

## **MEMORIAL SPORTSGROUND.**

### **Cricket Recreation Ground.**

The *Armidale Express*, 6 March 1896 announced that 'delegates representing the cricketers, footballers, and cyclists of Armidale met the trustees of the Armidale racecourse with a view to securing a portion of the racecourse reserve for a permanent sports ground for the city'. The conference decided to apply for seven or eight acres of land in the north-western corner of the course bounded by Douglas and Dumaresq Streets under the control of trustees. In June 1896 the trustees of the Armidale racecourse received a communication from the Lands Department concerning the 'proposed resumption of a portion of the racecourse, and the rededication of it as a sports ground'.<sup>1</sup>

No action had been taken by January 1899. The *Armidale Express*, 10 January 1899 reported that meeting was held in March 1896 because 'an uncertainty existed as to the racecourse being retained for any length of time'. The correspondent appealed to the organizations to take action because in the event of the Government resuming the racecourse, the city would be 'without a ground open to the public for recreation purposes'.

It was in November 1894 that council had refused a petition from Armidale residents to create a sportsground in the East End Park.

At the council meeting on 3 March 1903 a letter from S.J. Kearney was tabled with resolutions from a recent public meeting. The meeting sought council's support for an application to the Minister for Lands for the dedication of 40 acres of land (comprising part of reserve No. 1334) for a sports ground for recreation purposes. Council decided to meet on the ground and view portions asked for with the sports committee before reaching a definite decision. The meeting took place on Friday 13 March.

In April 1903 council approved the granting of an area of 13 acres (portion 49 and part of portion 50) being set aside in the West End for a sports ground. In October E.J. Curtis, W.D. Solomons and others petitioned council for a special lease of portion of the temporary commons as a cricket recreation ground in October 1903. Council had no objection.

At the council meeting on 8 November 1904 permission was granted to J.J. Rafferty secretary of the sports committee to use water on the new embankment on the sportsground at a rate of 1 shilling per 1000 gallons. The trustees organised a Grand Continental in aid of the sports ground funds on the King's Birthday, Monday 14 November on the sports ground. The United Friendly Societies of Armidale held their first annual sports demonstration on that

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<sup>1</sup> *Armidale Express*, 5 June 1896, p.5.

occasion. About 1000 attended and the *Armidale Argus*, 19 November 1904 reported 'the ground was in excellent order'. A cycling track costing £70 had been installed. An area of 9 acres and 30 roods was re-dedicated as an Athletic Sports Ground on 24 December 1904.

In 1908 the council assessed 'the unimproved value of the sports ground at £500, on which the rates amounted to £8 8s 8d per year'.<sup>2</sup> Trustees of the athletic sports ground appealed against the rates on the ground it was exempt because the area was dedicated to the public as a sports ground.

The Local Government Department informed council in February 1921 that it considered the local sports ground was ratable and considering the trustee's neglect of their duties, recommended council 'should approach the Minister, requesting cancellation of the trust, and to place the ground under the control of the Council'.<sup>3</sup> In that way the payment of rates could then be enforced. Two weeks later, the finance committee of council reported that the matter of the trusteeship should be deferred.

By March 1921 a Sportsground War Memorial Committee had been formed and appealed to members of the public to assist in the White City Carnival designed to raise money for the committee and the band. The carnival was presented for a week in the market square (Faulkner Street entrance) during the show week. Once finance was available the secretary of the sportsground committee J. Laurence, approached the Jockey Club for the possible sale of the leger grandstand. Initially the club rejected the approach in March but later the decision was reversed and the foundation of the grandstand, purchased from the Armidale Jockey Club was constructed in June 1921. Bricks for the grandstand were donated by Armidale builder G.F. Nott and the labor provided free by S. Burton, H. Dixon, J. Turner and R. Clutterbuck. By the end of July the grandstand was nearing completion; a tender had been let to J. Dento for new fencing. The *Armidale Express*, 22 July 1921 announced at the end of the football season, 'the grounds will be levelled, while further ornamental trees will be planted'.

By September 1921, rates were outstanding on the sportsground but council took no further action because the government had nominated new trustees.

In December 1922 the New England Cricket Association met trustees of the ground to discuss the state of the ground to enable Inter-District cricket to be played there. By that stage the association had installed a cricket pitch and despite the shortage of funds, the trustees promised to improve the playing surface.

In July 1923 the entrance to the sportsground which was part of the Armidale War Memorial scheme was being constructed under the supervision of G.F. Nott.

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<sup>2</sup> *Armidale Express*, 24 July 1908, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> *Armidale Express*, 25 February 1921, p.2.

By November 1924 action had been taken to improve the dilapidated grandstand; sportsmen had taken interest in the trust; the ground was included as part of the soldier's memorial scheme and £1000 worth of improvement had been completed. But at a meeting of the Sports Ground trustees held on Wednesday 12 November 1924 was informed 'that the Armidale Municipal Council had applied to have this ground placed under its control'.<sup>4</sup> Big improvements at the ground were proposed by the securing of an overdraft of £100 at the Australian Bank of Commerce on several guarantees of the trustees. But action was deferred because of council's action. The action to have the sportsground and the racecourse vested in council as trustees failed because the Land Department was not prepared to support the move.

