

## The Bakehouse

by C. Landon based on notes and comments by Sam Gatto and Terri Allen, information from Google and facts from Tilo Junge's book, *Wonthaggi's Bread Tokens*

It is ironic that in the same week the Shire Council approved the much-debated and initially (still?) flawed Historical Overlay, there was a report in the paper that the Council is considering an application to demolish one of the most significant buildings in Wonthaggi. While the Historical Society is focused on this development, with letters being written, reports compiled and motions passed, it seems a good time to explain how the building came to be, its significance as a part of Wonthaggi history and, importantly, what a wonderful building it was (and still is) when it was built.

### Robert Owen and the Cooperative Movement

In England, Robert Owen (1771-1858), a utopian socialist and social reformer, was the father of the Cooperative Movement, which was, for our purposes in this report, a co-partnership among employees for social and economic wellbeing. The Cooperative Movement became popular in coalmining communities throughout England, Scotland and Wales in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and so it was no surprise that when the opening of The State Coal Mine coincided with an influx of workers and the establishment of a town, the idea of setting up a cooperative was in the air.

### Matt McMahon, the idealist we needed

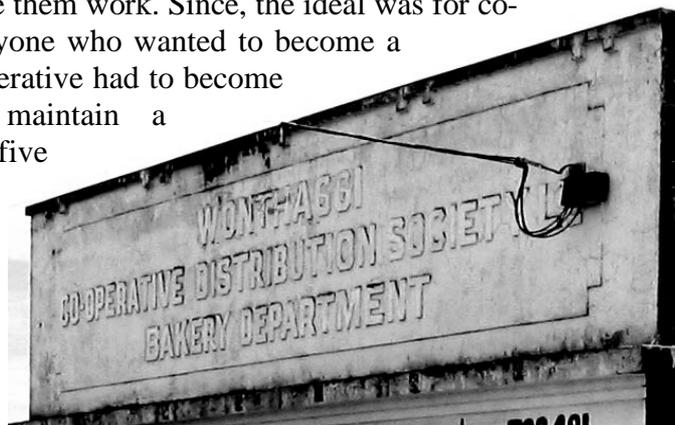
Early attempts to establish Coops in older mines in Jumbunna and Outtrim had failed, perhaps because they did not have charismatic characters like Matt McMahon to make them succeed. Matt was a political thinker and an idealist who could enter a room and clarify any confusion about issues of democracy, constitution, collective decision-making and social justice to the satisfaction of all parties.

### The Right Climate creates an opportunity

Matt and several other miners/townspople attempted to get a cooperative going as early as 1910, but it was not until 1912 that there was the right climate – a new town with a self-help, can-do ethos and democratic ideals combined with workers fresh from the Rutherglen, Creswick, Allandale, Ballarat gold mines – to take the ideas of Cooperativism and make them work. Since, the ideal was for co-ownership of any enterprise, anyone who wanted to become a member of the Wonthaggi Cooperative had to become a shareholder, required to maintain a minimum shareholding of five pounds, which could be bought on a subscription system at two shillings and six pence per fortnight. By late-1912 there was enough support for the Coop to commence trading from its first premises in Watt Street, on the very block the Bakehouse now stands. This first use of the block was for a grocery and general store, which, as the Coop grew, had to be shifted to larger premises on Graham Street in 1918.

### An Architect is hired

The building at Watt Street was probably then used to stable the horses that pulled the carts to deliver goods to homes throughout Wonthaggi (the wonderful story of the carters and how they operated will be saved for another PLOD), before it was torn down and rebuilt to house the expanding bakery connected to the Coop. The first



bakery had been at the back of the Graham Street premises, but after John Short took over as manager of the Coop, the boom years started and expansion was the word. Under the guidance of Short, the Coop employed Collins Street Architect, Harry A. Norris, in 1925 to re-design the Graham Street shop (with the remarkably innovative inclusion of a cool store!), and at the same time design a new bakehouse to be erected across the lane at the back of the Coop building on the original Coop premises at Watt Street.

### **A Builder is found**

The Bakehouse was built by Mr Frongerude, a Norwegian man (who, tragically, was later drowned with his whole family in Inverloch). Mr Frongerude, who was clearly a master builder and perfectionist, was also responsible for building the Railway Station, the Post Office, the State Bank and other public buildings in Wonthaggi. It is known that he salvaged and used the bricks from the original building at Watt Street in the new building. The Bakehouse was ready for use in 1926, when the Coop and Wonthaggi was at their height.

### **Sam Gatto uncovers Harry A Norris' Specifications for the New Bakehouse.**

During his researches for his book on the history of the Wonthaggi Hospital – also run as a Cooperative – Sam Gatto came across the detailed specifications for the building of the New Bakehouse tendered in 1925. The details in this document prove beyond a doubt that the Bakehouse is not a useless old building ready to fall down as the application for demolition declares but is a significant building constructed to last into perpetuity. Norris tendered his specifications on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1925 and in it declared that “The work is to be carried out in accordance with... this specification... and to the entire satisfaction of [the architect].”

### **All materials to be “best of their description”**

The architect required that all “materials and workmanship are to be the best of their respective kinds and the work is to be executed and finished in the best and most substantial manner.” He specified depths of excavation, levels, fillings, concrete – 4 parts bluestone screenings, 2 parts clean sand, 1 part Geelong Portland cement – widths and thicknesses of sleepers and lintels, piers and openings. He declared that “Bricks are to be approved machine made, the best of their description, hard, sound, and well burnt, of uniform size and color [*sic*] well soaked before using” and insisted that no lime mortar would be used in the contract.

### **Details of construction are available to peruse**

The building, according to the original document, was to be made of brick, cement, steel and ironite. To find out more about the shape of the building -- the Bake Hall and Loading Yard – and the construction of the building – roof trusses, flashing, spouting, purlins, windows, sashes, doors, plinths – a photocopy of the original specification document will be available at the next meeting, and in the museum thereafter, for members and visitors to study. All of the detail in the document is further argument, nay, conclusive argument that the building must not be demolished.



### **Next Month in the PLOD**

The Plod will continue and broaden this story of the Bakehouse and the Wonthaggi Cooperative Distribution Society, Ltd. with a discussion of the carts and token system that was unique in Victoria. Any memories or anecdotes you might have on these matters, please see me (CRL) at the end of the next meeting. I'll have my pen ready to take notes.