

# *SAOA Historical Series No 45*

## *John Sutton – a biography by Philippa Horton Part Two*



**John Sutton on Eyre Peninsula in 1925 during a field trip with A. M. Morgan, J. N. McGilp and F. E. Parsons; pictured with John is the Hudson Six motor car they used.**

**Photo: SAMA Bird Section.**

In Part One we explored John Sutton's family background and his career in banking, finishing with his early retirement from the bank and his final move to South Australia in 1918. Now we continue the story with John's retirement activities and his development as an ornithologist.

The move to Adelaide seems to have restored John Sutton's health as he soon resumed his sporting interests and joined the Parkside Bowling Club. He became honorary treasurer in September 1918, then honorary secretary in September 1919, resigning the latter position in September 1921.

In addition to bowling John took up bird watching and among his notebooks now held at the South Australian Museum (SAMA) is his first, covering July 1918 to February 1920. The first entry, dated 28 July 1918, reads:

“On the beach between Henley and Glenelg saw a dottrell with one leg” (probably a Red-capped Plover). Reading through the entries it is clear that he started as a novice, slowly identifying species and their calls, working out that magpies with grey backs are females or young, gradually learning to separate wattlebird species, and so on. He went on extensive walks in the area by himself or with his wife Harriet or Russell King (his step-daughter Ida's step-son) and on each occasion made a list of birds observed. He also recorded birds wherever he travelled for other purposes, such as to the Parkside Bowling Club; his first record for the club was of Noisy Miners on 11 Oct. 1918. By July 1919 he was able to separate the lorikeet species and was recording Musk and Purple-crowned Lorikeets around Netherby. In that month he also recorded Little Lorikeets, including one that he found dead under a blue gum in a paddock behind his home

(unfortunately this didn't find its way into the SAMA collection).

John's thirst for ornithological knowledge grew and he joined the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (RAOU) in 1919. At the meeting of the South Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA) held at the Royal Society of SA's rooms on 27 June 1919 "Mr. J. Sutton, of Netherby, Mitcham, was nominated for membership." At the same meeting, at which Captain S. A. White presided, John detailed his observations of a Brown Treecreeper at Mitcham that was in the habit of roosting in a vent pipe. His notebook reveals that the treecreeper would disappear into "the top of the tin air shaft of Aitchison's septic tank", the Aitchison family being next-door neighbours. There was no meeting of the SAOA in July owing to a restricted tram service because of the nationwide Seamen's Strike, so John had to wait until the meeting of 1 September 1919 to be elected a member of the association. He made immediate use of his membership by publishing his first ornithological paper in the *South Australian Ornithologist (SAO)*, on morning bird calls of 27 species at Netherby from 29 July to 1 September 1919 (Sutton 1919). These 27 species included Bush Stone-curlew, Jacky Winter, Black-chinned Honeyeater and Scarlet Robin, as well as the Brown Treecreeper, all of which have long vanished from Netherby. Now under the influence of SA's ornithological elite, including Captain White, Edwin Ashby, Robert Zietz, J. W. Mellor, A. M. Morgan, Frank Parsons and J. Neil McGilp, Sutton learned quickly. After the SAOA meeting of 26 September 1919 he wrote in his notebook: "Learned from Mr Ashby tonight that the bird heard for the first time on 16<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1919 and several times since was a Greenfinch and that the new bird yesterday was the Rufous Songlark."

September 1919 saw the welcome return of John's brother Harvey from the war. In the same month John accepted a position at the University of Adelaide as Lecturer in Banking and Exchange, as part of the University's Diploma in Commerce course. In this capacity he also gave a public lecture on 30 October 1924 on "The New Commonwealth Banking Act", given under the auspices of the Workers' Educational Association. John's university appointment was for six years, commencing in 1920, with a year's extension, but he did not re-apply thereafter and he retired at the end of 1927, aged 62. In his reply to Sutton's letter of resignation, the Registrar noted that the University Council expressed "their hearty appreciation of the services you have rendered in the Commercial Course during the period you have acted as lecturer in Banking and Exchange."

The start of John's lectureship in early 1920 must have been particularly difficult however, because of a double tragedy that struck the Sutton family. On 14 February 1920 William Sutton junior was on a hunting trip with a friend when a wheel of their buggy jolted in a rut and William's loaded gun slipped and fired, shooting him in

the chest and killing him instantly. William was 43 years old, an age of considerable significance for Sutton family births, marriages and deaths (see Part One). Only four days later, on 18 February, John and William's sole surviving sister Mary died at their mother's home in Perth, following an operation. Neither William nor Mary was married and neither had any children; in his will William bequeathed a yearly sum of £200 to John and a yearly sum of £100 to their mother Hannah, with the balance of the income from his considerable estate going to Harvey. After Mary's death Hannah left Perth and moved to Sydney to be close to Harvey and his young family. At the SAOA meeting of 28 February 1920 the Secretary reported "that Mr. J. Sutton had suffered a double bereavement by the death of a brother and sister, and it was resolved that a letter of sympathy be sent to Mr. Sutton."

