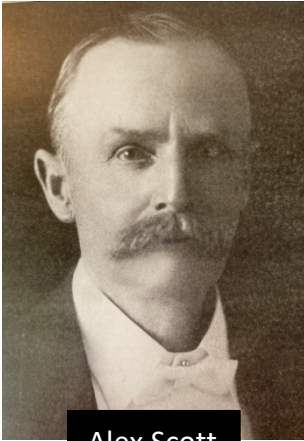


PLOD ESSAY: Alex Scott



Alex Scott

You can't live in our part of Gippsland without coming across the name Alex Scott. Since 1886, *Alex Scott & Staff*, has been the main stock and station agency in the area, and in recent times, also a real estate operation. Although its headquarters are still in Dandenong where the business began, descendants live in the Wonthaggi district and have been a part of South Gippsland history since shortly after Alex was born in 1861, the third son in a family of nine children

Alex was born in sheep grazing country at Back Creek near Amherst, northwest of Ballarat, but while he was still a toddler, his parents, James and Elizabeth Scott, moved with their children to Western Port Bay, as it was known then, where James managed, or leased, the *Westaway* cattle run on the eastern side of the bay where Corinella is now.¹ Soon Alex's father heard glowing reports of land along McDonalds Track, which was a newly cut track through Strzelecki scrub. He decided to take up land which was up for selection in Poowong. James Scott and his oldest son, Richard, then 20 years old, are credited with being the first selectors to peg out one selection each in the area, thus becoming true pioneers of the then wild country between Wonthaggi and Drouin. They ran sheep and cattle and bred horses there, and on his selection, Richard established a store, a butchery, mail depot and land agency, which he later transferred to his father.

The dedication it took to create a productive grazing property out of the heavily timbered wilderness in the Strzelecki hills is legendary. The family – James and his six sons – managed to develop a working farm with improvements such as solid and extensive stockyards, plus sheds and stables for their 300 cows, 20 horses and 100 pigs, as well as a store and butchery. They also promoted settlement and development in the area.

It was not long before the yards on the Scott property, which they called *The Priory*, became the centre of regular Poowong stock sales where auctioneers from Dandenong availed themselves of the yards for their sales. By the time young Alex was of age he had become a strong young man and a skilled horseman with a thorough knowledge of stock as well as a willingness to work. His ambition and cleverness did not go unnoticed by his brother-in-law, George Howard, who was struggling to run an auctioneering business out of Dandenong on his own as well as running sales throughout the district. And so, in 1886, at the age of 25, Alex Scott, joined his sister's husband to form *Howard & Scott, Auctioneers (Stock and Station Agents)*.

In the early days, before the trains came to South Gippsland, Alex had to do most of his work on horseback, which meant long hours in the saddle. Transport was not easy particularly as roads were poor and the stamina of the average horse in such conditions restricted travel to around 20 miles. And so, just as his father's place had become the centre of stock sales in Poowong area, Alex and his brother-in-law set up sales centres at intervals along where they had a pretty good idea the new trainline was heading. The coming of the railway to South Gippsland began in 1891

and made fattening cattle a more viable activity for farmers than it had been. It also helped develop dairying and certainly helped Alex Scott and his brother-in-law build their business.

It was also the reason Alex and his older brother, James Thompson Scott, made the move to buy cheap property in the Wonthaggi area when they did. In 1890, four years after young Alex had teamed up with his brother-in-law in Dandenong, and long before Wonthaggi was a town, he and his brother



Wonthaggi Dairy Sale 1967

¹ More about James Scott and why he moved his family to Gippsland is another story which can be found in *Since We Were a Century* compiled by the citizens of Powoong in 1999, pp 280-283.

took up several pieces of crown land in the Parish of Kirrak. The several sections they chose to acquire, ran from the Powlett River on Outtrim (Lynnes) Road through to the Inverloch Road. It was 3,500 acres in total and the brothers called it *Woodburn*. They paid thirty shillings an acre for the land, which was what 2nd and 3rd class swampy country was worth back then², but that didn't seem to faze the brothers. While their neighbouring landowners were on smaller blocks running a few milking cows to make a living, the Scott audaciously brothers ran sheep – thousands of them – which was unusual for such land, but as they were buying and selling in quick succession, it was a prosperous enterprise. The brothers did everything on a large scale.

But, as early as 1895 only nine years after he had joined his brother-in-law in business, Howard decided to try his luck auctioneering in Western Australia, leaving Alex as the sole business owner and operator. The name of the Dandenong business became *Alex Scott & Co* and prospered, but as it grew, Alex was forced to let James oversee the Kirrak property on his own while he was busy at auctions, and clearing sales, constantly moving from place to place.

As rail slowly made its way from Dandenong through Loch, Korumburra and eventually as far as Port Albert and Yarram, Alex kept horses at the train centres ready for his personal use so he could ride out to farms to inspect stock (and also, as a helping hand, to deliver goods and medicines only available in Dandenong to outlying properties) and to organise sales in these areas. The larger auctions were clearly most important, but the clearing sales were most fun.

