



Carlton Community History Group

NEWSLETTER

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Larrikin gangs in Carlton

From the 1860s through to the early decades of the 20th century, the streets of Melbourne and its nearby suburbs were plagued by gangs of young men known as 'larrikins'. Their behaviour ranged from irreverent pranks to obscene language, larceny, hurling stones, brawling, drunkenness and assault. 'Pushes', the larrikin word for gangs, were endemic in town and in the nearby suburbs including Carlton. In 1882 a Carlton resident wrote to *The Argus* newspaper:

Indignant protests, extending now over 12 months, have been lodged from time to time at the Carlton police station by property owners, house-holders, and others against the conduct of a mob of besotted, brutal larrikins, of the worst type, who are allowed to assemble on a vacant spot in Lygon-Street, between the Mount Pleasant and Australian Hotels [Ed: that is, just south of Lytton Street] every evening after dark. So emboldened have these roughs become through the entire absence of constables that they often remain in the streets till two and three o'clock in the morning, cursing and shrieking and blaspheming, sometimes in chorus, with bones and accordion; then they take to smashing windows; then they walk in a body up and down the pavement, yelling all the while like maniacs'. (The Argus, 3 October 1882)



(Source: The Bird of Freedom, Sydney, 20 August 1892)

Among the more notorious youth gangs in Carlton was one known as the 'Emu Push' that centered around the Lincoln Square area. On the night of 11 March 1910 the members of the 'Emu Push' and the 'North Melbourne Push' had a pitched battle in Victoria Street near the market, fighting with pickets, bicycle chains and other weapons. After the fight a group from the Emu Push marched

through Carlton, knocking down those in their way - until they saw the police, whereupon they scattered in all directions, leaving behind about 50 pickets that had been torn off fences. Later they went into the city and assaulted a constable.

Street fights between individual 'push' members were also common. In April 1910 a police constable saw a young man named John Kirby and another man fighting in Lincoln Square. According to a newspaper account: 'When he ordered them away, Kirby made use of dreadful language'. There were about 40 members of the Emu Push gathered around so the constable went for assistance. When he returned with another constable and they were about to seize Kirby he called out for the 'push' members to help him, but to no avail. He was arrested and later fined. A few months later two police constables came across a stand-up street fight on the corner of Pelham and Cardigan Streets watched by a large crowd. This was between a member of the Emu Push and one from the Cardigan Street Push. When the constables arrived on the scene the crowd dispersed. But soon after, the fight resumed at a different spot, at the corner of Cardigan and Queensberry Streets. The police arrested the two fighters who continued to use obscene language all the way to the watch-house.

Larrikins were defiant of the police and were not above assaulting a patrolling constable. On Christmas Day 1916 a police constable had his face severely injured by a gang of larrikins wielding bottles, and ended up the police hospital. It seems that a group of 15 or 20 men were creating a disturbance in Swanston Street, Carlton, near Pelham Street, opposite Lincoln Square. Some of them had bottles in their pockets. When the constable ordered them to move away, a 20-year old named Pearson threw a bottle at him. The policeman tackled him and brought him to the ground, but while they were struggling, Pearson struck him on the face causing a severe injury.

According to a former Carlton policeman who served in the First World War many of the youths associated with the 'Emus' eventually turned into useful citizens. 'I saw a number of them in France', he said in 1919, 'and they were fine fellows. They did their bit well and proved themselves great soldiers'. After the war public attitudes towards larrikins changed and softened. Some commentators have suggested that this may be because the pushes had become more interested in fighting each other than in assaulting or harassing members of the general public. Others believe that the growth of more serious crime and criminal gangs in Melbourne in the 1920s made larrikin street fights appear small beer, especially if they were only fighting each other.

The larrikin dress style

Youth cultures through the ages are often distinguished by the unique way they dress. They will often use their own particular dress style to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population. The larrikins of the late 19th century were no exception, distinguishing themselves by a style of dress that was regarded by the general public, and by the press in particular, as outlandish and to be ridiculed. Stylish peculiarities mentioned in the press include short jackets or coats with velvet collars, bright-coloured scarves or neckties, trousers tight at the thigh and flaring from the knee, high-heeled boots, and a hat worn with a jaunty tilt. However by the early 20th century this flamboyant style had fallen out of favour and larrikin dress became more subdued. Perhaps the economic recession of the 1890s meant that working class men could no longer afford to dress in such an extravagant way.



Local History News

Descendants of Melbourne pioneers

Descendants of passengers who arrived on the 'David Clark', the first ship to bring assisted immigrants directly to Port Phillip in October 1839, have been invited to attend a reunion to mark the 180th anniversary. This will be held on Sunday 27 October 2019 at Gulf Station, Yarra Glen, Victoria (a historic farm, once owned by William Bell, one of the passengers). Those interested can email davidclark1839@gmail.com and be put on a list to receive information as plans are settled.

