camperdown is another notable piece of the area’s rich racing history. Tucked away in a paddock of tall grass are the Baltic pine stables once owned by Andrew Spence Chirnside, a member of the extraordinary clan that based itself at Werribee Park, west of Melbourne. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Chirnside bred and housed some of the finest racehorses in the nation at his stables near Camperdown. The horses no doubt benefitted greatly from the lush pasture that abounded on the property, which he named ‘Newminster Park’. One of Chirnside’s most famous horses, which won the first Caulfield Cup in 1879, also bore the name Newminster. “The turf registers for the eighties tell the stories of many other classic victories of the Chirnside colours,” read his obituary in *The Argus* in April 1934. “At the stud farm at Newminster Park Mr Chirnside bred Colonel Shilinski – a great jumper. Newminster was, too, the first home of Clean Sweep, a Melbourne Cup winner; Hymettus, who crowned a career with two Caulfield Cups; and Riverside, twice an Ascot Cup winner.”

Chirnside owned grazing runs throughout Victoria, but he built one of his most imposing residences at Newminster Park. Designed by celebrated architect Walter Richmond Butler, built in the Arts and Crafts style and featuring 52 rooms, the mansion was completed in 1901. An article published in *The Argus* in March 1935 noted that,

“The cost of conveying the material to Newminster for the erection of an edifice that became one of the show places in the Western District must have run into a large amount of capital, consisting as it did of a two-storied brick mansion with gables to the four points of the compass, fluted tiles for the roof, an ornamental tower surmounting the structure and a terraced walk around the main portion of the building.” Yet it was occupied only sporadically by members of the Chirnside family before the property was sold. Newminster Park then changed hands a number of times before the Second World War; after the conflict, when building materials were scarce, its owner demolished the homestead, selling much of the bricks and timber from which it was constructed. Nowadays, an imposing red-brick water tower, with a large gothic door and a cast-iron staircase winding its way through the middle, is the only reminder that a grand country house once stood there. Strewn around the base of the water tower are countless finely-detailed terracotta tiles that were imported from the French city of Marseille. The stables have not housed racehorses for the best part of 80 years, yet they somehow avoided destruction. Inside, there are many clues to their past glory: a photo of a dead-heat between Egyptian News and Dimus in the Corinthian Handicap at Warrnambool in 1930 is one of them. The grand old doors on the horse boxes are a reminder that no expense was spared when they were built.

Not far from Newminster Park is ‘Meningoort’, the property owned by the McArthurs since they arrived in the Western District more than 170 years ago. At the heart of Meningoort is an elaborate bluestone mansion, built between 1860 and 1880. A few hundred metres away are the timber stables that were commissioned by JN McArthur in 1896. JN McArthur raced many successful horses, including Marmont, winner of the Grand National Hurdle and Australian Cup in 1903. Nevertheless, the stables were relegated to being used as a garage and workshop for almost five decades after his death in 1917. It was not until the afore mentioned Jock McArthur began seriously training horses in 1963 that the stables were gradually returned to their former glory. Today, they stand proudly once more. The clock tower above the entrance tells the correct time; above it, a horse-and-rider weathervane turns with the breeze. Across a gravel path is a headstone commemorating the burial of Chicquita, the famous mare that Jock’s father, Sir Gordon McArthur, bred at Meningoort.

Now into his 70s, Jock McArthur continues to hold a trainer’s licence, although most of his thoroughbreds are now based at the Camperdown track and prepared by his off-sider, Kieran O’Brien. Five of those horses raced during the 2013 Camperdown Cup meeting. The most under-rated of them all, a gutsy little mare by the name of Fashion Flair, ran down a number of more fancied rivals and won the second race of the day, the Louise Cooper Maiden Plate (the race was named in honour of a former jockey and mother of two young boys, who was left a paraplegic after a fall at race fall at Edenhope in March 2012). Given Fashion Flair was bred and owned by John Daffy, her win invited a question: Why wasn’t the horse being trained by John’s father, the inimitable Geoff Daffy? “She was just a runt of a thing,” John chuckled as he headed off to collect his trophy. “The old man thought she’d never make it to the track!”