In January 1925 the Armidale Cycling Club announced that trustees of the sports ground were to be approached to seek permission for the installation of electric light at the ground. The *Armidale Chronicle*, 14 January 1925 congratulated the club and commented 'with electric light at the sportsground, no end of attractions could be provided in Armidale'.

In February 1925 it was reported that £177 was owing on rates from the sportsground and council took action to write the sum off.

The trustees unsuccessfully applied for the free use of the municipal grader to level the ground in May 1929. That same month the trustees informed the Rugby League that the ground would not be available because of the possible damage to improvements. The racecourse trustees made their ground available. In defending the action of the trustees, F. Lamb, chairman of the trustees pointed that £200 had been spent on ground improvements and owing to continual rain work was not completed until March.

V.H. Kenyon applied on behalf of the recently formed Armidale Greyhound Racing Association to the trustees of the Armidale sportsground in March 1932 to use the ground for racing. Use of the ground was granted for £208 per year.<sup>5</sup> Two years later, the Armidale Coursing Club and Mechanical Hare Coursing Club met in April 1934 to amalgamate. Their inaugural meeting was held that August.

In November 1932 the *Armidale Express*, 7 November 1932 stated its concern about the state of the A.I.F. sportsground. 'Nobody ... can escape the feeling of regret that the A.I.F. has been allowed to fall into its present condition of neglect and desuetude'. By July 1933 the trust was in debt with little chance of income; the New England Rugby League had left permanently and the Cricket Association temporarily whilst the turf wicket was being installed.

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<sup>4</sup> *Armidale Chronicle*, 15 November 1924, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> *Armidale Express*, 11 March 1932, p.4.

By January 1936 improvements were being completed at the ground. The grandstand was being painted cream and green; improved lighting facilities were being installed and the bookmaker's stands were undergoing repair and renovation. A change window had been removed from the entrance gates to near the turnstiles and secretary's office.<sup>6</sup>

In October 1936 Ald. Dawson asked council to take control of the sportsground but the motion was defeated. The matter of rates was a contentious issue and the Department of Lands informed council in 1941 that rates should not be levied.

Trustees of the sportsground were informed in April 1942 that the Minister was to be gazetted as trustee. Two months later R.N. Hickson, on behalf of the trustees indicated that no objection would be raised to the suggestion. He indicated the trustees 'had decided to spend £150 on improvements to the cricket oval and £50 on seating accommodation'<sup>7</sup> and it was hoped that it would be carried out if council took control. Following a request from council, the Department of Local Government was 'prepared to ask for the resignation of trustees of the sports ground with a view of appointing the Council as trustee in their place'<sup>8</sup> in August. Council informed the Lands Department in September that council was willing to spend £200 after the war on the Memorial Sportsground.

An application from the Armidale Charity Coursing Club to council for use of the Soldier's Memorial Sportsground in December 1943 again raised the issue of trusteeship. To that date council had not been legally notified of its control but members of council met members of the coursing committee and the trustees of the ground. The trustees were prepared to hand over to council money held in trust for improvements at the ground. By that stage, the Cricket Association had laid down a turf cricket pitch but it was in a state of disrepair.

Early in February 1944 it was announced that the sportsground was now under City Council control and that month, council representatives met the ex-trustees, the Cricket Association and the Mechanical Hare Coursing to consider hiring of the sportsground. The former trustees of the Memorial Sports Ground paid £276 1s 11d into a trust fund and requested council 'spend £150 on ground improvements, and gave £50 on seating'.<sup>9</sup> Council also agreed to meet representatives of the Charity Coursing Club to consider terms of tenancy and draw up an agreement. In March council leased the ground to the club for forty race meetings and forty trials.

By April 1946 the ground was used by clubs for cricket, athletics, rugby union and coursing. In August the New England Union expressed concern about

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<sup>6</sup> *Armidale Express*, 29 January 1936, p.2.

<sup>7</sup> *Armidale Express*, 17 June 1942, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> *Armidale Express*, 12 August 1942, p.6.

<sup>9</sup> *Armidale Express*, 23 February 1944, p.5.

presence of the greyhound racing posts and fences because it interfered with the size of the ground. Council acknowledged the need for a sportsground for cricket and for rugby union but were not prepared to take action on the racing equipment.

By February 1948 a turf wicket had been laid by the Cricket Association following an appeal to the public for finance. Concerned at the condition of the wicket that month, council asked that Cricket Association representatives meet with council. During that year, some work was carried out at the ground and by January 1951 there was some levelling of the ground and the construction of some mounds outside the oval.

The *Armidale Express*, 13 April 1956 appealed to council to create a 'decent sportsground' and 'replace the dilapidated (memorial) gate and loose sheets of galvanised iron that have for long disfigured this section of the city'. That December, the outgoing council recommended that the triangular portion of the ground at the corner of Douglas and Dumaresq Streets should be improved and the iron fence replaced by a chain link one.

