

A Brief History of the Heathcote Maltworks

By Barrie Woods

I used to visit the maltworks in the 1970s as part of my work. The place was very much a mixture of the old and new, though I did not realise at the time how entwined with the history of early Christchurch it was.

I still remember the strong odours generated by the malting process, ranging from the 'damp straw' smell of the green grain through to the intense aroma of the kilned malt, a sort of nutty toasted smell, but unique in its own right, in a similar way that freshly baked bread or roasted coffee beans have their own specific aromas. The maltsters, I was told, could judge the maturity of the malt by its aroma, as could the brewers appraise its quality.

My work involved looking after the control systems for the plant. Some of the equipment was state of the art for the time, but an equal amount was well overdue for replacement, which meant I was a frequent visitor trying to keep it running.

My sister worked in the lab for a couple of years around the same time. The breweries required the quality of the malt to be closely monitored as there was a lot of money at stake if it went wrong, so the lab was quite up to date even if the rest of the plant wasn't. Even so, perhaps a significant part of the quality control happened during sampling at the after work sessions at the Valley Inn! She still remembers those days fondly. Apparently, at that time, many of the maltworks staff lived locally and a number had worked for the malting company for many years.

While I'll shortly talk about the early history of malting in Heathcote Valley, I'll firstly spend a little time explaining what malt is to give context to the rest of the article. Malting is the process of

converting raw barley grains to malt, which is then used to make beer. With Kiwis being consumers of large amounts of beer, there has always been a great need for malt.

The process begins by 'steeping', which is when the grain is soaked in water. It then passes through several stages of humidification and aeration, which encourages the grain to germinate. During this stage the starches in the grain are converted to fermentable sugars from which beer is brewed. The germination process normally takes between three and ten days. Then, once the grain has germinated just enough, it is spread out in a kiln and heated to a precise temperature. Like roasting coffee beans, this gives the malt its colour and flavour. It also stops the germination process so the barley doesn't turn into little barley plants before it reaches the brewery. Just like coffee roasting or wine making, the process is something of an art form, so the maltster's role is therefore an important one.

In 1869 a man named Alfred Lee Smith arrived at Lyttelton. He had visited other parts of the country with view to setting up an enterprise, and soon after arriving in Canterbury he recognised the potential offered in Heathcote Valley, so he purchased a substantial block of land. In 1871, seeing an opportunity, he took over the brickworks that had been established to build the new railway tunnel, and renamed it the Wincolmlee Brick Kilns. Wincolmlee is the name of Alfred Smith's home town near the English city of Hull.

Since the days of early European settlement, the Canterbury plains were recognised as good land for growing grain, and barley thrived alongside wheat and oats. Malting requires a supply of clean

water, fuel to heat the kilns, transport to bring the barley from the fields and to ship the malt to the breweries. Heathcote Valley had all the necessary requirements close at hand.

Being an entrepreneur, Mr Smith decided to diversify and seized the opportunity to establish a malt kiln next door to the brick kilns. Both operated under the Wincolmlee name and were located on the same site that the malt works occupied up until recent times.



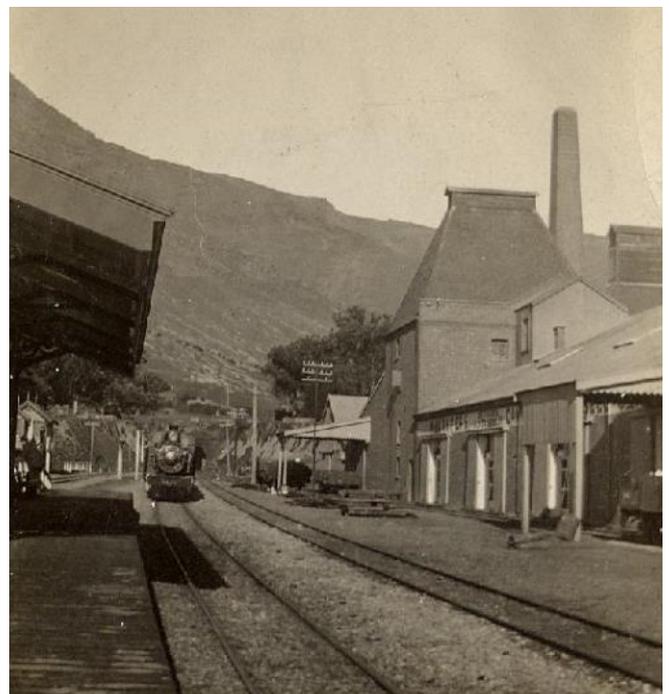
Early photograph (1890) of the malt and brick works, Gimblett collection, Christchurch City Libraries

