



Article: A History of Australia's Kodak Manufacturing Plant

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A HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA'S KODAK MANUFACTURING PLANT

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Abstract

After 96 years in Australia, Kodak which began after it merged with the Melbourne photographic firm Baker and Rouse in 1908 closed its manufacturing plant in Melbourne. This was the end of silver halide photographic production in Australia. After the closure of the site, Museum Victoria collected items pertaining to the manufacture of photographic materials and the history of Baker and Rouse and Kodak Australia. The museum now has a comprehensive collection regarding the history of photographic manufacture in Australia, its social history, technological changes in photography from 1886 to 2004, and Australia's role in this history.

Introduction

In September 2004, employees at Australia's Kodak manufacturing plant in Coburg, a suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, were notified that the factory would close. The plant stopped operating in November 2004, with most of the employees leaving a week later (Gooch and Leyden 2004). This was another factory closure in Victoria, a state once regarded as the manufacturing capital of Australia.

As the history of Victoria's manufacturing industry is a key collecting area for Museum Victoria, staff at the museum contacted *Kodak Australia* to determine if it could acquire any material relating to the plant. Although parts of the plant could not be acquired by the museum, due to the physical scale of the equipment, it collected a diverse range of materials relating to the history and manufacture of silver halide photography.

Baker and Rouse

The closure of Melbourne's plant was the end of what began as an Australian company in 1884. Thomas Baker ran a business from his home in Abbotsford, called the *Austral Plate Co, 1884*, which manufactured and developed photographic materials and plates. According to legend, Baker with the aid of his wife Alice and her sister Eleanor manufactured plates at night, which he sold by day (Lowe 1974: p9). By 1885 *The Austral Plate Co.* had listed an outlet at 190 Russell Street in Melbourne, which remained until 1891.

In 1881 Thomas Baker (b.1854), a registered pharmaceutical chemist, and his wife Alice moved from Queensland to Melbourne, where they purchased a property on the Yarra River at Abbotsford. The property was known as 'Yarra Grange' and was to become the site of his factory. From 1882 to 1883 Baker undertook a medical degree at the University of Melbourne, which he did not complete due to his consuming interest in the production of photographic dry plates. Thomas Baker was not the first to successfully produce dry plates in Australia; this is

credited to Phillip Marchant, who manufactured gelatine dry plates under the Eastman name: *Adelaide Instantaneous Dry Plate* (Davies & Stanbury 1986).

Thomas Baker, like George Eastman the founder of Eastman Kodak who only started producing dry plates using his coating machine a few years earlier in 1880, was an entrepreneur. Although it is unknown where Baker learnt to produce dry plates, it is highly likely that like Eastman his technical knowledge came from the *British Journal of Photography and Almanac* (Beal n.d). He may have also obtained information from various publications available at the time, such as the *Photographic Printers Assistant*, found amongst the material collected from Kodak by Museum Victoria.

Baker, like Eastman, was successful in marketing and selling photographic plates and materials. As a result he needed to expand his photographic manufacturing and retail business, particularly after forming a partnership in 1887 with accountant John J Rouse. In 1894 the company became known as *Baker and Rouse Australia Laboratory*. Baker concentrated on improvements to the manufacturing of plates and production in the laboratory whilst Rouse set up a network of retail outlets.

When Baker met John J Rouse (b. 1861), he was working as an accountant and sales manager for a Sydney photographic merchant and importer at a branch store in Melbourne. The two had very different personalities, Baker was said to be reserved whilst Rouse was athletic and outgoing. After Baker's unexpected death on 4th December 1928, Rouse wrote to George Eastman "During this long partnership he (Baker) never interfered with me, and never took my part in the running of the works. Although we were entirely different dispositions we had only one subject in view, namely the success of the firm" (Beale n.d).

Over the years the *Austral Plate Co* operated under the name *Baker and Company Laboratory*, *Baker and Rouse Australia Laboratory*, and after the merger with *Eastman Kodak*, became known as *Australia Kodak Limited*, *Kodak (Australasia) Pty Ltd.*, *Kodak (Australia) Pty Ltd.*, and *Kodak Australasia Proprietary Limited*.

Abbotsford Factory and Kodak Merger

The *Austral Plate Company* continued working from Baker's home until 1886, after which it moved into a three-storey building nearby (Beale n.d) to accommodate its 10 employees. In 1887 the new factory was producing a new bromide paper, known as Austral Pearl Bromide, which replaced albumen paper, previously the dominant photographic paper. By the 1900s the Abbotsford factory was producing bromide and gaslight papers, negative materials, mounts, envelopes, and ready mixed chemicals.

