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Whither Sporting Heritage? Reflections on debates in Victoria about Waverley Park and the Melbourne Cricket Ground

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Abstract

The successful nomination of Waverley Park to the Victorian Historic Register proved as controversial as the stadium was during its thirty-year existence. The nomination was accepted primarily on the grounds of the social historical value of the site, rather than its architectural or engineering qualities, but in fact a range of different social histories were in conflict during the registration process. Four of the social histories involved are outlined and their influence on the outcome assessed. Some of the implications for the evaluation of sporting heritage sites emerge therefrom (Hay, R., Lazenby, C., Lewis, N., Haig-Muir, M., Mewett, P., 2001).

Keywords: 20th Century heritage; sport; Waverley Park; social history;

1. Introduction

If we are to address the recent cultural legacy of Australia, we have to come to terms with sport. Though some may deplore it, there is little doubt that sport has played a significant, and probably increasing, part in Australian social and cultural life in the twentieth century. A popular belief that Australia is a 'sports mad nation' may or may not be sustained in international comparison but there is a mass of evidence that Australians take their sports seriously and in large quantities (Hay, 2001). The proportions of programming time devoted by television and radio to sport, and the pages devoted to sport in even the broadsheet newspapers, indicates that sport sells to Australians. Participation rates may have declined, but Australians have been and are involved significantly in sport (National Centre for Culture and Recreation Statistics Newsletter, 2001). Much of this 'activity' takes the form of spectatorship, which tends to be concentrated on football, cricket and horseracing, and 'theatre-goers', as those who turn out for big events are termed, are beginning to challenge besotted fans among the watchers. Nevertheless Australians turn out in numbers for sporting occasions from the local to the national level (Hay, 1981; Pappas, Carter, Evans and Koop, 1985). The economic contribution of sport to Australian society is also significant, with a turnover of \$A10.9 billion in 1999-2000 (Australian Sports Commission, 2001). References to the cultural significance of sport in Australia abound in popular discourse and literature.

So the question arises, what parts of our sporting activities might be considered part of our national heritage? Is it the venues where the sports take place or is the game the thing? Should we preserve the stadia or the facilities, or should our efforts be concentrated on recording and retaining the more ephemeral aspects of sporting performance? Since most of our sporting activities have taken institutional form since the late nineteenth century, and many only in the last fifty or sixty years, sport is arguably a major element of the legacy of the modern period and hence worthy of consideration as a major part of our twentieth century heritage. Issues of social value, a highly contested arena of heritage concerns, are central and have been the focus of

considerable debate in Melbourne and Victoria in the last two years, particularly over the heritage listing of two major metropolitan stadia, Waverley Park, the purpose built ground owned by the Australian Football League, and the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) (Register of the National Estate Database, 2001).

2. Background

In 1999 the Australian Football League (AFL) announced that it would not schedule any further matches at Waverley Park, its privately owned stadium in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, located in the City of Monash. Instead it would aim to sell the ground and its surrounding land, hoping to raise a sum of between Aus\$30 and \$80 million to meet its obligations towards a new stadium under construction at Docklands at the western end of the Melbourne central business district. Later the League would also argue that a portion of the income from the sale of Waverley would provide further finance for the development of AFL football as a national code in Australia (Arthur Anderson Real Estate Services Group, 1998). Until the mid-1990s Waverley Park had been promoted by the AFL and its predecessor, the Victorian Football League (VFL) as the home of football and the people's ground, though its hopes of staging regular grand finals at the stadium had been dashed by the opposition of the State Government, the Melbourne Cricket Ground Trustees and general public disapproval (Hay, Haig-Muir and Mewett, 2000).

