

JAMIES

A black and white photograph of a group of approximately 20 men. The men are arranged in two rows. The front row consists of seven men standing with their bicycles. They are wearing various styles of early 20th-century clothing, including flat caps, sweaters, and jackets. The back row consists of about 13 men sitting on a wooden ledge or bench. They are dressed in suits and hats. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

ROBERT CROOKE



**HERITAGE
SERIES**

JAMES ROBERT CROOKE

CONTRIBUTORS

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HISTORIC FACTSHEET

JAMES ROBERT CROOKE

Name: James Robert Crooke
Born: 1847
Retired: Narbethong in 1904
Died: 1932 (aged 84)
Buried: Marysville Cemetery

James has been credited with establishing the first motor race track in the world, but this is contested by the English. James also reportedly drove the first car over the Black Spur. He retired to Narbethong in 1904.

Motor rally at Aspendale circa 1904.

Courtesy Chelsea and District Historical Society



James Robert Crooke was famous for creating what was reportedly the worlds first automotive racing track. It was grass and is recognised in Australia's first motor racing tack. He was born circa 1847, son to James Elijah Crooke and Harriett Althorn. He had a strong interest in horses and horse racing, as well as motor racing. By 1869, James was linked with the Bushranger Captain Moonlight (Scott) (*Bacchus March Mail* 6 March 1869 and 13 March 1869) and was ultimately charged with cattle stealing. However, according to newspaper reports, he was later cleared of this serious charge.

By 14 April 1891, James had already established a racecourse which he called Aspendale and held his first event on that day. He also managed this first successful event of many. Aspendale was named after 'Aspen', a champion horse, which he had also bred and trained himself.

In 1904, the then newly established Royal Automotive Club of Victoria (RACV) held their first car rally at Aspendale Park, which was still owned and operated by James. The RACV had only just been established lat the previous year (by motoring enthusiast and inventor Henry Sutton, after he had gone on a days motoring to the Melbourne suburb of Mordialloc.

HISTORIC FACTSHEET

JAMES ROBERT CROOKE

The club was set up to accommodate anyone with a motoring interest, regardless of whether that was motorised vehicle or bike.



Motor racing at Aspendale circa 1905.

Although we cannot confirm all who were present at the inaugural meeting of the RACV on 9 December 1903, it is considered likely James was present when they met at the Port Phillip Club, Flinders Street, Melbourne. This is based on his strong connection with the RACV from its early days and his strong interest in motor racing.

In 1923, the *Argus* reported that James was encouraged by the success of his grass racing track, and had decided to construct a banked and sealed (likely bitumen) track. It was this track that was to be known historically as Australia's first commercial motor racing track. The track comprised of two quarter mile straight runs (60 foot wide) and was banked on the outside to a height of 27 feet. This enabled motor speed reaching, up to and exceeding 100 mph.

Interestingly, James claimed to have been the first person to drive a motor vehicle over the Black Spur, and also claimed to be the person that established the Wishing Well Spring on the Black Spur, which remains today 50 meters downhill from St Ronans Well. Crooke's spring is not easily accessed and not maintained by the Shire.

Crooke also once owned Saladin Lodge, which he named after his racehorse Saladin, which won the 1872 Australia Cup.



Motor rally at Aspendale circa 1904
Courtesy Chelsea and District Historical Society

