

SAOA Historical Series No 50

John Sutton – a biography by Philippa Horton Part Four



**The Sutton-Roake family grave at Mitcham General Cemetery
(photo P. Horton, Nov. 2012).**

There is no evidence to indicate that John Sutton ever drove a motor car but he did own one, a Renown Tourer, the Renown being a modified and rebadged version of the Model T Ford (W. Warmer, National Motor Museum, pers. comm.). He probably bought it around July 1934, given that his notes on birds observed on car trips began on 15 July 1934. His step-son Leonard (Len) Roake drove the car and for the next four years they made many journeys around the Adelaide Plains and Mount Lofty Ranges, occasionally travelling further afield to the River Murray and once to the Coorong. Most trips were on Sunday afternoons, occasionally on other days, and sometimes all day Sunday. They were probably as much family outings as birding trips as his wife Harriet often accompanied them, as presumably did Leonard's wife Alice ("Bob"). In later years Harriet's daughter Mrs Ida King also joined them, John's notes recording that their trips often began via Unley Park where Ida and her family lived. John wrote his observations neatly in pencil on quarto sheets and pinned these together in six-monthly or yearly batches.

For most trips John recorded times of departure and return, distance travelled and route taken, weather conditions, fuel consumption and the amount and cost of petrol purchased, as well as birds observed. We can gain some idea of yearly distances travelled from a remark he made for the 30 Oct. 1937 trip: "Passing along Eastwood Terrace [Fullarton Road] at the side of the Parkside Asylum two sparrows flew across and one (a male) struck the head of the car near the front and fell dead to the roadway – the first time the car has struck a bird in some 16000 miles." Oddly, the sparrow is not in the Museum

collection and we can only assume it wasn't considered of any value. In contrast, two waders that John couldn't identify at the North Glenelg Golf Links on a car trip there on 20 March 1938 were definitely valued. John's assistant at the Museum, Herb Condon, went to the location two days later and collected one of them, a female (B19615), thereby confirming its identity as a Wood Sandpiper; this was only the second Australian specimen of Wood Sandpiper for the collection at the time.

As well as joining her family on car trips, Harriet Sutton made her own contribution to public life. She was an active member of the Mitcham and Torrens Park Women's Branch of the Liberal and Country League, serving on the committee and hosting meetings at 12 Fullarton Road. Her son Leonard developed an interest in ornithology, with several records of his observations published in the *SAO* in the mid to late 1930s. He also picked up dead birds for donation to the Museum and a few are listed in Sutton's "Additions to the South Australian Museum Collection" published periodically in the *SAO*. There are 11 specimens of his in the Museum database, all collected from 1934 to 1938. Alice Roake also took an interest in birds and an observation of hers of early breeding of White-plumed Honeyeaters was published in *SAO* (Roake 1935).

After the mid-1930s John rarely revisited his old haunts at Belair National Park, Kinchina or Outer Harbor, but an exception was a car trip on 11 Sept. 1937 with H. H. Finlayson, author of *The Red Centre* (1935) and SAOA member since 1929. Finlayson was the Honorary Curator

of Mammals at the Museum at the time and on this particular Saturday he caught the tram to the Highgate terminus where John and Leonard picked him up at lunch time for an afternoon of bird watching at Belair National Park, dropping him off at his North Adelaide home afterwards. Among the birds they observed in three hours at the park were two Restless Flycatchers, two Hooded Robins and four Brown Treecreepers, species not likely to be found there today.

We can assume that John developed friendships with many of his Museum colleagues as he continued to work at the Museum every weekday afternoon with Dr A. M. Morgan. From early 1933 onwards however, John took more of a lead role in Museum ornithology as Morgan, referred to in John's notebooks as "the Doctor", fell ill. Morgan had suffered a heart attack on 1 March 1933 (Bradley 2004) but gradually improved as the months went by, keeping in touch with the Museum and continuing to provide advice, with John visiting him for about two hours every Monday (Bradley 2004). To assist John, Herb Condon, who had joined the Museum in February 1929 as a cadet, was transferred part-time to Ornithology. By February 1934 Morgan was ill again with heart disease (Bradley 2005) and he never returned to work at the Museum; he died on 19 Oct. 1934, John having last seen him on Monday 8th October. At a meeting of the Museum Board in February 1935 John was appointed Honorary Curator of Ornithology, replacing Morgan.

John fulfilled the role of Curator admirably and his advice was always freely given. A search on the Trove website indicates the volume of inquiries he fielded, with key words "Sutton" and "Museum" returning about 100 newspaper articles for 1934-38. At that time the Bird Room was housed on the first floor of the north-eastern corner of the Museum's East Wing and it was here that a very young Bob Brown visited Sutton. Bob remembers him as being helpful, kindly and understanding, and while hinting that it would be preferable not to collect eggs, John gave instructions on doing so properly by recording all data, and he gave Bob a drill and blow-pipe (R. F. Brown, pers. comm.). The Museum reaped the benefits, with Bob donating his small collection of 51 clutches in 1937.