The potential loss of a large sporting facility in South East Melbourne galvanised local residents and their political representatives and resulted in the formation of a 'Save Waverley Campaign'. The City of Monash appeared to be torn between interest in preserving the sports facility and the potential revenue growth which would flow from the sale of at least parts of the site for urban redevelopment. The neighbouring local authority to Monash, the City of Greater Dandenong, began an investigation to see whether the facility met the Victorian state heritage criteria and contracted a heritage architect and a team of social historians to investigate the matter. In February 2000, Greater Dandenong Council decided to nominate Waverley Park to the Victorian State Heritage Register. Subsequently the site was successfully nominated for listing by the National Trust as well as the Register of the National Estate. The Executive Director of Heritage Victoria accepted the nomination in draft form and opened the issue for public comment. The AFL and the City of Monash objected, activating a hearing of the Heritage Council Registration Committee. The City of Monash argued during the subsequent hearings that Waverley Park had local but not state significance and that it was appropriate that it be brought within its own planning scheme rather than being placed on the state heritage register. The Heritage Council confirmed the nomination on 31 August 2000 though it amended the statement of heritage significance on which the original nomination had been based. The nomination had stressed architectural novelty and engineering innovation, but the Committee was more concerned with broader issues of social significance.

The inescapable conclusion of the Committee, regardless of the ways in which it approached the question, was that Waverley Park was of great historical and social significance to Victoria in the second half of the twentieth century. Waverley Park is like no other sporting ground in Victoria, before or since: and the impact of the plan to build it, the use of the ground, and the

numerous controversies that have surrounded it throughout its existence have contributed to that significance (Victorian Heritage Register, 2000).

3. Social history

What is intriguing about the social history addressed by the Registration Committee is that there were at least four varieties of social history involved.

One was conventional social history which examines structural determinants of change, such as demographic movements, changes in the distribution of wealth and income, economic variables and their influence, national and regional political and sporting developments, and so on. It stressed the importance of Waverley Park to the VFL enabling it to break free from the control of ground managers of the suburban venues where the games were played and the Melbourne Cricket Club. It also shifted the balance from the clubs to the league since the latter now had a ground and its revenue streams under its own control.

The second was what might be described as an insider's micro-history of the individuals and groups who form the Melbourne elite and their politico-social interactions and struggles. The relations between MCC and VFL/AFL and members of state governments were central to this interpretation.

The third was the 'postmodern' narrative of the AFL as it tried to rewrite its own history in a way which would allow it to abandon the ground which probably did more to enable it to reach the position in which it finds itself today than any other single element. There is little doubt that the AFL totally underestimated the power and importance of social history in the Heritage Council process. They could be forgiven because social history had not been so important in the past. Nevertheless their selection of witnesses in this area and their responses to the case for social historical values meant that the strongest critique was not mounted during the hearings.

Then there was the collective memory of the Save Waverley Campaigners, several of whom attended every session of the five and half day hearing. Darryll Cavanagh, President of the Save Waverley Campaign, made an articulate and thoughtful presentation which summed up the widespread support for the preservation of Waverley Park, but it was the clear attachment of the rank and file members of the group to a set of views about the importance of the stadium in their lives which stood out. At one point during the hearing when discussion turned to the work of Bachelard and Bale and their use of the term *topophilia*, the Queen's Counsel for the City of Greater Dandenong invited the Committee to cease paying attention to the academic term and attend to the people in the public seats if they wanted to understand what the word meant (Bale, 1994; citing Bachelard, 1969). An insight into the meaning of Waverley Park for the members of the campaign can be gained from the film *Brutal Beauty* by cinematography student Siobhan Maiden, shot during and after the hearings as part of her final year project at the Victorian College of the Arts (Maiden, 2000).

4. A controversial decision

The heritage listing of Waverley Park has proved every bit as controversial as the stadium itself proved to be in its life as a sports ground since it was first conceived in the 1950s (Hay et al., 2000, 158-60 and 167-8). 'The consideration of the heritage merits of Waverley Park created more general interest, debate and comment across the community about "heritage" than any other matter in Victoria since the inception of heritage legislation in 1974', according to Ray Tonkin, the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria (Tonkin, 2001). Members of the public still regularly say, 'How did that happen? How did something so recent and so ugly and so cold become part of our heritage? Arctic Park, that is ridiculous'. One expert witness to the Registration Committee of the Heritage Council, which considered and approved the nomination unanimously, described the nomination as 'a joke', while others were equally scathing if a little more measured in their condemnation (Quarry, 2000). Subsequently, Professor Susan Balderstone has argued that by failing to focus on the physical remains and their architectural and engineering qualities, the Registration Committee has made it almost impossible to determine what should and what should not be preserved to retain the heritage values of this very large site (Balderstone, 2000).