HISTORIC FACTSHEET

TIMELINE

- 1847** James Robert Crooke born at Bacchus Marsh, Victoria.
- 1869** James was arrested and put on trail for cattle stealing. He was later to be acquitted. On 6 March and 13 March 1869, the *Bacchus Marsh Express* ran articles mentioning him and the Bushranger Captain Moonlight (Scott) together.
- 1872** While acting as a guide for horse dealers moving around Victoria, he was gifted a horse, which he selected and named Saladin. Saladin went on to win the 1872 Australia Cup. The race had to be run three times, as the first two times were dead heats. The third time, Saladin beat the Flying Dutchman and entered the history books. The property Saladin Lodge in Narbethong was once owned by Crooke and named after the racehorse.
- 1872** James married his first wife Annie Dunphy (15 December 1845 –3 January 1888). She was the daughter of John Dunphy and Catherine Wallace and died in a drowning incident at the Mordialloc beach when she was aged 38.
- 1873** First son Robert James Crooke was born at Bacchus Marsh, Victoria. He died in 1963 at Maldon Victoria (aged 90).
- 1875** Son Charles Herbert Crooke was born at Bacchus Marsh, Victoria. He died in 1922 at Fitzroy South, Victoria (aged 48).
- 1881** Son Fenton Wallis Jon Crooke was born at Melbourne Victoria and died in 1881 at Melbourne.
- 1888** Wife Annie Dunphy died on the 3 January 1888 after drowning at the Mordialloc beach (aged 38).
- 14 April 1891** James held the first horserace meeting at Aspendale Park.
- 1889** James married his second wife Leura Maud Burbank (1865–

HISTORIC FACTSHEET

TIMELINE

- 1946). They had two children She died at Heidelberg and was cremated at the Fawkner crematorium.
- 1891** Son Cyril Ednott Crooke was born at South Yarra. He died at Brunswick in 1965 and is buried at the Marysville cemetery.
- 1900** Daughter Marjorie Leura Crooke was born at Malvern. She died at Brunswick in 1980 (aged 80).
- 1904** Aspendale Park was the site of the first RACV Rally. James Crooke competed in and also won the race.
- 1906** James built the first motor racing track in Australia. It was built at his racecourse Aspendale, and the new track was officially opened in January of 1906. It was only used once, and then fell into disrepair. In 1906 it was described as being 'State of the art'. It was a mile long oval track. At its peak, over 1,000 spectators watched the motor bikes and motor cars race.
- 1907** The famous Brooklands Race Track in Britain was opened. The British later claimed this was the first purpose built motor racing track in the world.
- Unknown** James claimed to be the first person to drive a motor car over the Black Spur. He also claimed to have built the Wishing Well Spring area on the Black Spur, for horses to drink from.
- 1911** James retired to Narbethong in Central Victoria.
- 1914–18** James was elected Shire President of Healesville. He also served as a councillor (years unknown).
- 1919** Son Cyril Ednott Crooke married Gertrude Hardy Nance (1897–1955) Gertrude died in 1955 at Kanumbra (aged 58).
- 1921** Granddaughter June Crook born (died aged twelve in 1933).

HISTORIC FACTSHEET

TIMELINE

- 1923** James built the first sealed commercial motor racing track in Australia and possibly the world. It was a banked track, and was likely made of bitumen.
- 29 July 1931** The last horse race meeting was held at Aspendale Racing Club after the Government caused it to be closed down. James name was still on record at Aspendale Racing Club as having the controlling interest in the clubs affairs. A few horses continued to be trained at the park up until the late 1940s.
- 1932** James Robert Crooke died at Healesville (aged 84). He was burial at Marysville, Victoria.
- 1933** Granddaughter June Crooke died aged 12. She was buried with her Grandfather Robert Crooke in Marysville.
- August 1946** Robert Crooke's second wife Leura Maud Burbank died. She was cremated at the Fawkner crematorium. Leura was listed as being of Tarnpirr at Narbethong in the funeral notice published on the 27 August 1946. (*Melbourne Argus 27th August 1946: CROOKE.-The private Funeral of the late Mrs LEURA M. CROOKE, of Tarnpirr Narbethong will leave the Chapel of B. Matthews Pty. Ltd. 102 Toorak rd.. South Yarra, THIS DAY (Tuesday), at 3.30 p.m., for the Fawkner Crematorium).*)
- 1950s** Peter Crooke, son of James Crook, was a successful rally car driver and later became a respected medical officer to the governing motorsport body of the day.
- 10 July 1955** Gertrude Hardy Crooke died (aged 58). She was buried with her husband at Marysville. Gertrude was the wife of Robert Crooke's son (Cyril Ednott Crooke).
- 1965** Cyril Ednott Crooke died at Brunswick (aged 75).
- 1971** Design improvements proposed during an FIA conference by

