

Amazing journey no one seemed to know about

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In 2012, Ian Coutts visited the small western Victorian town of Harrow as an Australia Day ambassador, and was struck by the local history centre and the story it told of Johnny Mullagh and the 1868 Aboriginal cricket team.

On visits to countries such as Vietnam, Coutts had frequently been overwhelmed by the sense of history he encountered. Here, to his mind, was an amazing item of Australian history that no one seemed to know about. The following year, the Australia Day ambassador to Edenhope and Harrow, Tony Cavanagh, came away with a similar impression. Joining forces with former Melbourne Cricket Club committee member Jane Nathan, they formed the Mullagh Wills Foundation and resolved to do something to boost the story's visibility.

Their effect has been twofold. They had discussions with Cricket Australia, modifying its take on the story. Up until that point, Cricket Australia's focus was solely on the 1868 tour of England and not the team's tour, two years earlier, up the eastern seaboard which included the 1866 Boxing Day match at the MCG.

The Mullagh Wills Foundation's second initiative was more local in its focus. Carrying a leather-coated message book with parchment pages, they retraced the four-day journey of the team from Lake Wallace (now called Edenhope) to Melbourne in 1866, connecting with Aboriginal groups and community organisations along the way. This part of the project became known as "the Journey to the G".

At the launch of the journey in Harrow, Richard Kennedy, a descendant of the Aboriginal player known as Dick-a-Dick, wrote in the message book in both English and the Wergaia language: "It's good that all of you are here on our Jardwadjali and Wotjobaluk land. I pay respects to the elders (The elders are good). I pay respects to the land (The land is good). Long ago, grandfathers played cricket. They all Journey to the ground. Today, you all and I Journey to the ground. Today, you all and I celebrate."

Another Wotjobaluk and Jardwadjali elder, Bronwyn Pickford, is a descendant of both Dick-a-Dick and another Aboriginal player in the team known as Jim Crow. She wrote: "I remember their great journey. Long ago Dick-a-Dick and Jim Crow walked the land. Today, I continue the great journey leaving my footprints ... It was a proud moment for me to see this commemorative journal commence the journey to the G and stop in the town I've made my home, Ballarat."

The 1866 Aboriginal team was originally conceived by its financial backers as novelty entertainment. One of its members, known as Jimmy Tarpot, excelled at running backwards and spectators would be challenged to race him. This year, the program at the Apsley races was extended to include the Jimmy Tarpot Cup. The race, over 100

yards (91.4 metres), was called by Victoria Shaw and won by local footballer Dale Smith in 15.01 seconds. Tarpot won the race at the MCG in 1866 in 14 seconds flat.

In the course of "the journey to the G", the Moyston Willaura Football and Netball Club had a Mullagh Wills match day, playing Hawkesdale Macarthur. Buninyong played Ballan in a Mullagh Wills cricket match. The 1866 team was denied entry to the Skipton hotel. One hundred and fifty years later, the Corangamite Council held a special function to acknowledge the passage of the message book through its region.

One of the council's representatives wrote: "We are grateful for the opportunity to learn more about the remarkable achievement of Australia's first cricket team, and to partner with the Mullagh Wills Foundation in pursuit of its goal of 'reconciliation through sport'. We acknowledge our shared history and duty to care for the land on which we walk, and recognise and honour the outstanding achievements of the Indigenous people of our country."

Going on the many entries written in the message book, the "journey to the G" left a remarkable trail of good feeling in its wake. Ian Coutts is a media consultant who grew up in the Victorian country town of Kaniva; he says what he acquired from the journey is "some understanding of it all".

"The journey to the G" will end at 9am on Boxing Day at the scarred tree that stands on the eastern side of the MCG, roughly halfway between the stadium and Punt Road. Wurundjeri elder Joy Wandin Murphy will be present, the MCG being on Wurundjeri land. Richard Kennedy, the Wotjobaluk and Jardwadjali elder with whom the journey began, will present a traditional Aboriginal message stick to a representative of the Melbourne Cricket Club. All who wish to enter the spirit of the occasion are welcome.