

SAOA Historical Series No 44

John Sutton – a biography by Philippa Horton

Part One

The ornithological work of John Sutton is well documented. He was Honorary Secretary of the South Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA) for 16 years (1922-1938), Honorary Assistant Ornithologist at the South Australian Museum (SAMA) (1923-1934) and, after Dr A.M. Morgan died in October 1934, he became Honorary Ornithologist at SAMA until his own death in 1938. Following his death four obituaries were published (Anon. 1938, Cleland 1938, Condon 1939, Hale 1938). This Historical Series in the Birds SA Newsletter began with Paton's (2002) article on John Sutton and subsequent articles in the series have documented the copious correspondence between Sutton and various SAOA members, written in his capacity as the Association's

Secretary.

Little was known of Sutton's private life however. His obituaries did note that he was born in Castlemaine, worked with the National Bank, retired early and then took up ornithology, but they concentrated largely on his significant contribution to SA ornithology; they gave few other personal details and made no mention of any family. Paton (2002) remarked that "Very little personal detail about John Sutton comes out of the correspondence; in fact the only personal reference that I can remember is a mention on one occasion of his wife's ill health and therefore his non-attendance at an SAOA function."

The Bird Section of SAMA holds voluminous field notes and more correspondence written by Sutton but the only



“National Bank of Australasia Sports”

**A photo taken in Melbourne in 1907. John Sutton is fourth from the left in the middle row
Photo Courtesy NAB Group Archives.**

item of a personal nature is a photograph entitled “John Sutton and his Mother” (in the handwriting of Herb Condon who became Curator of Ornithology after Sutton’s death). This photograph was used in Condon’s (1939) obituary of Sutton but only Sutton himself was included, his mother having been cropped out. The original photograph had been cut to fit an oval frame and Sutton’s right shoulder had been partly cut off. When the photo was reproduced in the *South Australian Ornithologist (SAO)* his shoulder was painted in, as can be seen from the un-matched coat lapels.

While writing a history of ornithology at SAMA, in collaboration with Andrew Black and Brian Blaylock, I felt the need to know a little more of John Sutton’s private life to round out his story. I therefore delved into the resources of the SA Genealogy Library, internet resources such as the National Library of Australia’s “Trove” website and into John’s notebooks, and found far more information than I had expected. The following account is my interpretation of John Sutton’s life based on this information, interwoven with what we already know of his ornithological work. The personal information is probably more detailed than is warranted in an ornithological publication (or than Sutton himself would have liked), but the story is a fascinating one and it provides some insight into what made Sutton the extraordinary man that he was and why a banker from Victoria became an exceptional museum ornithologist and bird club secretary in Adelaide.

John Sutton was born in Castlemaine, Victoria in March 1865 (not 1866 as in his obituaries), the second child of William Sutton and Hannah née Howe (also spelled Hanna Hough). His date of birth is given as the 26th March on his birth registration but elsewhere it is always recorded as the 25th. Perhaps William, when registering his son’s birth some three months after the event, had mis-remembered the exact day, or the registrar made a mistake, or perhaps the family thought thereafter that John’s birthday was the 25th.

William Sutton, John’s father, was born in about 1836 to a farming family near Redhills, County Cavan, Ireland. He migrated to Australia in about 1853, first settling in Adelaide; the record of a William Sutton arriving at Port Adelaide on 2 November 1853 on the schooner “Dazzler” is most likely to be of him. Soon however William moved to Victoria to try his luck during the gold rush. In 1860 he gained employment with the Penal Department in Victoria, working for many years as the Turnkey, then Head Warder, at the Castlemaine Jail. In 1892 he was appointed as Governor of the Bendigo Jail and remained in that position until he was obliged to retire in 1896 due to a government retrenchment policy for 60 year old public servants at the time. The officers and warders of the Bendigo Jail presented him with a “handsome marble clock” on his retirement. He was a Protestant and was for many years a prominent member of the Loyal Orange Institution (now known as the Orange Order or Orange Lodge, the Protestant organisation based in Northern Ireland).

Hannah Howe, John’s mother, was born in 1837 to a farming family in County Limerick, Ireland, and migrated to Victoria in about 1861. Both she and William would have endured the Great Famine of Ireland (1845-1852) and perhaps their emigration was influenced by that or by favourable reports of Australia from earlier Irish emigrants. Hannah was a Catholic but her marriage to William on 8 September 1862 was in the Church of England, at Christ Church, Castlemaine.