The clearing sales – “thousands of clearing sales” – were great events in the country. It was a day out for farmers and their wives, something to look forward to where the ladies of various local auxiliaries would put on a lunch, and later when all was done and dusted, a barrel was usually turned on and maybe even some dancing occurred.

Alex was well known and happily welcomed wherever he went. He was thought to be “considerate and just at all times.”³ This was because he had a genuine understanding of the hardship of eking prosperity out of wilderness. He had watched his father win and lose and win again. He himself had come up against difficulties over time, buying and selling land. He was ready to help all his friends and clients: “When the Australian Bank of Commerce wasn't prepared to lend him money to help farmers re-fence and rebuild their farming enterprises after the 1919 bushfires that ravaged South Gippsland, he changed his business to the Bank of New South Wales making personal arrangements that would support the funding so he could lend farmers and clients the money to do the work with

little red tape attached.”⁴

He married Alice and started a family, and by 1917 he had four sons and two daughters and owned considerable property in the Wonthaggi area. He employed auctioneers at Dandenong who oversaw auctions as far as the trains went and beyond.

As a sign of Alex's business sense as well as his loyalty to his employees, in 1927 the business was incorporated as a Limited Liability



SCOTT FAMILY 1917: Edith (Clancy), Ella, Alex, Norman, Lex, Alice (Mrs Scott), Stewart, Bill, "Daisy"(Gibson)

Company (Pty. Ltd.) to allow two of the firm's auctioneers to take up shares in the business they had dedicated their lives to. These two men, Ernest Sanders and Ernest Williams became directors of the

² Barbara Moyle, *Pioneers of the Powlett and at Wonthaggi 1878-1910*, pp 115-119.

³ 1886-2006, *Alex Scott & Staff, 120 Years - A Cause for Celebration*, p.9.

⁴ *Ibid*, p,

company freeing Alex to pursue enterprises such as business expansion and land acquisition as far afield as NSW.

But, long before that, Alex's investments in property near Wonthaggi came and went.

In 1900, ten years after the initial acquisition of the land with his brother, Alex's part of the property was dissected when the shire cleared and formed the Outtrim Road. As a consequence, he sold his parts of the property at *Woodburn* and invested in a 5000-acre property in Kongwak that was known as *Scott's Estate*. There he re-claimed the marshy land and successfully ran sheep and bullocks. Being a horseman, he also bred horses for his stockmen and wranglers to use to get stock to auctions, which were held on his brother's property and later on his own property, or, to the trains that had finally made their way as far as the new town of Wonthaggi in 1910. The State Coal mine also used several of the Scott-bred ponies as pit ponies until Alex was forced to sell his Kongwak property to the Government in 1921 for soldier settlement properties. Nevertheless, these Scott ponies will now be forever remembered due the new mural celebrating the contribution Alex Scott made to Wonthaggi.



After Alex was forced to sell his Kongwak property, he kept his focus on his ever-growing business, but at the same time, he became more and more closely involved with his farming interests at a new 32,000-acre property he had acquired in 1919 in Tucumwal in the southern Riverina region of New South Wales. He called it *Aratula*. The large property was lush and productive. Once they had finished school, he sent his boys there to work the land, just as Alex himself had done in

Poowong and Wonthaggi with his brothers. Twelve years later, early in the 1930s, Alex finally asked the second of his four sons, Dandenong-born Stewart, to leave *Aratula* and take over *Alex Scott and Co*.

It was a big ask for a young fellow who had been brought up on the land with little business experience, and especially in the middle of The Great Depression, but his father was there to guide him. However, in 1935, before the young man was hardly settled, his father died, suddenly, after a brief illness while he was up at *Aratula*. It was a terrible blow. Young Stewart found himself in charge of the family company only four years into his "apprenticeship." Nevertheless, the son seemed to have inherited his father's heart, strength of personality and sense of loyalty. He took over the reins and remained head of a prosperous and growing business for fifty years until his sister's (Daisy's), son, Bruce Scott Gibson, who had been with the company assisting his uncle since 1950 took over. Under Stewart and Bruce, the business expanded, and new offices were established in Warragul, Mornington, Korumburra and Wonthaggi. And in 1980, Bruce's son, Tom Gibson, became a director of the Company.

And, so it goes on.

Despite land holdings all over Victoria and New South Wales, the family has never abandoned South Gippsland, especially Wonthaggi/Inverloch. They still have property here where members of the family live, and their recent unveiling of the Alex Scott Mural adjacent to the Workmen's Clubcar park has "quickly become a source of pride for the town as it features Wonthaggi's strong mining history while paying tribute to the agency's founder and his extraordinary family."⁵

⁵ *Sentinel-Times*, March 09, 2023.