

Heritage Hound News

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Special Edition

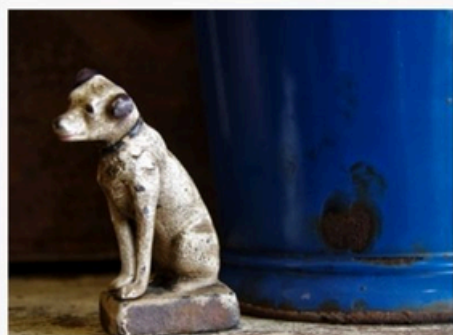
The "Heritage Hound" is brought to you by Dominic Romeo Historic Property.

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Have you ever wondered where Cricket's famous Ashes Urn originated? Whether you love or hate cricket, this is a truly remarkable story.



Rupertswood c.1874-76, Sunbury, Victoria



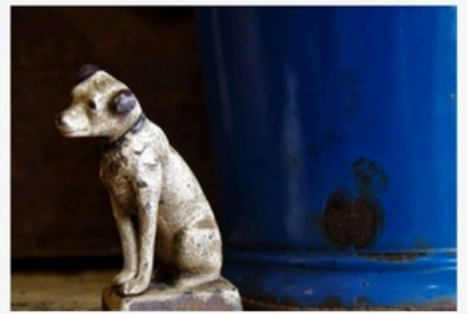
The Story of the Ashes
Notes and Extract from "The Constant Renovators - Restoring Grandeur"
By Marie and Dominic Romeo.
MUP Published 2015 pp 66 - 68

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Rupertswood

Rupertswood was built between 1874 -1876. Designed by local architect George L. Browne, it is one of Australia's most architecturally and historically significant mansions. Located in Sunbury on the outskirts of Melbourne, the 50 roomed mansion was built by William John Clarke, who was to become a pivotal figure of his time. Rupertswood became a power seat in the great English tradition. It was visited by Royalty, Governors, Dame Nellie Melba and other rich and famous of the day. It had a remarkable connection to the Ned Kelly story, the Royal Flying Doctors was founded in one of its dining rooms and one of the more fascinating aspects of its history was that it was the Birthplace of the Ashes.

The Ashes story :

On 29th August 1882, an Australian eleven cricket team defeated an English team on English soil. It had never happened before and was all the more astonishing because initially things were not going very well for the tourists, with all wickets taken after only two and a quarter hours. However, with only half an hour of play remaining, the English started to look very unstable. The tension was palpable: several people fainted, and one man in the crowd died of a heart attack. The Australians achieved the impossible and won by a mere seven runs.

The incredulity was so profound that a journalist for the "Sporting Times", Reginald Brooks, published a tongue-in-cheek obituary.

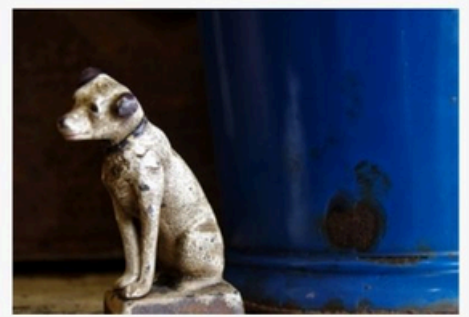


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This is the first of many references to the “ashes” metaphor by the press when describing the strong rivalry between England and Australia. Cremation was a contentious issue in Victorian times, and the implied insult was not lost on anybody.

English pride is at stake. The Hon. Ivo Bligh, amateur gentleman cricketer and heir to his brother’s earldom, was approached to captain a team to Australia. He vowed to the press that he would bring the “ashes” back to England. The team consists of eight gentlemen amateurs and four professionals. They were to play three official test matches: two in Melbourne and one in Sydney.

William John Clarke, owner of Rupertswood, was in England at the time with his family and retinue, and had made some very influential friends. Owning a land mass the size of Great Britain obviously opened doors for him, and he had found favour among the landed aristocracy. Queen Victoria bestowed a baronetcy on him for his services to the colony of Victoria, particularly for his role as the president of the Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880., for which the Royal Exhibition Building was erected. His baronetcy was Australia’s first and – to this day – only hereditary title. He heard of the honour while sailing home on the Peshawur.



Sir William John Clarke



Lady Janet Clarke

Sir William’s fellow passengers included the English Cricket team. The voyage afforded Sir William and Ivo Bligh an opportunity to become firm friends and an invitation was extended to the gentlemen cricketers to spend Christmas and New Year at Rupertswood. Travelling in the Clarke retinue is Florence Rose Morphy, music teacher to the Clarke children and companion to Lady Clarke. Florence is no mere servant. She is very much loved by the Clarke family, and despite their different social status, she comes to the notice of Ivo Bligh.

For many weeks, it is an uneventful journey, until a frightening accident with a large barque nearly sinks the steamer. After the initial chaos of the collision, the now Lady Clarke encourages a general calm among the women and children. Whilst the force of the impact nearly slices the Peshawur in two, remarkably there is no loss of life. There are however, some injuries.

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On Christmas Eve 1882, an enormous house party assembled at Rupertswood. After lunch, Sir William suggested a social game between the English and a Rupertswood team, made up largely of Rupertswood staff and a few houseguests. The house guests were run off their feet retrieving the many fours and sixes while the gentlemen stood their ground – as you would! It was an enjoyable game with no-one really keeping score, although it was generally agreed the English won.



Clarke guests watching the cricket match on Christmas Eve, 1882 at Rupertswood. England verses Rupertswood



1882-1883, Ivo Bligh and the English Cricket Team that played at Rupertswood

At dinner that evening, Lady Clarke presented Bligh with a small pottery urn full of ashes. There were stories about what precisely went into the urn – bail, bat or perhaps, it has been speculated, the veil that formed part of a hat belonging to a particular young lady, a secret flirtatious gesture instigated by the ladies of Rupertswood. Whatever was in it, Lady Clarke presented the urn in a light-hearted manner, perpetuating the joke begun in England. She announced to the company assembled that now England and Australia had a real trophy for which to play. England's win at Rupertswood foreshadowed their win in the official test matches, and wherever the English team appeared large crowds come out to see them



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In the meantime, a relationship had formed between Florence Rose Morphy, music teacher to the Clarke children and companion to Lady Janet Clarke, and Ivo Bligh. Though the secret was closely guarded by the ladies of Rupertswood, it nevertheless found its way into the gossip columns, capturing the imagination of the public at large. Before Bligh left Australia, he and Morphy were officially engaged. Their romance sparked an unprecedented interest among fashionable young ladies in attending cricket games as a means of attaining eligible husbands.



Florence Morphy



The Hon. Ivo Bligh

In England, Bligh had to convince his family that he hadn't just committed himself to a colonial nobody. Their reluctance was largely overcome through the efforts of the Clarkes, who threw their considerable support behind Morphy, launching her into society. Morphy and Bligh married on 9th February 1884 with a sumptuous reception held at Rupertswood. The cream of colonial society was present.

Ivo Bligh eventually succeeded his brother to the earldom, becoming the eighth Lord Darnley, and Florence Rose Morphy becomes his countess. Later in life she is honoured as a Dame of the British Empire, but remains a lifelong friend of the Clarkes; forever grateful to them for helping to secure her marriage.

For several decades the urn sat in virtual obscurity on the mantle, in the library at Bligh's family seat, Cobden Hall in Kent.

It was bequeathed to Lords after the death of Ivo Bligh in 1927, where it still lives today.

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