

History of the Blue Lake Oatmeal Mill

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Excellent pastoral land was taken up for sheep grazing around Mount Gambier from 1844 onward, and the town was established as a private speculative investment in 1854. (Messer & Hill 1954, pp. 10 & 12)

It was prosperous almost immediately. Within fifteen years, a description of the town listed the "principal buildings and places of business", including among them "Mr Williams's mill". (Ward 1869, p. 73)

Thomas Williams was born in South Wales in 1830 and worked in gold mines in his youth. He emigrated to the Victorian gold fields in 1854 and was later employed to operate mobile steam-powered threshing machines at Warrnambool. He brought the technology to Mount Gambier in 1863, and for several years operated mobile threshing machines around the district.

Business was good, and in 1864 he built a small flour mill at Port MacDonnell. In 1867 he built the Commercial mill in Mount Gambier. However, in February 1870 he sold this first mill to Thomas Wilson, and bought a larger area of land, lots 43, 44 and 45 in Percy Street, where he built a new flour mill which he called the Telegraph Mills. The new mill used orthodox technology, at first producing wheat flour from a mill with stone grinding wheels. (Border Watch 3 April 1912, p.2)

In 1892-93 there was a considerable expansion of the business, and the mill converted to the more sophisticated technology of crushing with steel rollers, using state-of-the-art machinery imported from England and the USA. The enlarged mill was re-named the Mount Gambier Roller Flour Mills. In 1898 the mill bought the adjacent lot 42 and the Blue Lake Oatmeal Factory was added to the complex, opening in 1903. (Border Watch 15 August 1903, p. 2)

Williams was prominent in the community. Besides the milling business he owned several farms, was active in the Horticultural and Agricultural Society and other organisations, was a JP and long-term town councilor and Mayor for a time in the 1880's. The mill was known by several names during its life, and its business arrangements are mysterious. During Williams' lifetime the mill's land ownership passed to a committee of trustees, presumably shareholders in a private company. It is not clear whether Williams leased the mill from the company, or whether he simply set up the business and let others run it.

Newspaper reports say that in about 1906, the mill was bought by A.A. Brice and Company, and operated by them until the 1940s. During the Brice era the name Blue Lake Oatmeal Milling Company was retained. However, there is no mention in land title records of Brice ever owning or leasing the land where the mill stood.

The two mill buildings were both two-storey masonry buildings, the flour mill on the corner of Percy and Mitchell streets, the oatmeal mill set back in the middle of the block. Along the Percy and Alexander street frontages were extensive single-storey sheds, built of Mount Gambier limestone. These were presumably used for storage of bagged grain, oatmeal and flour. The Percy Street frontage of the mill still has the painted name "Commercial Flour Mills", and the grain store at the corner of Mitchell and Alexander streets shows faintly the painted name "Commercial Mill".

Later in his life Williams was incapacitated by a long illness, perhaps related to an injury from his mining days, and he died in March 1912. (Border Watch 3 April 1912, p.2)

Soon afterward the mill expanded to the east, the company buying lots 40 and 41, in either 1913 or 1915 - the date on the certificate of title is indistinct. (CT 609/140)

Eventually the mill complex occupied the entire city block bounded by Mitchell, Percy, Hedley and Alexander streets. The easternmost allotments close to Hedley Street were never intensively developed, but contained a few small outbuildings. In its later decades the company operated as the Commercial Flour and Oatmeal Milling Company Ltd.

The wheat industry was changing in the twentieth century. Mount Gambier in the cool wet South-East had always been a peripheral grain-growing area, and the opening up of new irrigated agricultural land in the Mallee

in the 1920's and 30's was causing the focus of the industry to move north. Many grain growers were abandoning the South-East, and today wheat is not grown south of the Bordertown district.

The Mount Gambier wheat flour mill operated until about the 1950s, although different accounts give other dates. The oatmeal mill operated longer, but was certainly closed by 1973 when the milling company sold the land to O.G. Roberts (Properties) Pty Ltd, a development company backed by the local Holden dealer. There were hopeful plans for re-development, but nothing happened for years. Maintenance of the buildings had been neglected for decades, and they were in very poor condition. They were occupied by squatters and vermin, vandalised and damaged by minor fires. It was noted in a heritage survey that the mill complex "requires urgent conservation work". In 1983 Council talked about demolishing the buildings to provide car parking for the Mount Gambier CBD.

In 1984, the initiative passed to Leon Riquier, an energetic local businessman, whose vision for the mill complex did not involve car parking, but an ambitious re-development of the buildings into a complex for entertainment, fine dining, art displays and retail shopping.

In June 1984 he signed an agreement with O.G. Roberts to buy the land. In September he registered a company, The Old Oat Mill Pty Ltd to complete the purchase. (ASIC business search, CTs 4002/801 & 4296/460) There would be five years of re-development work, cleaning out tonnes of oatmeal, washing, painting, building and refurbishing ahead. In that time, it was one of the largest re-development projects underway in the South-East.

The redeveloped complex officially opened on 7 April 1989. (Border Watch 11 April 1989, p. 7). It consisted of the Old Oatmill Inn restaurant and nightclub, an upmarket business, serving both bistro and a la carte meals, with live entertainment three or four nights a week. The buildings also housed a wine cellar showcasing Coonawarra wines, and the Quail Gallery and Tearooms, later re-named the Oatmill Gallery. The restaurant hosted art exhibitions. Separate leased businesses in the complex sold antique furniture and leadlight glasswork.

On 29 June 1989 the older buildings of the mill complex, principally the wheat mill of 1870 and the oatmeal mill of 1903, were entered in the South Australian Heritage Register.

In 1989 Riquier expanded the redevelopment, announcing that the Oatmill Gallery, a former grain warehouse on lots 41 and 42, would be demolished and replaced by a much larger building housing a cinema complex. Plans were drawn up for twin cinemas, and expressions of interest were invited. ("Oatmill Plans", Border Watch 10 November 1989)

The cinemas opened in the 1990s, after Riquier had sold the property.

The redevelopment was a big success in most ways, and certainly brought new life and industries into central Mount Gambier. In 1991 the complex was placed on the market, but failed to sell in the short term. (Border Watch 16 August 1991, p. 11)

The sale took place in 1995, when Riquier sold the property to Alexander Mitchell Pty Ltd. His company The Old Oat Mill Pty Ltd was wound up in 1996. The complex has continued to operate much as Riquier envisaged to the present day, although retail tenant businesses have changed.

Mitchell sold the property to Wilna Investments Pty Ltd in 2007. Soon afterwards, the company began to attract investors to a development which would see the "existing heritage listed Flour Mill building transformed into 4 or 5 star boutique accommodation with 40 rooms, restaurant and conference space". (Wilna Investments website)

However, that development never took place, and by early 2018 the property was on the market again. (Border Watch 1 March 2018)

Subsequently, mortgagees forced foreclosure, and in 2019 the property passed to Oatmill Holdings Pty Ltd, the present owner. (CT 5276/666)

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