Mr Smith erected a new two-storey brick and slate building to accommodate the malting activities. It was adjacent to the railway line and measured 75ft by 26ft. Initially 200 bushels of malt per month were produced, but within a year production increased to 20,000 bushels per year and the business grew from two workers to fifteen.

Like many entrepreneurs it seems Mr Smith was on the lookout for new ventures and he moved to Dunedin, where he established another brickworks in Kensington. The exact business relationships and timings are unclear, but it appears that around the same time he bought an interest in Royse, Stead & Co, a grain and flour merchants and by 1875 the Wincolmlee works in Heathcote were operating under the Royse, Stead & Co name. In 1881, Alfred Smith and William Royse purchased Donaghy's Rope and Twine Company (which still exists today as Donaghys).

In 1881 Royse, Stead & Co merged into a new entity, the New Zealand Grain Agency and Mercantile Company, which floated on the stock exchanges of Great Britain and New Zealand with a capital of £1,000,000. It was intended to be a major enterprise but by 1884 the company was bankrupt.

In 1886 the Wigram brothers purchased the malthouse and brick yard and restarted production. You will probably recognise this name as one of the brothers was Sir Henry Wigram, who became mayor of Christchurch and a pioneer of aviation. The Wigram aerodrome and later Wigram suburb were named after him. The Wigram brothers expanded the brick making side of the business and, though there was competition from other brickworks nearby, they continued to supply the rapidly growing needs of the city. During part of this time the maltworks was managed by Charles Flavell, after whose family Flavell Street is named.



The malt house viewed from the railway station in the early 1900s, Gimblett collection, Christchurch City Libraries

When Wigram Brothers merged with T. N. Horsley in 1906 to form the Christchurch Brick and Tile Company, they sold the malting side of the business to the Canterbury Seed Co. It would continue to trade under this name until 1947 when the Canterbury (NZ) Malting Company was formed, however to most local people the business was always known as the Heathcote Maltworks.

Ownership of the company changed over subsequent years with The Canterbury Seed Company being acquired by Hodder and Tolley Ltd (a subsidiary of Yates Corporation) in 1984, and ownership of the malting company moved to the two major breweries, Lion Breweries Ltd and Dominion Breweries Ltd.

Initially the malting process was exclusively a manual operation until, in 1937, a decision was made to introduce a mechanical plant to meet increasing demand. This proved very successful and in 1941 further mechanised expansion doubled the capacity of the factory. This was not without problems due to the limited supply of electricity at the time. Needing a consistent supply of electricity, the company installed its own generators, providing a capacity of approximately 255 kilowatts of locally generated power to supplement the supply from the national grid. A major fire on 12 September 1957 significantly damaged the generation plant.

Bulk storage was needed for the barley and a former Air Force hangar was taken over at the end of the second world war. Later the iconic silos would be built. This conglomerate of brick, concrete and corrugated iron was a major feature of the local landscape until the site was cleared following the 2011 earthquakes.