By June 1959 some clashes had occurred between sporting bodies using the sportsground. Greyhound races took place on the same day as cricket was played and a dispute arose about the location of bookmaker's stands and the use of amplifiers.

On Sunday 29 April 1962, an army truck bound for the showground pulled into the area by mistake and demolished the Memorial Gates. That May the fence along Dumaresq Street was removed but no further action was taken concerning the gates. Because 1963 was Armidale's centenary year, the local branch of the Returned Soldier's League approached council in March concerning the damaged memorial gates. Council promised to take up the matter again with the Department of Army. In September it was announced the Armidale City Council and Armidale R.S.L. are to meet 'to design and cost of the new gates'.<sup>10</sup>

It was not until February 1966 that work commenced on the new memorial gates on a new site. The R.S.L. was to make £116 available to meet the balance of the cost and council agreed to complete kerbing, guttering and roadworks. Although it was hoped to have the gates finished by Anzac Day, they were not dedicated until Saturday 17 December by the State President, Sir William Yeo. 1966 was a significant year because it was the 50th anniversary of the R.S.L. The flanking walls were built of Gosford sandstone and built by voluntary labour and the gates were designed by local R.S.L. officials and made by Mr W. Bartimote.

That December the Chamber of Commerce president, Ald. K. Jones described the sportsground 'an absolute disgrace'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Armidale Express*, 25 September 1963, p.8.

<sup>11</sup> *Armidale Express*, 9 December 1963, p.2.

In January 1964 the chairman of the Greyhound Racing Club intimated to council that the Charity Coursing Club licence might not be received unless dog-racing had sole occupancy of the ground. The *Armidale Express*, 31 January asked 'the City Council not to perpetuate an unsatisfactory position by yielding to the demands of one authority'.

The Dumaresq Creek improvement committee presented a plan to council in January 1965 for developing the sportsground racecourse site into one sports area. The plan was presented in reply to council's request 'to comment on its (council's) proposal to purchase land north of Dumaresq Creek for hockey fields'.<sup>12</sup> Plans to develop the sports ground as a number one oval were hinged on the moving of the Charity Coursing Club's dog track to another site. Preliminary negotiations were already underway at that stage.

Following publication of newspaper articles and letters and a request from the Armidale Chamber of Commerce, a public meeting was called and on Thursday 5 May 1966. Eighty residents attended and the editor of the *Armidale Express*, 6 May 1966 commented: 'in effect the meeting, by its very size, gave the City Council a mandate to press ahead with the provision of such (recreational) areas'. The meeting recommended the formation of a committee consisting of council representatives and citizens to investigate and recommend the city's recreational requirements.

As part of the development of new recreational areas, a general proposal to relocate the coursing club at the sportsground was made in July 1970.<sup>13</sup> But the club remained and following complaints received from the Rugby Union about greyhound racing interfering with matches, council called a meeting of sportsground users in May 1971. 'Representatives of council, the Charity Coursing Club, the Cricket Association and the Rugby League agreed ... that the city needed a first-class sporting area and the sportsground could supply this need'.<sup>14</sup>

By June 1971 users of the ground were agreed that it should become Armidale's premier sporting ground. However a proposal by the New England Rugby Union in February 1974 to re-develop the ground as a sporting complex initially received little support from council. Following further consideration of the plans and suggestions by the recreation and playing fields advisory committee, the health, recreation and general purposes committee recommended that an application be made to the Minister for Tourism and Recreation for a grant to redevelop the sportsground. The committee approved a redevelopment plan drawn up by council's architects, J.J. Maggofin and Sons in April and recommended that council apply for a \$127 000 grant from the Federal Government.

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<sup>12</sup> *Armidale Express*, 13 January 1965, p.14.

<sup>13</sup> *Armidale Express*, 10 July 1970, p.6.

<sup>14</sup> *Armidale Express*, 2 June 1971, p.24.

In April 1976 the Armidale sports complex committee applied for a \$30 000 grant to cover half of the cost of stage one of the sportsground redevelopment. The first stage involved the removal of the greyhound track to allow room for two football fields, five turf wickets and a 400 metre athletic track. The old grandstand was planned to receive a face-lift. It was not until Saturday 3 December 1977 that a new greyhound track was opened on the racecourse reserve at the corner of Grafton and Canambe Streets. The complex was made available following a grant of \$60 000 and a loan of \$6 000 from the Racecourse Development Fund of NSW to the Armidale Greyhound Racing Association.

The sportsground was redeveloped at a cost of \$128 000 in 1988. The redevelopment included renovation of the grandstand together with provision of spectator facilities, referee's room, picket fence, paving and landscaping and the provision of a fully equipped Kiosk sponsored by City Gas. Work was carried out under the supervision of council staff and some contractors. The ground was officially opened by former test cricketer, Doug Walters MBE on the occasion of Toohey's Country Challenge cricket match.