



## Valley Worsted Mills Pty. Ltd. Mills, 207- Swanston Street

### History

Originally part of the Geelong police reserve, gazetted in 1867, this 16 acre site was alienated after revocation of the reserve in 1921.<sup>1</sup> A brick woollen mill complex was completed here between 1922 and 1927, sited immediately north of Hirst's Excelsior mills.<sup>2</sup>

Virtually a wholly British concept, the Valley Worsted Mills Proprietary Ltd. company architect, E H Bucknole, arrived from the 'home' country in 1922, setting up an office at 17 Malop Street. He called tenders in June to erect 'Block B': a wool warehouse, wool-washing shed, noble combing shed, cellar, soap store, lavatories, etc. as part of a planned six-unit plant and six-acre site development.

The company had been set up only recently after discreet dealings carried out chiefly by the Church brothers (S. C. & H. C. Church) on behalf of the Yorkshire master spinner, W C Gaunt<sup>3</sup>. They had chosen Geelong for their site because of its proximity to the wool suppliers and

finishers, its trained labour force, temperate climate and the good educational institutions such as the Gordon, who would further the training in the area. The company also was to train local labour, using British foremen in key factory roles. In the company's view, Geelong had a 'larger proportion of established textile industries than any other Commonwealth city...'<sup>4</sup>

The mill manager, A. Wilby, arrived in the town mid 1924 when the mill was near complete, receiving a well-attended, but sometimes qualified, welcome from the heads of local commerce and the wool industry along with prominent wool growers<sup>5</sup>. The expected workforce was 750 which would boost the numbers involved in the Geelong woollen industry to 2000<sup>6</sup>.

By March 1925, the mill's products were already on the market, more plant was being installed in the 'spacious' new buildings and more was on order in Britain. British employees comprised one-third of the 150 employed, fulfilling their training role, particularly in the fields of twisting and spinning worsteds. A staff canteen had been installed, under the management's workforce welfare

1 Corio parish plan

2 RB1923.450 NAV £400; RB1924.470 NAV £1200; RB1927.478 NAV £4000; INV. 1983 p.42

3 GA 14.6.22/3

4 ibid.

5 GA 17.5.24/3

6 ibid.

plan, where hot three-course meals were provided at 9d each to allow staff to spend their lunch hour at the works. Ten minutes break was allowed for morning and afternoon tea (again at a cost) in what was considered an enlightened approach to staffing. As in the English model, the staff were company-oriented with sporting teams representing the mills in cricket and other sports<sup>1</sup>. When completed to its present form in 1927, the mill was proclaimed the 'largest and most important mill of its kind in Australia..' with a nominal capital of £750,000 and a payroll of £1500 for the 550 men, women and children employed. Staff comfort had never been as assured, with ventilation, heating and cooling. And still there was more plant on order.

#### Description

Comprised of a multiplicity of forms and volumes, this complex nevertheless is a visual coherence arising from the short construction of the complex. Similarly much of the complex is altered in detail only and valuable parts of the original setting (fences, garden layout and planting) survive, resembling in its total concept other model industrial complexes of the era built up on model lines ie. Bryant & May match factory, Richmond.

Conceived in a similar manner to some of the large contemporary industrial complexes which arose after the First War, it has familiar components such as administration, boiler houses and chimney, mill or factory rooms, all on a much larger scale than the limited manufacturing structures of the 19th and early 20th century. The next comparison realm lies with warehouse or wool store complexes, which possess a similar spatial allocation but symbolize vastly different activities.

Baroque revival cement details on fences and ground-level openings mark the administration block while the factory wings rely on bold repetition of simple elements or unusual forms for their visual character. Elements such as the numerous roof vents or the monitor roof-end-walls, when seen from the east, because of their repetition are visually distinctive.

An encircling flood control wall marks the problems experienced by all occupiers of the Barwon's banks.

#### External Integrity

Generally original<sup>2</sup> but detailed analysis required.

#### Streetscape

Visually, a companion complex to the Hirst mills on the south and, in turn, linked historically to the earlier fellmongering buildings along the Barwon River, east of Swanston Street.

#### Significance

Historically, a link with Geelong's major industrial base and the introduction to Australia of large secondary industry complexes after World War One in this case by British interests.

Architecturally, because it was built as one concept, it possesses a high visual coherence and integrity for an industrial complex. It also achieves both stylistic sophistication in its administration block and stylistically sparse

but picturesque appearance in the mill and ancillary wings. Also, it relates closely to the adjoining Hirst complex.

1 GA 28.3.25/9  
2 see Geelong Wool Museum photographs