

Orcharding in Bridgetown

2 September 2023

by Peter Hall



Frank Hurley, National Library of Australia, PIC FH/8219.8220

An AI colourised composite of two prints taken by James Francis “Frank” Hurley of Mawson and Antarctica fame.

Acknowledgement of country

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Pibulmun/Wadandi people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, and to pay my respects to the elders who are here today and those that have gone before.



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For my presentation I would like to share my family's stories and experiences of living and working on an orchard in Bridgetown.

I have used a variety of references, and unless stated, the material has come from my own family records and those of the Bridgetown Historical Society.

Agenda

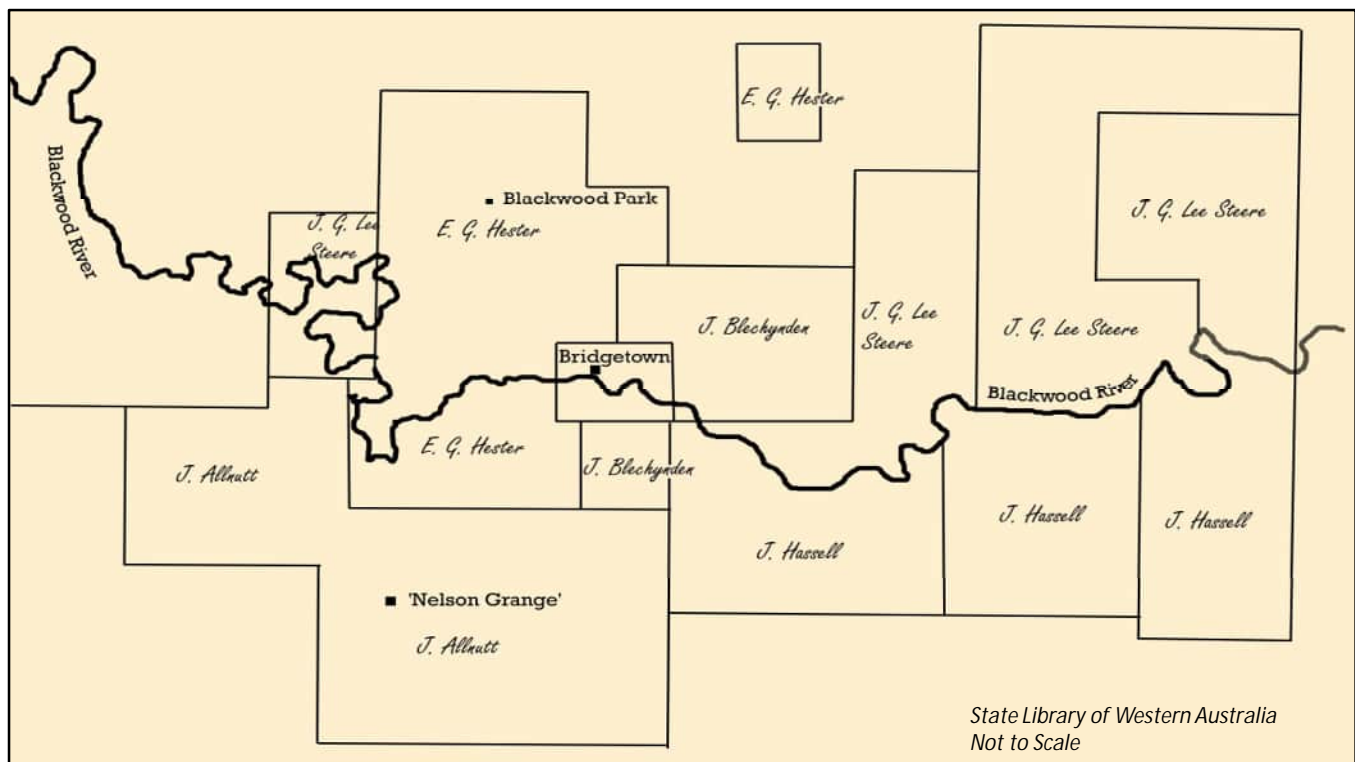


- Early settlers and orchards
- Fruit industry development
- EG Hall & orcharding
- Annual cycle of activities
- Italian PoWs
- What happened to the orchards?

