

Bundaberg Foundry

The Bundaberg Foundry has been a Bundaberg institution on the north side of the river for over 100 years. But it actually had its genesis in Targo Street, about where the Imperial Hotel stood (now the Central Hotel).

A Mr Thomas Child (Snr) was employed in, or began, Bundaberg's first iron foundry either on the site of the Imperial Hotel, or on land in front of the Imperial Hotel, depending on the source.^{1,2} Other sources credit Thomas's son Thomas Obadiah Child with adding the foundry arm to the business in 1885.^{3,4}

Adding the Foundry

Thomas (Snr) developed a prosperous and well-regarded business, and once he handed over the reigns to his son Thomas Obadiah the business continued to grow and develop. In 1884 it was noted that Thomas Obadiah opened a branch of his business at East Bundaberg and that he would shortly add a foundry.⁵ The business was earning a good reputation and was *"...becoming locally notorious for its usefulness [sic] and excellence of the work turned out there"*.⁶ In March 1885 the newspaper reported that the expected foundry had been added in order to expand the business and meet demand.⁷

While no explanation could be found in the newspapers of the time, Thomas O. Child took on a partner in Evan Roberts in late 1885. Thomas O. Child was advertising the business under his own name until 6 October. Then, in the next issue of the paper on 9 October, the advertisement changed to "Child, Roberts & Co."^{8,9}

This partnership must still not have been sufficient for the survival of the business as less than a year later the newspaper announced that shares were being offered in the foundry and carriage works of Messrs Child, Roberts and Co. They required £10,000 capital in order to extend the business. The article mentions that as of this announcement more than half of the £1 shares had already been applied for.¹⁰ It is believed this call for investors did not ultimately succeed as one source claims that a first attempt at forming a local company to take over the works failed in 1886 but a second attempt in 1888 was successful.¹¹

Unfortunately, by early-mid 1886 the foundry hit hard times, or *"evil times"* as one paper put it, and Thomas O. Child had to sell his share of the business.^{1,2} The partnership



bun01735: Bundaberg Foundry, North Bundaberg [undated]

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between Thomas O. Child and Evan Roberts was officially dissolved on 31 July 1886. Roberts purchased Child's shares and continued on with the foundry.¹²

From mid 1887 the foundry is referred to as Messrs. Roberts, Coombe, and Co. Bundaberg Foundry. Again, the newspapers don't reveal the exact timing of, and reasons behind, the new make up of the company. They were still successful, however, and they had won the job, despite competition from firms in Brisbane and Maryborough, of casting five beams for the Roman Catholic Church. The article also notes that the firm was in its 'infancy' and that they had won contracts for the railways, a new wharf, and the railings of the new Queensland National Bank.¹³

Move to North Bundaberg

In 1888 the company was set to change again, with the advertisement of the "Prospectus of the Bundaberg Foundry Company, Limited, Bundaberg" in the newspaper on 2 July.¹⁴ They were offering 5000 shares at £5 each (to raise £25,000) with the object to "...purchase and extend the business...". The prospectus also offered the opportunity to move to the other side of

the river where more room and better facilities could be utilised:

*The promoters have secured the right of purchase of about five acres of land in North Bundaberg with a frontage of about six (6) chains to the Burnett River, having the Mount Perry Railway running through the land. The Company will thus be able to erect the Foundry and Fitting Shops in such a position on each side of the line as will enable them by means of over-head cranes to entrain the heaviest machinery, &c., with the least possible labor and risk. The river frontage facilitates the erection of slips for building and repairing vessels, and for the erection of wharfs for the transshipment of goods, &c.*¹⁴

On 28 November 1888 the new Bundaberg Foundry Co., Ltd advertised their intentions to move their business to North Bundaberg.¹⁵

Flood of 1890

The Foundry unfortunately suffered some losses in the flooding Bundaberg experienced in early 1890. Approximately 3 feet (1 metre) of water went through the building and a significant amount of soil washed away. This resulted in the subsidence of some machinery but luckily there was no machinery lost. Fifty to sixty employees were affected and the damage bill was in the region of £500 plus lost time and revenue.¹⁶



bun01601: Interior of Bundaberg Foundry, 1933.



bun00223: Drafting office at the Bundaberg Foundry, 1926

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Bought by Woolley, Bergin & Co.

In July 1891 the Foundry was again offered for sale. Tenders were called for the purchase of the whole of the company as a going concern.¹⁷ Due to insufficient capital to carry on business, the old management was forced to sell.¹⁸

Another Bundaberg ironmonger (and furnishings) firm, Woolley, Bergin & Co., were the highest bidders with their offer of £8500 - incidentally the value of the machinery alone was more than that paid by the new owners.¹⁸ Apparently realising the importance of the Foundry to Bundaberg, many of the subscribers to the old company joined with Woolley, Bergin & Co., in order to help keep the business afloat. At this point in time not a great deal of work was being carried out by the Foundry, but it was still able to employ a reasonable number of men. A Mr Fiddes, well known through his work with the Millaquin Refinery, was appointed Manager.¹⁸

Sold by Woolley, Bergin & Co.

