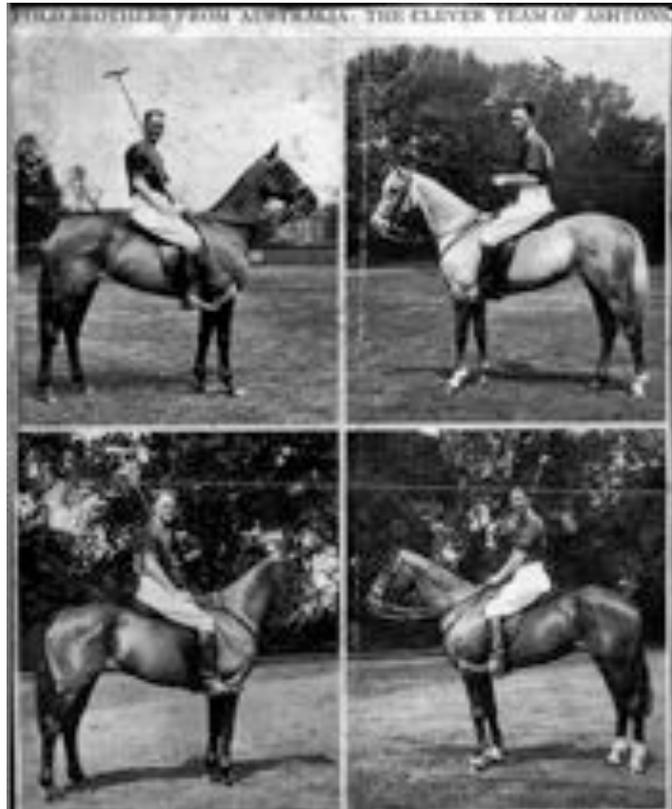


FOUR HORSEMEN

THE STORY OF THE ASHTON BROTHERS
Film Proposal

written by
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PRELUDE

AUSTRALIA, 1930: a country of less than 7 million people, still establishing its nationhood, barely registering on the world scene. Sydney had no Harbour Bridge, Don Bradman was not yet a household name. If the British thought of Australia much at all, it was largely as a faraway, rugged colony of Empire, a source of food and fibre.

All that was about to change. In the unlikely setting of **Markdale**, a sheep property in the isolated, rolling hills of south-western New South Wales, a story with the makings of a legend was stirring.

Four brothers – **Jim, Bob, Geoff and Phil Ashton** – hatched an impetuous plan to take on the English and American polo worlds, then in their golden ages and at the height of their glamour. Their father, **James Ashton** - pioneer and self-made man - and their mother, **Helen**, an artistic Anglican minister's daughter, joined their enterprise. It became a make-or-break family affair: the Ashtons – and Australia - take on the world.

Against the background of the looming Depression after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, their adventure brought this outback family into contact with some of the great luminaries of the day: the **King of Spain, Dame Nellie Melba**, the **Prince of Wales**, the future American statesman **Averell Harriman** and the Hollywood star **Spencer Tracey**.

From the dusty paddocks of Markdale, they embarked on the longest known sea voyage a string of polo ponies had ever made. Against impossible odds – the politics of Australia's polo world, and the sheer physical challenge of a sea journey half way around the globe – they took 25 horses to play the elite of England and America. Their feat changed the world's opinion of Australian polo – and of Australia.

It ended with one British newspaper declaring: "The four brothers Ashton, with their father and mother to inspire them, came over here with a string of ponies hardly less gallant than themselves. There was something in the unity and pluck of the Ashton family, who came across the world to compete in our English tournaments, that has won for them the sympathy and admiration of the British

public. The Ashton brothers testify – if testimony were needed – to Australian manhood as well as Australian horsemanship.”

In New York, *Town and Country* magazine pronounced: “An epic story, the journeyings around the world of the team from the Antipodes. It should be chanted by a Homer.” And J. P. Abramson, another American commentator: “Long Island abounds in polo-playing families, but there isn’t a high-goal combination of brothers anywhere in the world to match the team of Ashton, Ashton, Ashton and Ashton.”

An epic story, conquering the tyranny of distance, and embarked upon with the daring and disregard for convention that marked Australia’s national character. As Bob Ashton, one of the band of brothers, put it: “Australians stand pretty high in this ability to ignore statistics and have a go at the impossible.”

And yet, at every crucial point, it almost went disastrously wrong...

ACT ONE

The parents

James and Helen Ashton are central characters to the story. Their marriage was a lifelong romance that gave their sons the stability they needed to embark on such a daredevil venture. James was a child of the Australian frontier who turned adversity into success. Born in 1864, he left school at the age of 10, “owing to an unfortunate family financial disaster in his early youth”, according to one eulogy.

Forced to rely on his own resources, he started working in a printing office for two shillings and sixpence (25 cents) for a 54-hour week. At 13, he worked on two local newspapers at Echuca, Victoria, then became a printing compositor on the *Hay Standard* in New South Wales for £2.5.0 (\$4.50) a week. At 24, he returned to Hay and bought a half share in the *Riverine Grazier*. Four years later, he sold that and bought the *Narrandera Argus*. He was on his way. And his acumen was not limited to business and finance. As a young man, James competed and won second place in the **Stawell Gift**, a footrace that started at the end of the gold rush, when he was aged 14, and is now the most prestigious event of its kind in Australia.

By 1894, James was a member of the Legislative Assembly in the New South Wales parliament. He supported free trade at a time when politics in Australia was consumed by conflicts between "free traders" and "protectionists" in debates about the six state colonies joining in federation. His political career spanned more than 35 years, including roles as Secretary for Lands and Acting Premier. James met Helen in 1897 when he was 33 and she was 29. She was keeping house for her widowed father, Robert Willis, an Anglican minister at Sutton Forest, in the New South Wales Southern Highlands. She was winsome, lively, musical, artistic and mixed with noted painters of the day such as Arthur Streeton. Another prominent artist, Julian Ashton (no relation), painted Helen's portrait as a young woman (it is now in the collection of the Australian National Gallery, Canberra). For the next two years, James and Helen conducted an almost daily loving exchange of letters; they married in 1899.



Young Helen Ashton. James Ashton with their first two sons, Jim and Bob

As their four sons grew up, and James's political and business careers consumed much of his time, Helen became the family's guiding light who held them together. When the boys started playing polo, James worried that it could turn into a frivolous pursuit diverting attention from the rugged enterprise of running Markdale. Helen persuaded him that that it could be just the opposite: a bonding exercise that would help the boys work together even better.

The parents' strong characters, presence of mind and devotion to each other and to their sons turned out to be crucial at each critical stage of the polo odyssey. The family started off in Sydney. They lived in **Tueila**, a two-storey house dating from the 1850s, on a 9-acre (3.6 hectare) Sydney Harbour frontage in Double

Bay. The four sons arrived over eight years from 1899. Life at Tueila was idyllic. The Ashtons then owned the beach in front of the house. Swimming, sailing, picnics and parties were part of life there. Commercial sailing ships still visited Sydney. From those that anchored at Double Bay, some on board would row ashore to play billiards at Tueila.

But at that time, Australia's real wealth was in the bush. Australia grew rich as a supplier of agricultural goods to Britain, the mother country, just as it has grown rich a century later as a supplier of minerals to China.

So in 1920, James bought Markdale, a property 90 km south-west of Goulburn. The idea was that each of his sons could go there as they progressively left Shore, their city private school, and learn to run the property as a family enterprise. The dream was that one day, each son would have his own property.

In an era when roads were unsealed, telephones were in their infancy, aeroplane travel had barely begun and no science fiction writer could even have imagined the Internet, Markdale was about as isolated as you could get. But rural life had a style of its own. Black tie balls and race meetings brought people together. And, just as the Ashton boys arrived out west, so did polo.

Polo

Polo is thought to be the world's oldest ball game. It originated in ancient Persia, then moved to Tibet and China. Polo was first played in England in about 1870, and the game arrived in Australia six years later.

It is a fast, exciting game played by teams of four horsemen over about an hour, divided into several chukkas, or periods. The winning team is the one whose riders hit the most goals. The horses have to be skilled enough to respond to split-second timing, and almost be able to second-guess their riders' tactical moves. And, because of the game's high pace and physical demands, the horses are usually replaced each chukka. That is why the Ashtons had to take so many horses – 25 – on their trip to England and America.

They were setting forth into polo's golden age. J.N.P. Watson, a polo historian, has written that the 1920s and '30s were "years in which polo was never more

glamorous or more skilfully or dashingly played. They were years of leisure and low taxation and widespread support for the game”.

He was talking about the rich, elite class of gentlemen in England and America who then ruled polo. Their money – at least initially - safely insulated them from the Depression that was about to wreak havoc across the world. In Australia, things were somewhat different.

In 1921, a polo club started in Goulburn, the nearest big town to Markdale. It was founded by Colonel H.D.K. MacCartney, a former artillery officer from the First World War. The club drew its players not from people like sons of the English landed gentry, or the bankers and tycoons of Long Island, but from rugged young men like the Ashtons working on sheep and cattle stations. There was no glamour for these amateurs.

Bob Ashton, the second brother, later recalled vividly the first time he and eldest brother Jim went to play in Goulburn:

“It must have been in late October because we were shearing at the time. We had two ponies. I took the horses in on the Friday – 53 miles of rough road, which was a darn long ride. Jim had to supervise the shearing on the Saturday morning, so by the time he finished up and paid the shearers a cheque or two and got away it was after one o’clock. The old Dodge car had two punctures on the way in, so Jim arrived about the fourth chukka. Of course, no one had ever played before, and up to this time there was no score. Jim had had a game or two in Queensland, and for some reason seemed able to hit the ball more than twice running. He proceeded to hit the first few goals and so make it look more like a polo game.”

Father and sons

At the age of 23 in 1922, Jim emerged as the leader of the fledgling team of polo brothers. There was a typical Australian egalitarian culture among the brothers, except that Jim, as the eldest, became the natural conduit for communications from their father to all the brothers.

Their father James would visit the boys at Markdale on weekends. Like all journeys beyond cities in Australia then, travel was a challenge. Tired after his

week's parliamentary work, James would take the Friday night train from Sydney to Bathurst, arriving in the early hours. Railway workers unhooked his carriage and left him sleeping until morning. The boys drove to town over rough roads to pick him up.

Jim might have been the eldest brother; but ultimately they all looked to James for guidance and support. Wallace Ashton, one of Jim's sons – and one of the last family members still playing polo – describes the family dynamics:

"I always thought my father was boss of the other boys and ran the show. But I think grandfather James actually did. Dad took his orders from James. And James had come up tough. He didn't see the family as establishment at all. He saw them as coming up tough and astute and hard working. He expected people to perform. He'd tell them to go out and do the hard yards. My father, Jim, was the go-between. James would speak to Jim, who then passed on their father's serves to his brothers."

As the boys' confidence with polo grew, they tested their father's tolerance. James worried that they were neglecting Markdale. When they rode one weekend to a tournament further afield at Cooma, James exploded. Bob Ashton recalled:

"We returned from Cooma to Goulburn in cold weather. We had several punctures and arrived three hours overdue to find Dad very cold and very annoyed. He didn't know where we'd been as we hadn't told him, and he blew us up properly for going off playing polo and wasting our time. We had had late nights and were feeling very low.

