

WILCOX MOFFLIN LIMITED

Exporters of Australian Sheepskins, Wool Hides and Allied Products¹
(Logo)

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Early History of the Original Firm²

To trace the business to the beginning, it is necessary to go back as far as the year 1858, which is a long way back in Australian history, and in a period crowded with incidents of interest to the third and fourth generations of Australian born subjects. It is disclosed that Mr George Wilcox (who was born in 1838) in the year 1858 travelled to Port Adelaide on the good ship "Admella", a vessel remembered even today by old South Australians, because she struck the rocks in 1859, and only 24 survivors live to tell the tale out of 107 people on board at the time. Steamers passed close by, but did not notice the distress signals of those on the wreck who suffered intensely through lack of food and water. A Royal Commission found that the loss was due to severe currents forcing the "Admella" on to the rocks.

Mr George Wilcox proceeded to Gawler, South Australia, and there opened a grocery business, merging in 1860 with his father's general storekeeping business under the title of J and G Wilcox.

In 1860 George Wilcox was buying wool, skins, gum, bark, wheat, flour and gold, or taking these products in barter for stores, and shipping them to his father, Joseph Wilcox, in England, for sale, where the proceeds were used for buying English goods for the storekeeping business of J and G Wilcox, already mentioned. In the "Register" newspaper on June 11th 1870, appeared:-

"Messrs J and G Wilcox have purchased 73 oz. of gold this week."

George Wilcox was also interested in a small wool-washing plant on the Para River, and in the mid sixties and early seventies in a boiling down plant combined with a soap and candle works.

In 1864 he made a voyage back to England, taking with him some Australian parrots, 2 emus, some kangaroos, and a pingoe (or Pinkie), thus evidencing early in his career a leaning towards Australian fauna, which afterwards became such an important item in the firm's business.

(picture of rabbit skin with caption - 'Peculiar Markings are sometimes found on the inside of Rabbit skins.)

In 1872 Mr George Wilcox sold out this business in Gawler and took his family back to England with the intention of living there, but returned to Adelaide in 1874, because the English climate did not suit his health.

¹ See Letterhead Wilcox Mofflin Limited, letter dated 21 July 1975 to Judy Andrews from the Secretary ????? of the company.

² Extract from "A brief History of Wilcox Mofflin Limited, Present Day Organisation" by Eric N Birbs, Radcliffe Press, Sydney April 1921.

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From 1874 he intermittently bought wool, skins, etc., for shipment to England, and whilst actively engaged in handling these products he first came in contact with Mr William Mofflin in 1876.

From an historical point of view, this meeting was a momentous one and it occurred in Melbourne. Mr William Mofflin had proceeded to Melbourne to take charge of a wool and produce brokering business, and after some acquaintance with Mr George Wilcox, he suggested a partnership, with the idea in mind of earnestly and seriously entering into the regular export of wool, skins and produce.

Forty-four years ago it was not a mere matter of receiving a firm order from England or another country, executing it and advising by cable of the shipment, following up by posting the documents. A voyage at that time, at the very least, took many months, and was always accompanied by a good deal of uncertainty, moreover the postal facilities, even when the mail arrived in Australia, were uncertain. However, the partnership was entered into, and the firm of William Mofflin and Co., established and carried along till June, 1889.

It is, as a rule, not excusable when attempting to write a history to lead the reader forward for a certain number of years and then to turn back again, but the history of the early days of what afterwards became Wilcox Mofflin Ltd. is so crammed with interesting items, so permeated with the actions of strong personalities, that one may perhaps be forgiven for presenting the subject in a manner that seems easy to follow. Therefore, let us go back to 1870-71, in the days of the France-Prussian war.

Mr William Mofflin was at that time in Hobart engaged upon one of the big deals he was always interested in and nearly always successful with. He had bought a huge parcel of sheep skins, chartered a vessel, hurriedly placed them aboard, dispatched the vessel, and learnt just a short time after she cleared port that war had been declared, the news having come of course to the island of Tasmania by another vessel carrying mails. To-day, fifty years after the event, Mr Mofflin laughs about the incident, but it is easy to visualize the blow the news of that war and the decreased value of those sheep skins represented to the young man who had just accomplished something really big.