Talks on North Melbourne history

The Hotham History Project is presenting a series of talks over the next few months related to the history of North Melbourne. On 23 July at 7.30pm, there will be a talk on Alphonsus Vincent Tobin (1905–1993), funeral director and football administrator. On 17 August at 7.30pm, there will be a talk by Professor Janet McCalman on 'Vandemonians in North Melbourne: Our Local Convict Past'. The venue for these talks is the North Melbourne Library, 66 Errol St, North Melbourne. More details are available at www.hothamhistory.org.au



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History of the Rainbow Hotel in Fitzroy

The Fitzroy History Society is currently researching the history of the Rainbow Hotel, which is on the corner of Young and St David Streets, Fitzroy. It is this year celebrating 150 years since it first opened in 1869. They welcome any assistance in recording the history of this hotel, such as photographs or newspaper reports of incidents that occurred there.

Talk on heritage protection

On 21 May, the Royal Historical Society of Victoria will present the Annual Weston Bate Oration titled 'Making History by Saving it' by Kristin Stegley OAM, Chair of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria). Kristin will explore the nexus between history and heritage, especially the advocacy required to maintain and strengthen the vitality and integrity of both. Tuesday 21 May 2019, 6.30 pm after the AGM at 6pm at the RHSV, 239 A'Beckett St, Melbourne.

RHSV's latest exhibition

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria's latest exhibition at its premises at 239 A'Beckett St, Melbourne is titled 'Cold War Games: Espionage Chills Melbourne's 1956 Friendly Olympics'. To promote Melbourne's 'Friendly Games' in a cold war context, America's cold war warriors, the CIA, were told by ASIO not to attend. However, the CIA operated covertly encouraged fifty defections among athletes and officials from Eastern bloc countries, and gaining a propaganda coup for the 'free world'. The exhibition is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, until 4 June.

Do you have an interest in Social Media?

The Carlton Community History Group is looking for someone with an interest in history and social media to look after our Facebook page. We would supply news items and photos for the page and answer any inquiries. But we need someone to manage the process and to make sure that the page is active.

If interested contact Jeff at jeffann@bigpond.net.au

**Carlton Community History group presents
A History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.**

This talk by military historian George Ward tells the story of the process by which men who had been lost in the chaos of muddy battlefield became soldiers remembered in peaceful garden surroundings, and visited by relatives and friends.

Tuesday 2 July 2019, 7.30pm, Carlton Library, Rathdowne St, North Carlton.

History and heritage protection

The level of protection that is afforded to heritage buildings and streetscapes in North Carlton and Princes Hill is determined by the planning controls of the City of Yarra, of which those areas are a part. These planning controls are currently being reviewed and amended. In particular controls over what the City of Yarra refers to as 'activity centres', areas such as the shopping strips in Queens Parade, Clifton Hill, and Swan Street, Richmond, are currently being amended 'so that we can meet our future demands for housing and employment'. Amongst other things, the amended planning controls will determine the allowed heights and setbacks of new developments behind street facades, to ensure that their scale and form respond to the heritage character of the area.

In the proposed amendments to the planning controls for Swan Street, Richmond, a setback of five metres will be required before higher new built form is permitted. A submission to the Council on these proposed amendments has expressed concern that this is not enough and will lead to the destruction of most of the shopping strip's built heritage, as only the facades of buildings will be retained.

The Collingwood Historical Society, which has an interest in what is being proposed for the Queens Parade activity centre, was addressed at its April meeting by a researcher who has been carrying out extensive research on the history of the buildings lining this significant shopping strip.

Under 'Local History News' there is information about a talk organized by the Royal Historical Society of Victoria on the nexus between history and heritage protection and the advocacy that is required to maintain the integrity of both.

More information on the review of planning controls by the City of Yarra can be obtained at www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/the-area/planning-for-yarras-future/yarra-planning-scheme-and-amendments

**Interested in local history?
Then join us in the Carlton Community History Group
and help preserve our past for the future.**

Are you interested in working on any of the following projects?

- Researching your own family history as it relates to Carlton;
- Recording oral history, stories and recollections of former residents;
- Helping to maintain our Facebook page;
- Publicising the Group and its activities;
- Seeking grants to fund specific projects.

Sounds interesting? Then contact us to see how you can be involved.

Email: cchg@y7mail.com **Website:** www.cchg.asn.au

Origin of the term 'larrikin'

Larrikin was a 19th-century Australian slang term for a subculture that developed among the unskilled urban youth in the inner-city suburbs between 1870 and 1890. There are many versions of how, when and where the term arose. But Melissa Bellanta, a noted authority on the larrikin culture, in her book *Larrikins, A History* (University of Queensland Press, 2013) argues that it originated in the English Midlands as a dialect word for 'a mischievous or frolicsome youth' and was imported from there into the Australian colonies in about 1870. She says that the term was taken up in the colonies because it evoked the qualities of 'larking about', and of 'leariness' or 'lairiness' which implied streetwise. It was used to refer to youths of limited means who specialized in a showy insolence in public places.