HISTORIC FACTSHEET

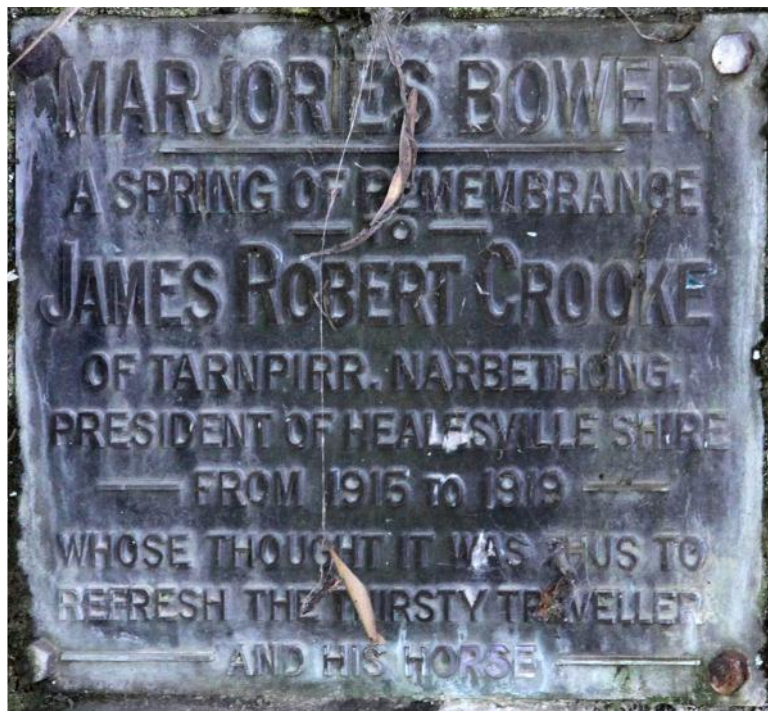
TIMELINE

- 1980** James Crooke's son Peter Crooke, included proposed changes to helmet design and the implementation of fireproof seats and suits. These were adopted across the sport.
Daughter Marjorie Leura Crooke died at Brunswick (aged 80).
- 1986** Jon Crooke, grandson of James Crooke, became the Australian Formula Two Champion. He also ran his own design business, which he called 'Big and Little Solar Houses'. It specialised in Solar efficient kit homes.
- 2012** Artworkz commenced this factsheet.
- 22 May 2013** Local historian Leisa Lees passed on this Robert Crooke factsheet and information regarding Crooke to volunteer Mary Kennealy of the Marysville Historical Society. She told Leisa that she was not aware of the importance of this man to Marysville and the broader district, or of the connection with the memorial on the Black Spur. She had not seen the Artworkz factsheet, which Leisa subsequently emailed to her.
- 23 March 2014** The Black Spur was cleaned up by Artworkz so that it was again visible to the travelling public.
- 26 March 2024** Told by an old local man (Leo) that James Crooke once flew a Tiger Moth bi-plane to Saladin Lodge and landed on the airstrip built there for the purpose. The strip is still present today. It was said that Crooke was the first man to fly a spitfire over the Black Spur and land at the lodge. Leo helped out at Saladin Lodge up until 2024.

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ARTICLES FROM THE eSPLASH eMAGAZINE

OUR HIDDEN MEMORIALS



NARBETHONG'S MEMORIAL TO JAMES ROBERT CROOKE

This amazing historic plaque, is all but lost to the current generation, as a result of the overgrown bush. Many may be surprised, that this important plaque is located just 30 meters further down hill from the St Ronan's Well, on the Maroondah Highway, Black Spur. The plaque is imbedded in a rock wall, with spring water running around the base.

The memorial is to James Robert Crooke of Tarnpirr. James is most noted for building the first motor racing track in the world at Aspendale. It is also likely that he was one of

only a small handful of men to first drove a motor vehicle over the black spur (from Healesville to Narbethong). Robert is buried at the Marysville cemetery (refer next page). This memorial is of significant importance, though has been left to rot and disappear into the bush. (Refer to the Artworkz Robert Crooke factsheet for more).