"I had to stay at Lynton to bring the ponies out and I felt sorry for Jim having to drive with Dad so angry. However, Dad soon recovered his good humour, and a few hours later I was waked from deep sleep by the telephone and Dad saying it was quite all right.

"Years later, when we reminded Dad of this and asked him what he'd have thought if we'd told him that in eight years' time we'd be the only Australian team to ever visit England, he reckoned he'd have put us in a lunatic asylum."



James Ashton and his sons at Markdale: the Ashton Brothers polo team.

The horses

Just as crucial as father, mother and sons as characters in this story are the horses, especially the star horse, **Checkers**. Polo ponies at the top of their forms are like good athletes: powerful, well-built, good looking. Like serious athletes, they enjoy what they do. They will be aware that they are being taken to a polo game, and as soon as they know it's business time they will click on in their heads.

The Ashton brothers started gathering a team of horses in the early 1920s, but they were mainly stock horses which they then gradually started schooling in the art of polo. The first was **Hopalong**, who they bought from a drover for £35, then **Lady Hilda**.

They first saw **Checkers** in 1925 on a farm outside Nowra. She was a beautiful dapple cream part Arab mare, with a silver mane and tail. The owner did not know if she could turn or not, but when Jim got on her he knew she was the horse they were looking for. "She was brilliantly clever, though entirely

untrained," his brother Bob recalled. They bought her for £35. This is Bob Ashton's portrait of Checkers:

"She was a most aggressive temperament, and, if turned out with other horses, would fight all of them until she bossed the paddock full. This was part of her brilliance as a polo pony, as she hated to be beaten for a ball and would fight like a tigress to get to it, which made her riding off and ruck work superlative. She had a lot of pace and wonderful change of pace.

"She would slow up by shortening her stride and would be moving about a ruck with a short, quick, snappy stride, which she could instantly lengthen to a gallop and get breaks on most horses. She was the most intelligent pony I have ever seen, and probably one of the best lightweight ponies of all time."

When the Ashtons went to play in England in 1930, Checkers stood out. One English journalist wrote of the visit: "I cannot close without reference to that cream-coloured genius of the polo field, the wonderful Checkers, whose brilliant and gallant performance in England this year won everybody's heart. She is the Maltese Cat of modern polo."



Jim Ashton on Checkers: a photo from the 1930 trip to England

Before the visit, though, English attitudes to Australian polo were not so generous. Lord Cowdray, chairman of the Hurlingham Polo Association, the governing body of English polo, had visited Australia in 1913. He declared Australian polo a joke. In 1928, an English army officer, Colonel T.P. Melvill, led a British Army-in-India team to Australia. The team was actually beaten in the Dudley Cup, the leading Australian polo tournament, but the English captain blamed the borrowed horses they were riding. The English dismissed Australian polo scornfully as being no better than the standard of second grade "hill teams" in India.

The Ashtons, and Australian polo, would have their revenge.

After their youngest brother, Phil, left school, the four boys played for the first time as the Ashton Brothers team in 1926. They would walk their horses 52 miles from Markdale to Goulburn over rough roads on Thursdays and Fridays, play on Saturdays and Sundays and walk the horses home on Mondays and Tuesdays. "It was an awful business," Bob recalled. "Sixteen ponies and four grooms had to be arranged, four at Crookwell, 25 miles from home, and the next night at Goulburn. They used to just about use a set of shoes each time they went in."

This rugged start later fascinated Americans when the Ashtons reached Long Island. In *Town and Country* magazine, the "About People We Know" column devoted a full page to the Ashtons. The correspondent was intrigued by Markdale's 20,000 acres and 20,000 sheep – "each sheep has about an acre for himself" – and noted: "But fifty miles to men who have spent their days pursuing infuriated unshorn sheep into mountain lairs is no distance at all, and so the Messrs. Ashton decided to take up the game."

As they did so, rivalry quickly built between the Ashtons and other local teams playing in the Goulburn tournaments. The teams classified themselves not as A and B teams, but as Goulburn Stripes and Goulburn Squares: the winning team had the right to wear sweaters with a square pattern. James pushed his sons to excel. Before one match, when the brothers had been too busy working on Markdale to play for a month, they found themselves seeded against the Goulburn Stripes. "Give 'em hell boys," James told them. They did: they hit four goals in the first chukka, and won 10-3.

The brothers' interest in starting their own polo team was sparked by watching the team from the nearby town of Harden, the strongest team in the district and possibly Australia. "We watched them play, and right there made up our minds we would start a polo team and beat them," Jim said. "We studied the best players of the Harden crowd and went home to imitate as best we could. We had no instructor at all. Hitting – we just worked that out ourselves mostly. Then as we saw good players, we learned certain wrist twists and orthodox methods of stroking. The theories and strategy of teamwork we studied up in text books."

Their scores against Harden gradually narrowed. Then, two years after forming their team, the Ashtons achieved their ambition. In 1928, they won the Dudley Cup, the most coveted prize in Australian polo. It is named after Rachel, Countess of Dudley, wife of the Earl of Dudley, who was Governor-General of Australia from

1908-1911. (The cup was first presented by the Countess of Dudley in 1910, and is still awarded today.) The Ashtons won the Dudley Cup again in 1929.

Jim later explained to a journalist in America how the four brothers pushed themselves and each other: a curious mixture of competition and teamwork:

"There is no fiercer competition anywhere than among brothers. They never hesitate to speak out and criticise each other's faults. We go home after every game talking it over, and sometimes the talk becomes heated. It makes us work harder to beat each other than we would have to beat outsiders. I really don't believe we would have been able to live on the same ranch, as we have done, if it were not for the outlet of polo. At first I taught the others the game, but now I can't tell them anything. Furthermore, we completely understand each other's manner of playing. This helps our teamwork. We anticipate each other's moves."

Taking on the world: an idea is born

In 1927, Bob and Geoff visited England, leaving Jim and Phil to play that season at home without them. The two brothers returned home through America. In both countries, they watched a lot of polo and met polo people. The idea of sending a team from Australia took root. But which team? And how would they handle the politics and jealousies of the inward-looking world of Australian polo?

The Ashtons' confidence had grown. "I'm afraid Geoff and I greatly over-estimated Australian form," Bob recalled. "We formed the opinion in 1927 that the best Australian players were good enough to meet the best Americans. They weren't anywhere near it."

Ever the entrepreneur, James Ashton went ahead to New York. While waiting for his sons' arrival, James set about meeting the top American polo players and officials, including Louis Stoddard, President of the United States Polo Association, the game's governing body. Lord Cowdray, the English polo grandee who had dismissed Australian polo on his pre-first world war visit to Australia, happened to be in New York too. While the Ashtons were having their first discussions with Stoddard, he was suddenly called out of the room. Stoddard came back laughing. He told them it was Lord Cowdray who had called him out, to tell him how bad Australian polo was. Stoddard was more open-minded, and decided to give the

Australians a go. The Ashtons noticed on his wall a photo of a magnificent thoroughbred. "Is that Belle of All?" they asked.

The knowledge of these men from faraway Australia impressed Stoddard. He took them to the top polo games and introduced them to the most famous players, including Tommy Hitchcock and Devereux Milburn. He told them he was keen for an Australian polo team to visit America for the following year's season.

At that time, the Mt. Crawford team from South Australia was the reigning Australian champion. James Ashton sent them a lengthy cable from New York, at US Polo Association expense, suggesting they field a team. Stunned by such an invitation, the Mt. Crawford players decided there was no hope of arranging a visit.

Stoddard then advised the Ashtons to think about visiting themselves a year later, 1929. He stipulated that James Ashton personally had to approve any team from Australia put forward. This was mainly because the Americans now knew James personally. They had had bad experiences getting poor teams from overseas through dealing with people they had never met.

Back home, the Ashtons won the Dudley Cup in 1928 for the first time. News filtered back to America. The US Polo Association had always preferred bringing in good private teams, rather than teams representing a country. It sent a cable directly to the Ashtons in October 1928, inviting them to go to America as a private team. It was a dream offer. The Americans would pay transport, feed and stabling costs for up to 40 ponies and 10 grooms. The Ashtons would have to cover just their personal expenses and fares home for the grooms at the end. The Americans assumed the Ashtons would cover their costs, and probably make a profit, by selling their ponies in the United States after the season. High-class ponies had always brought big prices in America after being played successfully.

Tensions rising

Tensions and feuds in the small, tight-knit Australian polo world now opened up. According to Bob Ashton's later account, the Ashtons realised that if they accepted the American offer, others in Australia would suspect them of doing a deal secretly and cutting other good players out. To do the right thing, James sent the US Polo Association's invitation cable, and a follow-up letter from the

association, to the Australian Polo Council, the governing body. The Ashtons suggested that the council reply to the Americans, saying that the Ashtons were prepared to accept, "but that, in the interests of picking the best team, the matter be held over till after the Dudley Cup in June 1929". The Ashtons asked the council to add that, if no other team was then available, the Ashtons would still be prepared to go as invited. "We wanted this added in order to keep the offer open," said Bob.

Perhaps put out, or wanting to cut the Ashtons down to size, the Australian Polo Council declined to do this. It replied instead that it would let the US Polo Association know in July, after the 1929 Dudley Cup. The Americans responded that they would keep the offer open until August 1st. The Australian Polo Council's response turned out to be a bad move.

The Ashtons won the Dudley Cup, for the second year in a row. The Australian Polo Association then put together a team of six players, including just two of the Ashton brothers, Geoff and Bob. But the association had dawdled too long. It had miscalculated the American temperament. A bombshell followed. The US Polo Association replied that they had arranged instead a visit from a team from Argentina for 1930, an international year when a team from Britain would also visit; they could not cope with an additional team from Australia. "This actually was a breach of agreement with us, because they had left the offer open to the 1st August," Bob said. But, having been put off twice by Australia previously, it seems the Americans' patience had run out. Argentina had made a definite offer to visit, and the Americans had accepted. "Also, they knew the Argentines were good and they knew nothing of our form."

Turmoil

Bob Ashton recalled: "This caused a lot of turmoil and annoyance. Practically all of us had bought ponies at high prices in anticipation of the trip. This left everyone very flat. We had looked forward keenly to the trip. You can imagine it got a lot of discussion everywhere.

"There was some chat that the Ashtons, being in close touch with the Americans, had got the matter squashed so that they could make the trip themselves. This was so obviously utter rot. We had already received a definite invitation, to us

personally, from the US Polo Association, asking us to go as a private team, but instead put it in the hands of the Australian Polo Council.”

The Ashtons do their own thing – and keep it under wraps

At Markdale, the brothers were feeling low. One day, when they were droving sheep between Markdale and another property, Sylvia Vale, one of them said, “Why not make a trip to England – as a *private* team?”

Drawing on their contacts from the 1927 trip by Bob and Geoff, they planned a secret approach to the English polo authorities. Knowing Lord Cowdray’s scornful view of Australia, they wrote instead to Sir Harold Snagge, chairman of the Hurlingham Club, who had been nice to them during their visit. There was no air-mail in those days, only sea – or “surface” – mail. Their letter would take six weeks to reach England. It could be three months before they heard back.

But about six weeks later, when the brothers were packing and burning timber in a horse paddock, Bob had to go to the Markdale homestead for something. A cable had just come in from Snagge: “If you can come as representative, New South Wales team, we can give you free stabling and feed.”