My presentation will cover a variety of topics, listed here.

Early settlers



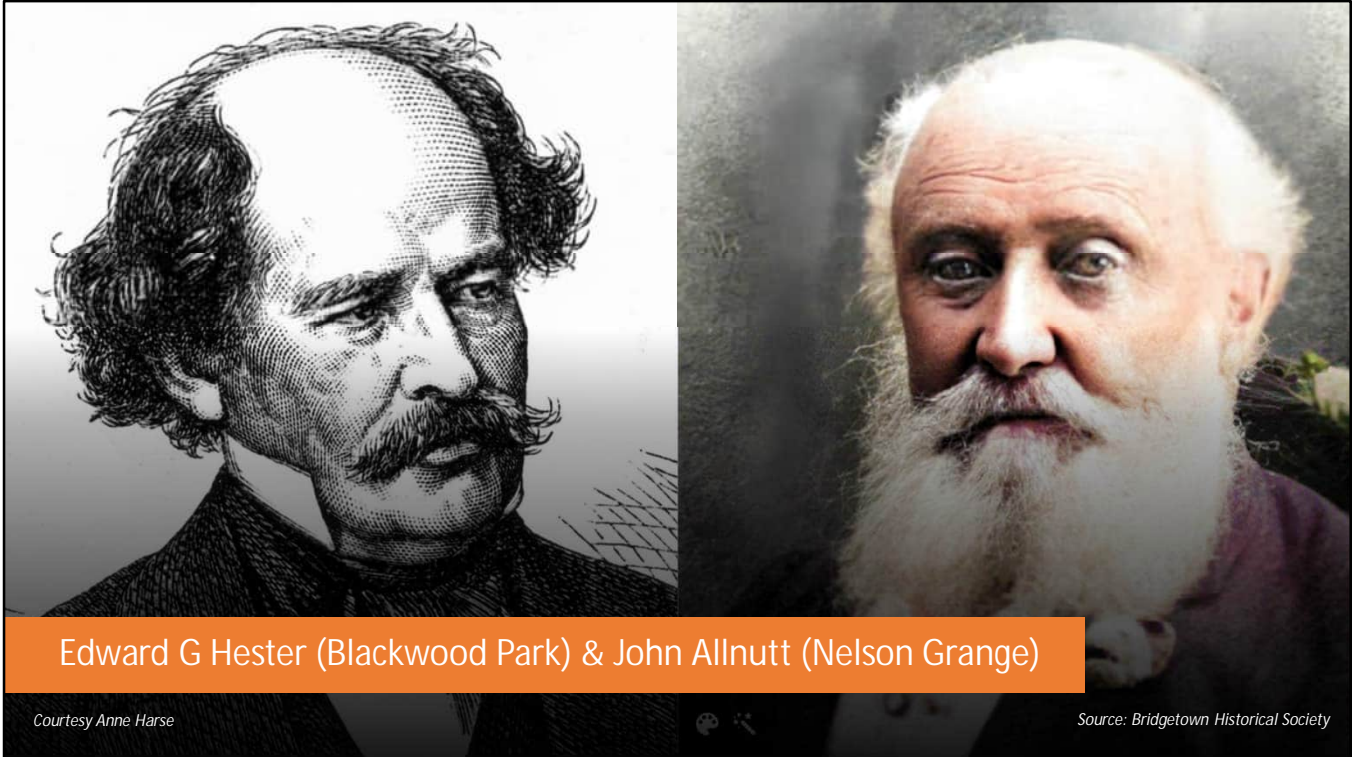


The first pastoral leases in the Nelson district were granted in 1853. Pastoral leases around Bridgetown were then granted on a regular basis over the coming years.



Leases were between 5,000 and 20,000 acres.

The early settlers would also purchase small lots to build their homes and grow vegetables, fruit and grain. Sheep and cattle were free to roam in the bush.



Edward Godfrey Hester and John Allnutt are generally accepted as being the first settlers to establish successful orchards beginning in late 1850's early 1860's.

Edward Hester had his orchard at his 'Blackwood Park' homestead, between Bridgetown and Greenbushes, while John Allnutt developed his orchard at Wilgarup on the south side of the Blackwood River at a farm he called 'Nelson Grange'.