Paul Lawson (Museum taxidermist 1936-1979) also remembers John as being helpful and very likeable (P. F. Lawson, pers. comm.). At one of their earliest meetings Paul brought a clutch of eggs for identification and John gave him a stern but kindly lecture on the importance of collecting eggs only if the adult birds were identified first. On his arrival at the Museum each afternoon John would call in to the taxidermists' room, then on the ground floor of the north-eastern corner of the East Wing, for a quick chat. He was always keen to add as many birds as possible to the skin collection, including Australian and foreign species bred in captivity. Many aviary-bred specimens came from the Foglia family's city bird shop in

Rundle Street. Paul remembers following John's instructions to pick up a shoebox full of dead birds from Foglia's following a heatwave, and recalls wryly that the intake of aviary birds dropped dramatically after John died.

Events at the Museum occasionally rated a mention in John's Netherby notebooks, for example a visit from Dr Alan Lendon (surgeon and aviculturist) on 1 Dec. 1937. Lendon had brought in to show John a mounted skin of a Paradise Parrot that he and the then Director of the Adelaide Zoo, Ron Minchin, had found and purchased in Hobart a week or so before. "It was amongst other birds in a small cage in a shop & the owner knew nothing about it, not even its name." It was the first Paradise Parrot skin John had ever seen. The Museum later obtained its own Paradise Parrot skin by exchange with Museum Victoria in 1952; it was collected in the Moreton Bay region, Queensland, but the date and collector are unknown.

In a letter to Walter Cain dated 2 Aug. 1936 John described a new project he was working on: listing all bird species found in South Australia and where they had been recorded (Bradley 2006). He asked Walter to send him lists of any species he found in his travels, stating places and dates seen. Clearly John intended this new list to be much more informative than his earlier publications that were simply lists of species names (Sutton 1923, 1927), but sadly he ran out of time to publish it. Terrill and Rix (1950) were the first to produce an annotated list of SA birds with information on distributions and habitats. It is likely that John's accumulated notes were the ones referred to in a letter from the Acting Museum Director, Herbert Womersley, to Professor J. B. Cleland on 8/11/1939. Womersley wrote: "The Museum Committee has approved the abstracting of certain parts of the papers bequeathed to the Museum by the late Mr. Sutton for the purposes of the Science Handbook on the birds of South Australia being compiled by a working committee of the South Australian Ornithologists' Association. We should be glad if you would arrange for Mr. Condon to have particulars of the abstracts required from time to time." The SAOA never produced this handbook; we can only assume that Condon may have used the notes himself as a basis for the first edition of his *Handlist of the Birds of South Australia* (Condon 1962). The notes themselves are no longer held by the Museum and their whereabouts are unknown.

By 1938 John was reducing his workload, although whether this was largely due to his own ageing or to looking after his ailing wife is not clear. He had stopped his all-day bird watching trips in April 1935, lamenting to Walter Cain in a letter of 13 Nov. 1935 that he seemed to be "getting ODTAA – one dam thing after another" (Bradley 2006). He no longer registered every new bird specimen at the Museum, having left that task mainly to Condon from April 1936 onwards, with his last register entry being on 10 May 1938. He resigned as SAOA secretary in March 1938 (Condon 1939), that position

being taken by Condon, who had joined the SAOA in 1933 (SAOA 1935). He had been doing afternoon walks for an hour or two around Netherby, Urrbrae and Springfield each Saturday from May 1937 onwards, but stopped in February 1938 with just two more walks in May. From late April to late August 1938 he made no bird watching journeys at all; his correspondence indicates that Harriet was ill during that time and John suffered a severe “bilious attack ... caused by two of my favourite dishes, which are now to be crossed off my menu card”.

Despite such setbacks he continued his editorial duties for the *SAO* and contributed his Netherby observations to it, one of his last being of Whistling Kites that he and Leonard saw circling overhead, reddened by the evening sun (Sutton 1938). He wrote a letter to *The Advertiser*, published on 22 August 1938 (with excisions, much to his chagrin), regarding the Animals and Birds Protection Act, pointing out drawbacks with the schedules of the Amending Act, before Parliament at the time. He kept up with news of his home state (Victoria), remarking on Saturday 29 Jan. 1938 “Had to-day’s Melbourne Argus shortly after 1 p.m. (aeroplane)”. On 3 July 1938 John noted “First trams to-day to Springfield” (i.e. on Fullarton Road south of Netherby) but instead of now alighting near his home it appears that John continued to alight at Highgate so that he could observe Galahs around the Waite Agricultural Research Institute as he walked home (this species still being a novelty in the Adelaide area). He continued to encourage observers to supply observations for publication in the *SAO*, writing to Frank Macrow of Delamere on 16 July 1938 to ask him to send quarterly lists of birds observed, with notes on their habits, remarking “We want observers in this State.” He also replied to letters from his prolific correspondent Walter Cain, with his last reply dated 5 October 1938. His final letter was to Neil McGilp on 20 October, asking his advice about the identity of some nests and eggs observed by Cain.

