

Builders of Modern Society Series

We continue to explore the important contributions of past parishioners of St Mark's Anglican Church, Darling Point.

Thomas Sutcliffe Mort - Part 1

TS Mort is one of the greatest Australians. He strode like a colossus across early Sydney and his influence was immense. He was a man of great vision and profound humanity and was a wonderful inspiration to others. His commitment to the development of a fair and prosperous Australian society is his enduring legacy.

As a result of reduced family circumstances and prospects in his native Lancashire, Thomas Mort arrived in Sydney in 1838 at the age of 21 with little capital. He rapidly rose to prominence in the colony through hard work and drive.

In the words of contemporary biographer JH Heaton, "Mr Mort was more or less identified with nearly every movement for the advancement of New South Wales, and by his business talents, indomitable enterprise, public spirit, and high character exercised a great power for the general good". When he died in 1878, his reputation was such that, in a rare act, the public subscribed funds to raise a statue to his honour in Macquarie Place.

Mort's family motto was "Persevere to Succeed". To this he added a towering intellect and outstanding business acumen. He personally started many commercial ventures and pastoral enterprises, including pioneering the auctioneering of wool (today's Elders). He was a Founder of the AMP Society, sugar growing in Moreton Bay district, the Sydney Railway Company, Mort's Docks at Balmain (the first dry dock in Australia), land sub-division at what is now the suburb of Mortdale, the establishment of a unique dairy industry at Bodalla, various mining enterprises and he established the first freezing works in the world.

While many of his deeds were ground-breaking, perhaps his greatest achievement was pioneering the refrigeration industry, particularly in regards to transportation over long distances which facilitated the supply of Australian meat and dairy products to the rest of the world.

Most ordinary men would be lauded for their singular effort in any one of these endeavours and yet Mort was promoter, financier and passionate instigator of so many of the worthwhile economic and social movements of early Australia. According to Prof Barnard in *Visions and Profits*, while eschewing public life, he maintained two underlying beliefs; "that the material welfare of the community *did* depend on the successful cooperation of capital and labour; and that a prosperous community could rid itself of social ills".

St Mark's itself is on land provided by TS Mort as part of his *Greenoaks* estate which partially exists today as 'Bishopscourt'. At a time when it took four months for news to arrive from the old country, churches were places where men of influence gathered not only to express their faith but to exchange ideas for the new society. Many of Sydney's new enterprises and lasting benevolent activities were initiated from such conversations led by TS Mort.

Next month in Part 2 of his story we will further discuss some of his legacy that shaped our emerging nation.

For more information please contact Ian Tresise, of the St Mark's Historical Society, via history@stmarksdp.org or visit <https://stmarksdp.org/history/>

Photo below: TS Mort. Photo courtesy of Mort family private collection.

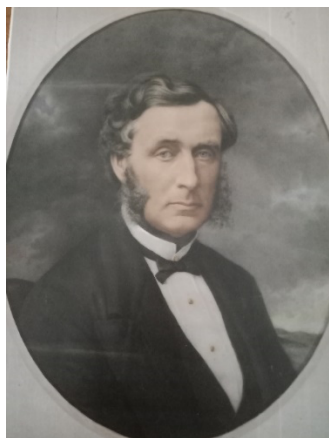


Photo below: Elders. Logo source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elders_Limited



Photo below: 'Bishopscourt'. Photo courtesy of Ray White Double Bay.



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Thomas Sutcliffe Mort - Part 2

As discussed in the previous article, TS Mort was a driving force in shaping much of our modern society. His initial and most lasting legacy was to be responsible for rationalising the sale of wool as it emerged as the nation's staple commodity. The public auctioneering system enabled local producers to stand apart from the London-based brokers who made vast profits from exploiting colonial produce.

As the wool industry emerged, Mort, with the aid of his brother William in England was able to guarantee a fair price for the high quality merino-based wool which had become the most valuable export commodity of the colony. Importantly, Mort was able to develop the first 'pastoral house' with credit facilities, consignment arrangements for their produce in London, and commercial assurance for pastoralists. This was so successful that it ensured the future success of the Australian Wool industry and allowed the young Mort to pursue other ventures which also benefited the broader community.

As a serial entrepreneur, Mort was able to invest in steamship companies, railways, mining, large pastoral concerns like the Twofold Bay Pastoral Company and many more. A devout church and family man, he provided encouragement and often financial support to all kinds of benevolent activities including founding of the Australian Mutual Provident Society, which provided life assurance to thousands of Australian families.

Mort was a complicated man who suffered from periodic bouts of depression. Despite his wealth and standing in the community he was driven to serve his fellow man. A genuine polymath, he invested much of his wealth in huge projects such as the creation of a dry dock which enabled overseas shipping to operate from our distant shores. He also experimented with large scale dairying, farming alpacas, producing silk, cotton and sugar, pioneering the way for others.

Perhaps his greatest achievement was pioneering the refrigeration industry. While he did not live to see the first export of frozen meat, after years of experimentation he had perfected the process which facilitated the preservation of fresh produce over vast distances, enabling the supply of Australian meat and dairy products to the rest of the world. He established the first freezing works in the world in Darling Harbour.

