



Fundraising in the bag

A sell-out success every year following its launch at the Sydney Royal Easter Show in 2014, the Ag Bag is the bag that gives back. Every cent raised by the sale of the Ag Bag goes directly to the RAS Foundation Community Futures Grant program. Celebrating Australian produce, the Ag Bag is jam-packed with product donations from generous supporters including SunRice, Carman's Kitchen, Saxby's and Kurrajong Kitchen. With more than 64,000 items packed into 3,600 Ag Bags onsite at Sydney Showground by volunteers and RAS staff, the bag serves as a brilliant reminder of what we can achieve when we come together for a great cause.

Donating organisations see it as a terrific way to celebrate Australian agriculture and farming whilst helping generate funds for rural community projects. Participants appreciate the exposure of their brand and product and the opportunity to support a grass-roots initiative.

The RAS Foundation Community Futures Grant program encourages and champions rural leadership by providing each successful grant applicant up to \$25,000 to fund a community project that addresses a need or issue in their local community. Each project results in enhanced social and economic outcomes for the wider community and have included new fencing for Kyogle Showground, a mobile outreach service

for the Port Macquarie region, rejuvenation of Trundle main street, a farmbot for Dungog High School and a community garden in Uralla.

The continued support for the Ag Bag allows the RAS Foundation to assist with funding for these community projects and encourages collaboration and community-thinking amongst residents of rural NSW.

The Ag Bag stand at the 2019 Sydney Royal Easter Show is in the Home & Lifestyle Pavilion, opposite the CWA Tea Room. The Ag Bags are available for \$20 each until sold out. ■



Cool ideas

The Heritage Pavilion at this year's Show will focus on the 1870s – that enterprising decade when agriculture embraced science to give us... the first frozen dinner.

Roast mutton, anyone? Tongue in aspic? Wonga pigeon baked in a pie? Perhaps something sweet: blancmange or ice pudding?

It was a menu fit to feed Sydney's finest, and although a picnic at an abattoir might not be everyone's idea of a good day out, the novelty of the event, and the economic potential it represented, was too much to resist. At the invitation of Thomas Mort – who was the start-up king of his day – three hundred of the colony's most influential citizens attended, and lived to tell the tale. Their survival was by no means assured given that everything they ate – including lobster – had been frozen and

thawed. Some meats had been killed the year before; preserved after a good deal of handling and travel. And the date of this daring repast? September 2, 1875.

The host was a man made for his changing times. As a 27 year old Thomas Mort had set up as an auctioneer and was the first to specialise in wool sales, forming the company that morphed to become the Elders we know today. With his quick intelligence Mort saw new opportunities everywhere and soon branched out into sugar growing, gold and copper mining, newspapers, railways and heavy engineering. By the time of the picnic, the admired entrepreneur and philanthropist was also a vice president and a past president

of the Agricultural Society of New South Wales. In fact he had been one of the key players in the Society's revitalisation.

Putting itself on a new footing in 1868, the Society declared it would foster improvements to agriculture and livestock by 'the enlightened combination of Practice with Science', a motto which soon appeared on their medals. To be near transport hubs and the greater populace, the annual exhibition was relocated from Parramatta to Prince Alfred Park in the city. Offices were opened in George Street where meetings and lectures were held to disseminate the latest information. To the same end a journal was published and widely distributed. In



Thomas Sutcliffe Mort was an entrepreneur, philanthropist, the driving force behind the invention of refrigerated transport, and President of the Agricultural Society of NSW 1863-1864

its pages the results of experiments were reported (some run by the Society itself), and experts wrote on a wide range of associated topics including insects, geology, soils and weather. Scientists were recruited on to Council and through them the Society offered members a chemical analysis service, whereby samples of just about anything could be tested for a small fee.

Science seemed to be opening up all sorts of possibilities, and one of the biggest ideas around, with wide-ranging consequences for agriculture, was refrigeration.

Ice was first made commercially in Australia by a Geelong man, James Harrison, in 1857. Before then it was little more than a novelty. Imported in blocks cut from frozen American lakes and shipped across the seas, what didn't melt was mostly shaved into the drinks

and desserts of the wealthy. Harrison's patented system was capable of making 3,000 kilograms of ice a day. It was a world first and a game changer with global implications.

Harrison expanded on his Victorian operation to set up an ice works in Sydney which was quickly bought out by a group which included the French-born engineer, Eugène Nicolle. When Nicolle improved on the technology, Thomas Mort became interested, stepping in to finance further experimentation. Together, Nicolle and Mort pushed on with the more ambitious aim of inventing refrigerated transport, and producing large-scale machinery which would freeze and chill food products in bulk.