Early orchard apple varieties

Source: National Fruit Collection (<https://www.nationalfruitcollection.org.uk/disclaimer.php>)



Dunns Seedlings



Yates



Stone Pippins



Jonathan



Rome Beauty



Irish Peach



Doughertys



Blenheims



Sturmer



Cleopatra



Five Crowns



Democrat

Those early orchards contained a great range of fruits including apples, pears, oranges, peaches, plums and other fruits including figs, quinces, lemons, apricots, cherries, almonds and walnuts.

Presumably the great variety of apples provided a long season, from early to late ripening, to satisfy the local and export markets.

Industry development

2



The fruit industry had progressed quietly and steadily throughout the late 19th century, but then the Western Australian economy took a giant leap forward with the discovery of gold at Kalgoorlie in the late 1890s.

A number of other factors also contributed to the growth of the industry.

1. Transport:

The lack of efficient transport was a serious thorn in the sides of our early settlers. They needed to get their fruit to market quickly without great cost.

In 1862 the Government began developing the Blackwood River Valley by calling tenders for the construction of a bridge over the Blackwood River.

On 4 June 1868 Bridgetown was formally gazette as a town.

Then, in November 1898 the railway reached Bridgetown and this event seems to have been the turning point for the district and the industry.



While the railway had come to Bridgetown, growers still had the arduous task to get their fruit from their orchards to the train.



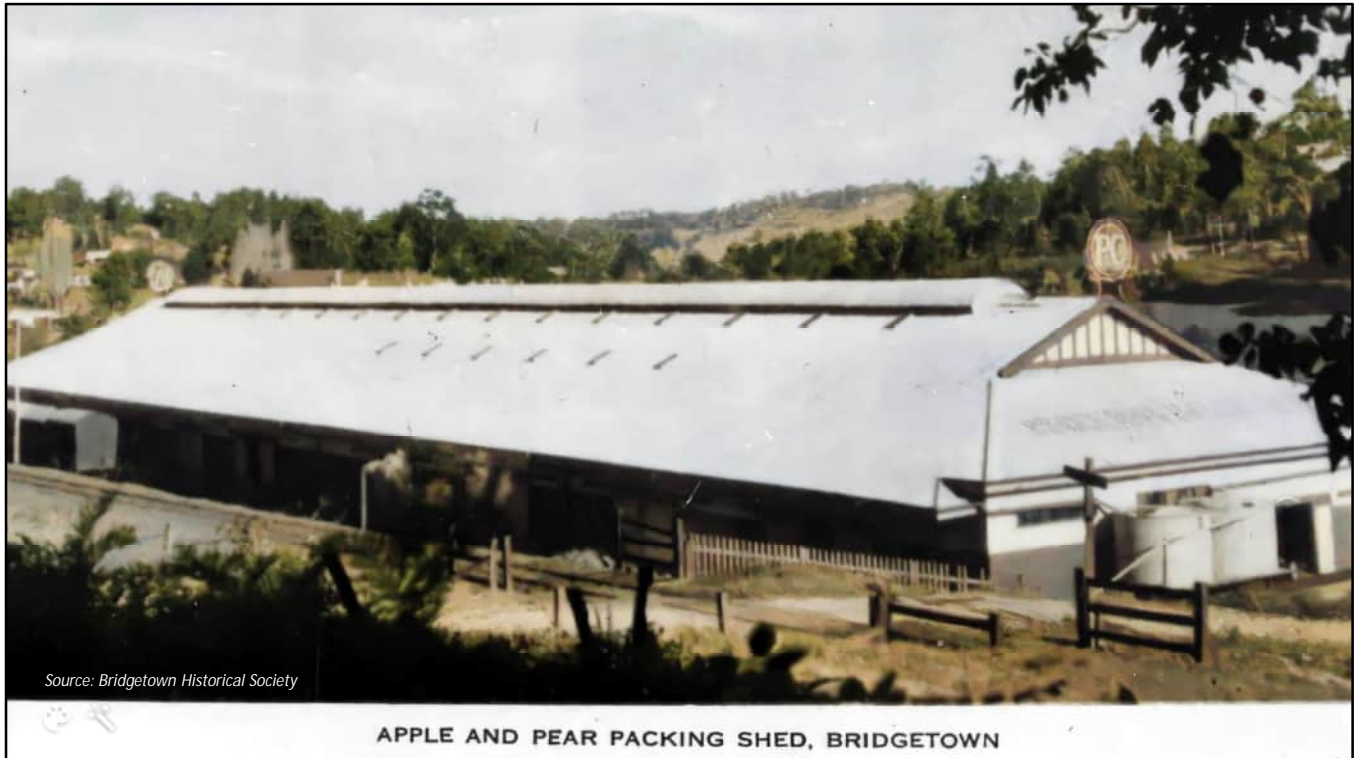
As the transport systems improved, orchardists could then export their fruit. This image shows one of the first loads of export apples going to London from Bridgetown.

