

# 'Poor man's racing' Pigeon racing in Victoria

Madeline Pentland & Emma Russell, August 2022



Considered a 'poor man's racehorse', racing pigeons have a rich history in Victoria that we would like to shine a light on after our recent fascinating investigations into a pigeon club in Yarraville.



Once a sport of international acclaim, popularised in Belgium, France and the Midlands of England, pigeon racing made its way to Melbourne in 1875.

The sport offers humble beginnings, with most pigeon lofts built in racer's backyards (large cages that look like a shed with multiple internal levels). Pigeons were trained to return to this 'home' after being released (homing) from 'liberation points' that become further and further away as the pigeons become more experienced.

Lofts contain nest boxes, perches, feeders and drinking bowls, a clock and a trapping system that secures and times the birds when they've homed.

To race, pigeons are mass released from a liberation point to return to their loft. Exact location of each home loft is marked on maps by club officials, calculating the distance from each liberation point to each loft. The curvature of the earth is accounted for using the Great Circle System formula, which measures the shortest distance between two points on the surface of a sphere - in this case Earth. With no straight lines on Earth's curve they are replaced, for the sake of calculations, with 'geodesics', which are the 'great circles' with a centre that coincides with the centre of the sphere.[1] Pigeon racing is also a 'smart man's sport'!

Winning pigeon racers in Victoria were awarded prizes of money in addition to community notoriety. For most avid racers, these prizes would fund the next generation of pigeon champions.

The long history of pigeon racing in Victoria smacks of politics as well as sport. There used to be a large number of clubs competing under the former Victorian Homing Pigeon Association. Once the governing body for most or all clubs in the early 20th century, the Victorian Homing Pigeon Association defected in 1938, transitioning over 200 members in the north and west of Melbourne to the newly established Victorian Racing Pigeon Union. Several decades later, in 1972, the western suburb clubs within the Victorian Racing Pigeon Union defected again to form the Western Pigeon Federation.

One club in Melbourne's west, the Yarraville Pigeon Homing Club, has a history that spans over 100 years. Originating in 1903 it once covered Footscray and Williamstown racers but later become the Yarraville Pigeon Homing Racing Club. In the early decades local 'fanciers' met at members' homes or nearby hotels, but a block of land in Regent Street, Yarraville was purchased in 1926 and the quaint, yellow weatherboard clubhouse was constructed several years later, likely awaiting more community funding.



The Yarraville Pigeon Club had almost seventy members by the 1940's, and boasted great success. In 1947 Rollinson and Son from Yarraville (pigeon racing was very much a family sport) claimed victory in the inaugural young bird Federation race. Their pigeon travelled 125 miles from Korong Vale in 2 hrs, 53 minutes and 40 seconds – 1164 yards (1064 metres) a minute to beat 1100 competing birds.

In WW2 the Australian Corps of Signals' Pigeons Service was established to confound enemy attempts at tampering with our communication systems. A request for pigeons was made to pigeon fanciers across the nation and the Corps received 13,500 birds towards the war effort!

The Yarraville Club pigeons stood out from the crowd when two were decorated with the Dickin Medal for gallantry after flying through treacherous conditions to deliver SOS messages at the maritime frontline of the war. The Dickin Medal honoured the work of animals in WW2 and is the equivalent to the Victoria Cross for humans. You can read their stories on our Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/p/CgyYsofsUBp/>



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Considered a 'typical example' of a 'prosperous sport' in 1947, the Yarraville Club was in 2013 fixed in Victorian Pigeon Racing history as 'the oldest club in Victoria still in its original rooms'.

Apart from its racing successes the Club became a multicultural and multi-aged community hub with Italians, Polish, English, and Maltese migrants joining the Australians in the post-war years. Generations of fathers, brothers, uncles and sons met at the clubhouse to share pigeon stories. The Club's last president, John Saggars, with a lifetime of involvement following his father's and uncle's, remembers Saturday mornings spent waiting to hear their pigeons had been 'liberated'. 'We'd have lunch, wait for the pigeons to come home, then go to the club and work out who won.'

In the 1970s there were 20 clubs in Melbourne's west, all part of the Western Pigeon Federation, but only 10 by 2019. As a one-time home to likely 1/5th of the original Victorian Homing Association membership, the pigeon racing community of the Western Suburbs took a hit with the sale of the Yarraville clubhouse in 2020, with only 8 members remaining. The building still stands on Regent Street, noticeably without the iconic 'Yarraville Pigeon Club' signage above the door, and former member Laurie Moore speaks highly of the rich history of the Yarraville Pigeon Homing Club in the wake of the sites auction, 'I have great memories here, all of us have.'



TEXT: Kilgower, Ian. & Robert Kilgower, & Karen Disney, Australian racing pigeons, Rigby, Adelaide, 1982. Bissett, Ron, Pigeon Fancing: Carrying, Breeding, Racing, and Exhibiting, David & Charles Publishing, 1985. Newspapers: Perso, Mike, 'The pigeon kings of Regent Street', MaribyrnongNews, 13 February 2015; Webb, Carolyn, 'Poor man's racehorses', The Age, June 9, 2019; Webb, Carolyn, 'Auction date set for Yarraville pigeon hall as members fly the coop', The Age, 21 October 2020; Winner from Gift Egg', Weekly Times, 19 March 1947, p.46; Websites: Victorian Racing Pigeon Union website, 'History' page; 'Great-circle distance, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great-circle\\_distance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great-circle_distance)  
IMAGES: History At Work; Australian War Memorial collection: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1227304?image=1>; Perso, Mike ibid - banner and group images



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