The business continued to expand as Baker and Rouse took over existing companies or trade outlets. They imported Eastman products from London and in 1888 obtained a trade agency for the American Eastman products, which they successfully sold. Baker and Rouse opened new stores and branches in Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Hobart, and Sydney. Between 1887 and 1900 they had outlets at fourteen locations. Their first wholesale and retail store opened at 37 Collins Street Melbourne, where *Lichtner & Co*, a photographic supply store had operated.

Due in part to the success of sales at *Baker and Rouse* of Eastman products, *Kodak Limited* opened (in 1900) its own branch in Melbourne, at 284-286 Collins Street. However, the store did not match the sales figures of *Baker and Rouse*, which continued with good sales. Contributing to *Kodak Limited* losses were the high tariffs imposed at the time on imported films.

After Thomas Baker visited George Eastman in Rochester, *Baker and Rouse* was appointed in 1905 sole Australian agent for *Eastman Kodak* products. The agreement included the sale to Baker and Rouse of the *Kodak Limited* store in Collins Street. In return Baker and Rouse agreed to purchase a certain percentage of Kodak products directly from Rochester, rather than London. A clause in the agreement provided that at a suitable time *Kodak* could purchase *Baker and Rouse*.

That time came in 1908, after further import tariffs introduced in 1907 greatly increased the cost of imported goods. Baker traveled to Rochester and convinced Eastman on the benefits of a merger between *Baker and Rouse* and *Kodak Limited* to form *Australia Kodak Limited*. Baker saw the merger as an opportunity to upgrade and expand the factory in Abbotsford. Eastman saw this as a way of avoiding tariff imports by manufacturing and finishing products in Australia.

Baker returned to Melbourne with technical information, formulae, and procedures from *Kodak limited* and a plan to reorganize and extend the Abbotsford factory on the 'Yarra Grange' site. New buildings for the factory and offices were erected with staff numbers increasing. In 1909 Baker asked Eastman to send a trained *Kodak* staff member to the Melbourne plant to assist with the setting up of film, paper and emulsion production. A year later he sent Mr Defendorf.

As the popularity of photography increased, so did the number of available products, which in turn required expansion of the factory. By the 1920s the company had grown too large to be run by Baker and Rouse and their families. Up until this time the company had been more like a family run business and staff had been part of the 'Kodak family' (Beale n.d).

In 1927 a new four-storey building was constructed on Southhampton Crescent, in Abbotsford. The building, which was the largest, was used for film and paper inspection and packing, for product testing facilities and emulsion melting, and to supply equipment to service the coating room.

In December 1928, Thomas Baker died unexpectedly. John Rouse had to acknowledge that although he had successfully assisted Baker in running the company, he had little experience with the manufacturing side of the business. This prompted him to request from George Eastman and William Stuber, the expert in emulsion making at Kodak Park in Rochester (Brayer 1996: p29) to send someone to assist. They sent Henry Foote, who was appointed Controller of Sensitized Goods Manufacture at the Abbotsford factory. He was 26 years old and remained with *Kodak* until 1962. At this time Rouse, who was based in Sydney, appointed his son Edgar Rouse, a science graduate, Managing Director and Abbotsford Factory Manager. In 1938 on the 7th September John J Rouse died in Sydney at the age of 77 and Edgar Rouse succeeded him as Chairman and Chief Managing director.

Production Facility

In 1936 the Abbotsford factory became the first place outside the USA to process Kodachrome film. A new building, at the already crowded Abbotsford plant, was built and further building changes continued at the site during the 1940s and 1950s. This included the creation of the emulsion department, an analytical and technical services laboratory, the film coating machine was upgraded, a separate over-coating station was installed, and the recovery department was upgraded. By 1949 the Abbotsford factory, which employed 650 staff, was producing film, plates, paper, and photographic chemicals, and was undertaking developing and processing of negatives and motion picture processing. By the 1950s expansion space was limited at Abbotsford.

In 1955 production began in Australia of Kodachrome and by 1957 a decision was made to start assembling cameras in Australia, using parts and accessories imported from Rochester and Harrow. Later, cameras were produced using locally made components. In 1960 Kodacolor film processing was also introduced at Abbotsford. Growth continued in the photographic industry during the 1950s worldwide with *Kodak* advantaged by import license restrictions in Australia, which limited the purchasing of overseas equipment. As a result *Kodak* concentrated on the production of raw materials and accessories such as, reels, cassettes, slide boxes, and cameras.

Due to demand for production the Abbotsford site was no longer adequate. This prompted the company to begin looking at building a new factory on a previously purchased site in the outer Melbourne suburb of Coburg. Design work started in 1956 for the new film finishing department, followed by the emulsion coating area, the engine room, and the amenities, with building beginning in 1957.

The powerhouse personnel were the first to move onto the Coburg site in 1959 followed by the x-ray and sheet film, and roll and movie film departments. In 1960 the emulsion and coating trace, and the paper finishing departments were completed and commissioned. By the end of that year the garage, distribution and the workshops were also completed (Beale n.d). The yet to be completed factory in Coburg was officially opened on 14th April 1961.