It was taken c. 1911 and pictured L-R are:

Monty Sells, Bob Wheatley, D Sharp, Alfred Cullen, Ben Blechynden (owner of the bullock wagon), Owen Sparks (my great grandfather), John Walter and E Armstrong



Then as the motor vehicle replaced the bullock wagons local entrepreneurs established transport businesses. These included Henry Klopper amongst others.



2. Cool storage:

The development of improved methods of cool storage is probably the biggest single factor that supported the improvement and growth of the fruit industry in Australia.

Due to WA's large distance from world markets our pioneers could not see how the perishable markets could prosper, but cool storage changed the outlook to one of optimism because they could then compete with other countries who were closer to WA's markets.

Further, fruit kept in cool stores could then be released to the market when prices were most favourable for the seller.

Bridgetown had two cold stores: the Paterson & Co. store pictured here, and



...and the Wesfarmers store, seen here as it was in 1935.



3. Bridgetown Agricultural Society

The next significant development was the establishment of the Bridgetown Agricultural Society.

In January 1885 a meeting of settlers of the Blackwood District unanimously agreed to establish an Agricultural Society. Bridgetown was the chosen site because of its central location, large areas of pastoral country and the finest tracts of agricultural and horticultural land in the colony – no less.

The object of the society would be: "the promotion of practical and scientific, pastoral, agricultural and horticultural pursuits among its members and their families."

Seen here are the Allnutt brothers George and Frank with their 'Best Collection of Produce', c. 1886



Agricultural Shows would then be held annually in November, with an additional show in March for the apple season.

Fruit was always an important display.



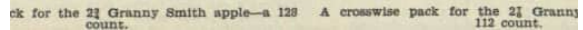
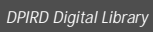
4. Bridgetown Fruit Growers Association:

The fourth development was with the establishment of the Bridgetown Fruit Growers Assoc.

In 1907 the Bridgetown growers met and formed themselves into an Association.

This image shows participants at a meeting held at the Mechanic's Institute Hall, c. 1916.

The association's constitution was developed to provide practical ways whereby the Association would help the industry.



EG Hall & orcharding

3



Here is my grandfather, Ernest George Hall or 'EG' as he was known to family and friends, in 1953 at the age of 67 doing one of his favourite jobs - 'NOT' - setting rabbit traps.

EG was born in Herefordshire, UK to a long line of tenant farmers who were heavily involved in the development of the Hereford breed of cattle.

After a good education, he followed his older brother into the Lloyds Bank in Worcester, but it wasn't to his liking. A letter in 1911 from an old high school chum who was living in Bridgetown, convinced him to try Western Australia. EG agreed and arrived in the district later that year.



In April that year EG purchased the 360 acre western portion of the estate on which Edward Hester had planted about 30 acres of orchard.

This image was taken c. 1920 and shows the old barn, and to the very left you can see a part of Edward Hester's original orchard.



EG likely purchased the western portion because it had an orchard and was a 'going concern' that could give immediate cash flow. This event kick started EG's involvement in the fruit industry for the next 45 year.

