

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE - DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY

PROGRAMMES - OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

- H.M. HENRY

History projects, 1986.

Nine essays and oral history transcripts on
the lives of Australian women 1929-1986.

Gwyneth Robertson.

Thursday.

A HISTORY OF WINNS LTD. FROM OCTOBER, 1878 TO

19th JANUARY, 1980.

From the records of St. Peter's Church, Trusthorpe, Lincolnshire, England, is learned that Harriett Johnson, born on 11th January, 1823, married James Isaac Winn in April, 1844. They sailed for Australia on the "Templar" in May, 1844, arriving in Sydney in August, 1844, then sailed to Newcastle, where they settled in Cameron's Hill, Pit Town, now known as Hamilton, on the present site of St. Peter's Church of England.

In August, 1855, James, who was a carpenter by trade, died, leaving Harriett a widow with four children to support. With little money and no financial security, Harriett opened a small store, probably in part of her home. This was the first Winn's store. The first Methodist church services in Hamilton were held in her home in 1858.

After serving their apprenticeship in Newcastle, two brothers, William and Isaac, went to Melbourne, where they gained valuable experience in a prominent wholesale drapery warehouse. In October, 1878, together with Mrs. Aird, a sister of Mrs. William Winn, they commenced business as co-founders of W. Winn & Co., in a small building with a 19ft. frontage to Hunter Street, The Broadway, Newcastle. 1. The venture had a humble beginning, with only one assistant, and floor space of only 450 sq. ft.

Additions and alterations were constantly being made and "with thorough lighting and ventilation" the shop was well patronised. It was "literally full of fresh, clean, well-bought goods"..." and novelties suitable for the due celebrations of Newcastle's centenary are shown in almost endless variety". By this time, the staff had grown to thirty. 2.

In 1897, the eldest son of Mr. Isaac Winn, Mr. William Winn commenced work at the firm: this enabled Mr. William Winn Snr. to leave Newcastle for Sydney, where he started businesses in Oxford Street, Redfern and Camperdown.

At the turn of the century, advertisements appeared in the press. On Monday, 3rd September, 1900, the people of Newcastle were invited to see:

1. Newcastle Morning Herald. 9.9.1897.
2. Ibid.

NEW SPRING & SUMMER COATS
BIG SHIPMENTS NOW OPENING
FROM LONDON, MANCHESTER, BRADFORD.....
OUR MILLINERY
UNDER MISS TASKER'S MAGIC HANDS
IS A GREAT SUCCESS. 3.

The business was formed into a limited liability company in 1903, with Mr. William and Isaac Winn as Governing Directors. In 1910, the original shop with its additions together with what had been an old Newcastle landmark, the "Hunter River Hotel", on the corner of Hunter and Brown Street, was replaced by a solid structure of three floors. Further premises including Pike's boot shop and the "Paragon Hotel" were acquired in July, 1912. 4.

Winns had become renowned for the catering services that it provided. From the tiny ground-floor tea room in 1910, with a staff of two, to the 1924 development, with new kitchen and restaurant facilities, to 1936, when the well-known Shortland Room was opened, Newcastle people had learned to rely on excellence in food presentation. On Monday, 20th July, 1964, under the catering management of Mr. Tregloan, the Regency and Empress Rooms were opened. Functions of many types were successfully catered for.

On 25th July, 1967, Winns Newcastle Ltd., took over Cox Bros., who had been trading with stores at Belmont, Cessnock and Cardiff, as well as Newcastle. This brought a great deal of satisfaction to Mr. K. Winn, who had returned to Newcastle from Sydney in 1937, as Managing Director. Winns Newcastle, became amalgamated with Sydney Winns in 1969 with Mr. K. Winn as chairman until his retirement in December, 1970, at the age of 77.

Winns Ltd., went into liquidation in 1978. Its Hunter Valley stores were sold off and operations at Newcastle, scaled down. The building was sold for \$2.5 million.

A notice in the Newcastle Morning Herald on 11th January, 1980 announced: WINNS LTD. WILL CEASE OPERATIONS IN NEWCASTLE ON 19th JANUARY, AFTER 101 YEARS IN THE CITY.