Around the time of the First World War, public anxiety about larrikins diminished somewhat, and the meaning evolved into a high-spirited person who playfully rebels against authority and conventional norms. Crocodile Dundee as portrayed by Paul Hogan in the film of that name would be a typical example of this more 'lovable larrikin'. The term persists in Australian English to this day, but with this latter meaning.



Larrikin – Is my darling true to me?
Larrikiness – Yes, your darling is true to you.
Larrikin – Then pay for these bloomin drinks.
(*Melbourne Punch*, 30 March 1876, page 121)



(*The Bulletin*, 2 February 1895)

Female larrikins

The females found in the company of these rowdy youths were often referred to as their 'donahs' and portrayed in the press as the compliant, subservient and often badly treated companions of larrikins who were by definition male. But Melissa Bellanta in her book *Larrikins, A History*, referred to above, argues that this is a misrepresentation, that they were larrikins in their own right. She gives as an illustration an account in the *Collingwood Mercury* of 29 April 1882 of the arrest of four teenaged members of a gang or 'push'. According to this report they were well known for loitering in Smith Street, stubbornly ignoring shopkeepers' efforts to drive them away. Two of them were girls and two boys. On this particular occasion they had been found half-drunk at one o'clock in the morning, on a vacant lot, shrieking with laughter while swigging from a communal bottle of beer. Female larrikins or 'donahs' were usually depicted in the press as brazen, and as wearing flamboyant dresses and hats with a profusion of feathers.

Anger and frustration from the public

To the citizens of Carlton and other parts of inner-suburban Melbourne, larrikinism was of course an endless annoyance. Their frustration and anger over the apparent inability of the authorities to rid them of this perpetual nuisance can be heard in the Letters to the Editor and other pieces that appeared in the press at the time. One of these is an article that appeared in *The Herald* of 4 January 1877, and that refers to the haunts of the larrikins as being in Carlton and Collingwood, 'where policemen are few, and not always to be found':

It seems to us that of late the magistrates have been rather too lenient with the larrikins. To fine them leads only to one of two results, either the fine is paid by the 'company [the 'push']', or the offender 'takes it out' defiantly, and is hailed with enthusiasm when he emerges from Mr Castieau's establishment [gaol] as a hero, and one who 'sees life'. Neither of those results work permanent good. On the contrary, a few good floggings would frighten the larrikins, and do away with the hero business.

One of the more notorious youth gangs in Carlton was the 'Bouverie Street Push', and a former policeman living in that street expressed his concern that the bad reputation his street had acquired because of their presence was having an effect on property prices. In a Letter to the Editor of *The Herald* of 25 February 1879, he suggested that action by local residents might be the answer:

I have expressed my willingness to assist the police at any time when necessary in maintaining peace and order. In this I am promised support by my neighbours, who are determined if possible to live peaceably and earn a respectable livelihood rather than succumb to and become the victims of larrikins, thieves, and vagabonds. Nor does the mischief created by such a state of things cease here. It perpetuates the unenviable notoriety the street has acquired, interfering with places of business, depreciating the value of dwelling houses in every way suitable for the purpose rented and occupied.

The idea of vigilante committees was also raised by another Carlton resident in a Letter to the Editor that appeared in *The Age* on 15 December 1880. He was also concerned that the magistrates were handing out sentences to larrikins that were too lenient:

If the magistrates persevere in such decisions, Carlton will soon be as great a plague spot as other localities that are afflicted with the curse of larrikinism, and I see no other prospect but the establishment of vigilance committees for the protection of property and the morality of the country.

In a lecture delivered in the Recreation Hall, Mentone, in April 1899 on 'The Larrikins of Melbourne', the speaker referred to Carlton as being the hotbed of larrikinism, and mentioned in particular the 'Bouvieries', and the 'Freeman-street push' in North Carlton. He said it had been found that solitary confinement and flogging did not deter larrikins. He believed that they should be gathered from the streets and drafted onto training ships, or placed under military training. 'Drill halls and gymnasia would provide healthful and pleasurable entertainment for them'. He also referred to the German military system, and pointed out that there were no larrikins in Germany. He would form a regiment of larrikins and 'ne'er-do-wells' who could be 'made a credit to themselves and useful to their country'. Nothing but forceful methods, he believed, would check larrikinism.

This Newsletter is produced and distributed four times a year. If you would like to be put on the mailing list, email the Carlton Community History Group at cchg@y7mail.com or visit our website www.cchg.asn.au

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