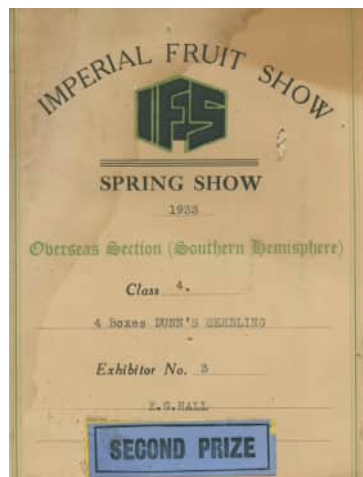
He is likely to have named his farm 'Blackwood Park' primarily because of the old mill, sheds and the orchard.



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EG was active member of the local farming scene and regularly submitted produce to the local agricultural shows that won a number of prizes.

However, his goal was to win prizes at the UK export exhibitions, and to this end he was successful on 3 occasions.



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He first won a bronze medal for fruit at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924, and two Seconds at the 1933 Imperial Fruit Show.



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His prized win was a gold medal for Dunn's Seedling apples sent to the Spring Imperial Fruit Show in London in 1931.

The medal pictured here was presented to him at the 1931 Perth Royal Show, by the Governor General Sir Isaac Isaacs for which EG received local prize of £2.19.11d.



In 1928 EG arranged with local printing firm Sands & McDougall's, to produce a fruit case label for the apples leaving Blackwood Park for Europe, and specifically London. The market, always competitive, was demanding quality brands to indicate quality products.

EG had been producing quality fruit for export – hence the Bronze Medal – and wished his mark – the 'White Roo' brand – to reflect that quality.

Annual cycle of activities

4



There was little respite from the orchard after the last of the fruit has been picked, generally around mid June, because then the pruning started - a long, arduous job that required one thinking of each tree and how it should look in spring when the leaves started to shoot and the fruit started to develop.



Once the pruning had finished, and the trees had sprouted leaves and flowers, it was time to encourage the pollonisation of the flowers.

Bee swarms were captured and the newly colonised hives were brought near to and in the orchards.



Then as the fruit had started to form, it was time to spray against Curculio beetle and scale.



Seen here from R-L are EG and brother-in-law-to-be, John Potts Henderson, who had bought a spraying machine in 1915 and had done contract spraying in the district.



After the spraying came the ploughing, turning over the green grass and cape-weed into the deep brown soil.

In the early days Clydesdale horses would pull the single-disc. In the late 1920's and early 1930's, Sykes Willmott was in demand to disc the orchards with his small (but then modern) Caterpillar tractor.



Preparation of the trees and the ground completed, one waited for the fruit to grow, then it was time to harvest.



This image shows the optimal set up for either a family run or large corporate packing shed.

Trolleys to carry the one-bushel packing cases moved over rails alongside the benches loaded with apples.

The wrapping paper was on a small tray on the left side of the trolley, and a case for reject fruit was located at the front of the trolley.

Packing became a monotonous routine, but one constantly had to keep awake! Cases of fruit had to be packed in particular size ranges, in 1/4-inch increments. The eye became conditioned to sizing the apples.

Co-ordination was another vital characteristic - one had to pick up the appropriate apple with one hand while the other hand picked up the wrapping paper; the two hands were brought together and with a twist of the wrists the paper was wrapped around the apple. The apple was then placed with one hand in rows in the case while the other hand went out for the next apple. This was then repeated about 100 to 120 times per case, for about 100 cases a day!

Once the case was full, then the nailing up could start, and then stencilling or labelling of

one end with the growers name and the apple brand and size.

Stencils were only used for local markets; for export from the 1930's onwards, export labels would be used, and for our apples we used "White Roo Brand" paper labels.

