



RYMI L L

COONAWARRA

HISTORY OF COONAWARRA

Although John Riddoch recognised the potential of the terra rossa soil on his pastoral run soon after he arrived in 1861, a wine industry only became feasible once the tyranny of distance imposed by bullock transport had been conquered, with the advent of a railway being built through the district in 1887, due largely to his efforts whilst the local member of the South Australian parliament.

Careful planning and comprehensive feasibility studies were undertaken by Riddoch during 1888 and 1889, and on 14 April 1890 he announced his proposal to establish a fruit-growing colony in a speech which began with the bold declaration: 'Ever since I have been interested in this neighbourhood, which is now 29 years, I have been a firm believer that a great deal of the country was well suited for vineyards and fruit growing, and that in time it would come to be used for that purpose.' Observing that 'many hundreds of thousands of acres of the vineyards in France have been ruined by the phylloxera' and consequently 'there is an almost unlimited market for these products, at good prices', he predicted that such an enterprise 'if taken advantage of now, would have the effect of raising South Australia to be not only one of the most wealth producing, but at the same time most attractive countries in Her Majesty's Dominions'. He intended to boost employment locally, and to attract skilled migrants from Great Britain, Germany and France who would 'come and settle amongst us, and from whom we would learn much'. The 62 year-old Riddoch also advocated that sub-dividing 'the large estates', like his own, would 'give a fresh impulse to the prosperity of the colony... Young men would be able to get suitable blocks of land for [vine and fruit growing], and in a few years' time make comfortable and happy homes for themselves'.

In his typically pragmatic manner Riddoch did not waste any time implementing this vision. Three months later, on the morning of 31 July 1890, the plan of the 1,000 acre Penola Fruit Colony, as it was initially known, was displayed in the Royal Oak Hotel and a ballot was conducted to determine the choice of ten-acre blocks amongst 15 anxious aspirants, with the first selection going to the local manager of the National Bank who, no doubt, kept an astute eye on subsequent proceedings.

Although the successful balloters did not commence large-scale development until the next winter, Riddoch planted his first two acres of vines in 1890, and also established an 80 acre nursery on the main road, under the management of William Lumsden, from Ballarat, to provide both the rootlings for the colony, and advice and contracting services to the colonists. Lumsden was succeeded by Lewis Sinclair, who in turn was followed by the extremely capable 22 year-old Yorkshire horticulturist, Frederick Wood. Arriving early in 1894 with his young bride, the dedicated and meticulous Wood, with his handsome waxed moustache, is now also acclaimed as being the district's first winemaker, because it became his responsibility to undertake the pioneering 1895 vintage in his Nursery shed. Although it comprised only 1,500 gallons, by 1896 the vintage had increased to 6,000 gallons, and necessitated evicting the sheep from Riddoch's Katnook woolshed to make room for expanded operations which were ably conducted by the 27 year-old specialist winemaker, William Salter, who had just been head-hunted from Great Western in Victoria. Remembered as 'a charming man, thorough, skilful in the winemaking business and possessed of an engaging dry wit', he was also busy during that year supervising the construction of Riddoch's new cellars. This elegant sandstone building, with its now-famous three gables of similar design to

the Salter family's own Saltram winery in the Barossa Valley, was ready by March 1897 to receive 32 tons of Cabernet Sauvignon and 69 tons of Shiraz which were vinified into 16,000 gallons, or the equivalent of about 8,000 cases of wine.

By 1897, at the conclusion of its pioneering decade which included the bank crash of 1893, Riddoch had nurtured his visionary enterprise to fruition with the inauguration of the new cellars and, on the 815 acres they had taken up, 27 self-reliant colonists had planted 350 acres of vineyards and 300 acres of orchards. Their community had grown to the stage where its 34 children required a school, which was opened in July, and today serves as a restaurant. Furthermore, the colonists decided that the district should merit its own distinctive appellation and, in August of 1897, the Penola Fruit Colony formally became Coonawarra. This was the name that Riddoch had chosen for the label of his newly-bottled first vintage of Shiraz which was ready to market. It had just been released and publicly acclaimed as 'very palatable, with a fragrant bouquet; an excellent wine', and was declared by Professor Perkins of Roseworthy College to be of 'excellent quality, as fine as he had tasted in the Colony, and just the kind that would find a market in London among the higher classes'.