Burned by the politics of the earlier fiascos, the Ashtons decided they would go as a private team or not at all. They cabled back: “Can only come as a private team but will come paying all our own expenses if you will make us honorary members of clubs and allow us entry to all tournaments for which our form makes us eligible.”

A few days later, a cable came from England agreeing. The rush was on. And the stakes were high.

First, James and his sons decided to keep their plan in the family. The rest of Australia’s polo fraternity were not to know about it. Second, as they were paying transport costs and living expenses for themselves and the horses, the financial outlay on a venture such as this, that no one had ever before attempted, would be enormous. Not even the wool clip from a well-run property like Markdale would ever cover it. So James Ashton called on all the gambling instincts from his youth that had so far served him well. He would **bet the value of Markdale**

itself to underwrite the trip. And when the polo tournaments in England were over, they would **sell their horses there** to pay back their costs.

The gamble begins

The Ashtons now became pioneers of a different sort. The task unfolding before them was quite alarming. In some ways, it seemed mad. No one had ever travelled so far for so long – 48 days – with horses on board a ship, expecting them to be ready for fast work four or five weeks after arrival.

There were no books, manuals or experience to draw on. The Ashtons had to work everything out for themselves. There had to be accommodation on deck for 25 horses. How would they cope in rough weather? Should they have tight stalls or ones with more room? And what should be under the horses' feet?

Jim and Geoff went to Sydney and inspected ship after ship. They did not quite know what they were looking for, and had to trust their instincts. Finally, they settled on the **Port Huon**, a fast cargo boat with a flush wooden deck running the full length of the ship.

They set about re-fitting the deck for horses. They designed stalls about eight feet square, giving each horse space to move. The horses were spread all over the available deck space: 16 stalls on the after deck, eight on each side, three each side midships, and three more forward. They commissioned the Blind Institute in Sydney to make coir mats, like doormats, to give the horses perfect foothold. They built an exercise yard forward of the bridge, with a fence seven feet high and a narrow entrance.

They covered the yard deck with matting, and dumped about six inches of sand on top for extra foothold. They laid down huge rolls of coconut matting across the deck so the horses would not slip on their daily walks from their stalls to the exercise yard. And they installed small roof shades over the front of each stall so the horses would not be worried by sun and rain on a journey that would take them from the squalls of the Southern Ocean to the equatorial heat of the Red Sea.

To ensure the horses were in perfect condition for their arrival in England, the Ashtons packed top-of-the-range feed. William Inglis and Sons supplied them with the best available chaff, oaten hay from Victoria and meadow hay from New Zealand. "Our baled lucerne hay was the best I ever saw," said Bob. "It created a lot of interest among local farmers in England."

Only now, with the Port Huon engaged, the accommodation designed and the 25 horses gathered together, did the Ashtons decide to tell the Australian Polo Association that they were going to play in England. They advised the council they would like to go with its approval. The council called a meeting. It was packed. Jim addressed it: "In view of the failure of the planned American trip, we have decided to forego the chance of any monetary assistance, and have arranged to make a trip to England as a purely private team paying all our own expenses. The American project was in the hands of the council for nearly three years with nil results. It seems the trip to America may never happen. We're keen to make a trip, and have decided on this."

His words caused rumblings. One member proposed that the Ashtons not be given permission to go to England, and that the team the council had chosen earlier to go to America should go instead. Jim replied: "We'd sooner go with the approval of the Polo Council. But this is a purely private venture. We're paying all our expenses – and we're going anyhow." At this, Sir Colin Stephen, the council chairman, said there seemed to be no reason why the Ashtons should not go with the council's blessing. A motion was proposed, seconded and passed.

Now that the news was out, Australian polo experts started predicting the Ashton trip would fail. Some who had taken horses to India, a trip lasting less than half the time of the England voyage, said the horses would need at least six months before they could start fast work after arrival. Others said the horses would never be able to stand in open boxes for so long. The Ashtons pinned their faith that two things they had thought out would prove the sceptics wrong. One was giving each horse enough space in a stall to lie down whenever it felt like it. This would have an enormous effect on its health compared with standing in one position for seven weeks. The other was giving them exercise by riding them in the yard daily.

But then Sir Colin Stephen himself confronted James Ashton with another question. He argued that his sons had overrated their ability to the English. They

had told Hurlingham in their letters that they thought they could play 24 goal polo, a high class of game. Stephen based his opinion on the handicaps of a team he had played with in Australia before the first world war, which had included the then Governor-General, Lord Denman, and his ADC's: all Englishmen on English handicaps. Bob Ashton later wrote: "He turned out to be wrong. It is very hard to compare the strength of teams that have not yet met, let alone when there is a lapse of 15 years in between."

Back at Markdale, the brothers now embarked on a frenzy of practical preparation for the trip. It involved the typical brand of improvisation and imagination towards solving problems that has always characterised outback Australians.

They built sample boxes the same sizes as the ones for the ship, so the horses could get used to them. They put boards around the open practice ground at Markdale, similar to the boards around English polo grounds. They walked the ponies up and down the verandas around the Markdale homestead, so they could get used to walking along a timber deck. They even hosed the veranda down to simulate sea spray. At first they had leather boots made to put over the horses hooves, as they planned to do on the ship, but discarded these and rolled out matting instead.

Then came the crucial question of the size of the Australian horses compared with their English counterparts. Australian horses tended to be shorter than English ones, which gave the English another reason to consider Australian polo inferior.

At Markdale, the Ashtons pored over copies of *Polo*, an outstanding American magazine. It reported in detail a recent three-game match between America and an Argentine team. The Americans won 2-1. The Ashtons were able to tabulate which ponies on both sides played the most, betting that the ponies that played the most were the best ones. The magazine also published detailed descriptions of every pony: breeding, colour, height and weight. After crunching all the information in their heads (the way their grandchildren might crunch it today in computers), they were delighted to find that the smaller horses played the bulk of the polo. They matched the weights with the heights of the horses. Then, to see if their horses might match the top horses from this American match, they walked their 25 horses 25 miles to Crookwell and weighed each one on the weighbridge at the local railway station. The weights were not much smaller than those of the best horses from the American match. Now, finally, they were ready.



Helen Ashton and her four sons outside the front door of Tueila in Sydney, just before their departure for the 1930 trip to England.

Drama on the high seas

The Port Huon left Sydney in January 1930. The pony accommodation was still being finished the day she sailed. They loaded everything they had calculated they would need: horse feed, buckets, brooms, forks, rugs, lanterns, veterinary supplies, matting, tools, nails, saddles, extra sand for the exercise yard and straw for the bedding. And, of course, the 25 horses all hoisted aboard and led to their boxes. There had never been a ship departure quite like it.



Loading the horses in Sydney



Leaving Sydney

Jim, Geoff, Phil and four grooms travelled with the horses. Bob was the worst sailor, so he sailed to England separately on the liner Orsova with their mother Helen. James went later still. As the Port Huon pulled out of Woolloomooloo later in the afternoon, James, Helen and Bob went to the Domain to wave and coo-ee her off. "It was the actual start of what, for us, was a pretty big adventure," said Bob.

While his brothers set to the task of getting the horses used to the ship where they would live for the next seven weeks, Bob had a chance to reflect on all the things that could go wrong. Had the Ashtons over-estimated their playing ability? What if the horses got sick? Would they recover from the voyage quickly enough to compete in the arduous London polo season? And what if the ship was struck by a violent storm?

The first day out of Sydney was windy with rough seas. The horses went off their feed. Seasickness affects them as it does human beings. The horses can feel sick, but they can't be sick. Tonnes of sand blew away from the exercise yard at the front of the ship. It had to be replaced, and the sand kept wet to save it.

The horses could have spent the next several weeks doing little but staring at the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. But the brothers were determined to keep them fit and occupied. They led each horse out of its box, along the deck and rode it in the exercise yard every day, two horses in the yard at a time. They did this 25 times a day for the entire voyage, possibly 1,700 times. One brother went ahead to make sure there was nothing on the deck to frighten the horse, such as a sailor, flapping canvas or tins being emptied; another brother led the horse, and a third went behind in case the horse lurched backwards in fright.



On board the Port Huon (above and over)



All went well across the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. As the Port Huon plied slowly through the Suez Canal, passengers on passing liners were fascinated by the unexpected spectacle of the Australian men riding horses on her deck. Then...

Disaster

After a few days in the Mediterranean, a big storm welled up. Jim argued with the chief officer to shift ballast aft so there could be a better lift in heavy seas. The chief officer said it wasn't necessary, and he wasn't going to be told by a land lubber what to do. He did so later, but too late.

The brothers stabilised the horse boxes with wire ropes in case they loosened in the swelling sea. Shortly before midnight, a huge wave crashed over the port side midships and shattered three boxes. They had to move the horses aft so they could share space with three other horses, two to a box.

The brothers were soaked. Jim asked Geoff to walk forward to check on the horses there. Suddenly Geoff heard a roar as another enormous wave came over the bows. To his horror, he saw matting from a loose box floating past in the sea, and thought his brother Phil had gone overboard with it. But Phil had seen the ship's nose plunging down into the great wave, and dodged behind a bulkhead just in time.

The forward boxes were smashed. Two horses were more or less on their feet. First, they moved **La Barba**, down the deck, but there was so much water slewing across that all hands had to be called. The crew had to hold the matting on each side so the horses could make the treacherous walk across the ship, between a hatch and a bulkhead, through narrow iron doors and right along the narrow promenade.

Worse was to come. One of the forward horses, the mare **Magic**, had fallen down under a rail, and was hanging half overboard. [Note: in the film this could be **Checkers**.] She was jammed under the rail, and the rail had to be removed to get her back on board. Stunned and alarmed, at first she refused to get up. They thought she had broken her back. "I'd have taken five bob for her then," Jim said later. Finally, they got her on her feet and she gingerly made the walk aft.

The third forward horse was **Lady Hilda**. Even in calm conditions up to now, she had never wanted to leave her box for the exercise yard. She would just stare at the sea and refuse to move. If they did get her to the yard, she was terribly nervous. Now, in the storm, after La Barba and Magic had been rescued, she was whinnying with fright and loneliness. Jim put a bridle on her and managed to get her out of her box. She put her head right over his shoulder and followed him the whole way down the deck until they reached the other horses.

After the storm lifted next morning, the brothers surveyed the damage. Six boxes were smashed, and 12 horses were now sharing two to a box. They picked and fought, and could not lie down. The sand exercise yard was destroyed. Another 12 days of cold, rough weather lay ahead.

Jim sent a telegram to their parents: "Three forward three midships boxes sand yards smashed last night all ponies selves escaped damage everything O.K. today double banking aft love "

Received Cablegram or Radiogram			
From <i>Port of the United States</i>			
25 9-45 p 22nd			
Addressee <i>Capoff</i>			
<p>Three forward three midships boxes sand yard smashed last night all ponies selves escaped damage every thing O.K. today double banking of aft love.</p>			
NAME AND ADDRESS	STATION FROM WHICH	TIME AND DATE SIGNED	SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS
<i>Leicester</i>		<i>24 3p</i>	<i>5th</i>



A GREAT SEA CAME OVER THE BOWS AND SMASHED TWO OF THE PONY BOXES
One Pony Was Pinned Helpless in the Wreckage, but the Boatmen Spread Mats in the Gale, Water to Their
Knees at Times, and Led Six Frightened Horses to New Quarters.



