

Icon in the archives

Andrew Lemon

Archival institutions and historians need each other. Among the grand collections in the University of Melbourne Archives is a very modest group of records dating from 1930 to 1969, occupying 1.02 shelf metres, of the defunct Melbourne business of 'manufacturing jewellers', J.W. Steeth and Son. Three of the items, prosaically listed in finding aids as workbooks 1/1, 1/2 and 1/3, helped solve a series of mysteries concerning highly valuable gold trophies presented to winners of Australia's greatest horse race, the Melbourne Cup. As is so often the case with archival research, they answer only some of the questions, and give rise to new ones.

These records were not originally deposited in order to solve mysteries. They were donated to the university to preserve the memory of a unique Melbourne business and to memorialise a tradition of Australian goldsmithing. The material proved a goldmine in a different way to me as a historian. In return, my researches may help the archives and its many users gain a richer appreciation of the importance of this collection.

The reasons why a donor places records in an archive may have no connection with the motives of those wishing to consult them. Perversely, bread-and-butter items sometimes hold the key to understanding.



The Steeth records include 26 undistinguished duplicate invoice books covering only the years 1963 to 1966. Most likely they will never be consulted in detail, but they could imaginably help provide proof of provenance of an article made in the Steeth workshop. They also show the range of work undertaken, and who were their clients. I regret the Steeths did not keep their earlier invoice books; it might have made my quest easier.

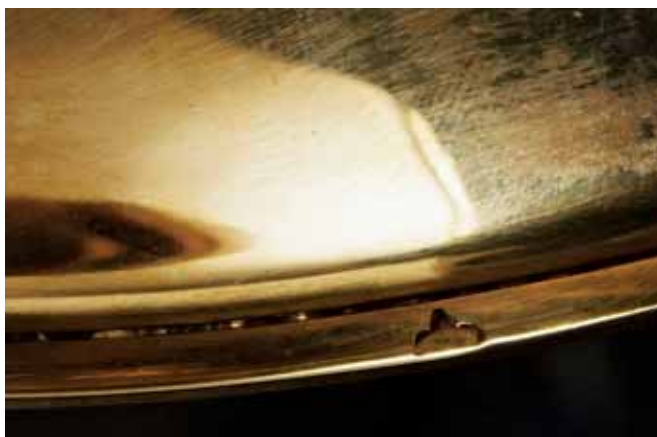
Finding aids to individual collections at the University of Melbourne Archives are now increasingly available online, so a researcher no longer needs to visit in person to consult the lists. But

the wise researcher will often probe further. This is what the finding aid tells us about the Steeth records:

Founded in the early 20th Century by James William Steeth, (c1884–1959) this firm gained a reputation for the high quality of its work. The Melbourne Cup was produced for William Drummond & Co from 1919 to 1970 (missing only four years). James' son Maurice James Francis Steeth (c1913–1970) was employed as a toolmaker with Aviation Manufacturing Co Pty Ltd from Jan 1941 until Oct 1945 when he left to join the family firm.

Previous page: The 1980 Melbourne Cup trophy (formerly the 1953 trophy) that the author believes was originally made by James Steeth and could well be Phar Lap's trophy from 1930. Pictured with Dr Andrew Lemon (at the launch in August 2008 of his book *The history of Australian thoroughbred racing*, volume 3), are Susan, Lady Renouf (owner of the trophy) and trainer Bart Cummings. Photograph courtesy of the Victoria Racing Club.

Right and opposite: Details of marks on the 1980 trophy (believed to be Phar Lap's 1930 Melbourne Cup). Photographs courtesy of the Victoria Racing Club.



He continued the business after the death of his father on 1 Jan 1959, until his own sudden death on 10 Jun 1970. Maurice gained a reputation as a teacher and examiner. The business was acquired by the Italian born silversmith Fortunato Rocca.

DESCRIPTION: Work books, invoices, stock sheets, newspaper cuttings and photographs. The collection also holds work punches for Steeth and Edward Fischer of Geelong.¹

Maurice Steeth's daughter Ann and son Michael donated the Steeth Collection to the university many years ago. When Maurice died in 1970 the children were too young even to consider taking over the business. Fortunato 'Lucky' Rocca was Maurice's leading apprentice in the 1960s and was able to acquire the Steeth workshop and goodwill, but despite the outstanding quality of the work it was only ever an artisan business on a modest scale. Rocca is still in business today on his own account as a gold- and silversmith in Elgin Street, Carlton, close to the University of Melbourne. He kept making the famous gold Melbourne Cup trophies annually until 2000, first for Drummond and Co. and later

for jewellers Hardy Brothers, who retailed them to the Victoria Racing Club (VRC). Hardy Brothers now make the trophies in Brisbane.

