

## **CAPTAIN JAMES FEARON**

### **LACROSSE BUILDER AND ADVENTURER**

For those who may not be aware of Captain James Fearon he never played the game but was president of Williamstown Lacrosse Club from 1901 until 1943 and died in 1944, and presided over the club during WW1, the Great Depression and most of WW2. Prior to retirement he was a sea captain on tug boats for 25 years, bringing international shipping through the "Heads" to Melbourne port and had an immaculate record. He had an important job and for the times would have been highly remunerated and highly regarded in the seafaring community. As a young man he was mate on an early bay excursion steamer in the Queenscliff and Sorrento trade and he was master of the tug Advance before he joined the pilot service. He retired in 1928 at the age of 65, thus allowing him time to dedicate more time to the club and lacrosse. A feat worth recording was that in 1928 Captain Fearon refereed or umpired 42 lacrosse matches, not bad for a 65 year old.

As former Williamstown and Australian player Peter Hogg recanted "I was too young to know Captain Fearon but Mal Taylor, Berry Newgreen, Lionel Burgoyne and many other oldies always talked about how Captain Fearon sponsored trips, paid for social occasions and importantly saw that a Council by-law was enacted which stated that as long as Williamstown fielded a senior team the club could not be kicked off the Fearon Reserve. The "Skipper" was also known to pay fines for individuals who got into difficulty and couldn't pay."

As an example, at Malvern in 1934 Williamstown's George Dever, who at the time was a trainer for an Australian boxing champ, punched a Malvern spectator, and was subject to a police arrest until Arch Fowler promised the spectator his broken dentures would be replaced. Captain Fearon paid for the dental work!

According to Arch Fowler, after committee meetings senior members were invited to Captain Fearon's home for supper, beer and occasionally champagne.

He was not only generous with his time but he was also very generous with his money, and while we don't know we suspect he came from a wealthy family, he was a bachelor, and was very active in the community, in particular the sporting community. His father was a carpenter who became a shipbuilder.

Captain Fearon was also President of the VALA from 1934-35 as well as Vice President for a period. He was active in many sporting clubs around Williamstown that furthered junior sport (Cricket and football) and was Sea Scout Commissioner for Victoria for many years. He was also at one stage president of the Victorian Football Association and the Williamstown Football Club. He was also supportive of lacrosse outside of "Willy" and was for several years in the 1930's patron of the Sunshine Lacrosse Club. The Sunshine Advocate in April 1937 wrote in its article on Sunshine Lacrosse Club "Gratitude is felt for last year's patrons, especially Captain Fearon, who is very well known and highly respected for all the time and energy he has given in the junior section, and he is not a local personality, "The skipper" hails from Williamstown and takes an active interest in the Sunshine club and no club knows his value better."

The purpose of this article is highlight that for the times Captain Fearon was an amazing promoter and builder of the game of lacrosse, notwithstanding he never played the game. This man was arguably one of the great altruists for lacrosse of all time.

While he held the club together during WW1 and WW2, when many of the younger players enlisted and went overseas, with many paying the ultimate sacrifice, he also initiated many trips by ship or train, as well as introducing junior lacrosse to Williamstown. He also presided over the club and the game in Victoria to a lesser extent during the "Great Depression", which effectively lasted from 1929 until the outbreak of WW2 in 1939.

Captain Fearon started the ball rolling with junior lacrosse in 1929 and the numbers of juniors that turned up amazed the club officials, so much so that they had to make two teams. Mal Taylor was one of the boys in the early "Wanderers" teams that Captain Fearon initiated, and clearly the "Skipper" had an impact on Mal Taylor, so much so that he followed him years later as the rebuilder of Williamstown and the builder of many clubs in the western suburbs.

Many of his exploits and adventures have only come to light since we published a story on Captain Fearon in 2020, but what he did for lacrosse, the youth of Williamstown, given the times, is nothing short of incredible, and during the journey he not only built a club but he helped develop and shape the direction in life for many young lads at Williamstown, along with the people he took the game to.

Arguably the greatest builder and promoter of lacrosse we have known in Australia, but regardless of whether he was or wasn't, what he did do for our great game was amazing. This was an era when computers, iPhones, mobile phones, electronic media, etc did not exist during his life, everything was done manually and face to face. And by the way, money was short and life wasn't easy.

In 1910, under the Captain's guidance, the local boys visited N.E. Victoria, and played an exhibition game at Nagambie. The trip was a huge success, and Nagambie formed a club right away, and made our genial "Jimmy" its first president. In his home today may be seen a fine token of esteem from the Goulburn Valley organisation. So rapidly did the Nagambie club improve, that shortly afterwards their president invited them to Williamstown to try conclusions locally. The Captain personally met the visitors at Spencer Street on arrival, and escorted them to Williamstown, via Port Melbourne. The irony of the whole thing is that the country team accounted for one of the best teams the locals could put in the field. At a convivial gathering later on in the day, one of the visiting team jokingly suggested that "it was not quite the act of a good sport like the Captain to bring the "Hayseeds" across in the bay ferry on an exceptionally rough winter's morning, in order to get the team sea-sick and overwhelm them in the lacrosse arena afterwards, an event which the local team failed to accomplish.

In 1911 Williamstown through the instrumentality of "our subject", engaged South Yarra in an exhibition game at Geelong, with a view to establishing lacrosse at the "Pivot". Williamstown were successful, and a prominent Geelong business man

presented the Captain with a handsome memento of the occasion, which also adorns his library and music room.”

