

Preston Cricket Club

Today the Preston Cricket Club fields four teams in the Victorian Sub-District Cricket Association. This is the second tier of competition for cricket clubs in Melbourne, behind what is now known as Premier Cricket. The club has fielded four teams since the 1950s, having first joined the VSDCA in 1922. Like Preston Football Club, the Cricket Club's emblem is a bull ant.

The first recorded match of a Preston Cricket Club occurred in 1860. It is not until 1868 that there is any more evidence of the team. At that time the leading Sports Newspaper of the day, Bell's Life, reports a match between Preston and Leamington near the Water Tanks in what is now Reservoir. Then in 1869 there are reports of a game between Preston and powerhouse club South Melbourne, which was surprisingly won by Preston, probably against a 2nd XI of South. There are other early matches recorded for Preston against the Collingwood Commercial Cricket Club, and Richmond Cricket Club. Evidence suggests that Preston may have fielded 15-18 players given the strength of Richmond.

Over the next three decades, several different clubs emerged promising to represent Preston. They all came and went, but common threads run through these clubs and help to trace a long history of cricket in Preston, and of the Preston Cricket Club.

One of the main sources of continuity for cricket in Preston was the use of Preston Park, also known as the Cramer Street Oval. The land was acquired by the Jika Jika Shire Council, led by President J.C. Clinch, in 1876 for the reasonable sum of £180. The nine-acre lot was finally decided upon after much debate between a divided council. At this time there was a considerable rivalry between Preston's two main settlements. The original settlement of Preston had been on and around High St, between Wood and Tyler Streets, the area which is now Regent. Subsequently another settlement had appeared in South Preston, near Dundas St. This area was known as Gowerville. The Shire Council was split with representatives from both areas, and they took some time to come to an agreement on where to place a sporting facility. Neither settlement had a ground to speak of; matches had previously been played on an oval behind the Preston Arms Hotel. Finally a site was agreed upon which was considered near enough to both settlements to be an adequate compromise. Preston Park has since become the sporting hub of Preston in an area that is now the heart of Preston. All the cricket clubs that have represented Preston since 1876 have used Preston Park as their home.

Perhaps in honour of the new oval, a club emerged called Preston Park, but little evidence of it exists, and by 1878 a club known simply as Preston is recorded playing against the Northcote Zingari Club. Whether this was a re-named Preston Park, an oversight in the reporting of the match, or an entirely different club is unknown. Firm evidence of this incarnation of a Preston Cricket Club exists in the 1880/81 Victorian Cricketer's Guide, which records the team playing 17 matches, winning 11 with 4 drawn and just 2 lost. This was an impressive record, especially considering Preston was really still rural, with a small population to draw from, even compared to neighbouring Northcote let alone the bigger inner-city clubs.

In 1880 there is the first record of a team called Gowerville. This club shared Preston Park with Preston. They also shared an intense rivalry, with locals from each area claiming to represent Preston. The Gowerville area was growing more rapidly at this time, but Preston was older and its locals felt that made their settlement the 'true' Preston.

The Preston Cricket Club's annual meeting in 1884 was referred to as the fourth such meeting, giving the club a start season of 1880/81. It is unknown if the club was a renamed Preston Park Cricket Club. Evidence available from 1885 suggests the Preston and Gowerville clubs may have been set to merge, but later reports show Preston disbanded in 1886, with Gowerville adopting the name of Preston in 1889. It's not surprising that Gowerville outlasted Preston, as while Preston may have represented the original settlement, South Preston, which Gowerville represented, was growing much faster. Contributing factors to its growth were its proximity to industrialising Northcote and beyond that to Melbourne. Also, Preston and Gowerville had been separate ridings in the shire of Jika- Jika, but in 1886 they were united as the Shire of Preston, giving the entire area a united identity. In the time when

Gowerville and Preston shared Preston Park the ground did not have the embankments and grandstands it has today, and so the playing surface would have been a lot larger. So 'shared' in this case meant there were actually two pitches at different ends of the ground, which meant Preston Park could stage two matches at once.