3. Newcastle Regional Library - Local History Section.
4. "The Story of 50 yrs' Successful Business" Newcastle University Archives. (Mrs. Joan Aird's collection.)

The code of integrity and honesty on which the business had been founded, lasted for 101 years. From the principles instilled by Harriett, emerged a merchandising enterprise that had no equal in Newcastle. Four generations of the Winn family had been actively involved in the firm. Their policy: "The Utmost in Value at the Lowest Price" had been followed faithfully.

Miss Anne Griffiths and her two sisters spent over 40 years in the employ of Winns. At the age of 14, Miss Griffiths began her long career in the company and she emphasised the feeling of pleasure she had in working in the atmosphere of "one big happy family". Many changes have taken place since 1921, when she first went to work.

In the department in which Miss Griffiths first worked, were sold fancy goods, crockery, kitchen goods and handbags. At that time, customers were often known personally by the assistants and seats were made available while purchases were made. Goods were displayed in large glass cases and customers were given individual, personalised service.

Winns Ltd. was known for its generous donations to charity. A social committee was formed and many fund-raising functions were held, raising money to donate to causes in need of help. The management always supported the staff wholeheartedly in their efforts and the first motorised ambulance in Newcastle was presented to Mr. Dolan, the ambulance superintendent, by the staff and management of Winns.

The depression was a hard time for everyone. In an effort to be fair, each employee was interviewed and home situation assessed and those in greatest need were given the most work. Depending on their situation, some were "stood down" for several days weekly, while the sole wage-earner was given longer hours to work. The management was reluctant to dispense with the services of any good employee. Any food that was left over from the tea-rooms was always sent to the mission to be distributed to those in need.

The last twenty years of her employment with Winns, Miss Griffiths spent as pay-mistress. This was very different from the occupation that she had previously known, but when issued with the challenge, she accepted and successfully filled that position until her retirement. Wages were computed manually, an arduous, but satisfying task.

Miss Griffith's comment that "they did not earn the name Winns Friendly Store" for nothing, was re-iterated by another retired long-term employee who preferred not to be identified. Commencing her employment in 1923, she remembered the many changes that have taken place. In the early days, merchandise was placed outside the front door of the shop on display. It was the duty of one young employee to be a "dog walloper" and to keep any stray dogs away from the materials. At one time, the internationally known artist, William Dobell was employed in this capacity.

The phasing-out of the "floor walker" was cause for regret. Always a male, impeccably dressed and with a flower in his button-hole, his duty was to make sure that every customer received attention.

Mrs. Marie Maddrell, a long-time employee of Winns, recalled some of her experiences while working there. After being employed at Ginges, another well-known Newcastle store, she applied for a position which had been advertised in the "Newcastle Morning Herald". She was successful and on 24th May, 1946, commenced as secon-in-charge of the haberdashery, buttons and wool department.

After two years, Mr. Keith Winn approached Mrs. Maddrell and offered her the position of buyer for these departments. In this capacity, she was required to travel to Sydney each week: this entailed catching "the flyer" and for this she had a "gold pass". Asked if she felt any discrimination against her as a woman, Mrs. Maddrell said that the opposite was the case; it was usual to have women buyers for the products in which she was dealing and she was always treated with consideration and respect.

Mrs. Maddrell attributes some of her success to the fact that she was a "suggestive seller": never "pushing but suggesting some other item that a customer might find useful. She passed this technique on to the many junior girls she trained, some of whom are still working and sought after for their skill in selling.

The fourteen girls under her control worked hard for 48 hours each week, with two weeks annual leave. So busy were they, that customers lined the counters "two deep" most of the time. No money was handled by the salesgirls: the docket and money were placed in a capsule and taken by a suction chute to the cashiers upstairs in the office, then the change and docket would be returned in a similar manner

The policy of Winns was to unquestioningly accept any item brought back for refund. This sometimes irked the salesgirls who knew that on some occasions, the item had not been purchased from the store. However, the management was firm and the good will of Winns was upheld.

After twenty two years in the "baby" department, Mrs. Maddrell transferred to "ready made curtains" then as a "casual" in the fashion department. It was while in this department Mrs. Maddrell saw the doors close for the last time. It was a very sad day, she recalled: "I enjoyed so many happy years..... It was my life."