Some relief for the family came with the safe return of John's step-son Leonard after he was discharged from war duty on 24 February 1920. During the war Leonard's wife Alice had lived with her family in Meadows but on Leonard's return they lived with John and Harriet at 12 Fullarton Road, Netherby. Leonard returned to his job at the National Bank of Australasia but resigned a little over five years later, joining the many men who left their bank jobs soon after returning from active service (H. Cadzow, NAB Group Archives, pers. comm.). Leonard's resignation was in unfortunate circumstances but the bank looked after him generously. We can only guess that Leonard had unresolved issues arising from his horrific experiences in the trenches and that these may have affected him for the rest of his life.

After missing the February 1920 meeting of the SAOA, John returned for the March meeting and probably rarely missed a meeting thereafter. Although we do not have any of his Netherby notebooks for 1920 to 1927 at SAMA, John was definitely keeping home bird records as shown by his frequent contributions to "Bird Notes" in the *SAO* during those years. The RAOU Congress and campout for 1921 were held in October in Sydney and at Wallis Lake (between Newcastle and Port Macquarie) and John attended along with Captain S. A. White. After the campout John returned to Sydney and stayed for several days with his brother Harvey at his home "Lynton" in Rose Bay; we can assume he also visited their mother who lived nearby. John gave an account of both the Congress and campout at the SAOA meeting of 26 November 1921. The trip to Wallis Lake seems to have whetted John's appetite for field work as shortly afterwards he began day trips around SA in earnest, starting with the Belair National Park in December 1921.

Including an earlier visit to Belair National Park in August 1919, John made 66 day trips to the park up to August 1930, with one more in each of 1931 and 1933. The first few visits he made by walking there and back from his home in Netherby, but thereafter he walked to the Mitcham railway station and caught the train. He

made a tabulated summary of most of these visits, now held in the SAMA Bird Section, and he published some of his observations in the *South Australian Naturalist* (Sutton 1928, 1936). Despite his many visits there, John saw only one Spotted Quailthrush in the National Park, on 11 May 1929; unfortunately he didn't write a description so its gender is unknown. He had seen another nearby on 5 Sept. 1922 during a trip to Upper Sturt and the Sturt River. This one was on the steep side of a valley and from the description was a male. On the same day John "Slipped into the Sturt, off a stone, onto my back when crossing & got fairly wet from waist down." This was not the only occasion when he suffered for his hobby, at other times getting soaked with rain or broiling in the heat; the weather didn't deter him.

On Thursday 23 December 1926 John visited Belair National Park in company with a 22-year old Dominic L. Serventy, by then already a keen birdwatcher and Western Australian state secretary for the RAOU (Erickson 2012). Mid-week trips such as this were relatively infrequent however, as Saturday was John's usual day for visiting Belair National Park. Saturday was likewise his usual day for trips to Kinchina, a now abandoned railway siding between Monarto South and Murray Bridge. John's first visit to Kinchina was on 5 June 1922 with the Field Naturalists' Section of the Royal Society of South Australia which he joined around that time, and he published the results in the *South Australian Naturalist* (Sutton 1922). He must have felt this was a good site for long-term observation as he made 186 more visits until mid-December 1928, with a peak of 54 visits in 1924. He made five more visits from 1929-1934 and again made a tabulated summary of birds recorded on all visits, now held in SAMA. On most trips he walked to Mitcham railway station and caught an early train to Kinchina, returning in the evening. On a few occasions he caught a late night goods train so that he could be dropped off at Kinchina in time for the dawn chorus. Taking this a step further, on Friday 2 February 1923 he caught a 5 pm train at Mitcham, arriving at Kinchina at about 8 pm, and "stayed up all night in the signal box" so that he could record overnight and morning bird calls. He did the same in June 1923 but on a later visit had the luxury of spending the night in the signalmen's residence. For his Belair and Kinchina trips John wrote his observations on individual sheets of paper, not in notebooks. Many of these sheets were his former University banking students' exam papers, usefully blank on one side. John always wrote in pencil and with incredibly neat writing, so neat as to suggest that he wrote them afterwards from field notes made during the day.

