



The Kelly connection

He has been called everything from villain to hero but Ned Kelly has a real link to Australian Football. By Ben Collins.

Although the much-hyped movie *Ned Kelly*, starring Heath Ledger, premiered on the eve of the 2003 AFL premiership season, you could be forgiven for thinking that was the extent of the link between the notorious outlaw and our great game.

But it runs much deeper than that. Deeper than the fact both are national icons ... or that the latest big-screen Ned Kelly, Perth-born Ledger, is a keen West Coast supporter and co-star Peter Phelps is a Collingwood fan.

The connection runs so deep that a VFL/AFL champion would have been lost to football if it wasn't for the bushranger.

Former Essendon champion Ian 'Bluey' Shelton, a star at centre half-back for the Bombers in 91 games including the 1962 and 1965 premierships, says he owes his existence to Kelly.

In 1865, Shelton's grandfather, Richard (Dick) Shelton, who was seven at the time, slipped into the fast-flowing Hughes Creek in Avenel on his way to school. He was rescued by a 10-year-old Kelly who, without hesitation, jumped into the water fully-clothed and dragged young Dick

safely to the creek's bank.

The shivering youngsters made their way to the nearby Royal Mail Hotel – still standing today as bed and breakfast accommodation – which was owned by Dick's parents (and Bluey Shelton's great-grandparents), Esau and Elizabeth. The Sheltons rewarded Ned with an elaborate 2.21-metre long, 14-centimetre wide green silk sash, complete with gold bullion fringes at each end.

Fifteen years later, he wore the sash under his famous suit of armour in the police shootout at Glenrowan. While Ned was captured after receiving 28 bullet wounds and executed less than five months later, on November 11, 1880, the blood-stained sash survives, and is on display in a Benalla museum.

"If Ned Kelly didn't do what he did for my grandfather, who knows whether our family would have been what it is today," Shelton says from his Avenel farm. His grandfather ended up having 12 children, including Shelton's father.

One of Shelton's biggest fans during his playing days was Essendon coach Kevin Sheedy,

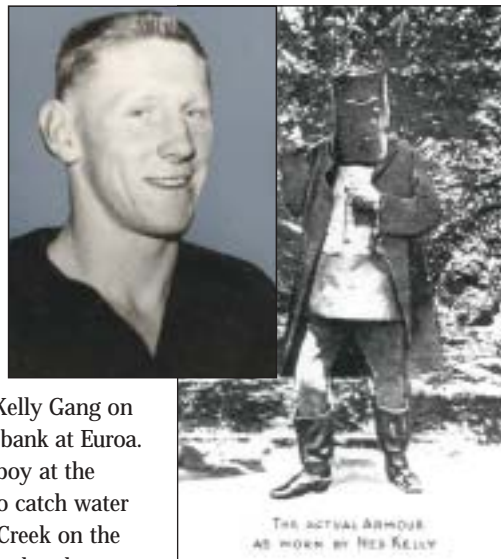
who has his own link with the bushranger. Sheedy's maternal grandfather, Michael Cusack,

was the first person to see the Kelly Gang on its way to rob the bank at Euroa.

Cusack, only a boy at the time, was trying to catch water rats in Faithfull's Creek on the outskirts of Euroa when he saw the gang members – Ned, his younger brother Dan, Joe Byrne and Steve Hart – ride by. The Kellys, with a £500 reward on each of their heads after killing three plain-clothes police six weeks earlier, held 22 people hostage at a nearby sheep station, which they used as a base for the £2260 bank heist.

Sheedy, a history buff, told the *AFL Record*: "That's the story that's been passed down."

A man well-versed in mateship and battling odds was Bob Chitty, the late Carlton premiership captain who fittingly starred as Kelly in the 1951 film *The Glenrowan Affair*. Like Kelly, Chitty was a top horseman who grew



LINKED: Former Bomber Ian 'Bluey' Shelton (left) and Ned Kelly's armour.

up in north-eastern Victoria.

Also keeping the legend alive are VFL clubs Bendigo Bombers (the Essendon reserves) and Williamstown, which battle each year for the 'Game As Ned Kelly Trophy'. Williamstown lays claim to Kelly serving about six months there: three aboard the prison hulk Sacramento and another three ashore in an artillery battery.

But that's not all. Brisbane's triple premiership player Martin Pike has a Kelly tattoo and former Collingwood premiership player and now player manager Craig Kelly has long carried the nickname 'Ned'. 📍

Pic from 'The Legend of Ned Kelly' exhibition at Southbank