The date of the first Steeth Melbourne Cup trophy, and of the start of the business itself, causes confusion. William Drummond and Co. as prestige jewellers had supplied racing trophies to the VRC since the late 19th century—most often a piece of imported English silverware in one of a variety of forms, from epergnes and statuettes to tea services. Contrary to many claims, there was no official trophy presented for the first four Melbourne Cups (1861–64), and thereafter the practice of including a trophy was sporadic.

Only twice prior to 1916 had the VRC presented a Melbourne Cup trophy in gold. Both were Australian-made but the 1887 version was nothing more subtle than a mounted golden horseshoe. The 1876 trophy on the other hand truly represented the colonial goldsmith's art. The Geelong goldsmith Edward Fischer, whose work punch ended up in the Steeth Collection, made this ornate cup, paid for by VRC chairman James Blackwood and won by James Wilson, owner-trainer of the wonder filly Briseis. Tragically this trophy was sold decades ago to be melted down. It would be worth a lot more than

its gold value today in the collectors' market. Only a golden medallion, originally part of that trophy and engraved with details of the winning horse and connections, was retained by Wilson descendants. Last year this relic was stolen, only to find its way into the premises of a gold dealer who thought it was a commemorative medal. I think it has now been restored to its rightful owner.

In World War I the VRC abandoned its preference for importing trophies and pragmatically agreed to have them made in Melbourne. In 1916 Drummond and Co. supplied a small gold cup, won by New Zealand horse Sasanof, and this trophy remains in New Zealand today. You might irreverently describe it as a Magic Pudding—a round bowl with three curved handles that become its short legs. It stands on a circular timber plinth. James Steeth, by his own counting of the years, was the goldsmith who made this trophy, probably still as an employee of Drummond.

James began working independently as an artisan soon afterwards, but still worked extensively for Drummond, for whom he made the next two Melbourne Cup trophies. Again they had bowls but this time featured two handles and a single stem with a rounded



base. The 1917 example is owned by the Australian Jockey Club (now the Australian Turf Club) at Randwick. The next step in the evolution was in 1919 with the creation of what we now recognise as the Melbourne Cup design—a three-handled loving-cup about a foot tall, in liquid Art Deco style with a shaped stem supporting the bowl, the stem emerging from a scalloped base, and the whole thing resting on a circular polished timber stand.

Steeth's Melbourne Cups superficially look the same but the designs fluctuated subtly over the years, altering in width, height, weight, proportion and gold content. It is the workbooks of James and Maurice, imperfect as they are, that help explain how the cups changed. In the depression years from 1931 the trophies became smaller and contained less gold, and they never fully returned to 1930 dimensions until 2010.²

Maurice Steeth began working with his father *before* World War II, not afterwards as the University of Melbourne Archives summary suggests. He made his first Melbourne Cup solo in 1938, with James standing by; his anxious comments are preserved in the workbooks. After the war the Steeths more rigorously standardised the design but still introduced small variations.

Maurice became a student of the history of goldsmithing and jewellery manufacturing in Australia. The collection contains a beautifully presented typescript of his research. He voiced two loud laments. One was that so much fine Australian gold craftsmanship had been destroyed in times of economic depression; the Briseis Melbourne Cup trophy was just one example. His second grief was that English goldsmiths denied Australian makers the use of traditional hallmarks to sign their work. Maurice himself often placed James Steeth and Son identifying marks on their work in locations where they would not readily be seen. Without the Steeth Collection at the University of Melbourne Archives, many items made by the father and son could have ended up simply attributed to retailers 'Wm Drummond and Co.' whose company name was engraved visibly on the rim or base of all the Melbourne Cups they supplied.

It is true as the finding aid says that in four years (during the 1950s) Steeth and Son did not make new Melbourne Cups, even though trophies were presented for each of those races. In addition, in three of the years during World War II (1942, 1943 and 1944) no trophy was made, war bonds being presented in lieu.