Mort's ultimate goal was to ship frozen meat to England where meat was expensive and people starved for want of it. A huge market waited, and as Mort



pointed out, Australia could certainly spare the carcasses. With only 1.7 million people to eat them, the country supported 47 million sheep and 4 million cattle, with numbers constantly rising. A frozen meat trade, lucrative in its own right, would also act as a hedge to shore up Australia's wool business which was vulnerable to fluctuating prices. There were domestic advantages to the technology too. Mort had gone into dairying in a big way, establishing a model estate at Bodalla on the south coast. If he could keep dairy products refrigerated, he could reach the growing city market.

With chilled and frozen products the food supply could be properly regulated for perhaps the first time in human history. Times of plenty and scarcity could be ironed out, and food could be taken, as Mort was so fond of saying, 'to where it was not.'

Mort scaled up, taking over the Sydney ice works. He relocated the business from Darlinghurst to large premises in Dixon Street at Darling Harbour, designed by Nicolle. The new operation was state-of-the-art. A railway siding ran right to the door. In chilled rail cars, meat slaughtered at Mort's Lithgow Valley abattoir could be sent directly to town. Once there, carcasses progressed through the plant on a system of hoists and travellers to reduce manhandling. A cool room and a freezing room, both 80 x 70 feet in size, were each capable of holding two to three tons of meat.

With this part of the business set up, Mort felt ready to tackle the export stage, but refrigeration during shipping presented unique problems. Ships' captains and their insurers worried that modifications made to accommodate machinery would weaken the integrity of hulls; and the safety of the ammonia



MESSRS. MORT AND CO.'S MEAT PRESERVING WORKS, DARLING HARBOR, SYDNEY. 1.—THE ICE MAKING ROOM. 2.—THE COOL OR FREEZING ROOM. 3.—MILK PRESERVING ROOM.

refrigerant was another concern.

To solve the remaining difficulties, extra investment was required. But investors had reason to be cautious. A primitive attempt by Harrison failed with stinking consequences, while an earlier funding push by Mort (which was heavily supported by members of the Agricultural Society) had been premature. Indeed, for most people, the very thought of frozen food was still strange: was it really possible to eat 'old' produce that had been through such radically altered states?

Hence the picnic. As a publicity stunt it was genius.

To begin with, guests assembled at the Dixon Street premises for a tour. Then at 10 am they boarded a steam train waiting outside for the five hour trip to Lithgow to view the modern abattoir and chilling works at the other end of Mort's concern.

In the grounds, a magnificent luncheon was laid on with the three hundred visitors treated to a choice of more than thirty dishes. When the guests learned that all the ingredients had once been frozen they were astonished, such was the quality, taste and freshness of all they consumed.

Mort and Nicolle carefully explained the science and the benefits to their captive audience, and in following days the whole event was reported in detail in

Perfecting the freezing process was an international race, but Australia was well placed, thanks to the pioneering efforts of Harrison and the vast sums Mort was willing to invest

newspapers across the country.

The publicity blitz was a resounding success; and businessmen and squatters generously promised subscriptions to further the export project.

It took two years but finally, in 1877, a ship was found and specially fitted out – the Northam. A cargo of frozen meat was loaded into the hold, but at the very last minute the equipment to keep it cold broke down. The captain would not wait for repairs and the meat was removed before sailing. A technician remained onboard, however, and after the initial problem was quickly fixed, the machinery ran perfectly for the duration of the voyage. For want of a day's delay in departure the venture would have been a triumph.

The South Americans were first after all, making a long distance crossing with a small cargo to France not long after the Northam docked in the UK. On its return voyage the Northam caught fire and went down, taking the precious refrigeration equipment with it. Mort was never to hear of that loss. He died

from pleurisy in May 1878, his big dream unrealised. Dispirited and in ill health himself, Eugène Nicolle retired to the NSW south coast. But Australia's first success wasn't long coming. In December 1879 investors from Queensland waved off the SS Strathleven on its journey from Melbourne to London. The 40 tons of meat it carried arrived unspoiled.

For Thomas Mort, the frozen trade was always about more than business. He knew poor health might rob him of line honours, and he told the Agricultural Society as much at a meeting in their rooms. But he believed all the costs and troubles of the project were worth it. 'From the commencement of our undertaking to the present hour,' he said, 'we have been thoroughly imbued with the consciousness that there was no work in the world more big with importance to the social interests of mankind than this in which we have been engaged.'

The Society to which he entrusted his vision agreed. ■