By 1930 John had found a new group of birds to study and a new location: sea and shore birds at Outer Harbor. He was able to reach Outer Harbor by train and he visited on most Saturdays from April 1930 to April 1935 (not 1926-1935 as stated by Condon 1939), with a total of 249 trips. From the Outer Harbor station John walked around Fisherman's Bay (a place name no longer in use) to

Pelican Point and nearby areas and "took off my boots & socks" so he could walk across the mud flats. All his Outer Harbor observations are written on individual quarto sheets (he had by now run out of exam papers to re-use) and he pinned each year's worth of sheets together. These, together with his tabulated summary of birds recorded on each visit, are also in the SAMA Bird Section; unfortunately he never published any of the observations. Among the most notable of species he recorded at Outer Harbor was the Eastern Curlew (now Far Eastern Curlew), which he regularly recorded in the hundreds over spring and summer, numbers never recorded today in SA. On 20<sup>th</sup> September 1930 John counted 251 curlews at 10.40 am, seen from the end of the wharf. Meanwhile the Governor (Sir Alexander Hore-Ruthven) was inspecting the "Java", flagship of the visiting Netherlands East Indies fleet, and at 10.53 "a salute of guns was fired and every curlew flushed at the first gun." John's tally rose to 572 and, together with others seen further along the shore, he eventually counted 900 curlews for the day, the most he ever recorded.

In addition to Saturday train trips, on Sundays, long weekends or occasionally mid-week from 1922 to the early 1930s John was often picked up by other ornithologists in their motor cars, mostly Dr A. M. Morgan, F. E. Parsons, J. N. McGilp and H. Brewster Jones. Together they made birding trips to locations including Woods Point (between Murray Bridge and Tailem Bend), Sellicks Beach, Happy Valley, Camden Swamp (presumably now obliterated by the suburb of Camden Park), Bridgewater, and various others. Given that John always walked, caught the train or was driven by others, it is likely that he himself did not drive.

Only two and a half years after joining the SAOA John became Honorary Secretary in March 1922, replacing J. N. McGilp. At the same meeting Prof. J. B. Cleland was elected President and F. E. Parsons Vice President. As noted by Paton (2002) the position of secretary at the time included the duties of treasurer so it involved a lot of work, although the membership was still relatively small (51 members in October 1922). By April 1927 John was held in sufficient regard by his fellow ornithologists as to be elected to the editorial committee of the *SAO*, joining J. B. Cleland and F. M. Angel, and these three remained as the editorial committee until John's death.

Early last century SAOA members were of course without the benefits of fully illustrated field guides and colour photography. Talks at SAOA meetings were therefore often illustrated with study skins from the private collections of members and from SAMA. The latter were brought along by the SAMA Ornithologist F. Robert Zietz. Tragically however, Robert Zietz died in April 1922 of cancer, at the age of 47. The Board of Governors of the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of SA invited Dr A. M. Morgan to replace Zietz but in an honorary capacity. At their meeting of June 1922 the President of the Board reported that Dr Morgan had

agreed to become Honorary Ornithologist. He joined four other honorary curators (and two more the following year), with only the entomologist being a salaried curator at that time; the financial saving to the Museum would have been considerable. In his annual report for 1922-1923 the Museum Director (Edgar Waite) noted that the Honorary Ornithologist "is being ably assisted by Mr J. Sutton, a voluntary worker." John's work was recognised formally when he was offered the position of Honorary Assistant Curator of Ornithology; his acceptance was reported by the President of the Board at its meeting on 16 November 1923.

Morgan and Sutton continued Robert Zietz's contributions of Museum study skins to SAOA meetings for many years. Their appointments also began a remarkable period in the history of ornithology at the Museum. Together they completed the transition, begun by Zietz, from an uncatalogued collection with a primary focus on display, to a fully catalogued collection with an emphasis on scientific research. Apart from occasions when he was away interstate or on field trips, John went in to the Museum every Monday to Friday from the time he was appointed until, according to Condon (1939), a month before he died. Around lunch time he would walk to the Highgate terminus of the electric tram at Cross Road and catch the tram along Fullarton Road and into town. His hours at the Museum were 2-4 pm (Bradley 2004) and he would return home around 5 pm, often adding observations to his notebook of birds seen on the walk between the terminus and his house. In those two highly productive hours at the Museum he registered and labelled the entire "Old Collection" of birds both Australian and foreign (acquired before Robert Zietz began registration in 1911), and set up a card index by species, with a code for the cabinet each specimen was housed in. John's printing on labels, cards and registers was beautifully precise, honed from his many years as a bank clerk. Even though the bird collection is now fully databased, John's registers and card index are a lasting legacy and are still in frequent use today.

### To be continued in Part Three.

### Acknowledgements

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