We have written that the partnership was entered into and carried on in the name of William Mofflin and Co., to the year 1889, but it is worthy of note that in 1888 the firm opened a branch in Sydney, which constituted one of the earliest moves in establishing a chain of offices and branches throughout the continent. A few months after the opening of the Sydney branch, another one was opened in Melbourne, and in 1887 we note the entry into the business in the Adelaide branch of Mr Sidney Wilcox, who is alive today, and an active member of the directorate of the present day organization.

In 1889, actually in the month of June, Mr William Mofflin sold out his half share of the partnership to Mr George Glen Legoe and Mr Sidney Wilcox.

Immediately after this sale, Mr William Mofflin left for England accompanied by his wife and family, and upon his return rejoined Messrs. Kugelmann and Rickards, who had separated from William Mofflin and Co., and were trading Mofflin, Rickards and Co.

The Wilcoxes established a Sydney office and traded as George Wilcox and Co., and in 1894 the title William Mofflin and Co. had ceased to exist, the Wilcoxes trading throughout the States as George Wilcox and Co. In this same year the original George Wilcox retired, giving his share of

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the business equally to his two sons, George Seaborne and Murray Wilcox, who had been added to the Sydney staff.

In 1900 Mr Mofflin acquired Mr Rickards' interest, and traded up to 1908 as W. Mofflin & Co., in which year he converted it into a limited liability company, taking in several old employees as shareholders, and from then on W. Mofflin & Co. Ltd. existed up to the time of the amalgamation.

In July, 1915, George Wilcox and Co., was converted into a limited liability company, trading as George Wilcox and Co., Ltd.

From 1894 onwards George Wilcox & Co. extended their interests, opening branches at Brisbane, Rockhampton and Townsville, and establishing agency relations in Western Australia. However, Mofflin, Rickards & Co. had been the first to pioneer the Queensland territory, first opening at Brisbane and a little later, or 24 years ago from the time of writing these notes, Mr I M Triggs had been sent to pioneer further north and had opened the Rockhampton and Townsville branches. The arrival of George Wilcox & Co. on the scene in this territory lead to intense rivalry between the offices, the staff and the outdoor representatives of the two firms in particular.

Prior to 1894, the firms had been engaged in a business that was almost entirely of a speculative nature, buying wool, skins, and produce for export to England, to be sold upon arrival in the open markets. The exception to this purely speculative business was the execution of firm orders from American buyers for kangaroo and wallaby skins. In 1889 it had become apparent to all parties that this method of merely buying and shipping with a long wait for the proceeds of sale, was a precarious trade, and that something had to be done in order to put the business on a sound commercial basis. Therefore as early as 1893, various members of the firms made tours abroad, taking in such places as Manilla, Hong Kong, Japan, and visiting America, Canada and most of the continental centres. These journeys abroad stimulated competition for firm orders, and proved to be the establishment of genuine and lasting connections all over the world. A chain of orders was secured by both interests, which almost entirely eliminated the speculative nature of the old business.

The period 1889 to about 1913 reveals many interesting incidents and experiences. For instance, whilst on the one hand, George Seaborne Wilcox, by his bold buying had become know as "King" of the trade, on the other hand William Mofflin, senior, was handling deals of considerable size; in one instance involving the purchase of £175,000 worth of ox hides from the one source of supply. Another instance of the methods was the quiet buying during the Russian-Japanese war of opossum skins, which were practically a drug on the market at very low prices. George Wilcox and Co., Ltd., quietly bought and bought until they had collected upwards of 1 ¾ million skins, on which they eventually made considerable profit when the revived demand set in.

In short, from 1889 until 1917 both organizations were busily engaged in conducting their own business, and at times trying to outdo the other one – sometimes succeeding.

Preserving Works

In 1900 George Wilcox & Co. purchased a small Canning Works at Mt Gambier, S.A. This deal was consummated because George Wilcox & Co. were acgtively engaged in the export of frozen rabbits and believed that the ownership of the works would considerably augment the supply. At

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first, however, only small quantities were frozen, most of the rabbits being canned. Then came the Chicago canned meat scare with the result that the demand for canned rabbits from the Mt Gambier Works absolutely ceased, so the Works were closed and remained closed for nearly three years. Then the demand began to grow again and the Works were re-opened and gradually increased in size and equipment. The progress was so satisfactory that it was decided to buy tree trunks from nearby and establish a sawmill for the supplying of cases in which to pack the canned goods.