AFTER THE STORM

Led Around the Deck for Exercise, by the Brothers of
the Team, Not Grooms

The Port Huon was scheduled to berth at Hull, a port on Humberside in north-east England. After the crisis in the Mediterranean, the brothers were anxious to get to land quickly. The cooped up horses were restless, and being knocked around by kicking each other. They worked out they could cut six or seven days off the remaining voyage if they could land at Southampton, and unload the horses and gear there. They sent a cable to the Cunard Company in London, offering to pay an extra £250 if they could do this. Cunard refused permission.

So on they went to Hull, to a splendid arrival. Their mother Helen and brother Bob were on the dock to greet them. Horse boxes were waiting on the wharf. The horses were unloaded and put straight on a special train. A carriage was attached for players and grooms. The railway supplied them with food and hampers. "Jim, Geoff and Phil always said they cannot remember a more wonderful feeling of satisfaction and relief," Bob recalled.

ACT TWO

England

The Ashtons had stepped into a charmed world. The train took them straight to the magnificent stables and polo fields of the Beaufort Polo Club in Gloucestershire. The world of polo was in the full flush of its glory amid the wealth and leisure that defined the 1920s. The decade was also the height of the British Raj, and many English players had learned to play polo in India. The game's supporters in the top of rungs of society included the Prince of Wales and King Alfonso, the King of Spain. They did not know it then, but the polo-playing king would soon bestow a special honour on the Ashtons.

Although they went as a private team, the Ashtons were known in England as the Goulburn Team from Australia. After five weeks' settling the horses in, they started slow practice games against English teams. At first the English were sceptical. They thought the Ashtons' horses were too small compared with theirs. The Ashtons told them their horses were actually thicker set, which made them look lower than they really were.

One of the early slow practice games proved a turning point for the Ashtons' self-confidence in this milieu, where they already knew that opinions about their capabilities were stacked against them. The English team hopped straight into full

gallop and hit three goals against the Ashtons in the first chuckka. As they rode off, Bob heard one English player say to another: "It makes all the difference when we go full speed, what?" Bob was furious. He told his brothers they should "have a go" at them. So the Ashtons quietly switched horses, rode back on the field for the second chukka as if they hadn't noticed anything special – and then rode flat out for the first time. In the second chukka they hit two goals to none for the English.

Bob recalled: "We knew we could play to equal them. This meant we hadn't misjudged our form, and that the trip was justified and could be a success. It was a terrific thrill. I hope we didn't show it on the ground, but when we got back to our room at the hotel, we locked the door and did some handshaking."



One of their next games was against a team from India led by Colonel T.P. Melvill. After a visit to Australia in 1928, Melvill had disparaged Australian polo as

not being up to the best high-goal standards in England. Now, the Ashtons beat the Army in India team 4-3. A week later they beat them 9-4.

James Ashton arrived around this time to join the rest of the family. He was thrilled by his sons' performance. Bob recalled: "Colonel Melvill was embarrassed and tried to avoid Dad, knowing we had surely read his remarks on Australian form. I think he expected Dad to have some crack about it in front of the other English players."

But James cleverly turned the tables. "Dad said how pleased he was to meet him and how grateful to him, because it was the tremendous knowledge he had imparted to us during his visit to Australia, both as regards polo tactics and the training of horses, that had enabled us to make the great advance in form that we had shown since his visit. The remarks, having been made by Dad in front of a lot of English people, who had doubtless been asking the Colonel about his estimate of our form as 12 goals, put Colonel Melvill in a good light with everyone. He immediately became our bosom pal. You couldn't beat Dad for doing the right thing."

If some players were initially condescending about the Australians, the wider polo world and the Press were enthralled. The Ashton brothers, with their good looks, charm, exotic background and sense of adventure, quickly became the toast of the London season. At home in Australia, the *Guardian* newspaper called them the Ashton Ambassadors: "On the basis that our sportsmen are our best ambassadors, Australia is banking on its credit in London going up by leaps and bounds as soon as the four wealthy Ashton brothers, Jim, Bob, Geoff and Phil, play their first polo match in England...The entire quartet are bachelors, and their station property, Markdale, outside Goulburn, roughly covers an area of 10 square miles, and is one of the most elaborate homesteads down south."

After an early game in the Open Challenge Cup at Roehampton, when the Ashtons beat their opposing team, the Knaves by 12 goals to four, one English newspaper hailed their "brilliant display...Their combination is excellent and their hitting accurate and long."

Punch magazine described them in verse, and captured them in a cartoon by "The Tout" showing the boys in polo gear on a horse with father James in his suit as part of the team:

From a land so far below us/ Where the fenceless fields lie wide/ Here are four good men to show us/ How the lean Australians ride./ Here's a team distinct from others/ With a unity made plain/ By a lusty line of brothers/ Linked in a perfect chain./ Mr Punch, most proud to meet them/ Boot and spur in England now, / Though he hopes our best will beat them, / Greet's adventure with a bow.



Punch Cartoon

Another English magazine pictured the boys posing resplendently in their Goulburn polo gear, with the caption: "The Ashton Brothers from Australia, who together make up the Goulburn Team, are among the outstanding personalities of the day in the polo world."



The Ashtons moved to London to contest the Whitney Cup, their first appearance at the Hurlingham ground, the "centre court" of polo. The Whitney Cup was the main handicap event of the London season. The Ashtons won their first two rounds. In the second round they played the Hurricanes, a team considered that year to be the best private team in the world. They were organised by Stephen Sandford, an American. Bob Ashton described the Hurricanes as "a beautifully mounted team, as Sandford had combed the world for horses and paid up to \$22,000". The Ashtons beat the Hurricanes 13-7 on handicap. After winning their third round against another team, they won the prestigious Whitney Cup of 1930.

After this triumph Lord Cowdray, another English polo grandee who had once dismissed Australian polo, was left shamefaced – especially when he found himself chatting to Bob Ashton after the game. It was Cowdray who had told Louis Stoddard, president of the United States Polo Association a couple of years

earlier, that polo in Australia was of a very low standard. In pitching their England trip, the Ashtons had deliberately bypassed Cowdray and written instead to Sir Harold Snagge, chairman of the Hurlingham Club. Snagge now told them he was delighted that they'd proved their form. He was extra pleased because he'd had to fight Cowdray over whether it was worth the Ashtons' while coming to England at all.

"I'm afraid it was quite a pleasant feeling yarning to Lord Cowdray knowing all this, and knowing he knew I knew it," Bob Ashton said.

Next, the Ashtons played, and won, the Ranelagh Invitation Cup on handicap. Their opposing English team included Captain Melvill. "We were keen to beat them off equal handicap after Colonel Melvill's derogatory remarks about Australian polo," said Bob.

The Ashtons had moved into a flat in Cromwell Road, near Earls Court Road, about half way between the West End and the Hurlingham polo field. "Mum got hold of a man and his wife and another woman, and we were extremely comfortable throughout the season," wrote Bob. The boys' successes raised the stocks of not just the Ashtons but Australia. Among many in Australia, London was still seen as the imperial capital of the Mother Country. The presence of this dashing, frontier family from one of its Dominions reached beyond the polo fields.

As a member of the New South Wales Legislative Council, and chairman of the MLC insurance company, James Ashton was one of Australia's most eminent politicians and businessmen. And he took advantage of his time in England to stand up publicly for Australia's cause over "Empire Free Trade", a cause then gaining ground in England after the burst of the speculative bubble and the Crash of Wall Street in October 1929.

Its chief promoter was **Lord Beaverbrook**, the powerful proprietor of the *Daily Express* and its sister paper, the *Sunday Express*. A Canadian by birth, Beaverbrook in July 1929 launched what he called an "Empire Crusade", calling for completely free trade within the Empire in agriculture and manufacturing. On the day of the Wall Street Crash, Beaverbrook rushed out a pamphlet, *Empire Free Trade by Lord Beaverbrook*, which sold for one penny. (In their biography of Beaverbrook, Anne Chisholm and Michael Davie write: "As in the First World War,

Beaverbrook worked on the principle that propaganda bit deeper if people had paid to read it.”)

The pamphlet’s cover featured a striking design showing a helmsman at sea gripping a wheel and surrounded by a looming wave. Around the rim of the wheel, the words “The British Empire” were written, and on the only visible spokes, “Canada”, “Australia”, “Ind...” (the apparent order of Beaverbrook’s interests).

As a staunch supporter of free trade, James Ashton saw through the Beaverbrook campaign. He felt it would harm Australia. James wrote to the *Times* newspaper on July 14, 1930, from the Cromwell Road flat describing the slogan “Empire Free Trade” as a “misnomer” and “mischievous”. His letter, headed “An Australian View”, ran almost the entire length of one column in the broadsheet newspaper. James suggested that if Australia was expected to allow British manufactured goods in free, while taxing those from other countries under the Beaverbrook plan, it would effectively mean Australian manufactures could no longer compete with those from Britain. “I venture to predict that if this proposal were made to Australia, it would not be seriously entertained,” he wrote. “I express this view, not as a protectionist, but as a lifetime free trader, forced to the conclusion that fiscal policies the world over have relegated free trade for the time being to the limbo of lost causes.” [Note: in the film, the letter could become a **speech** at a gathering of top people, perhaps even including Beaverbrook.)

As with politics, London’s social life beckoned. The polo world was a natural conduit for invitations. For her part, Helen gave and attended tea parties. Her sons went to regimental dinners, which Bob found “splendid affairs with all the regimental colours and silverware”.

“One day at Hurlingham, a gentleman came up to me and said it was right that we were expected to dinner on a Friday night. I had no idea who he was, and he was a bit cold when I said I was sure it was O.K., but I would ask my brothers. He said rather stiffly that he hoped it would be right, as the **Prince of Wales** (later **King Edward VIII**) had expressed his wish to be there. The gentleman turned out to be Colonel Turner of the Life Guards. We went, and it certainly was a tremendous honour, the Prince of Wales, being Honorary Colonel of the Regiment. Every past Colonel was supposed to attend.”

The brothers dined three times at Regimental messes. At the first, the 17th/21st Lancers, the "tremendous tradition" impressed Bob: "Surrounded by battle colours torn with holes from the battles in which they were carried. A silver table ornament, out of all the fabulous regimental silver, I have never ceased to covet. It was of five horses grazing on a grassy hillock."

In fact, brother Jim as captain/manager of the team had to take a tough stand to keep his brothers from succumbing to social temptations so their fitness and focus on polo would not suffer. "The only fly in the ointment as far as I am concerned is the social whirl which is overwhelming," he wrote to his Aunt Bella in Australia. "Invitations by letter and telephone simply pour in, and a social secretary would be a very useful addition to the ménage."

Jim's policy on social life paid off. Of the 21 matches the Ashtons played in England, they won 16, including the Whitney Cup, the Ranelagh Handicap Cup and the Indian Empire Shield. But the Ashtons' greatest triumph was to make the final match of the Championship Cup at Hurlingham, the greatest event in English polo. The night before the game, James, Helen and their four sons were invited to dinner at the Savoy Hotel [no record of by whom]. In the dining room, they came face to face with **Dame Nellie Melba**, the great Australian-born opera diva (she died the following year). Bob has left a priceless record of the evening:

"As we were being shown to our table, Dad was waved to by Dame Nellie Melba. Dad knew her well, admired her tremendously and liked her very much. After we had sat down a head waiter brought to us a menu. On it was written by Melba 'Please send me tickets for tomorrow's game. We, Australians, have got to win.' Later on we were amazed and flattered to see Dame Nellie Melba standing by our table, accompanied by the HEAD Head Waiter, and another waiter, who was carrying a cake, shaped as a horseshoe, and tied with red and blue ribbons, which was presented to us for luck.