THE BURIAL PLACE OF JAMES, JUNE GERTRUDE AND CYRIL CROOKE

Marysville Cemetery
July 2012

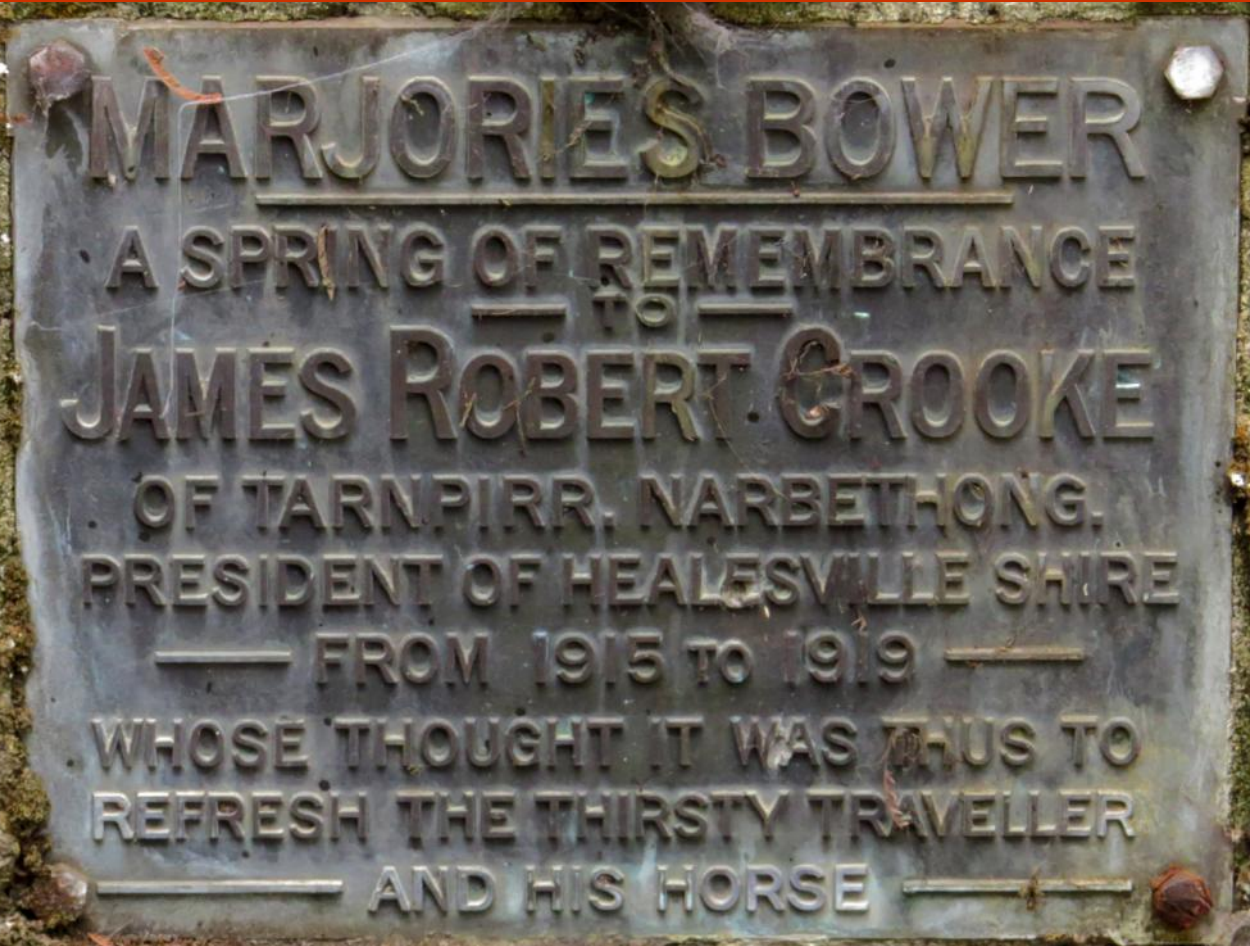


MEMORIAL CLEANUP

BLACK SPUR 2014







HISTORIC FACTSHEET

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

DROWNING OF A LADY AT MORDIALLOC.