One reason for the disquiet among the experts is the concern that in making the decision primarily on the grounds of social and cultural historical value, the Registration Committee has departed from the relatively secure and validated grounds of historic architectural and aesthetic merit, or didactic qualities for a much more unfamiliar and untested set of criteria. Architectural historian, Dr Miles Lewis was concerned about this aspect of the decision among others, though he admitted to not having read the decision or the reasons for it when he went to print. 'It took much longer to find a meaning for "social", and in my view the concept remains entirely unsatisfactory' (Lewis, 2000). Leaving aside the issue as to whether the architectural or aesthetic tests are as unproblematic as is claimed, there is no doubt that the decision does break new ground and further debate over the validity of social historical criteria needs to take place (Davison, 1991). The issue is not new and it is more than a decade since author Robert Hewison published his critique of the British passion for heritage which he claimed was turning the country into a giant theme park and museum (Hewison, 1987).

But the broader issue opened up by the Waverley Park listing and the debates to which it has given rise, is the extent to which popular sporting venues have a claim to cultural significance to match those which have become enshrined in the traditional architectural and engineering discourses which have tended to dominate heritage studies, apart from the area of industrial archaeology. If the broad claim on behalf of sport is accepted, what aspects of the sporting activity should be preserved as distinct from being commemorated?

5. What should be preserved from sport and where should sport stand in the hierarchy of things to be preserved?

The heritage listing of sporting sites is still uncommon. Very few sporting sites get on to heritage lists by virtue of the fact that they are sporting sites, as distinct from having innovative or interesting architecture or engineering elements within them. So the grandstand at Glenferrie Oval in Hawthorn, Melbourne, is listed but not the whole site as with Waverley. There are currently about fifteen parts of sporting sites on the

Victorian Heritage Register, and a thematic history of sporting sites in Victoria which was completed for Heritage Victoria enumerates several more and lists about 20 potential nominations. The Registration Committee of Heritage Victoria was very bold when it elected to accept the arguments that Waverley Park deserved listing for its social and historical significance.

About the path-breaking nature of the decision there can be little question. This is probably the first time that a complete major modern sporting site has been put on the heritage register of any country. In addition to the stadium itself and associated scoreboard and tiled mural depicting football heroes, the full 86 hectare (212 acre) site encompassing car park, irrigation dam and surrounding open space has been listed on the Victorian Heritage Register and the Register of the National Estate, managed federally by the Australian Heritage Commission. In the United Kingdom, Wembley Stadium has not been heritage listed and is about to be demolished. Nor was the MCG in Victoria at the time of the Waverley exercise, though it has been subsequently nominated in part and as a whole and listed. The Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) in New South Wales is not listed as a whole, though the Members and Ladies Stands are. The Adelaide Oval and its surrounds have now been listed following an extensive conservation study (Register of the National Estate Database, 2001). In Amsterdam, the Ajax Stadium has been converted into a housing estate, while the new Amsterdam Arena, a very similar structure to the Colonial Stadium at Docklands, has been constructed in another suburb. The Harvard Stadium is listed in the United States as the first concrete structure of its type and it dates from very early last century (National Historic Landmarks Program, 1987).

Another example from country Victoria of a partially listed site, Central Park, Stawell raises some fascinating issues. Its grandstand is listed. This site as a whole was included among recommendations to Heritage Victoria as a sporting place with outstanding state significance. But what constitutes the site? The one thing that makes Stawell's Central Park so prominent to Victoria is the staging there of the most renowned race in professional running, the Stawell Easter Gift which has been run there for over a century. So, is the whole park the site? Or, just that same strip of turf on the football oval over which the race is staged every year? The significance of Stawell to the sport of professional running as a 'sacred site' eludes the casual gaze and is revealed only through a more careful examination of the social historical sources.