"I remember saying to Dad, 'How on earth could they produce such a thing late in the evening, even at the Savoy, and how would she even know what our colours were?'. Dad's reply was that when Dame Nellie Melba wants something done, it was done, even if it was impossible. The next morning I went to Hurlingham and told them that tickets were to be at both gates for Melba, and that seats were to be kept. She did not get there, but that night rang her apologies, and we

accepted her reason, which was that she had been bidden to Buckingham Palace by **George V** and **Queen Mary**. It seemed a reasonable excuse."

The final of the Championship Cup at Hurlingham was played on a Saturday. The ground was firm, the crowd big and the weather perfect. The Ashtons faced the Hurricanes, the best team in England. "Having got to the final of the Champion Cup, a lot of the nervous strain was off us," Bob later wrote. As the favourites, the Hurricanes carried most of the strain, he reckoned. "The challenger has everything to gain and nothing to lose." And so it proved to be. The Hurricanes beat the Ashtons by only nine goals to seven. But it was a thrilling match, and a great sporting victory for the Ashtons simply in reaching the final, the high point of English polo.

The *Polo Monthly* magazine of England put it this way: "Individually, the Australian players gave of their best. In no way dismayed by the tall reputations of their rivals, they drew themselves into the struggle with an energy and enthusiasm which were delightful to witness...The Hurricane four have played so frequently together that they should be able to combine as well as any team in the world, but on this occasion their combination was certainly not superior to that of the Australians, who seemed to have a great gift of anticipating each other's movements and strokes. Altogether their exhibition was a remarkable display of what may be accomplished by a well drilled and skilfully handled team."

Jim Ashton, the magazine reported, "made an admirable leader of the team, keeping the whole combination together wonderfully well". The Hurricanes were ahead 6-2 in the fourth chukka, but in the fifth, penultimate, chukka the Ashtons started closing the gap: "Excitement was now intense, every shot and every movement being followed with the closest attention by the enraptured spectators. It is not too much to say that the sympathies of the crowd were generally with the visitors, and had they been ultimately successful, they would have been accorded an ovation such as no other team has ever received on the Hurlingham ground."

Alphonso, the King of Spain, presented the Championship Cup to the Hurricanes. The king and the Marquis of Villavieja had introduced polo to Spain. Then came a magic moment. Alphonso turned to the Ashtons and congratulated the four sons and their parents. He told them he planned to send them a special

Cup to honour their initiative in travelling to England, and the standard of their play. When the silver Cup later arrived, its inscription read: "Presented by His Majesty the King of Spain to Mr James Ashton in recognition of his sporting enterprise in bringing to England the Goulburn Polo Team, comprising his four sons, and in memory of their brilliant display in the final of the Champion Cup at Hurlingham on June 28th, 1930." [Note: no mention of Helen in the tribute.]



The King of Spain congratulates the Ashton brothers at Hurlingham. Proud mother Helen on the right. Same picture below, with proud father James.



Ngayo Marsh, a prolific writer of detective novels (and a contemporary of Agatha Christie), wrote a vivid description of this scene for a newspaper piece:

“One of the pleasantest places in all England is Hurlingham on a summer’s day. The lawns are like springy green carpets, and the courteous sun patterns them with the faint image of tall trees. I went there this afternoon to see the Ashton boys, that remarkable team of four young Australian brothers, play the Hurricanes, one of the best teams in England.

“There they were in the sunshine, making a good fight of it against Sanford, Balding, Roark and Wise. The play was hard, fast, and, for first-class polo, at times a little dishevelled; but one could not hope to see a more exciting game. At the end of the sixth chukka they were six-all. When the whistle sounded for the last time the score was 7-9 – a win for the Hurricanes.

“From a box close beside us rose up a saturnine but rather gallant little figure, surrounded by lots of chiffon ladies and sleek toppers. He made his way down to the grass and was met by the winning team and by the Ashtons, with Ashton pere, stout and squatter-ish, and Ashton mere, beaming and wearing her best. The little dark man, who is Alphonso of Spain and a good polo player himself, presented the cup and congratulated the Hurricanes. Then he turned and clapped

Ashton senior on the back and shook hands with the four sons, while the English crowd cheered again for the Australians. We went off to enjoy strawberries and cream in the vastness of the club, its windows open on green lawns with white tables and hurrying waiters in sky-blue coats.”

After this triumph, the Ashtons played about three more games in England. In the India Empire Shield game **Checkers** suddenly rolled, trapping Jim under her. It was the only time the brothers had seen her off her feet. Bob jumped off **Phantom** to sit on her head. The stirrup had flattened: if she hadn't got up, Jim would have been caught in the stirrup. Their trophy for winning the Indian Empire Shield (7-5) was a magnificent gold and silver shield with Indian motifs – so valuable that the Goldsmiths and Silversmiths Ltd took it straight away from them, and sent them a picture instead.

Then came a match for the British Empire Garden Party, watched by the biggest crowd ever at the Roehampton Club polo ground. The Ashtons played the Roarks, three brothers and their father, Captain Roark. “It was a very enjoyable game, bright and interesting,” reported one newspaper. “But the young men from the Commonwealth, with their dash and fine team understanding, were much too strong for the Roarks.” The Ashtons won 8-4.



In their final game of the season, the Ashtons lost to England in the first match of the Prince of Wales's Empire Cup at Hurlingham. But once again, their style struck the English press: “The brothers, as usual, played hard all the time, with perhaps J.H. Ashton the most prominent of the four. Their combination and the way in which they cover each other is the strongest feature of their play, and there are few sides of their own handicap – they total 24 points – capable of beating them.”

With the Ashtons' performances, the family's gamble had paid off. English critics of Australian polo had been forced to eat their words. As they wound up their visit, the *Polo Monthly* lauded them: "We are happy to congratulate the brothers Ashton on the remarkably good impression they have made during their visit to this country...It is a satisfactory feature of their visit that the ratings accorded to these players in their own country have not proved to be over the mark when put to the test of English polo."

All had gone so well...but then,

Another disaster

While the Ashtons were playing in the rarefied English polo world, the Depression had started to grip the world. Suddenly, they were staring at financial calamity. They had hoped that Markdale's wool cheque would pay for at least some of their trip. But the price of wool had suddenly halved, from 20 pence a pound to nine pence. Their main revenue source, though, was to have come from selling their 25 horses on the buoyant English market. Now, just like panicked investors bailing out of the stock market, all the rich polo men who normally were the big pony buyers, were putting their horses on the market. Prices plunged. "The manager at Tattersalls, who was an Australian, said we would be lucky if we averaged £60," Bob said. "This meant disaster."

ACT THREE

America to the rescue

Out of the blue, and no doubt having followed the Ashtons' match performances in England, the Americans who they'd met on their earlier trip got in touch. They offered no expenses, but said if the Ashtons considered taking their ponies across the Atlantic, and playing some games in the Long Island season, they reckoned the ponies would sell well there.

Here was yet another gamble. As Bob explained: "It was a tremendous decision to make. The expenses were going to rise greatly, because it meant a trip across the Atlantic with 25 horses, spending several weeks on Long Island, where costs are terrific. As a team paying all our own expenses, we were under a great worry

and strain the whole time. If we, or the ponies, got sick or we lost our form, the sale of the ponies would be bad, and we could have spent all that extra money.”

Then they discovered that 20% duty was charged on the value of each horse entering America. They wanted to budget this cost before deciding. But American authorities in London told them they could not have the horses valued in England before they left. The value would be decided only at the point of entry, New York. “In spite of these worries, we decided to go. We were getting pretty desperate.”

They shipped the horses across on the S.S. Minnewaska. It had none of the elaborate horse accommodation the Ashtons themselves had built on the Port Huon. But it was only an eight-day trip, and the rest did horses and players alike good. They arrived in New York harbour at night, Manhattan’s lights aglow. The morning shattered their rest and relaxation. For Bob:

“Then started the worst day I ever remembered.”

Getting the horses through customs was a nerve-wracking test that called on all the Ashton brothers’ ingenuity. It also had elements of a Marx Brothers story. Bob Ashton’s account reveals its twists and turns. Prohibition still ruled in America then. The first person they had to encounter was the veterinary department officer. To make sure they did not fall at that step, they pitched all their spare whisky through the porthole. “The first thing the veterinary officer asked was, did we have any good stuff down in the cabin. He was disgusted when he found we had not, and we felt he might bar the horses out of bad temper. However we got past that.”

Bob then went to look at the floats that had arrived on the wharf for the horses. “They were not nearly as good as Sydney ones.” He spotted two notices on the side of each float. One advertised the sale of “Mr Cheever Cowdin’s string of Argentine polo ponies”. The other – astonishingly – announced that “the full string of Australian polo ponies were to be sold at Mr Fred Post’s East Wiliston Long Island stables on August 30th at 10.30 am”.

The Ashtons had made no such sale arrangement. Bob was horrified. The brothers had calculated their horses’ value at what they would have fetched in Australia before their trip, about \$500 each average. This would have meant total duty on entry at New York of \$2,500. Now Bob feared the customs officer could

demand to wait until after the announced sale for valuation, which could have put duty at \$25,000. "This would have broken us. There was no time to see the other blokes, so I ripped the notices off each lorry and threw them in the Hudson River, and watched them sink. Then, feeling I had done a good job, I went back to the ship."

His brothers handled the horses, while Bob handled the customs officer. "We were getting along fine, when a reporter walked up, asked if I was Mr Ashton and said he wanted to talk to me about our pony sale. I said we had only just arrived and had had no time to arrange anything, but he said they were advertised for sale on the sides of the horse trucks.

"The customs man snapped his book shut and said he'd like to see this. Before we got to the trucks, the reporter said 'There you are, stuck on the sides of the truck'."

The only remaining advertising notice was the one for Cheever Cowdin's Argentine ponies. The reporter was still sure he had seen a notice about Australian ponies. "I was quite nice to him and said he probably did not know there was any difference between the Argentine and Australia, and with Australia in his mind, he had made a very natural mistake. The customs man looked at him a bit sourly, and the reporter, shaking his head, walked off, probably to visit his psychiatrist. We got the horses through and off the customs man went. When I told Jim the story his legs buckled under him, and he sat down on a bollard. We did not hear from the customs man for three days, during which time we did not sleep well. They finally accepted our valuations, we paid the cheque, and took a deep breath."

The brothers accompanied the horses in their floats as they drove through New York City, and finally reached the stables on Long Island late in the afternoon. If the polo world they had just left in England was comfortable, the one in America was sumptuous. "Next morning at the stables, things looked a lot rosier, and hundreds of people came to see the horses. It was a fascinating morning, with grooms dressed like businessmen and young millionaires dressed like hoboes."