Mrs. Crooke, wife of Mr. James R. Crooke, a well-known racehorse owner, was drowned at Mordialloc yesterday, under circumstances rendered the more distressing by the fact that her husband and sons were witnesses of the occurrence, and unable to render any assistance. Mrs. Crooke, who was a capable swimmer, went as was her custom to a bathing house near her residence, and at a point on the beach between Mordialloc and Frankston. She was accompanied by her two sons, Robert, aged about 15 years, and Bertie, who is younger, and a lad named Patrick O'Dea, who resides at Malvern, but who was staying for the holidays with the young Crookes, who are his schoolfellows. Mrs. Crooke had entered the water, and swum out some distance from the shore, when a large wave carried her over a sandbar which separated the bathing place from deeper water beyond. She struggled bravely to regain the shore, but was unable to do so. The boys soon realised her danger, and whilst Bertie ran for his father his companions unhesitatingly went out to the rescue of the distressed lady. Mr. Crooke soon arrived with two of his employes, and seeing that the boys could not succeed in their endeavour he swam in without stopping to divest himself of his clothing. Like the boys he was unable to reach Mrs. Crooke, and then ran to his boathouse close by, intending to try to rescue his wife with the boat. In the meantime, however, young O'Dea, who is only 14 years of age, pluckily swam out in the face of the breakers, and he succeeded in obtaining a hold of the lady and in bringing her to the shore. She showed no signs of life, but all possible efforts were made to revive her. Inspector Pewtrees, who was spending his holidays in the neighbourhood, assisted in these efforts, which were carried out in accordance with the directions published by the Royal Humane Society. Dr. Verity, of Cheltenham, arrived on the scene, and for two hours the party laboured earnestly, and then seeing no sign of returning consciousness, they desisted. The body was conveyed to Mr. Crooke's residence.

The Argus

Wednesday 4th January 1888

Courtesy National Library Australia

Drowning of James first wife - Annie Dunphy.

Argus

Wednesday 4th January 1888

Marriages.

CROOKE-BURBANK.—At the residence of the mother of the bride, the Rev. Charles Strong officiating, Robert Crooke, of Aspendale, Mordialloc, to Leura, eldest daughter of the late Mr. Ednott Burbank, of Koolmala, South Yarra.

The Argus

Thursday 18th April 1889

Courtesy National Library Australia

James marriage to Leura Maud Burbank

Argus

Thursday 18 April 1889

HISTORIC FACTSHEET

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Obituary.

MR. J. R. CROOKE, J.P.

The death occurred on Saturday, at the age of 85 years, of Mr. James Robert Crooke, J.P., of "Tarnpurr," st. Fillian's.

For many years deceased was a Healesville councillor, and was president of the shire for five years during the war. He took an active part in war work, and entertained 300 soldiers from French Oceania, who were awaiting embarkation from Melbourne.

Cr. Crooke claimed to be the first person to drive a motor vehicle over the Blacks' Spur, and the well known Wishing Well on that road was built by him. He had been a prominent Melbourne business man for many years, was a keen racing enthusiast, and owner of Aspendale Park.

The remains were interred in the Marysville cemetery on Sunday, the service at the graveside being conducted by Mr. Edgar Tozer. Among the many who attended were Cr. S. B. Mowle (shire president) and Mr. W. A. Burnside, J.P., representing the water trust. The funeral arrangements were carried out by Messrs. Phillips and Son.

A widow, a son and daughter are left to mourn their loss.

The obituary of Mr James Robert Crooke JP.

Robert claims to have been the first person to drive a motor vehicle over the Black Spur and also claims to have built the Black Spur's wishing well, located on the side of the highway, just down from Dom Dom Saddle on the Narbethong side.

Healesville and Yarra Glen Guardian
Saturday the 18th June 1932

Healesville & Yarra Glen Guardian
Saturday 18th June 1932
Courtesy National Library Australia



Artworkz

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