

An unfortunate accident

John Higgerson, born in 1810 was the most successful and famous jockey of his time. In his 35-year career, he rode many big name horses, including Veno which he raced to victory in 1857 before a crowd of over 20 000 in Victoria in a high-stakes race, promoted as a NSW vs Victoria 'Grand Race'.

In May 1905 Higgerson's son and his mate, Henry Roberts were cleaning their guns for hunting when a loaded gun accidentally discharged, severely wounding 95-year-old John. He was badly wounded and died in Sydney Hospital shortly afterwards on 28 May. Higgerson is buried at Woronora Cemetery.

On his retirement Higgerson had lived in Bottle Forest. Higgerson Avenue, Engadine and Veno Street Heathcote are named after the jockey and his horse.

His riding career is remembered in Adam Lindsay Gordon's poem 'Hippodromania or Whiffs from the Pipe'.

*'Johnny Higgerson, fancied him lock'd in the
straight;
I've heard that the old horse has never been
fitter.'*

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John Higgerson was one of the greatest jockeys of his time in a career that spanned 35 years. One of his most successful mounts was Veno, owned by George Taylor Rowe of Liverpool. On Veno, Higgerson won the Australian Plate, AJC Plate and Homebush Stakes in 1857. That race, held in Victoria, attracted over 20 000 spectators.

He rode many of the big name horses in his time and was still riding winners at the big races at the age of 55. Higgerson was known for his honesty and good sportsmanship, and reportedly declined an offer of £4000 to throw a race.

Higgerson was believed to be born in 1810 (but it is not recorded in NSW BD&M) and at the age of 95 was still working as National Park Ranger. His address was quoted as 'near Bottle Forest, Old Illawarra Road, Heathcote'. Higgerson Avenue and Veno Street, Heathcote were named after the jockey and horse, although they are now located in Engadine.

Married twice and the father of 22 children between 1858 and 1888, this larger than life character – at the age of 90 – walked a half-mile to Heathcote Station and back to meet reporters who came to interview him. In his 90s Higgerson was still tending a large vegetable patch and acting as a National Park Ranger.

On 6 May 1905, Higgerson was on the veranda of his home as his son and a mate were cleaning their guns prior to going shooting. The friend, Henry Roberts, a railway fettler, loaded his gun and was in the act of locking it when it discharged and hit John in the groin and hand. He was severely wounded, with one report saying that his hand was blown off. He was rushed to Sydney Hospital by train where he lingered until his death on 28 May. He was held in such high regard that while in hospital he was visited by the Premier of NSW, Mr Carruthers and the Chief Commissioner for Railways.

John Higgerson was buried at Woronora Cemetery Anglican Monumental Section 1-0235.

Reference:

- John Campbell, 'Stories from the Cemetery', *SSHS Bulletin* 2012