The explanation for the four blank years in the 1950s turns out to be that second-hand Melbourne Cup trophies had come onto the market. These were acquired by Drummonds below cost, then re-engraved and re-presented as new, unbeknown to the winning owners. To that list we need to add the 1980 trophy won by Robert Sangster's imported stallion Beldale Ball, which was in fact the 1953 trophy. Lucky Rocca refurbished it at the request of the VRC, who had acquired it from a deceased estate. In 1980 the gold price went through the roof, just as it has done this year, so it seemed to make sense to bring this old cup out of the vault and rebrand it.

What Rocca did not know, and nobody in the VRC had remembered, was that the trophy was already second-hand when awarded in 1953. This fact was tucked away in financial ledgers that miraculously survived sundry purges of records at the VRC and is confirmed by the silence in Steeth's workbook. This now invaluable source gives weights and details of many of his trophies, and it led me to conclude that the Beldale Ball trophy had originally been made at least 50 years earlier, no later than 1930. Whose cup was it?

James Steeth at work (photographer and date unknown). Box BWP 9012, ref 8/1, accession no. 1983.0111, J.W. Steeth and Son Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



A process of elimination, helped by Steeth's notes but requiring much wider detective work, narrowed the field down first to 12, then to just two: Spearfelt's of 1926 or Phar Lap's of 1930. Owner and trainer Harry Telford secretly sold Phar Lap's trophy when he fell on hard times. Spearfelt's appeared to be safely in the family of the winning owner, but we later discovered it had gone missing, probably stolen, and possibly before 1953. Dimensions, weights, dates and circumstantial evidence favour Phar Lap but another lucky find in an archive, somewhere, someday, might be the only way of completely deciding the point.

There are other quirks in the story, and again Steeth workbooks help tell the tale. A few duplicate Melbourne Cup trophies were made, sometimes with the permission and knowledge of the VRC, sometimes not. Leo Menck, who owned the 1942 winner Colonus and who received war bonds instead of a trophy, later commissioned his own version. Once or twice a cup was stolen from its owners and replaced. One gentlemen's club in Collins Street lost Trivalve's 1927 cup in this way and commissioned a less valuable replica from Steeth and Co. Years later the original turned up, so now the club has two!

There were instances where joint owners of a Melbourne Cup winner commissioned an extra trophy, out of their winnings, and times when Drummond and Co. ordered an extra without telling the VRC. It was one such trophy, falsely engraved by a later owner, that ended up being touted as Phar Lap's missing Melbourne Cup. This was the case that sent me first to the Steeth Collection in 2005, and the workbooks became central to proving the forgery.

These days racing publicists are quick to apply the overworked label 'icon' to the Melbourne Cup. In this case they are justified. The design of it is widely recognised, and now the VRC tours each year's trophy (this year valued at \$175,000) around Australia and New Zealand, indeed internationally, in the weeks leading up to the first Tuesday in November, Melbourne Cup Day. Wherever it goes, from kindergartens to nursing homes, from bush races to glamour events in regional towns and big cities, the trophy is greeted with admiration and fascination, even reverence—a secular chalice handled with white gloves—contemplated, photographed, coveted. I have been part of the tour and I have seen the effect for myself. James Steeth would have been amazed that his rough

notes, reminders and calculations would end up as a treasured part of Australia's history in the University of Melbourne Archives.

Dr Andrew Lemon is consultant historian to the Victoria Racing Club and author of the three-volume *History of Australian thoroughbred racing* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant, 2008). He tells of 'The mystery of Phar Lap's cup' in *The story of the Melbourne Cup* (Melbourne: Slattery Media, 2010). He is president of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria and a member of the University of Melbourne Archives Advisory Board.

University of Melbourne Archives collects, manages and provides access to the historical records of the University of Melbourne, Victorian business, trade unions and other labour organisations, community and cultural organisations, as well as the personal papers of many individuals prominent within them. The records are available for research and may be used in the Cultural Collections Reading Room on the 3rd floor of the Baillieu Library. See www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/archives/ for further information.

- 1 T.J. Hart, Finding aid for J.W. Steeth and Son Collection (accession no. 1983.0111), prepared 19 November 2001. University of Melbourne Archives.
- 2 Dimensions of the 2010 and 2011 trophies were based on those of the 1980 trophy, which could be the missing 1930 trophy and is similar to the extant 1929 trophy. The current trophies are more robust and contain about 1,600 grams of 18-carat gold, compared with under 1,100 grams for the older versions.