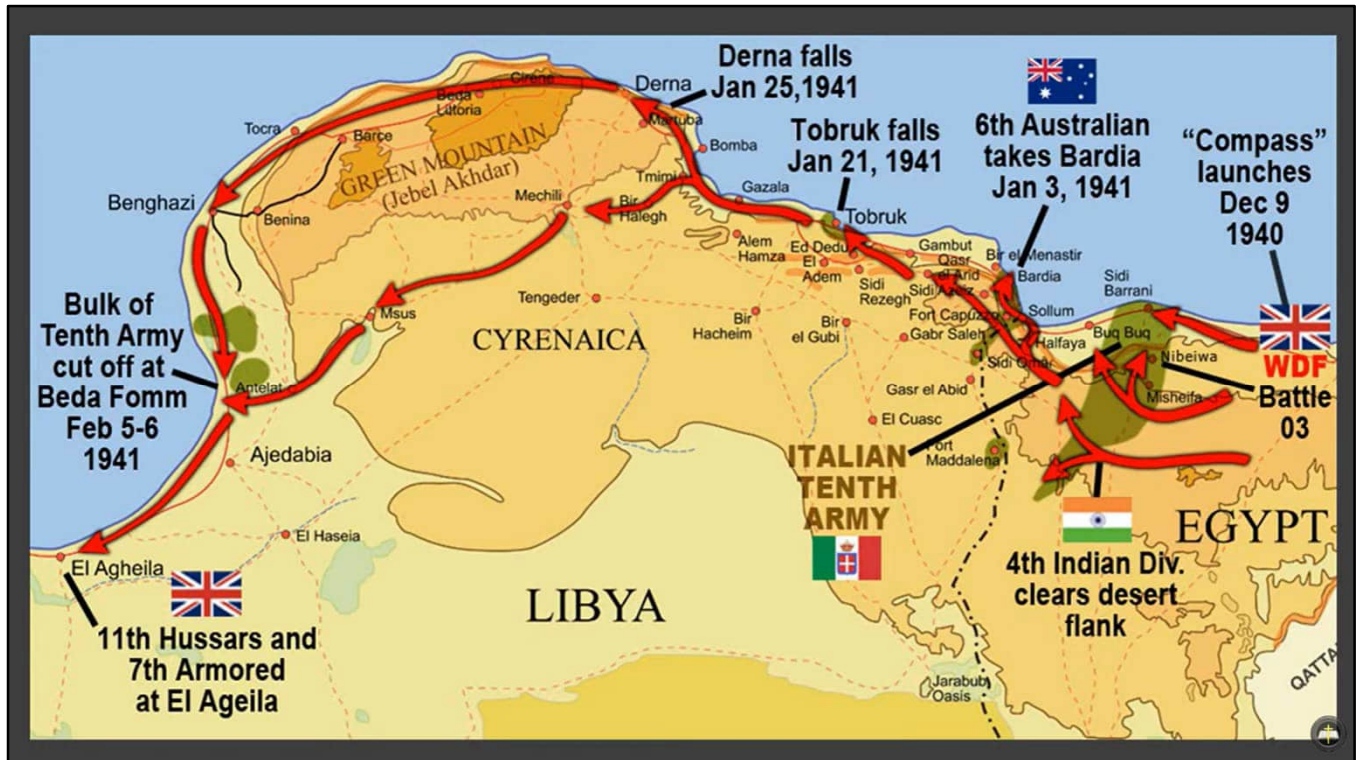


Fruit packed and labelled, recorded, and consignment note filled in, all that remained was to get the fruit to the train. One of the local carters such as Gus Markey, or one of the Meyn brother's big trucks would be called in to carry the load away. 120 cases was a good load in those days. Once the truck was out of the yard, everyone could relax for a while.

Then the phone would ring: "There's space on another boat leaving in three day's time - do you want any?", and the process would start again.

Italian PoWs

5



Italian PoWs played an important role in the fruit industry during the war.

Seen here is a time lapse of "Operation Compass", the first successful large British military operation of the Western Desert Campaign in north Africa.



Some 130,000 Italian soldiers were captured as a result of Operation Compass.

Initially the Italians were transferred to internment camps in India, then many were moved to Australia, including some 3,200 to Western Australia.

A shortage of agricultural labour during the war prompted the WA Government to request an allocation of Italian PoWs to work ungarded on farms.

Italian PoWs



Francesco MINUTIELLO
Captured: Sidi Barrani, Egypt
10-Dec-40



Nicola MANCINI
Captured: Bardia, Libya
4-Jan-41



Agostino IANNONE
Captured: Bardia, Libya
4 Jan 1941



Guido GIOIA
Captured: Bardia, Libya
4-Jan-1941



Giovanni D'AURIA
Captured: Bardia, Libya
5-Jan-1941



Santo MISTRETTA
Captured: Tobruk, Libya
21-Jan-1941



Guiseppe MISTRETTA
Captured: Tobruk, Libya
21-Jan-1941

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EG was one of many farmers that took up the opportunity to use the Italians, particularly in the orchard.

