‘Many an unmarked grave’: The physical and cultural remains of old racecourses and their preservation

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Horse racing has been one of ‘British’ Australia’s most influential meta-narratives. The impact of racecourses on the morphologies of its city’s suburbs has been very significant. However, in common with other sports grounds that once drew thousands of paying spectators, most of Australia’s defunct racecourses have unmarked graves and are absent from the minds of the people who live or work near them, or travel past them. The original Rosebery racecourse in the Sydney suburb of Beaconsfield is an example. In other cases, like the sites of the old Ascot and Kensington racecourses, Sydney, there are uncaptioned physical remains known to a few students of history. In a third, emerging category, typified by the Victoria Park racecourse, Sydney, there has been a concerted effort to commemorate the history of the site of a racecourse that once not only attracted race goers, but also enthusiastic hackers to its infield golf course, runners to the cross country championships held there, and motoring and aviation enthusiasts to races and exhibitions.

This paper will provide a preliminary survey of the fate of some of Australia’s defunct racecourses and imagine an online database of racing’s material culture that would have hyperlinks to documents, images and film. Such a database would provide a significant contribution to the digitalisation of the humanities and social sciences. The opportunity to gather data has expanded greatly recently; the burgeoning Australian Newspapers collection on the National Library’s Trove web pages, and the continuing expansion of the Pictures Australia facility, have opened up many new possibilities for the on-line racing archaeologist. Some examples will be shown.

The paper will also briefly address the broader question of preserving and celebrating the history of Australian horse racing in light of recent important anniversaries such as its bicentenary, the running of the 150th Melbourne Cup and AJC Derby. The recent closure of iconic Harold Park, Glebe, and other racecourses, and proposals for commemoration and preservation of their material and cultural heritage, and the downscaling of cultural institutions such as the Australian Racing Museum and AJC library and archive, will also be discussed.

Dr Wayne Peake completed a PhD thesis in 2005 on unregistered proprietary racing in Sydney. This formed the basis of the Book Sydney’s Pony Racecourses (Walla Walla Press 2006), which was published with the assistance of a grant from the Australian Academy of the Humanities. He has written for the racing industry journals Turf Monthly, Bloodhorse Breeder’s Review and Harness Racing International and been published in academic publications such as Sporting Traditions: the Journal of the Australian Society for Sports History and the monograph A Global Racecourse. He has been interviewed on ABC radio on a diversity of racing subjects including the outbreak of the equine Influenza, illegal bookmaking, the handicapping of the Melbourne Cup and famous Australian racecourse rorts and ring-ins. From 1997 to 2001 he worked on the Sydney Olympic Games, initially as a sports researcher and librarian. He was an editor of The Official Report of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, and contributed the text for the opening chapter, ‘The Bid’ and sections of the chapter on the Torch Relay. He has written an article on the racing administrator George Ryder for the new edition of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, and a chapter called ‘Sydney or the Bush’: Adaptation, Centrality and Periphery in Australian Horse Racing’ for the Cambridge University Press Companion to Horse Racing, both due for publication in 2012. He has also written a collection of fictional light humour with horse racing themes, ‘The Gambler’s Ghost and Other Racing Oddities.’