Geoff Daffy’s best chance of notching yet another winner at his home track came when he saddled up Gowana in the opening race of the afternoon. Many of Gowana’s co-owners crowded around the three-year-old filly’s stall in the lead-up to the race. “We’ve set a record for the most people crowded around a maiden horse at Camperdown!” one of them joked. A similar scene unfolded in 2012 when many of the same people turned up to see Population, also trained by Geoff Daffy, run in the Camperdown Cup. Population won the big race, but not before a dose of drama. “It played up in the barriers before the race,” John Daffy recalled. “Silence fell across the course. At any other track, the stewards probably would have scratched it. But they weren’t game. There would have been a riot. So they shoved it back in and hit the button.” Population’s victory ignited raucous celebrations on the lawn. However, Gowana was unable to match that feat. In a reasonable position on the turn, it was unable to run down Stone Lucky and finished second.

A couple of hours later, a big crowd gathered around the mounting yard prior to the big race of the day. But before the cup contenders were paraded, the punters were treated to the sight of one of the Western District’s most famous equine exports: retired champion sprinter Sacred Kingdom. Bred by the Calvert family at Kornong Stud Farm, 80 kilometres north of Camperdown, Sacred Kingdom was sold to a Hong Kong-based trainer Ricky Yiu for \$200,000 in 2005. He went on to become one of the greatest sprinters in the world, winning 17 races, including seven Group 1 events. Retired in



Racegoers enjoy the atmosphere. *Noel Butcher*

2012, Sacred Kingdom has returned to Kornong, where he'll spend the rest of his days. His story demonstrates that the Western District remains a key player in the global racing industry.

As Sacred Kingdom began his short journey home, Flemington-based galloper Henshaw delighted his owners by winning the 2013 renewal of the Camperdown Cup. Henshaw was bred by Darley, the international racing behemoth controlled by the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. So it was perhaps not surprising that he was too good for his rivals during the final couple of furlongs. On the lawn in front of the grandstand, countless punters waved their winning betting slips in the air. If all goes to plan, many such racing fans will be enjoying the closing stages of the big race from the old grandstand in years to come.

The building was opened in 1903 after a six-year public fundraising effort. Bazaars were regularly held in Camperdown's main street to aid the project, and people from all walks of life and both sides of the sectarian divide contributed. "When you think it was one of the few buildings constructed without backing from a church or the government, it's pretty amazing," marvelled Peter Daffy. Now a similar community effort is powering the million-dollar restoration, which took a big step forward when the roof was replaced during 2012. The work was carried out under the supervision of project manager and local architect Paul McPhee, with plumber Deiter McDonald and painter Geoff Gaut among the Camperdown-based tradesmen who completed the job. Most of the funding has come from the Victorian Government, via Heritage Victoria,

which has committed almost \$500,000 so far. The Corangamite Shire has also assisted with administering the project, while many individuals have committed cash or in-kind support.

As Henshaw's connections were awarded their trophy, Peter and Mary Hay walked the lawn, selling raffle-tickets to add a few more dollars to the grandstand fund. "It's a beautiful old building," Mary said. "It was designed by local architect Michael McCabe. People say the clock tower [in Camperdown's main street] is the finest building that McCabe designed, but I think the grandstand is every bit as great. So we're very excited that it's coming back to life. It's been a long haul. When we started out we were miles away from having people sitting in it; now we're just inches away." It is hoped that the restoration of the building will ensure the Camperdown Turf Club's long-term viability. But the challenges ahead are many, none more significant than people's changing tastes in regional Victoria. While Henshaw was led back to his stall, 100 kilometres away more than 10,000 people were attending a craft beer festival in Ballarat.

"I think we've always been under pressure," was Hickey's summation. "We've always had to meet criteria that perhaps bigger race clubs haven't had to meet, in terms of our crowds, our amount of cash in the bank and our member numbers. But we've also got very good community support, so I'd say the future of our club is now very secure. When there's a grandstand full of people cheering a horse home, it's going to be a wonderful atmosphere. So there are exciting times ahead." Like the historic grandstand, racing in Camperdown is on the way back.

**Opposite** The disused bars and function areas under the historic grandstand. *Noel Butcher*