Fred Post, who owned the stables, and his wife were Texans. "They were wonderful people, and so like our Western people [in Australia] it was uncanny." The Ashtons were unhappy with the Garden City Hotel where they had stayed

their first night – “a magnificently gruesome dump, where people apparently went to die”. The Posts had a spare house at the stables and offered it to the Ashtons. “Mrs Post and Mrs Hitchcock helped Mum to get enough things together for us to move in. Cheap stuff from Macy’s. They also got us two coloured girls to cook and do housework. And there were Dad, Mum and the four of us – it was ideal.”

In America, the Ashtons’ arrival had been keenly awaited. News of their epic sea voyage to England and their success there had given them an aura in a country where celebrating fame, fortune and success is central to its ethos. “America is Waiting for the Arrival of a New Team of Internationalists,” was the heading to a full-page article by Peter Vischer in [title obscured]. “The four brothers Ashton, who have scored such a delightful and spectacular success in London polo, are Australian ranchers, growers of sheep and wool. The boys are lean, lithe, leathery, keen on the hunt.”

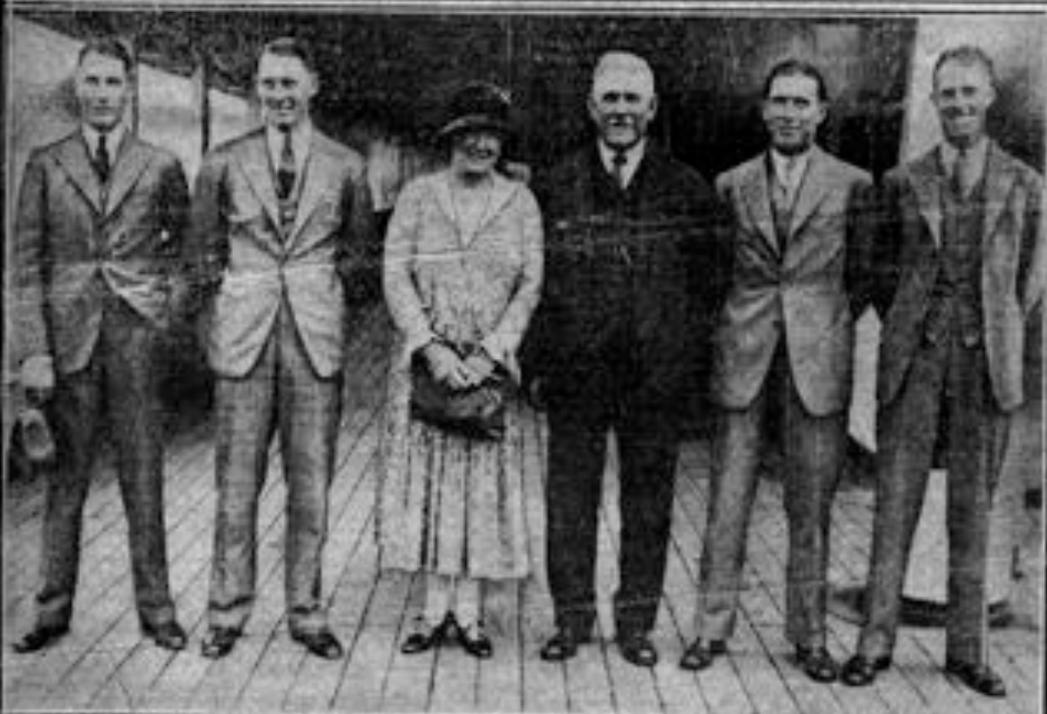
Reporting their arrival on July 29th, the *New York Times* said: “What is probably the greatest polo family in the world arrived in New York yesterday aboard the S.S. Minnewaska. Most recently, they have completed a successful invasion of England, during which time they played twenty-one matches, winning sixteen and losing five.” The *Times*, too, was fascinated by what the Americans saw as a log cabin-to-fame aspect of the Ashtons’ story. “They Learned Game on Sheep Ranch in New South Wales – Parents Accompany Them”, was one of the story’s headings. A handsome picture of the brothers in smart suits illustrated the story:

Brothers, Noted Polo Family, Arrive for



POLO TEAM CONSISTED OF ASHTON BROTHERS ON ARRIVAL YESTERDAY FOR HAYLING BARR,
 Left to Right: Philip Ashton, Geoffrey Ashton, James Ashton Jr. and Robert Ashton.

Here From "Down Under" on a Polo Mission



The Ashtons, Pictured as They Arrived Yesterday on the Minnesota. All From Australia, the Boys, Who Ride as the Goolburn Team, Are Here to Play in Special Matches on Long Island. Their Parents Accompany Them. Left to Right, Are Philip T. Ashton, Geoffrey G. Ashton, Mrs. James Ashton, Hon. James Ashton, James H. Ashton and Robert S. Ashton.

Champion Polo Ashtons Arrive in U.S.A. 20th July 1910

Another New York reporter, J.P. Abramson, described the Ashton venture as “the first round-the-world polo tour known to the sport”, and credited the Ashtons with having “pushed Australian polo into the international scene with an invasion of England...They made a unique picture as they lined up on the deck of the ship, four brothers here to demonstrate Australian polo for the first time. Dressed in varying shades of gray suits, all with fedora hats, there was an unmistakable family likeness. All are stalwart, lean and rangy...The Ashtons are stockmen back home in Markdale, Goulburn, New South Wales, raisers of sheep.”

Burriss Jenkins Jr in the *New York World* wrote: “These Ashtons are so extraordinarily GOOD that it seems unbelievable they could all spring from the same family. Three of them are ranked by Hurlingham – an international system of grading – at seven goals apiece, and one of them, Phil, the youngest, at five. A grand total of twenty-six goals, which is plenty high rating for anybody’s polo team. And equally strange is the fact that eight years ago none of them had ever played polo.”

Jenkins interviewed Jim, the “general spokesman of the outfit, without the faintest trace of the conceited false modesty so often thought to be the thing by some of our American celebrities who pretend to a dignified reticence...He is just plain downright congenial and pleasant – not afraid to answer any questions and without a pose in the world. He makes one a little ashamed of our Sharkeys and even our Lindberghs.”

In America the Ashtons played a series of special matches against some of the country’s top players, although the series was not part of that year’s championship tournament. By now, they had travelled 17,000 miles around the world, played a full London season and the horses had been in feed for nine months.

A week after their arrival on Long Island, they played their first match against a team called Old Westbury. It consisted of **Averell Harriman**, the future diplomat, Democratic Party politician and close friend of President Franklin Roosevelt; Michael Phipps, Howard Phipps and Stephen Sanford. The *New York Times* reported they drew 5-5; Bob Ashton said they won 8-5 [the difference could be handicap measure.] The *Times* reported: “The Ashton ponies, which have attracted so much attention, also came off nicely in comparison with some of the best ponies we have in this country, Sanford’s and Phipps’s and

Harriman's. They were extremely handy and now and again, when any of the brothers let their mounts out, they had plenty of speed."

Bob remembered the match more for an incident involving **Checkers**. Averell Harriman had played for America two years before as No. 1 against the best Argentine team ever assembled. He was riding Sugar Ruby, his English thoroughbred that had been named Pony of the Year. Jim Ashton on Checkers played a short shot; Harriman shut back on him to block his next move. "As he did so, Jim hit a hard one and jumped Checkers to full speed. She had a terrific change of pace, and he whipped past Harriman, and carried the ball down the field to score, with Harriman chasing him like a greyhound chasing a rabbit. Checkers' price rose from \$500 to \$5,000 in 250 yards."



WHEN THE ASHTON BRITISHES GOT INTO THEIR FIRST GAME ON LONG ISLAND FIELDS LAST MONTH

The Ashtons played their next game at Piping Rock, and won it 8-4. Bob Ashton was riding **Hopalong**, who consistently out-turned Harold Talbot, the Number 1 player in the opposing team. Talbot later asked the name of Bob's horse. When the Ashtons sold their horses at the end of the visit, Talbot bought Hopalong for \$8,000 for his friend **Robert Lehman**, the racehorse owner and polo player; Lehman was also a long-time head of **Lehman Brothers**, the investment bank whose collapse 78 years later heralded the global financial crisis of 2008.

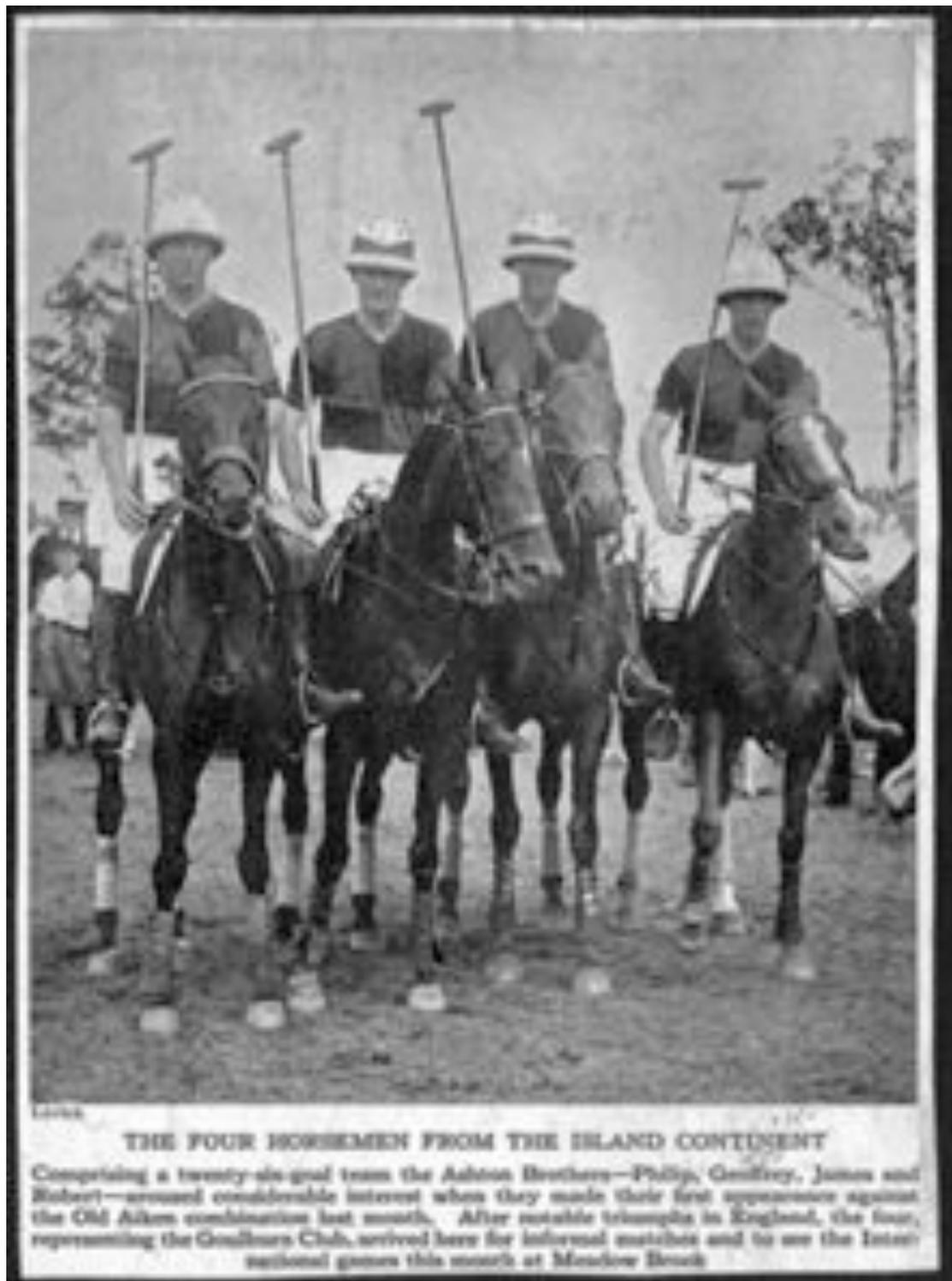
They played their third game on a new field built by **Jock Whitney**, the multi-millionaire sportsman, financier, newspaper publisher and pioneer colour movie producer (he was an early investor in Technicolor). The Ashtons won "quite nicely", as Bob put it. But the match was noted more for being the first ever played on Whitney's remarkable field. He had gone to Europe, leaving instructions with his estate that he wanted a polo field to hit about on, but not to interfere with his private golf course. The field was reputedly built at a cost of \$1 million, a

grand fortune in 1930. "I always remember it as the most perfect surface I ever saw," Bob said.