1929 visit to Rushworth.

1930's trip to Wallan – while today this is probably an hour or more car ride from Williamstown to Wallan in the 1930's it was probably a train from Willy to Flinders Street Station and then a regional train that stopped at Wallan along with many other stations along the way.



Captain Fearon with team members at Wallan Train Station

August 1932 the Skipper took the A section team from Williamstown to Launceston by ship, S.S. Nairana, to play an exhibition match against the newly formed Tasmanian Lacrosse Assn. The skipper provided a 4 page typed report on the trip.

The report of 13 August “Iroquois” concluded with “In an endeavour to give encouragement to lacrosse in Launceston, Williamstown played them on Saturday, and treated the crowd to a good exhibition of the game. The Tasmanians showed fair form, considering their lack of match practice but Williamstown won by 13 goals to 6”.

This revival was confined to the north of Tasmania and centred on Launceston: but an encouraging report appeared in “The Australasian” report on lacrosse on 20 August, under the sub-heading of Hobart Notes, where it stated “An effort is being made to revive lacrosse in Hobart. Captain J.H. Fearon of Melbourne, has been interesting himself in the matter, and he has called a meeting for this week. It is hoped to form two or three teams. Before the war lacrosse was fairly popular in Hobart”.

Again Tasmania there was further interest developing. A team from the Williamstown club, under the guidance of the Hon. secretary of the Victorian Association, Mr. A.J. Fowler (Another Williamstown stalwart), visited Launceston, with **Capt. J.H. Fearon, the President of the Williamstown club having undertaken to bear the expenses.** The visit was successful, and highly appreciated by lacrosse supporters in Tasmania.

1933 - Junior team visit to Adelaide by train – more detailed report available on this trip.

During 1934 a Victorian team visited N.S.W. accompanied by the President of the Victorian Lacrosse Association, Captain Fearon. The Victorians were surprised by the vigour and skill of the New South Wales players, and won the first of the two games by the narrow margin of 9 goals to 7. The second game was better from the Victorian point of view but still close enough to show that the New South Wales players could play effective lacrosse. Victoria won the game by 13 goals to 7. Captain Fearon presented a cup for the best player of the series. This distinction was awarded to R. Turnbull of New South Wales.

August 1934 a senior Williamstown team visit Launceston for an exhibition match against the Tasmanian representative team.



Team photo in August 1934 in Launceston

1934 - In September Captain Fearon led and we suspect paid for the return train travel to Adelaide along with the accommodation. This would have been an expensive trip and I suspect most of the boys couldn't afford to pay for such a trip, particularly given the nation was still in the grip of the Great Depression. As part of

their development Captain Fearon asked each boy to write an article on their experiences over their 6 day journey, which included playing a match in Adelaide against a West Torrens team along with a few excursions around Adelaide. Captain Fearon being the professional he was had their essays typed and published as a book. Click here to read the full report

<http://www.lambtonmountlacrosse.com/museum/47716173.pdf>

In 1935 Captain Fearon led another Williamstown team to Launceston, by ship, to play Tasmania on the Launceston Church Grammar School ground.



In July 1935 Captain Fearon, as president of the V.A.L.A., led the inaugural Victorian senior team visit to Perth to play W.A. (Outside of a carnival), where he celebrated his 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday, and two matches were played between the two rivals. We cannot be sure that Captain Fearon actually “Skippered” the boat from Victoria to Perth and back, but no doubt he would have been instrumental in organizing the inaugural “one on one” state game against W.A. What we also know is that on the way home the ship stopped off in Adelaide and the team played the S.A. team. While we don’t have any evidence to support it, but being the man he was, no doubt Captain Fearon initiated the inaugural trip and also suggested the stopover in Adelaide on the way home. In those days a ship was really the only viable option available to get from Melbourne to Perth.

1935 - Captain Fearon leads the Victorian team to Sydney and Brisbane. Below is a photo taken at the station in Melbourne where the team departed on the Sydney Express. The captain and manager is Jack Beattie (With hat), also from Williamstown.



1936 - Junior Williamstown team visit to Launceston to encourage schools to take up lacrosse as a school sport

**SPORT FOR YOUTHS**  
**Stimulating Interest in Lacrosse**  
**VICTORIANS' VISIT**

An effort to induce students of secondary schools in Launceston to take up lacrosse is being made by Captain J. H. Fearon, President of the Williamstown Lacrosse Association (V.), who reached Launceston by the Tarona on Saturday. He brought with him a team of lacrosse players from the Williamstown Club. Most of the team are youths, whom he brought to Tasmania to increase their interest in the game. Since he has been bringing teams to Tasmania the membership of the Williamstown Lacrosse Club has increased from 50 to 130. The boys talk of their trip, and stimulate interest among their friends, not only in the game, but in Tasmania. Captain Fearon said he knew of at least 50 Victorians who had travelled to Tasmania for holidays as a result of his praise of the State's attractions.

It was desired to place lacrosse on a proper basis, he said, and it was necessary to arouse interest in the schools, as youths were not likely to take up the game after they left school. He did not wish to see the game die out in Tasmania, as interchanges of visits were needed to stimulate it in Victoria.

Because the lacrosse season has ended the team which visited Launceston played cricket with a Launceston team on the Grammar School oval on Saturday. The Tasmanian side was composed mostly of Launceston lacrosse players, and was captained by Mr. H. Bushby. The visitors were met by Mr. S. B. Hopwood, President of the Tasmanian Lacrosse Association.