Seen here are 7 of the Italians that worked on the farm between March 1944 and October 1945.

EG's diaries record that the Italians were involved in all the annual cycle activities in the orchard.



While the Italians were known to be hard workers and earned the respect of most communities, there was one subject that they regularly complained about – FOOD.

One instance in particular hit a raw nerve with my Uncle Tony while on service in the UK with the RAAF during the war. In a letter back home in March 1945 he wrote, quote:

"...For breakfast I had a real fresh egg!! - an absolute luxury these days; and to think the BI.... PW's at home are kicking up a fuss for not getting 2 eggs."

What happened?

6



Among the 4 main growing districts of Bridgetown, Mt Barker, Manjimup and Donnybrook, Bridgetown remained the principal apple producing district at least until 1960 when district by district records stopped being published. In 1931 38% of all export apples from WA came from the Bridgetown district, the highest % amongst the 4 districts at the time.

However, any large industry is likely to have setbacks and the apple industry of WA is no exception.

The 2nd World War was one:

New plantings of fruit trees almost ceased as young men left to join the services, no prunings to speak of, fertilizers were unprocurable, no research was possible and of course there were no overseas markets; all these points and more, gave the local industry its biggest setback, a setback that the Bridgetown district never really recovered from.

Outbreak of Codling Moth in Bridgetown 1956/9:

The discovery of Codling Moth at Bridgetown in March 1956 was a severe blow to the apple industry, coming so soon after World War II.

The outbreak resulted in many of the apple trees being destroyed. A further outbreak in the late 1980s/early 1990s resulted in more orchards being subdivided or used for plantation trees.

Labour:

Orcharding is a labour intensive industry. So labour intensive was it that, with post-War inflation and union conditions, the financial return to the grower was too low for a decent living for the average orchardist.

BRITAIN'S DECISION ON T
 Europe gree
 entry with
 enthusiasm

Friday
 enthusiastic
 from all
 in Europe
 British Par-
 e to join
 Market.
 Press re-
 challenge and that it
 would be necessary to
 come to terms with a new
 trading giant.
 There was no official
 reaction from France,
 which twice under the late
 President de Gaulle bloc-
 ked British entry.
 "Great day for
 Europe"
 Within minutes of the
 House of Commons vote
 being announced last night
 reaction began pouring in
 from all
 quarters.
 Mr. Menzies
 described the
 move as a
 "great day for
 Europe".
 Although official
 France, at
 the time
 the Treaty
 was signed
 in 1957, it
 was not until
 1973 that it
 joined the
 Community.

Menzies Tells Of Impact If U.K. Joins Market

EXPORTS, ALL AUSTRALIA - "HARD HIT"

Australia's export primary industries would be hard hit if the United Kingdom joined the European Common Market, the Prime Minister, Mr. Menzies said last night.
The impact would be distributed over the whole nation, Mr. Menzies said in the House of Representatives.
 But it would fall with particular severity on particular areas, industries and people, he said.

'Problems if UK joins the Common Market'

Australians should be alerted to the complications of Britain's entry into the European Economic Community,

Source: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article110684534>, [/nla.news-article103084183](http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article103084183), [/nla.news-article110334011](http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article110334011)

There were other head winds developing in the world, and the final death knell was when the UK, Australia's major buyer of our fruit, joined the European Common Market in 1971.



With Bridgetown's major markets disappearing, the writing was on the wall and many growers left the district in the late 60's early 70's – including my family.

However, the industry didn't disappear altogether with Donnybrook and Manjimup taking over as key production centres.

Those that stayed in the industry recognized that they needed to develop new varieties to survive.

We are all aware of the huge success John Cripps had by crossing a Lady Williams with a Golden Delicious to create the Pink Lady – an international success story.

This entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well today, with West Australia's latest innovation, the Bravo, about to take over the world – so look out for it.

Thankyou.

Questions?

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

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(<https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/second+level+view?ReadForm&prodno=1300.5&viewtitle=Wes+tern%20Australian%20Year%20Book-1886-Previous-30/06/1887&&tabname=Past%20Future%20Issues&prodno=1300.5&issue=1886&num=&view=&>)
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