They went back to Jock Whitney's field to play their first formal game in America ("our first deadly serious game", as Bob Ashton described it) against Old Aiken, a team comprised of young men in their early twenties who were former students of Aiken, an exclusive school. It was also the Ashtons' first defeat: they lost 11-6.

In the *New York Herald Tribune*, the reporter Harry Cross said the Ashtons "formed a snappy looking combination with their red and blue jerseys and swift-footed ponies. The Australian mounts are a splendid looking lot: they are an eye-ful for any horseman." But he also noted: "It took four chukkas for the Australians to get their eyes on the ball. They were inaccurate at times in their shots at goal and their game did not have the aggressiveness of the American side. There was also a notable difference in their style of horsemanship. They used long stirrups and sat in their saddles closely...The Goulburn team couldn't have picked a harder nut to crack for its first real test in this country than the Old Aikens. These boys are a hard-seasoned lot, and have been playing in pretty fast company."

Bob Ashton later explained their relative lack of form: "I'm afraid we played like a tired team, and we would really have liked to have met them a bit earlier in the season as the travelling and financial worries caused a lot of strain. One thing amazed me. I could not credit that any club team could be mounted like they were. When we were on our best horses we were O.K., but they seemed to be on their best every chukka. We found that less than half the ponies were their own, the rest borrowed, and they were better mounted than anything short of an international team."



The Ashtons won three more games (including one again against Old Westbury), before playing their last formal game against the United States Army team at Mitchel Field. They lost 11-5. One newspaper reported: "Army won chiefly through application of brute force, playing a hard game and carrying the fight to Goulburn all the way. The Army men were slamming into their opponents and riding them off the ball for all they were worth."

Checkers became a casualty of this brute force. Bob reported: "An Army player hit Jim almost at right angles, knocked him off and she was lame. It was her second chukka and Jim said to me 'Shall I ride Checkers again or save her?' I said 'It is the last time you will ever ride her', so he did. Later we were having tea at Devereux Milburn's home, and Carleton Burke, head of Western Polo, and a very admired person, came in. He said that in forty years of polo, he had never seen such emotion in a crowd equal to that when Checkers got hurt. He said she was the greatest personality as a polo pony he had ever known. She was still fitted in the leg for the sale ten days later, but brought \$5,000, and played some wonderful polo for Michael Phipps [one of the Americans they had played against in the Old Westbury team].

The Depression bites

While his sons were playing polo, James Ashton was trying to keep track of how the Depression was closing in on the world economy, and Australia's. Peter Visher, one American journalist, described James as "that fine Australian gentleman, the Hon. James Ashton, whom Americans found so open and friendly at the time of his brief visit here three years ago". The *New York Times* also interviewed James about the Depression. Under the headings "AUSTRALIAN CRISIS LAID TO PRODIGALITY", "Dominion Legislator, Here on Visit, Blames 'Orgy of Extravagance' for Economic Stringency", the article began:

"Commenting on reports that a grave economic crisis is threatening Australia, James Ashton, member of the Legislative Council of that dominion, who arrived here two weeks ago for a brief visit to this country, declared yesterday that "Australia for the first time since the war is realising that it is necessary to cut down expenditures and put an end to extravagance.

"The whole world is experiencing an orgy of extravagance such as has never been seen before," said Mr Ashton. "Many other countries, too, did not cut things down to the bone following the World War."

AUSTRALIAN CRISIS LAID TO PRODIGALITY

Dominion Legislator, Here on Visit, Blames 'Orgy of Extravagance' for Economic Stringency

SEES NEED FOR HIGH TARIFF

James Ashton Predicts Increase in Taxation and Move to Reduce His Country's Imports.

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The Australian legislator said that while he felt he was not in a position to discuss reports on the present conditions of his country's domestic affairs, as he had not been there for four months, he knew the government was taking drastic steps to improve conditions. Taxation was being increased, he said, and a move was being made to reduce the volume of imports to Australia.

Referring to Australia's action on the tariff, Mr. Ashton said that the dominion "seems to be following the example of the United States and other countries which see a salvation in higher duties."

Herbert Brookes, Commissioner General of Australia, announced yesterday at the Australian Consulate here that he had been informed that James Ashton, C. M. G., arrived

Sea Swallows Malayan Island As Krakatau Volcano Erupts

BATAVIA, Java, Aug. 2 (AP).—The Island of Anak Krakatau (Child of Krakatau), which yesterday had a height of 170 feet, today disappeared beneath the surface of the sea during intense activity of Krakatau, which is throwing out thousands of feet.

Krakatau is a small island of the Malay Archipelago, in Sunda Strait, between Sumatra and Java. From May to August, 1883, there occurred there probably the most tremendous volcanic eruption of modern times, by which two-thirds of the island was completely blown away. A gigantic wave was formed, by which 20,000 people perished, the wave propagating itself as far away as the English Channel.

ALIEN SMUGGLER CAUGHT.

Cuban Police Seize Weinstein, Head of Ring Broken Up Two Years Ago.

Special Cable to The New York Times.

HAVANA, Aug. 2.—Isaac Weinstein, a Hungarian and a fugitive for two years, was arrested today and held for possible action by the United States authorities in connection with the operation a year ago of the largest alien smuggling ring that ever worked between the United States and Cuba. When taken he was attempting to sell a "gold brick" to a local merchant.

More than a year ago the secret police broke up a smuggling ring and arrested Weinstein's two companions but the leader escaped. The band worked under the name of the "Alien Information Bureau" in downtown offices and used false immigration papers and passports, United States seals and other papers. Cuba, deported Weinstein's associates.

PILSUDSKI'S LEGION IN REUNION AT RADOM

Demonstration Likely at Polish Town—Opposition Calls Counter Convention.

Wireless to The New York Times.

RADOM, Poland, Aug. 2.—Thousands of former soldiers and volunteers in Marshal Pilsudski's famous war-time Legion, the first Polish armed force formed in August, 1914, to fight Russia, have filed this quiet Polish provincial town for the Legionnaires' annual convention. The meeting commemorates the anniversary of the Legion's crossing the old Austro-Russian border when the Polish soldiers set foot on Polish soil then under Czarist rule.

The convention, which opens tomorrow, is expected to make a great demonstration in support of the present régime and in protest against the opposition at Cracow in June, when the resignations of President Maricki and Marshal Pilsudski were asked. The Marshal, who missed the convention last year, will be present this time and may even speak to the Legion on the political situation.

Another Legionnaires' convention will open in Warsaw tomorrow. It has been organized by opposition leaders who maintain that Marshal Pilsudski and his followers have turned away from the Legion's old ideals of a democratic, popular Polish republic.

WOULD DEVELOP MOROCCO.

Spanish Paper Urges New Methods, Citing Economic Crisis There.

Wireless to The New York Times.

MADRID, Aug. 2.—The serious economic crisis in Spanish Morocco is the subject of an editorial in the Madrid newspaper *El Sol* today. The paper says Count Jordan, High Commissioner in the Spanish zone, suc-

[Note: In the film this, like James's London *Times* letter on politics, could also be done in the form of **James** making a **speech**.]

The Great Gatsby world

The orgy of extravagance was nowhere on show more than in the Long Island polo world. The Depression had barely touched its cast of characters. While soup kitchens were operating on the streets elsewhere in America, and back home in Australia, many of America's super rich lived in another world. The Ashtons caught a glimpse of it.

There were more than 20 polo grounds in an 11 km radius of their house on Long Island. Helen wrote home to Bella: "There is no doubt that the USA is the place where there is a huge number of people with a great deal of money...It is quite

impossible for people who have only seen Australia or even England to realise the amazing amount of money these people spend on their homes without turning a hair.

"The polo colony down here are a perfectly delightful, very simple-mannered lot of people who have fair-sized families whom they adore and lead wholesome open-air lives doing quite a lot of community work and paying frequent visits to England where they feel at home among the English country people. There are lots of bad, vicious-living millionaires but we are meeting the nice ones."

One night **Tommy Hitchcock**, a star American polo player, took the Ashtons to dinner. Hitchcock's father had helped found the Meadow Brook Polo Club on Long Island. Tommy Hitchcock had had a colourful time flying for the French Lafayette Escadrille during the first world war. He had returned home to cut a dashing figure as a leading polo player along with the likes of Jock Whitney and Gerald Balding. The newspapers called him "Ten Goal Tommy" after his 10-goal handicap, the highest ranking in polo.

To some, Tommy Hitchcock embodied the wealth and glamour of the "Jazz Age", the term that the American novelist **F. Scott Fitzgerald** coined for the 1920s. Fitzgerald met him at the Meadow Brook Club, and is said to have modelled characters on Tommy Hitchcock in his novels *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. Hitchcock was a friend of **Robert Lehman**, another rich polo player. He later joined the Lehman Brothers investment bank. Hitchcock would fly to work in his seaplane, land on the south end of Manhattan, and fly back to Long Island after the markets closed in the afternoon in time for a few practice chukkas. He was killed while flying as a test pilot for the US air force during the second world war, aged 44.

Tommy Hitchcock was married to Ailsa, daughter of **Andrew Mellon**, a financier who had amassed a huge fortune and who, in 1930, had been Secretary of the Treasury for nine years. Then aged 75, Mellon had taken a controversial approach to dealing with the Depression. He had advised President Herbert Hoover to "liquidate labour, liquidate stocks, liquidate farmers, liquidate real estate...Values will be adjusted, and enterprising people will pick up from less competent people". At 45, Mellon had married an Englishwoman 25 years his junior, who later deserted him. He was one of America's biggest art collectors and philanthropists.

Tommy Hitchcock took the Ashtons for an evening out on Andrew Mellon's 2,000 ton yacht, which had been built as a steam cruiser. They had dinner, and cruised up Long Island Sound. Helen described the evening in one of her letters home:

"After we got aboard we had a look over the great cabins, each with its own bathroom – the owner and his wife, Mr and Mrs Mellon, have a cabin that goes right across the steamer and they have another cabin on the top deck which they use in the tropics.

"While we were at dinner we steamed up about 14 miles to an amusement resort, Rye Beach, in Connecticut. One or two of us stopped on board while the others did the rounds of the shows on shore. Then we steamed back to Sands Point and got home at about 1.30 am."