One of Thomas Mort's greatest strengths was his profound understanding of the obligations imposed by wealth and status, combined with his desire to express his Christian faith in practical ways. In 1857 Sir Alfred Stephen, the Chief Justice, said of his works, "It would be difficult to specify one public undertaking, having for its object the advancement of religion, or benevolence, or the promotion of the interests of the colony, which Mr Mort has not aided - by his purse and his advocacy, almost invariably by both".

TS Mort died in 1878 at the age of only 61. He was deeply mourned throughout the community. A fine statue in his honour stands in Macquarie Place erected by public subscription.

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Photo below: TS Mort statue in Macquarie Place.



Photo below: AMP logo from years ago. Logo source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AMP_Logo.svg



Photo below: Elders. Logo source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elders_Limited



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Thomas Sutcliffe Mort - Part 3

In this article we look beyond the commercial life of TS Mort to the true nature of the man himself. Certainly, he qualifies as a great patriot and one of the most "noble colonials", but above all Thomas Mort was a great humanitarian.

When Mort died at the young age of 61 in 1878, there was a massive outbreak of public grief. Statues, monuments and even a church were proposed and erected by the people in his memory; leading citizens eulogized about his great deeds, and the *Sydney Mail* even published a full page portrait of him for people to hang in their homes.

As an example of his profound humanity we need go no further than his 1875 speech to 300 Sydney luminaries whom he had invited and sent by train to his meat works at Lithgow. To prove that frozen food could be preserved and in perfect condition, Mort had organised a feast of meat, game and fruits which had been frozen eighteen months before. Amid the triumph of this evening, he spoke as follows;-

"There shall be no more waste! Yes, gentlemen, I now feel that the time has arrived, or at all events is not far distant, when the various portions of the earth will give forth their products for the use of each and all; that the over-abundance of one country shall make up for the deficiency of another; the super-abundance of the year of plenty serving for the scant harvests of its successor, for cold arrests all change (cheers).

Science has drawn aside the veil, and the plan stands revealed. Faraday's magic wand gave the key-note, and invention has done the rest (cheers). Climate, seasons, plenty, scarcity, distance will all shake hands, and out of the commingling will come enough for all; for 'the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof' and it is certainly within the compass of man to ensure that all His people shall be partakers of that fullness." (Continued cheers).

Although he was not to live to see the commercialisation of his many years of endeavour, the impact of his achievement has been felt across the world for the past 150 years. Refrigeration, which he pioneered, and which we take for granted today, has been a major boon to the consuming masses across the world and to producers alike.

At St Mark's we understand the nature of the divine inspiration that drove Thomas Mort to serve humanity to such an extent - it was his profound Christian faith and his love of his fellow man - an inspiration to us all.

In this day and age it is common for people to misunderstand and even denigrate the profound influences of men like Mort. He was indeed a noble colonist and he changed the nature of land use and tenure in Australia forever. The main driver was the good he was doing for his fellow man and providing food security for the masses of the world who had always been prone to periods of famine and starvation.

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Thomas Sutcliffe Mort - Part 4

In this final article on the life of TS Mort, we continue to discuss the true nature of the man who had so much impact on the commercial viability of our emerging industries – wool, meat, dairying, mining, shipping and more which were enabled by his active participation and quiet genius.

In this day and age it is fashionable to decry the impact of colonisation. Certainly, there are many aspects of the migration of hordes of Europeans on these shores which are shameful and even despicable. This unfortunately was true of all society in those days.

Life was incredibly tough and uncertain. In our relative comfort these days it is hard to imagine the uncertainty and misfortune that readily impacted lives. Accidents, high infant mortality, pestilence and starvation were ever-present threats. It is important that the young today understand how fortunate we are in the 21st Century, due to the inspired endeavours of people like Mort.

In TS Mort's day it was common for a woman to bear ten children and lose 3 or 4 before adulthood. There were no publicly-funded hospitals and no social welfare if the bread winner was not there, almost all welfare was provided by philanthropy and mutual societies were formed to provide rudimentary income protection and insurance. The income tax which funds many of these safety nets today was only introduced in 1915 in Australia, making us one of the first nations to universally fund public welfare.

It was in this environment that TS Mort supported and influenced the lives of so many. His commitment to others ranged from dispensing his own homeopathic medicines, to being a founder of the great AMP society, and to showing others how to prosper and create savings from those industries he initiated. His impact and example were profound.

According to historian, Laurelle Pacey OAM, even in refuge at Bodalla on the south coast of NSW, where he loved to rest with his family of ten children, he devoted "considerable energy and capital to turning dairying from a cottage industry into a factory system where milk for a number of different farms was manipulated to produce a uniform product that rivalled English cheese imports" and eventually led to the supply of fresh milk when preserved by refrigeration to Sydney.

It is indeed extraordinary that when he died in Bodalla in 1878, Mort had created a new community of share farmers working so harmoniously with the indigenous custodians that

more than 300 Australian First Nations Yuin people attended his simple funeral coming from Moruya, the Bay, or Eurobodalla to pay their respects to this great human being.

Through a profound humanity and his great Christian faith, Thomas Mort had found a way to share the benefits of European progress and industry with the indigenous custodians while respecting their society and traditions. A respect returned to this fine individual by possibly the largest assembly of the local Yuin people ever at his funeral.

This concludes our brief introduction to the wonderful life of Thomas Mort. Next month, we will look more closely at another builder of modern Australia parishioner from St Mark's, reflecting on the extraordinary life of Sir Thomas Mitchell.

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