The supply of timber proved to be in excess of the needs of the canning works and advantage was taken of the opportunity to make dried fruit boxes and apple cases, with the result that the saw-mill and box factory became a revenue-producing subsidiary industry, and is still carried on today by Wilcox Mofflin Ltd., who hold considerable reservations of growing timber. In addition to this the company have recently added the purchase of some more heavily-timbered land, with the net result that they now have many years supply of firewood in sight as well as excellent timber suitable for milling for industrial purposes later on. Further, the cut-over land is again growing useful timber which will soon begin to yield.

Some idea of the size and importance of the Mt Gambier interests may be obtained by visualizing one and one-eighth acres of ground completely roofed over, with freehold land attached comprising 509 acres.

The year 1903 saw the early beginnings of the meat business which subsequently grew into a very large factor in the total turnover of the South Australian interests of the company. In this year the question was asked: "As many successful export seasons for frozen meat have been enjoyed, why not kill for local consumption?" So a small experimental shop was started to ascertain whether the business would be profitable or not. The success was immediate, and it was decided to build the very best class of butchers' shops, so the old shop was scrapped and a thoroughly up-to-date, hygienic, clean meat store was built in a thickly-populated suburb, which became the model for other shops, which are conducted under the title of the "Adelaide Meat Stores."

In 1907 the Torrens-side drying yard of the firm was completely gutted by fire and it is of interest to note that immediately after this fire the firm secured 1 ½ acres of land at the corner of three streets – Howard, Market and John Streets, Hindmarsh, S.A. They soon had the greater portion of the present-day packing sheds in commission, the whole of the timber being cut and supplied by the sawmill at Mt Gambier.

Prior to 1917 it had become apparent to a number of those interested that if the resources of the two concerns were combined and merged into the one company, not only would the business be more easy to conduct, but the probability was that the combined facilities would lead to increased turnover, inasmuch as orders could be more readily executed, and any one of a number of centres used as an assembling point if circumstances demanded.

These thoughts and suggestions were earnestly advocated by Mr G G Legoe and Mr S Wilcox representing the Wilcox interests, and by Mr L M Triggs, who had been brought back to Sydney as Managing Director of the Mofflin interests, and after many interviews a scheme was evolved mutually satisfactory to both sides, which ultimately led to the amalgamation of the two concerns later on floated into the present company of Wilcox Mofflin Ltd.

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There in a nutshell you have the history of the various stages which have lead up to the flotation of one of the biggest companies of its kind in the world, and it will be admitted that it is unusual to find two partners starting together and separating by agreement, only to come together again for the companies' good, when each had succeeded beyond his early dreams, and each had passed the allotted span of three-score years and ten.

The extract below is taken from.....³

Owing to the general financial stringency brought about by acute exchange difficulties the above company's operations were restricted, particularly in connection with its Continental and English clients during the last six months of the financial year, while the severe depression of trade in USA curtailed sales to that country considerably. This resulted in decreased profits, and the directors do not recommend the payment of a bonus this year.

The outlook in international politics is now more reassuring, and as advices to hand and actual business transacted since the closing of accounts indicate a general improvement in trading, the directors are of the opinion that prospects are brighter for the ensuing year.

The accounts were issued on Thursday, and showed a net profit of £60,682 as against £75,070 in 1923, £66,132 in 1922, a loss in 1921 of £31,367, but profits in 1920 of £148,665 and in 1919 of £44,357.

There was paid in February a dividend of 1/- and a similar dividend is due on September 18 – a total of 10 percent, as against 12 ½ percent for the two previous years. The past year's dividend requires £40,000, and £20,000 has been added to reserve funds as well as provision for depreciation and taxation. Undivided profits to be carried forward will be £2,220 as against £1,538 a year ago. Balance sheet items are summarized below:

Liabilities

	1922	1923	1924
	£	£	£
Paid up capital	400,000	400,000	400,000
Sundry creditors and bank overdraft	93,115	77,911	130,772
Suspense accounts	7,981	10,604	11,158
Reserve funds	113,699	145,805	163,658
P & L balance	31,468	31,538	22,220

Assets

Property, plant & goodwill	328,534	346,460	354,261
Stock	207,450	214,941	248,141
Sundry debtors	103,462	102,944	123,459
Cash	1,871	1,513	1,947
Commonwealth loans	5,000	-	-
Totals	646,264	665,858	727,808

The reserve funds for 1924 comprise reserve for depreciation and renewals £33,658, and reserve fund £130,000

³ Extract from ?????