William and Hannah had eight children of whom two, Margaret Eleanor (1863-1865) and Mark (1879-1880), died in infancy. The remaining six children attended Castlemaine Grammar School and were remarkably successful in their varied lives. The family was well known in Victorian football circles and Edmund Hamilton (born 1868) was the most successful of the brothers; he played for the Carlton Football Club and in 1892 was Vice-Captain of the team. Sisters Mary (b. 1871) and Anne (Annie, b. 1873) both became teachers and moved to Perth in 1896 where they held senior positions in the Education Department. Annie had gained a Bachelor of Arts degree from Melbourne University and went on to become a lecturer at the Claremont Training College in Perth. She was described as a born educationalist with a rare gift for imparting knowledge; her devotion to duty, strength of character and cheerful nature were greatly admired. William (b.1876) was dux of his year at Castlemaine Grammar School, then studied law in Bendigo and qualified for the bar. He moved to Camperdown (SW Victoria) in about 1910 where he played for the local cricket and football clubs. He was involved in several successful mining ventures including the Edna May gold mine in Western Australia and so pursued his legal profession more as a hobby than a necessity. Nonetheless he was regarded as one of the best informed lawyers in Victoria and his “sterling traits” and “genial disposition” won him a host of admirers.

In February 1882 at the age of 43, Hannah gave birth to Harvey, the family’s eighth and youngest child. Harvey also excelled at school and was dux at St Andrew’s College, Bendigo, where he had won a scholarship. He studied medicine at Melbourne University, gaining honors in every subject. Athletic like his brothers, he was the 1½ mile running champion for Australasia. He was lucky to survive unharmed in a collision between a train and a picnic cab in Bendigo on New Year’s Day 1900, in which two of his fellow cab passengers and both horses died. In 1905 he was awarded a Rhodes scholarship and worked with J.S. Haldane at Oxford University. While in England he represented Australia in the 1908 London Olympics. Returning to Australia in 1909 he continued an illustrious career in public health, preventive medicine and tropical medicine. His many achievements are detailed in biographies by Walker (1990) and Ferguson (2009) and both highlight Harvey’s enthusiasm, dedication (“he worked long hours and was always on the run”), courtesy and friendliness.

Clearly, John Sutton came from a remarkable family. His parents had the courage and determination to establish themselves in a new land and to give all their children a

good education. They cultivated a devotion to duty and an involvement in the community, and fostered academic and sporting achievement. Had they remained in Ireland their family values and the inherent brilliance of their children may have seen the latter flourish, but it seems likely that the opportunities provided in Australia helped them reach their full potential.

I have not found a record of John Sutton's achievements at school but it is likely he did well as he was offered a position with the National Bank of Australasia (NBA) at the age of 19. He joined the bank on 13 May 1884 as a Probationer, stationed at Castlemaine. On 1 January 1885 he was promoted to Clerk, still at Castlemaine, and later that year (31 July) moved to Head Office in Melbourne. For the following 16 months he worked variously at Head Office and suburban branches before moving to Sale and nearby Maffra in late 1886 for a month, back to Head Office for a month (January 1888) and then to Peshurst in western Victoria for a year, still as Clerk. In his obituary of Sutton, Condon (1939) stated that "As a young man he was stationed at branches of the bank in the western districts of Victoria, where he spent much of his leisure time in rambles through the bush. These early associations and experiences, especially with birds, left a lasting impression, and Mr. Sutton attributed his choice of the study of birds as a hobby in later life to this fact."

On 21 January 1889 Sutton returned to NBA Head Office and spent the next 20 years there, with two very brief periods as Relieving Manager at suburban branches, and on 16 December 1897 was promoted to Sub-accountant. For a while he lived at Moonee Ponds together with his parents when they moved to Melbourne following William's retirement in 1896; later he moved to Malvern, while his parents lived nearby in East Malvern. Continuing the family's involvement with sport, John was a member of the Melbourne Cricket Club (Anon. 1938) and he also appears in a 1907 photograph taken in Melbourne entitled "National Bank of Australasia Sports", showing 36 gentlemen including Sutton, many wearing straw boaters. This photo is reproduced here and in it, as in others taken years later on ornithological field trips, Sutton towers over his colleagues. As Condon (1939) remarked "Physically a big man he was always an outstanding figure at any gathering...". His hobbies also included stamp collecting, so he had the attributes of collecting and organising objects that would later make him a good museum curator.