Bob Ashton's account focused more on Rye Beach: "As a bit of a diversion we went ashore at Rye Beach where Tommy said there was the most terrifying roller coaster on the east coast, and he had to have a go at it every now and again to prove his nerve was O.K. We all went on it, and finished dazed and shaken."

There was another dinner hosted by one of the players from the Old Aiken team. "The Ingleharts gave us a lovely dinner," Bob wrote. "Not very big, about forty people. The girls all hand picked by experts. They had had the artist Paul Brown [a leading American illustrator of equestrian subjects] do two paintings in frieze style, one of Old Aiken attacking our goal, one of us attacking theirs. Jim was too quick for me. After dinner he admired them so much that Mrs Inglehart gave them to him. They are now in the hall at Millamolong."

Millamolong was one of the Ashton properties in the central west of New South Wales, which the family bought after the American trip's financial success.



Paul Brown: "Down The Field"



Paul Brown: "Tommy Hitchcock Circa 1930"

The Ashtons had played seven games in America. They won five and lost two. Now came the moment of truth. Despite their polo success in England, the Depression had dealt a financial death blow there to their gamble of taking their horses around the world. They had embarked on a second gamble by coming to America, in the hope of rescuing their financial stocks. Would they now be able to sell their horses to pay for the trip, as the Americans had led them to believe?

They started getting the horses ready for sale. They had been in feed for 10 months. "Not many horses in history have done as much, certainly no polo

horses," Bob wrote. "Our forty-eight day trip to England was probably twice as long as others have ever travelled with the problem of playing or racing etc. shortly after arrival."

As the sale drew close, Bob reflected on the horses that had been their friends on this remarkable journey. **Checkers** was easily their favourite. But then there were **Hopalong**, **Play On** and **Coaster** which Bob had played: "I was never as well mounted again." Jim played **Isobel** three times, "one of the greatest polo ponies of all time". **Splinter**, **Debutante** and **Sportsman** "went wonderfully for Phil". Geoff had **Meta** and **Au Revoir**. "When I look at the list I think Geoff was the least well mounted of us all, and it is a tribute to his polo that no one ever found this out."

Bob thought back to the day they bought Au Revoir in Australia. "We thought she was a good buy at twelve pounds. We bought her on the road near Woodstock. When we asked was she fast, the owner said 'My oath, she can go from here to Cowra in two-and-a-half hours'."

They prepared the horses for sale with soft rations, plenty of sun, sand yards and grooming. Then: "By Saturday evening we were to be broke or out of trouble."

On August 30th, the auction took place under a tent on the William Post & Son polo field on Long Island. A crowd of about 800 people had assembled on the field to watch the ponies paraded by grooms half an hour before the sale began. George A. Bain, the auctioneer, got it under way at 10.45 am, 15 minutes late. The *New York Times* reported: "The bidding was so brisk that all ponies had been disposed of in less than an hour".

The brothers presented the horses from the back of the team, and worked forward. First came Hopalong, thoroughbred, compact, strong and a perfect handler. "He looked the works," said Bob. He fetched \$8,000, a great start. Jim stood in the auctioneer's box with Fred Post, and made remarks about each pony to bidders. Phantom came next. "There was quite a murmur around the ring," said Bob. "Jim, to the horror of the auctioneer, said 'This pony is fast, strong and clever, but she is hot headed and only a strong rider should buy her'. Fred Post said afterwards he nearly fell out of the box. However, it set the tone for the sale. If Jim said they were good, they took his word for it."

He told buyers that Isobel was the greatest pony they had ever had. She bought the top price: \$10,000. Checkers came a few ponies later. "She was regarded with more interest than any other, but she was small, and still showed filling in her off front." She bought \$5,000. Checkers was one of five ponies that Major Leonard Avery, the day's biggest buyer, bought for a total outlay of \$21,700. The *Times* also reported: "Winston Guest of Tommy Hitchcock's Whites dropped in at the sale long enough to make a successful bid of \$5,100 for Coaster, a big 10 year-old gelding and a veteran of polo."

When the final hammer fell, the Ashtons had sold their 25 horses for **US\$77,600**. It was a small fortune, worth at least US\$1 million (or more) today.

ASHTONS SELL
POLO PONIES

Remarbable Prices Paid
In New York

Purchased World Widely

NEW YORK, Sunday. — The 25 polo ponies which were brought to the United States from Australia, New Zealand, and the Argentine, for the remarkable sum of \$77,600, were sold at auction by the Ashtons, of English Town, New York, at the Polo Grounds, New York, on Sunday, August 27, 1920. The ponies were sold for a total of \$77,600, the highest price ever paid for polo ponies in this country. The ponies were sold for a total of \$77,600, the highest price ever paid for polo ponies in this country.



John Ashton
Owner

Ashtons' 25 Polo Ponies Bring \$77,600 at Auction

Major Avery, of English Town,
Buys Several of Mountain

As a First Development

NAST WILMINGTON, N. Y., Aug. 26.—The string of twenty-five ponies belonging to the Ashtons polo team of Australia were sold at public auction today by William Post & Son. The lot brought \$77,600. These animals were taken to the first Ashtons location in their ponies in England and in the few years they played on Long Island.

Isobel, a bay mare six years old, sold for \$10,000 by James Larkin, captain of the Ashtons team, was purchased by J. C. Clancy for \$4,000, the top price of the sale.

M. S. Walker Jr., agent, bought Stephen for \$4,000. Major Leonard Avery, of the English team, bought several of the ponies.

The purchase of the animals and the prices paid are as follows:

Isobel, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	\$10,000
Stephen, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	4,000
Coaster, Winston Guest,	5,100
Checkers, Major Leonard Avery,	21,700
Isobel, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	10,000
Stephen, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	4,000
Coaster, Winston Guest,	5,100
Checkers, Major Leonard Avery,	21,700
Isobel, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	10,000
Stephen, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	4,000
Coaster, Winston Guest,	5,100
Checkers, Major Leonard Avery,	21,700
Isobel, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	10,000
Stephen, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	4,000
Coaster, Winston Guest,	5,100
Checkers, Major Leonard Avery,	21,700
Isobel, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	10,000
Stephen, M. S. Walker Jr., agent,	4,000
Coaster, Winston Guest,	5,100
Checkers, Major Leonard Avery,	21,700

The selling was opened and the ponies were sold by William Post & Son.

W. Post & Son, Auctioneers

They could not have dreamed of such a result. The family gamble, hatched long ago at Markdale, had more than paid off. And Australian polo had been established on the world stage.

That same summer, Don Bradman caused a sporting sensation when he set a record Australian cricket Test score against England of 334 runs at Leeds. But the Ashtons had put Australia on the sporting map first. In May 1930, Amy Johnson landed in Darwin after making an epic solo flight from England in a Gypsy Moth biplane. The feats of Don Bradman and Amy Johnson provided inspiration for a public weighed down by the Depression.

The Ashtons' feat that same year was no less inspirational. But it won less publicity – at home, at least - because polo was seen as a game “played by a class for a class”, as one newspaper letter writer in Australia then put it: “While so much publicity is being given to Bradman and his Australian cricket colleagues, let us not forget the splendid showing for this country also being made by the Ashton brothers at polo. Really, polo should be as much an Australian national game as cricket, but its expense is against it.”

The Ashtons had now more than covered their expenses. They left the money invested in America and returned home. They returned to a country where the Depression had set in. By 1930, unemployment reached 20%. Families forced out of homes were living in makeshift settlements such as Happy Valley, in south-east Sydney. One report noted in September 1930: “Many men have ‘jumped the rattler’ to try to find work in the country...The rabbits are taken a hiding, as they are needed for the stews that are supplemented with begged or stolen vegetables.”

James faced a cool reception from fellow board directors at the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney. It was intimated that his sons' polo adventure in America was self-indulgent and reckless at a time when the Depression was gripping the rest of society, and the bank was tightening its lending policy.

Then came a report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “Australian Ponies Realise \$76,000 in New York.” This was language the bank could understand. There were smiles all around from the directors, who were suddenly happy to be associated with such astute financial enterprise.

At Markdale, the family decided that Bob should go back to America in early 1931 and decide what to do with the money. The American polo officials in New York greeted him warmly. "We were quite appreciated by the Americans for a particular reason," he wrote. "They told us that we were the only team that had visited them without any money being supplied by them. Not only had we not asked for money, but a lot of other teams invited there with expenses had wrangled for more."

The Americans now offered the Ashtons \$25,000 to help bring them back for another polo season, first in California then in New York. Bob sent the offer home to the family, then rang them to discuss it – an overseas telephone call was then a big deal, and highly unusual. By the time the trip should have happened, the world economy had plunged even deeper into Depression. Bob asked the Americans if they would like the Ashtons to withdraw. The Americans said they would stick by their side of the bargain, but they would be grateful if they called it off. They did.

Meanwhile, Bob invested most of the 1930 horse sale money into American Telephone and Telegraph bonds, one of the few investments that held its own when everything else was plummeting. During the time the money had been left in America, the Australian pound had depreciated against the British pound by about 30%; the British pound in turn had depreciated against the US dollar by 35%.

So the money they transmitted to Australia was worth even more back home. The trip that the sceptics in Australia and England had predicted would fail had been a triumph. The family used the money to fulfil James and Helen's dream of broadening the family's holdings beyond Markdale. They bought a property for each of the sons, one of which they called Checkers.

End captions:

- As the Depression gripped the world for the rest of the 1930s, the Ashton brothers bred and trained polo ponies on their properties for export mainly to India.
- In 1937, they returned as a team to England. This time, they won the Hurlingham Cup, English polo's highest honour. In California, they met **Spencer Tracey**, the Hollywood star, himself a polo player. [For the film, this meeting could be part of the 1930 trip.]
- The Ashton Cup, named after the brothers, is still awarded in English polo today.

End



Spencer Tracey meets Geoff and Bob Ashton, California 1937

Sunday Observer
A BAND OF BROTHERS

While there is so much—in cricket and aviation—upon which to congratulate Australia, we must not omit a word of recognition to a defeat which was almost as good as a victory. The four brothers ASHTON, with their father and mother to inspire them, came over here with a string of ponies hardly less gallant than themselves, and very nearly won the Champion Cup. Lovers of that noble game saw on Saturday one of the finest matches ever played on the polo-fields of Hurlingham. There was something in the unity and pluck of the ASHTON family, who came across the world to compete in our English tournaments, that has won for them the sympathy and admiration of the British public. The ASHTON brothers testify—if testimony were needed—to Australian manhood as well as Australian horsemanship. We hope they will come again. Such men and such riders will always be welcome in England.

Acknowledgements

In preparing this Proposal, my thanks go to the following people:

Wallace Ashton, for his hospitality at Goulburn and Harden.

Rosemary Foot, nee Ashton, for her help with archival material.

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Sue Ashton. for her hospitality at Millamolong

Debbie Daniher

Mimi Zilliacus

I also acknowledge the following works:

"Stories of the Polo Games and Trips Abroad", by Bob Ashton, 1975

"James and Helen", by Chris Ashton, (John Dixon and Co), 1985

"Geebung: the story of Australian polo", by Chris Ashton (Hamilton Publishing)
1993

"The World of Polo", by J.N.P. Watson, (The Sportsman's Press, London) 1986

"Horse Riding the Australian Way", Judith Byrne (ed), Lansdowne Press 1972

Robert Milliken

Sydney, September 2011