In the mid to late 1880s Gowerville (Preston from 1889) Cricket Club's leading players were the Paterson brothers, James and Robert. Their father William was the club's president. The Patersons were considered a leading family in the district, William Paterson part owned the Watson-Paterson Bacon and Ham Curing Factory which was one of the major industries in South Preston/Gowerville. The factory was on the corner of Dundas St and Plenty Rd and remained there for over 50 years.

In the early 1890s, after years of struggling against their bigger and more populous neighbours in Northcote, the Preston Cricket Club started to have some success in the local derbies, winning 2 of 3 in the 1891 season. By this time the club had switched to matting wickets, which was producing a much higher standard of match. The star batsman was George Robertson, who was also manager of Preston's only bank, the National. He would later have two terms as Shire President. Just before the start of the 1892/93 season, the Preston Cricket Club recorded its annual meeting as the 14th, dating it back to 1878. This is somewhat confusing, but given that Gowerville would refer to the old Preston Cricket Club as an older brother, it's conceivable that this indicates Preston Park Cricket Club became Preston, and that Gowerville was adopting their collective histories.

The first incarnation of a Preston District Cricket Club was in 1891, and it was made up of several players and officials previously of the Preston Cricket Club. The reason behind its creation is at least partially revealed in the records of Preston's annual meeting in 1892. Club chairman, G. Smart, referred to a debt the club had incurred for failing to pay its fees for competing in various competitions. The failure to pay, according to Smart, was due to several players shirking their responsibilities to pay membership subscriptions, and that rather than facing those responsibilities, the players had formed a new club. Though Smart expressed confidence in Preston's ability to overcome the financial difficulties facing it, it's likely the depression, which swept through Victoria at this time contributed to the club effectively disappearing following the 1892/93 season.

Preston Districts won its first trophy in the 1893/94 season. The club captured the Sherrin Trophy, which ranked behind the Boyle and Scott Cup and the Melbourne Sports Depot trophy in prestige for junior clubs. Nonetheless it was the first sporting trophy won by a club based in Preston. At this time, the word 'junior' was not a reference to the age of the players, as it is today, but indicated the strength and standard of the clubs and the competition. The senior clubs were then the bigger more established clubs like the Melbourne Cricket Club. Preston District's early wins were over hitherto unknown clubs, an indication of the quality of the competition, with the trophy clinching victory achieved over the Collingwood Crescent Club.

Another Preston C.C. came and went in the 1890s, and the Preston Districts club also disbanded following the 1900/1901 season. This was after the club had been taken over by the newly formed Preston Presbyterians Cricket Club in 1897. The hard felt recession made it difficult to keep sporting clubs afloat all over Melbourne. A meeting in 1901 at the Preston Shire Hall resolved to form a new club to represent Preston. This new club elected Jack Ralph, licensee of the Junction Hotel as President, and called itself Preston District Cricket Club. Over time the word 'district' was dropped from the club's name. Although there is no record of a formal decision being made, it is likely that it was dropped due to a lack of use. It was this incarnation which remains today as the Preston Cricket Club. Prior to the 1906/07 season Preston started playing in the Victorian Junior Cricket Association's first division. This represented a step up in organization and quality for the club. Preston finished third in their first year of competition. Cricket's popularity in Preston thrived throughout this era. The 1915 grand final saw Preston make its first appearance to vie for a VJCA premiership, but they could not defeat the powerhouse club of the day, South Melbourne Footballers.

Their strength was growing though and in 1922 they joined the Victorian Sub-District Cricket Association (VSDCA). The first Preston XI to win a premiership was the club's 2nd XI, who won the 1939/40 title. The 3rd XI won in 1956/57 and the 4th in 1957/58. In 1964/65 the Preston 1st XI finally captured their first premiership. Only a few years earlier, before the 1960/61 season, the club changed its colours from blue and gold to red and white. Perhaps this helped!

So while there has been a Preston Cricket Club dating back to 1860, it seems unlikely that it has been a continuous consistent entity. However given the small population, it is reasonable to assume that similar individuals were involved in the different incarnations, giving Preston Cricket Club further continuity in addition to its long held ties with Preston Park.

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