On 2 July 1908 at the age of 43, John married a widow, Harriet Roake née Fulcher (born Echuca, 1867) at St Alban's Church, Armadale in Melbourne. Intriguingly his death registration states that this was a remarriage, but on his marriage registration he is described as a bachelor, not a widower or divorcee. I can find no record of a previous marriage so we can assume that this was his first and only marriage. On marrying Harriet, John acquired an "instant family". Harriet had married John Edward Roake in Victoria in 1885 and they had three children: Ann Ada Nellie (born 1886), John Raymond (1888) and Leonard Edward (1890), all born in Melbourne. John Edward Roake died in 1897 at the age of 38.

Further promotion on 1 January 1909 saw John Sutton move to the Adelaide Office of NBA as Accountant (not acting Manager as stated by Hale 1938), which position he held for the next 7½ years. During this time he was in demand at criminal courts as an expert witness in handwriting. The entire Roake family had moved with him to Adelaide and they lived at "St Jacques" on Park Terrace (now Greenhill Road), Eastwood. Leonard Roake attended Hoare's Business College and played football for the college; later he played amateur league with the Marlborough Football Club, of which John was elected President in March 1911. Leonard followed in his step-father's footsteps and gained employment with the NBA in December 1909. He married Alice Mabel (born Mabel Alice and nicknamed "Bob") Vickery of Meadows in 1916. In 1911 Ann Ada ("Ida") married a widower, Harry Fremantle King, youngest son of the Hon. Thomas King (newspaper proprietor and politician), and became step-mother to his two sons Stuart and Russell King. She and Harriet moved in Adelaide society circles; they also played croquet at the South Terrace Croquet Club and Harriet was a member of the Parkside Bowling Club. John Raymond ("Ray") Roake married Ada Olive Ottaway in 1914 at the College Park Congregational Church and they moved to Claremont Avenue (off Fullarton Road), Netherby.

While celebrating family marriages, John also mourned the deaths of family members in Melbourne. His footballer brother Edmund (Eddie), who had become a railway employee, died of tuberculosis at their parents' home in June 1911. Eddie was only 43 years old and left a widow and 14 year old daughter Hannah Elizabeth (Nancy). Little over a year later in July 1912, William, John's father, died aged about 75 of heart problems. Following her husband's death, Hannah moved to Perth to be close to John's sisters.

On 17 August 1916 Sutton was promoted to Branch Inspector and returned to Victoria where he was stationed at the Branch Department of the NBA. The move may well have been necessitated by the enlistment of many bank staff on active service. Although himself too old to serve in the First World War, John Sutton and his family, as with so many, were closely involved. John's youngest brother Harvey enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in March 1916 and his younger step-son Leonard followed in July 1916. Both survived the war, although Leonard was twice wounded in France. Harvey had a lucky escape when his troop ship, the "Aragon", was torpedoed and sunk off the coast of Egypt while waiting to enter the port of Alexandria in December 1917. Harvey was twice mentioned in dispatches and awarded an OBE for distinguished services as a medical officer in northern Africa. His war service dossier (in the National Archives of Australia) includes a letter from John dated 24 January 1917 inquiring about a new address for Harvey for sending him letters and papers. No doubt John's correspondence was a great comfort to Harvey.

Tragedy struck the Sutton family not on the battlefields but in Australia when John's 43 year old sister Annie died of tuberculosis at their mother's home in Perth in April

1917. John's own health began to fail (Anon. 1927) and although the cause is unknown it may well have been exacerbated by the recent deaths of two siblings and concern for his brother and step-son away at the war. The family's troubles worsened when John's step-daughter Ida's husband, Harry King, was declared insolvent and at the end of 1917 sentenced to nine months imprisonment, with their Kensington Park house sold at auction. No doubt this was a major influence when John tendered his resignation from NBA on 13 June 1918, at the age of 53. His resignation was accepted four days later and his length of service with the bank was noted as 34 years and one month.

Returning to Adelaide almost immediately, John bought a property of 90ft x 200ft with an existing bungalow on Fullarton Road, just around the corner from step-son Ray Roake and his family; the sale was finalised in July 1918. The house was "The Bungalow" (later number 12), Fullarton Road, Netherby (often quoted as "Netherby, Mitcham" or just as "Mitcham") and John and Harriet lived there for the remainder of their lives. It was also his address for correspondence while SAOA secretary, so would have been familiar to members and other ornithologist of that era. The house remains there today although it is no longer number 12, that section of Fullarton Road having been renumbered twice in the 1950s and 60s.

To be continued in Part Two.

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