In 1965 the Heathcote Maltworks was the largest single malthouse in the Southern Hemisphere with an output of 3500 bushels a day or 1.6 million bushels a year. In those days the maltworks fell within the Heathcote County Council region, which

was a separate entity to Christchurch City, and was the county's biggest consumer of both water and electricity, at around 15% of the total usage for each commodity.

During the late 1960s automation was introduced to various aspects of the plant. It was a peculiar mixture of old and new that never quite worked as intended, but never-the-less acceptable malt seemed to be an end result.



Metal silos at the malt works, Standish and Preece collection, Canterbury Museum

Growth of the malting business was not without controversy. An ammonia leak in 1970 caused the evacuation of nearby houses and the hospitalisation of an elderly woman who was "affected by the fumes". This event possibly signalled something of a turning point setting locals against the company and its impingement on their peaceful enjoyment of the neighbourhood.

In 1972 a public meeting attracted about 150 local residents to oppose the construction of the new concrete silos, which would later be described by many as an eyesore. At the time the Heathcote County Council said it was "powerless to do anything about the present siting of the Canterbury New Zealand Malting Company's malthouse in Port Hills Road", and so the project went ahead.

At that same meeting locals complained about the “excessive non-stop noise” and the frequent movement of grain trucks along Port Hills Road, which they feared would only become worse. News reports of the day said “the meeting was frequently interrupted by heckling and comments from many of the residents in attendance”.



The concrete silos under construction in the 1970s

Not everybody agreed however, as many people relied on the maltworks for their livelihood, or had strong family connections over generations. Locals were divided on the matter.

Noise continued to be a problem and in 1978, having received multiple and ongoing noise complaints from Heathcote residents, the Heathcote County Council set up a subcommittee to investigate the issue. The Health Department completed a survey and it was concluded that “noise from the factory premises was of sufficient magnitude to constitute a nuisance under the Heath Act 1953 and an ‘objectionable element’ under the Town and Country Planning Act 1977”. The subcommittee concluded that “no measureable diminution of the noise had occurred since the complaint was lodged with the council”.

The company said the council was partly responsible because, by allowing the widening of Port Hills Road, it had cut out the possibility of landscaping at the factory. Councillor Hindmarsh said that “so far he had been disappointed by the company attitude”.

In June 1980 the County Council served formal notice on the company requiring it to reduce noise levels. A year later the problems still persisted and the County Council threatened legal action, but it seems the law at the time gave little scope for prosecution. Then, in 1984, the Press reported in its headline of 10 August “Council Cannot Solve Noise Complaint”. “Residents will have to live with the noise,” according to Cr P C Mc Grail. “The malt factory has been there longer than many of the residents,” he said. The County Council had given up, and locals were not happy.

In 1979 the Canterbury Malting Company, under the ownership of DB and Lion, built a new factory in Marton. Perhaps the company realised the future prospects for the Heathcote site were limited, and decided a new site offered better opportunities, though it does not appear the intention at the time was to replace the Heathcote operations.



Inside one of the malting rooms. This picture was taken in 2012 after the works were closed and after the earthquakes.

When the Resource Management Act became law in 1991 the company would have realised any further development at Heathcote would be difficult, especially as much of the plant and many of the buildings were very old. Electricity prices had risen sharply and an application to convert to coal power was denied. Moreover, their noise problem had not gone away!

If you haven’t already, you might like to read John Squibb’s article from the Spring 2023 magazine

titled, 'The Demise of the Heathcote Maltworks', where he explains how this decision led to the closing of the Heathcote maltworks plant in 1999, with production ceasing the following year.



The abandoned malt works provided an irresistible canvas for local graffiti artists.

The maltworks will mean different things to Heathcote locals. Some will have fond memories of a place where family worked and others will remember the controversies, or the blot on the landscape, particularly after the plant was abandoned for some years before it was finally demolished.



The Heathcote Maltworks demolition site, January 2012

After a history of 130 years of malting in the valley, the maltworks name lives on with the Maltworks Villas, though visits from the council's noise control officers are no longer such a regular occurrence!