How, for example, can the Stawell Gift track be interpreted and evaluated? Except for the Easter weekend, when the annual race meeting staged by the Stawell Athletic Club is held, this revered strip reverts to an innocuous portion of the oval regularly used for other sports. To the sport's stalwarts, it is much more, as evidenced by those who will that their ashes be spread along this ribbon of grass. But the reverence with which it is held is not simply conveyed through the knowledge that deceased runners have had their powdered remains pounded into the turf by successive generations of athletes, nor even by witnessing an associate of the deceased spreading them. Rather, the interpretations are conveyed by the spoken and written regard in which this strip of the oval is held. Much of it is spoken: being a largely plebeian sport, professional running has not produced many skilled writers. But to capture these interpretations and meanings, it is necessary to turn to data sources (such as interviews and ethnographic data) that, while putting flesh on the dry bones of the observed site, do

not of themselves constitute 'heritage-able' items. Such sources, while emphasising the particular significance of the Gift track, also point to the importance of the whole park to the professional running fraternity. So, we come back to the question of what constitutes the site, how is it constituted and by whom?

6. Has heritage listing been a success?

What has the heritage listing of Waverley Park achieved? At best it appears to be a stay of execution and some breathing space that is now running out. The AFL has called for expressions of interest in purchasing and redeveloping the site and is now evaluating and negotiating these, but admits the process is likely to be drawn out.

Preserving some of the fabric of Waverley and the site was somewhat of a pyrrhic victory and an expensive one at that. We are left with a decaying stadium, subject to internal vandalism by its owners and with little prospect of public access or its use for the purposes for which it was built. This is not a satisfactory outcome. None of the local municipalities or the State government appears willing to put finance into redeveloping the ground. The redevelopment of the Melbourne Showgrounds in Melbourne's inner west is said to require around \$120 million and there have been some discussions about moving the Royal Agricultural Show to a reconstructed Waverley, but this proposal is not making much headway. The Save Waverley Group does not have the resources to continue a legal fight to preserve the ground, far less support its continued running. The cost of a contested heritage hearing alone can be prohibitive, and while Waverley was a landmark decision, the costs involved seem excessive.

Though there are some features of this episode that are specific to Waverley, it raises the general issue about the retention of physical constructions on this scale if they are not continuing to be used for their main purpose. The current imbroglio over the MCG is quite different, for there the stadium will be retained and used for top-level cricket and football, even if the internal structure of the ground is revised. No one shed a tear over the replacement of the Southern Stand by the so called Great Southern Stand in 1991-2, and while the Members Pavilion and the Long Room have obviously attracted a great deal of affection from members, it is not clear that their replacement, if sympathetically done will destroy the heritage value or the character of the MCG. It will remain, as it always has been, an eclectic mixture of old and new elements, even if the models currently under discussion tend to reek of the modern soulless and placeless style of international stadia.

Waverley on the other hand is just a physical monument, a modern Stonehenge, without its *raison d'être*. It moves the visitor by its massiveness and it reflects just a little of the lunatic optimism which underpinned its construction but does it really satisfy any of the reasons mentioned above for its retention? It commemorates a phase of the game and hints at the growth in power of the VFL at the expense of the clubs, but without major efforts of interpretation it does not speak directly to the public or to historians. To simply preserve it as a giant artefact seems to us a fraud on the people who want to retain it as a working stadium, without having much compensating advantage as a monument. On the other hand it is clear that appreciating the value of past artefacts and working out ways of incorporating them into new structures more appropriate to the age takes time and if you destroy now you deny yourself that

opportunity. In Geelong, Victoria, there is the contrast between the Bow Truss Building that has gone, and the other woolstores which have been retained, for long periods as ugly derelict sites, but which now house the National Wool Museum, the Ford Discovery Centre and Deakin University's Waterfront Campus. If Waverley can be mothballed then we may have time to work out a method of recycling it in a way that brings it back into use and retains some of its heritage values.

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