

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.

From a report in the Newcastle Morning Herald of 1st November, 1928, when the staff of W. Winn & Co. held a banquet to honour the founders of that company, Mr. William Winn spoke of the early days of his mother's shop: "There were only about a dozen houses in Hamilton at that time, no 'buses and the shop was reached by a sandy bush track." The work was hard and the hours long: the shop opened from 7 a.m., sometimes not closing until 8 or 9 p.m. and 11 or 12 midnight on Saturdays, with no half-day holiday.

Harriet Winn's eldest son, Robert, was a builder and is known to have built, sometime between 1878 and 1888, a terrace of four houses, still standing on the western side of Ferkins Street, Newcastle. (nos. 34-40). These houses were occupied no later than 1888, by Robert, William, and Isaac Winn and their families and by Mrs. Mary Anne Aird, who was the sister of Mrs. William Winn.

After serving their apprenticeship in Newcastle, the 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, they commenced business as co-founders of W. Winn & Co., in a small building with a 19ft. frontage to Hunter Street, The Broadway, Newcastle.<sup>1</sup> The venture had a humble beginning, with only one assistant, and floor space of only 450 sq. ft.

The family lived in and occupied portion of the premises as a residence; living rooms were situated behind the shop. At an early date, the dining room was utilised to meet the demands for increased shopping space and gradually the other rooms were taken as the business grew.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Aird left the partnership at an unknown date, and together with Mr. William Scott, commenced trading as Scott and Aird. This was a forerunner of Scotts Ltd., but this particular venture was unsuccessful.

In 1890, Mr. J.D. Jones entered the business and continued until 1899. After leaving, he set up in business for himself in Hunter Street. Having Mr. Jones with the firm, enabled Mr. William and Isaac Winn to travel overseas to the "home markets" at London, Bradford and other leading centres, where with clever purchasing and good contacts made, the store flourished.<sup>3</sup>

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 celebration of Newcastle's centenary are shown in almost endless variety" By this time, the staff had grown to thirty.<sup>4</sup>

The Messrs. Winn were staunch advocates of the early closing movement and closed their store at 6.30 p.m. (Saturdays excepted) "greatly to the benefit and health of their assistants."<sup>5</sup> All the female assistants wore black, and aprons with scissors at their waists. At one time, a special tram used to run from Dudley every Saturday, to bring in miners'wives on their fortnightly shopping spree.

1. Newcastle Morning Herald. 9.9.1897.

2. "The Story of 50 yrs' Successful Business" Newcastle University Archives. (Mrs. Joan Aird's collection.)

3. "The Story of 50 yrs'!"..

4. N.M.H. 9.9.1897



When shops were closed on Saturday night, windows were barred and covered for the rest of the week-end. Gas lamps provided illumination. 6.

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:

NEW SPRING & SUMMER COATS  
BIG SHIPMENTS NOW OPENING  
FROM LONDON, MANCHESTER, BRADFORD....  
OUR MILLINERY  
UNDER MISS TASKER'S MAGIC HANDS  
IS A GREAT SUCCESS. 7.

By 1901, property at the rear of Hunter Street was acquired and a large building with louvred roof, which allowed maximum lighting, was built. This enabled better shopping facilities and was known as "The Palace". 8.

The business was formed into a limited liability company in 1903, with Mr. William and Isaac Winn as Governing Directors. As well as taking an active and intelligent role in the business, they occupied positions of responsibility in church affairs. Together with Mr. William Arnott, a great friend, Isaac chartered a ship to come out from England with New Testaments.

The Winn company had marketed their own sewing machine, called "WINNETTA", which sold for five pounds, five shillings: Home deliveries were made free of charge, first by horse drawn vehicle, later by motor trucks.

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. 9.

During the Great War, Five thousand, five hundred pounds were raised by the staff and management for patriotic funds. Twenty six employees served at the war, two were killed in action.

6. From an article by Allan Watkins, Newcastle Morning Herald, 9.10.1971, on the retirement of Mr. K. Winn.
7. Newcastle Regional Library - Local History Section.
8. "The Story of 50 yrs".....
9. ....

As business developed, the organisation touched the whole of the north coast, north and north west district, with an efficient mail order service. By 1922, the store had stocks of furniture, floor covering and sporting goods. 10.

In 1924, a fine building was erected with an extra lift and such modern facilities as "Grinnell Sprinkler" system. The staff were apparently, loyal and contented in their work and as each one completed 25 years service, he or she was presented with a suitably inscribed gold watch. 11.

On 7th August, 1941 a musical review, "Just for Fun" was produced by the staff and presented at the City Hall. The staff members, as well as invited guest artists performed, and the proceeds went to the Staff A.I.F. Ambulance Fund. 12.

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 in food presentation. Indeed, a school holiday treat for many Newcastle children was a visit to Winns' cafeteria. 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.

10. Newcastle Sun. 8th September, 1922. (Newcastle Regional Library Local History Section.)

11. "The Story of 50 yrs'!..."

12. From the Souvenir Programme. Newcastle Regional Library.



Mr. Allan Winn had retired two years previously, on 20th February, 1968, and Mr. F.C. Winn on 1st August, 1974.

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.

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 14½, 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. The customers were often known personally to the assistants then, and they were offered seats while making their purchases. Goods were displayed in large glass cases and customers were given individual, personalised service.

Miss Griffiths recalled the "wonderful sales" Winns held twice yearly. On the last Friday of the sale, goods were marked down to half price. She remembers the windows barricaded to protect them from the crush of the assembled shoppers. Men were knocked to the ground as they opened the doors to admit the eager bargain hunters.

Winns Ltd. was known for its generous donations to charity. In the early days, a social committee was formed and bazaars were held in the Central Methodist Mission hall, processions were arranged and many other fund-raising functions raised 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 were 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.

Miss Griffiths also recalled the days of the 1939-1945 war, when ration coupons were issued. Winns had bought in a special purchase of towels, which were in desperately short supply. In response to the advertisements in the Newcastle Morning Herald, hundreds of women converged on the store and those unfortunate enough to "miss out" refused to leave the store, until a salesman, well-known to most of them stood on the counter and convinced them that the 400 towels for sale, were all gone.

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 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 second-in-charge of the haberdashery, buttons and wool department.

After two years, Mr. Keith Winn approached Mrs. Maddrell and asked her to take the position of buyer for these departments. With some reluctance, Mrs. Maddrell accepted, but now looks back and remembers them as: "the happiest years of my life". It was a family business and the staff members were treated "as family". As buyer, Mrs. Maddrell 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 may 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.

In the department under her control, Mrs. Maddrell had fourteen girls. She recalled how very hard they worked: Friday night shopping was very popular, as well as Saturday morning. They worked a 48 hour week, with two weeks annual holiday. So busy were they, that customers lined the counters "two deep" most of the time. Customers were often prepared to wait for their favourite salesgirl, if they felt that she had a special understanding of their particular needs. After reaching the age of nineteen, the girls were transferred to other departments (never put off), usually as second-in-charge.

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 war had just ended and business was booming. The day's takings of the previous year were always made available and it was expected that each year, the figure would be improved on the last. This became almost a contest as everyone was involved in the outcome. 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 goodwill of Winns was upheld.

Trams were operating in Hunter Street and the sales that Winns had would see them packed with shoppers intent on acquiring some of the bargains offered. The sales were genuine. Mrs. Maddrell remembers having to submit items to Mr. Keith Winn, who personally inspected them before they could be advertised in the sale.

After twenty two years in the "haby" department, Mrs. Maddrell transferred to "ready made curtains" then as a "casual" to 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."