By March 1898 Woolley, Bergin & Co. had sold their stake in the business to a local company - "...men of consequence, experience, ability, and influence...".¹⁹ The new registered shareholders were J.B. Atkinson of Gympie, and Angus Gibson, George J. Young, John White, J.E. Turner, George Buss, and P. Ridley of Bundaberg.²⁰ The capital (£12,000) was raised in a few hours and the new shareholders intended to keep the firm operational, but to modernise it to compete with other foundries around the colony.^{19,20} The company was registered in Brisbane on 28 March 1898.²¹

Tours for the newspaper

A reporter from the *Bundaberg Mail & Burnett Advertiser* was lucky enough to receive a tour of the facility with the manager Mr J Fiddes in March 1894. The article details extensively the works being carried out by the Foundry including iron and brass castings, boilers, shafts, rollers, a travelling crane, and many more items for numerous mills and businesses in the Bundaberg and Isis districts.²²

In August 1902 (*see reference note*) the press was again invited to view the progress of the foundry over the preceding few years. As they noted, "*It is a matter of common knowledge that the path to the establishment of this fine enterprise has not been strewn with roses...*". Despite being "*cursed by being too small*" the Foundry had turned itself around with new management and funding and "*...the stoutest of hearts [which] quailed*



bun00224: Bundaberg Foundry Managers, 1920



bun01594: Staff at the Bundaberg Foundry, no date.

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somewhat in looking out upon the future” could be heartened by the new direction of the Foundry.²³

"Fire fiend at work"

On the evening of 18 December 1920 a fire at the Bundaberg Foundry lit up the night sky. It was already well alight when the fire bells pealed at 10.30pm. By the time the fire brigade arrived the northern part of the building was well involved and lack of water and low water pressure hampered efforts to extinguish the blaze. 3000 locals had gathered outside the foundry by 11.00pm to witness the *"...greenish-hued flames [which] appeared, crawling and creeping about like so many demons."*^{24,25}

Within six hours the moulding and pattern-making shops and the store room had succumbed and hundreds of pounds worth of workers' tools had been lost. In trying to save some of these tools Mr Christy Johnson's hands were burnt. The northern end of the building, which had been involved from the beginning, finally collapsed about 12.30am, and the fire was brought under control about 5.00am. More than 100 jobs and new orders in the vicinity of £50,000 were affected while the rebuilding was done.^{24,25,26}

Modern History

1926

120 hands were employed by the Foundry which was regarded as the headquarters for the manufacture of machinery for the Australian sugar and mining industries.²⁷

1949

In order to raise more capital to continue and develop their business the Bundaberg Foundry Co. Ltd. offered their existing shareholders 6000 shares at £1 each.²⁸

1952

Bundaberg Foundry delivers to Mossman Mill in North Queensland two steam coal-fired locomotives, 'Bundy' (named after the Foundry) and 'Speedy'. These two locos now perform tourist service at the historic Bally Hooley Steam Railway at Port Douglas.²⁹

1982

Staff at all levels faced job losses when the sugar industry bubble burst. This downturn not only affected the Foundry, but also other sugar industry-reliant businesses in the area.³⁰



bun01583: Locomotive made at Bundaberg Foundry as it is delivered to Bingera Mill, no date



bun01114: Barge constructed at Bundaberg Foundry ready for launch, no date.

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1989

Bundaberg Foundry was purchased by Bundaberg Sugar. Bundaberg Foundry becomes a member of the Bundaberg Sugar group.³¹

2000

Bundaberg Sugar, including Bundaberg Foundry, is acquired by Finasucre, a Belgian manufacturer of cane and beet sugar.^{31,32}

2001

On a June morning an explosion at the Foundry shook homes and businesses in North Bundaberg and resulted in molten metal landing in surrounding streets. A Foundry worker managed to run from the scene just before the explosion, which was the result of contact between water and molten metal. The explosion set fire to the roof and caused \$50,000 damage.³³

2003

Bundaberg Foundry acquires Maryborough company Walkers Sugar Business.^{31,32}

2008

In January Bundaberg Foundry changes its name to Bundaberg Walkers Engineering Limited.^{31,32}

The Foundry today

Bundaberg Walkers Engineering Limited still remains part of the Bundaberg Sugar group which is owned by Finasucre. They provide a diversified range of products and services for the sugar industry, as well as general engineering products and services. Their work serves domestic and international clients.³²

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Bundaberg Regional Libraries



Bundaberg Walkers Engineering Ltd (Foundry), looking across the Burnett River from the south, 3 March 2012. Photo: Kym Browne

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- ¹² *Bundaberg & Mt Perry Mail*, 6 Aug 1886, p5.
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- ²⁶ *Bundaberg Daily News & Mail*, 20 Dec 1920, p4.
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