The Sutton family’s weekend bird-watching trips by car resumed briefly at the end of winter 1938, their destinations being the Happy Valley Reservoir and the Millbrook Reservoir and nearby Gumeracha Weir. On 16 October John documented an encounter between a pair of Australasian Grebes and a Brown Snake swimming across the Gumeracha Weir, with one of the grebes swimming under the snake and pecking its tail. Their final trip was on 23 October to Millbrook Reservoir and Gumeracha Weir; not long after, John fell ill. Oscar Symon of Delamere visited the Museum on 14 November only to learn from Herb Condon that John was in hospital, and wrote him a letter the following day sending his best wishes. John did not recover however, and died on 22 November 1938 at the age of 73, his death certificate recording that he had died at home of heart disease, myocardial failure and pneumonia. Notices in *The Advertiser* the following day stated that “John, the beloved husband of Harriet Sutton” had died at a private hospital and that his funeral was to take place that

afternoon. The discrepancy in his place of death is puzzling but it seems likely that he died in hospital. John was buried in a picturesque plot at the Mitcham General Cemetery, 1½ km south of his home. The following January George Mack, ornithologist at the National Museum, Melbourne (Museum Victoria), wrote a letter of sympathy to the SA Museum Director, by then Herbert Hale. Hale replied “Mr. Sutton worked in an honorary capacity at this museum for fifteen years, and became a friend to all of us. He is greatly missed by everybody at this institution.”

As a mark of the esteem in which he held his friend John Sutton, Walter Cain, a professional carpenter, made a memorial tablet of 44 Australian timbers and donated it to the Museum in March 1939. In his letter of 4 March thanking Cain, Hale asked if Cain could supply a chart giving the names of the different woods used in the tablet and Cain duly obliged. The memorial tablet is now housed in the SAMA Bird Section office. The SAOA honoured John by designating the April 1939 issue of the *SAO* (Volume 15 part 2) as the Sutton Memorial Issue.

John’s will, prepared in July 1935 and describing him as a “Retired Bank Officer”, is carefully thought out and succinct. He bequeathed his bird books to the Public Library, all other ornithological documents and journals to the SA Museum (although we no longer have the cabinets in which they were housed), and his brother Harvey was to take whatever he wished of the stamp collection and remaining books. Income from his invested estate was to support Harriet for the rest of her life and to employ a maid. It was also to finance the upkeep of his motor car, “and the services of my stepson [Leonard] in connection therewith”. Upon Harriet’s death the estate was to be wound up and given entirely to Harvey, with the wish that he would use it for the benefit of his children, John’s nieces and nephews.

Losing such a big man, great in stature and in energy, must have drained the life from the family at 12 Fullarton Road. Harriet, who had been suffering from high blood pressure and chronic kidney disease, died of a stroke at Walwa Private Hospital (Fullarton Road, Myrtle Bank) on 3 May 1939 at the age of 71. Harriet was buried alongside John at the Mitcham Cemetery, with the headstone inscription “Reunited”. Leonard and Alice were left to mourn, amid the prospect of losing their home of nearly 20 years as John’s estate was wound up and the property sold. But sadness was followed swiftly by tragedy when Leonard suffered a perforated duodenal ulcer two days after his mother died, and he died aged 49 at the Parkwynd Private Hospital (East Terrace, Adelaide) on 9 May 1939. One can hardly imagine circumstances more devastating for Alice. She buried her husband in the family plot at Mitcham Cemetery, together with John and Harriet, probably wondering how long it would be before her own remains would be laid to rest in the fourth and final grave in the plot.

The property at 12 Fullarton Road and all household furniture and effects were auctioned in November 1939. Notices in *The Advertiser* gave detailed descriptions of the property and household items, the latter including even the crockery and cutlery. John's motor car was also to be auctioned, as were his numerous remaining books, and a black marble clock that may well have been his father William's retirement gift (see Part One). After months of turmoil, Alice's life entered a phase of relative stability when she and her sister-in-law Ida King and her family all moved to a house at 12 Princes Road, Mitcham. Leonard had inherited the whole of Harriet's estate and although he had made no will of his own, his estate was granted to Alice, so we may assume she had some small income. Around the late 1950s Alice was moved to the Salvation Army Aged Women's Retreat on Victoria Terrace (now Belair Road, Kingswood). Her last days were in the Parkside Mental Hospital, Eastwood, where she died of bronchopneumonia on 27 Feb. 1963, aged 72, with no family to fill in the blanks on her death certificate. Her will stipulated that her body should be donated to the University of Adelaide for anatomical studies and she was finally buried in an unmarked grave, along with other donors, at the West Terrace Cemetery on 21 Aug. 1964 (P. Skinn, Adelaide Cemeteries Authority, pers. comm.). Her place at Mitcham alongside her husband and parents-in-law remains empty.

The four obituaries of John Sutton all paid tribute to his diligence, helpfulness, attention to detail and tremendous capacity for time-consuming work. They made no mention of his family but there can be no doubt that Harriet, Leonard and Alice contributed to Sutton's work by supporting him at home, accompanying him on bird-watching trips, and providing a loving family life – the family behind a great man.

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