By 1963, through the purchasing of local shares, *Eastman Kodak* owned 99% of the Australian company (Beale n.d), which by now had new management. After thirty years of close involvement in the daily activities of the company, Edgar Rouse and Henry Foote had retired. The company was now predominately owned by *Kodak* in Rochester, and the Australian balance sheets came under close scrutiny. With greater pressure placed on the Australian company to perform financially, head office in Rochester directed the Australian plant to 'optimize performance and reduce waste'. In addition, the growth and changes to photographic products and technology reduced a product's life, from forty years to ten years (Beale n.d).

Final Days

Befitting with other changes throughout the history of photography, the evolution of technology would see another fundamental shift. In 2006, after 103 years in the photographic business, Konica announced that the company would withdraw from the camera and photographic business by 2007. Fujifilm, which is due to celebrate its 75th anniversary in 2009, has shifted its

focus to inkjet technology (dyes and inks), polarizing plate material for LCDs, and semiconductor technologies. Although Fujifilm announced it would continue to support its customers with silver-halide products, it also states that it is unknown for how long, particularly with the changing market place (International Contact 2006: p11-14).

Ilford, founded in 1879, went into receivership in August 2004 and its business no longer concentrates on silver halide photography. In 2005 Ilford Imaging Switzerland was acquired by Oji Paper, Co., one of the Japan's largest paper companies. Ilford is now the second largest manufacturer of inkjet 'photo' paper, which is considered by the company to be more 'profitable' (than the traditional photographic industry) (Ilford 2004, Ilford 2005).

After starting the Agfa trademark in 1897, Agfa Photo became insolvent in 2005. The company is now a "100% business-to-business company, fully focused on its two business groups; Graphic Systems and HealthCare". However, the brand rights, which were legally disputed, are still owned by Agfa-Gevaert AB in Belgium.

Similarly, Kodak has become an "imaging business in the digital age" (International Contact 2006: p11-14). In 2005 digital sales for the Eastman Kodak Company were 54% of the company's total revenue. This was the first time digital imaging sales was greater than that for traditional imaging products, a trend that will never be reversed.

The decision to close Kodak's Coburg plant was a business decision that was faced by many companies once based on traditional silver halide photography. These companies now either no longer exist or have shifted towards 'imaging' or 'digital photography' (technology). This change within the industry, which has resulted in the reduced demand for traditional photographic film and papers, has seen the rapid decline and discontinuation of a large numbers of silver-halide products.

These changes and the role of photography or 'imaging' as it's now known continue to influence us. And is perhaps best summed up by Henry Foote's welcoming speech in 1961, at the opening of the Coburg plant, which is just as relevant today.

"We have lived through all of those episodes that represent human progress; depressions, periods of prosperity, periods of great happiness, periods of great sadness. In our 75 year history there have been many such intervals that we are exceedingly proud of – we are proud to have grown with the Australian people to have been part of the development of this country.

It became evident to all of us that we could not permanently face up to the future, the industrial progress, the growth that is taking place in this nation today in our old factory, and a new site in Coburg was selected. Today we officially close the history of Abbotsford and 75 years of photographic manufacture there. It is with some regret and some sorrow, but we are proud to present her at Coburg, a new factory, that we know is going to plan an even greater part in the future that this nation has in front of it."

However the ‘future’ in Australia’s photographic history no longer exists with the closure of the Coburg factory, albeit only after 43 years.

“If we go back to Abbotsford, our old site, there is still a well preserved building with the date 1886 on it. That date represents the beginning of photographic manufacture in Australia. We, as an industry are proud to be associated with that small band of secondary industries tracing its history into the past century. Our history is the history of Australian people.”

The acquisition by Museum Victoria of Kodak’s history highlights the end of traditional photographic production, not only in Australia but elsewhere. It is timely that this collection has been acquired whilst there are still people alive who once worked in this industry to tell the story about manufacturing and production of silver halide based ‘analogue technologies’.

This acquisition by a public institution will ensure that photography’s historic evolution, social history, technological changes (particularly from 1886 to 2004), chemical history, and Australia’s role in this history is maintained. It will enable curators and conservators to learn about the manufacturing techniques used to produce the most prevalent 20th century processes, and will assist conservators in answering questions regarding these techniques and flaws.

Approximately 400 employees remain today at the new headquarters of Kodak Australia in Collingwood, which is not far from where the company started. However, the manufacturing of photographic materials is now part of Australia’s history and not its future. This “is the natural evolutionary progress of photography” (Romer 2005) and what has occurred is “the closing of another chapter in the history of photography” although “perhaps the last chapter” (Romer 2005).

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