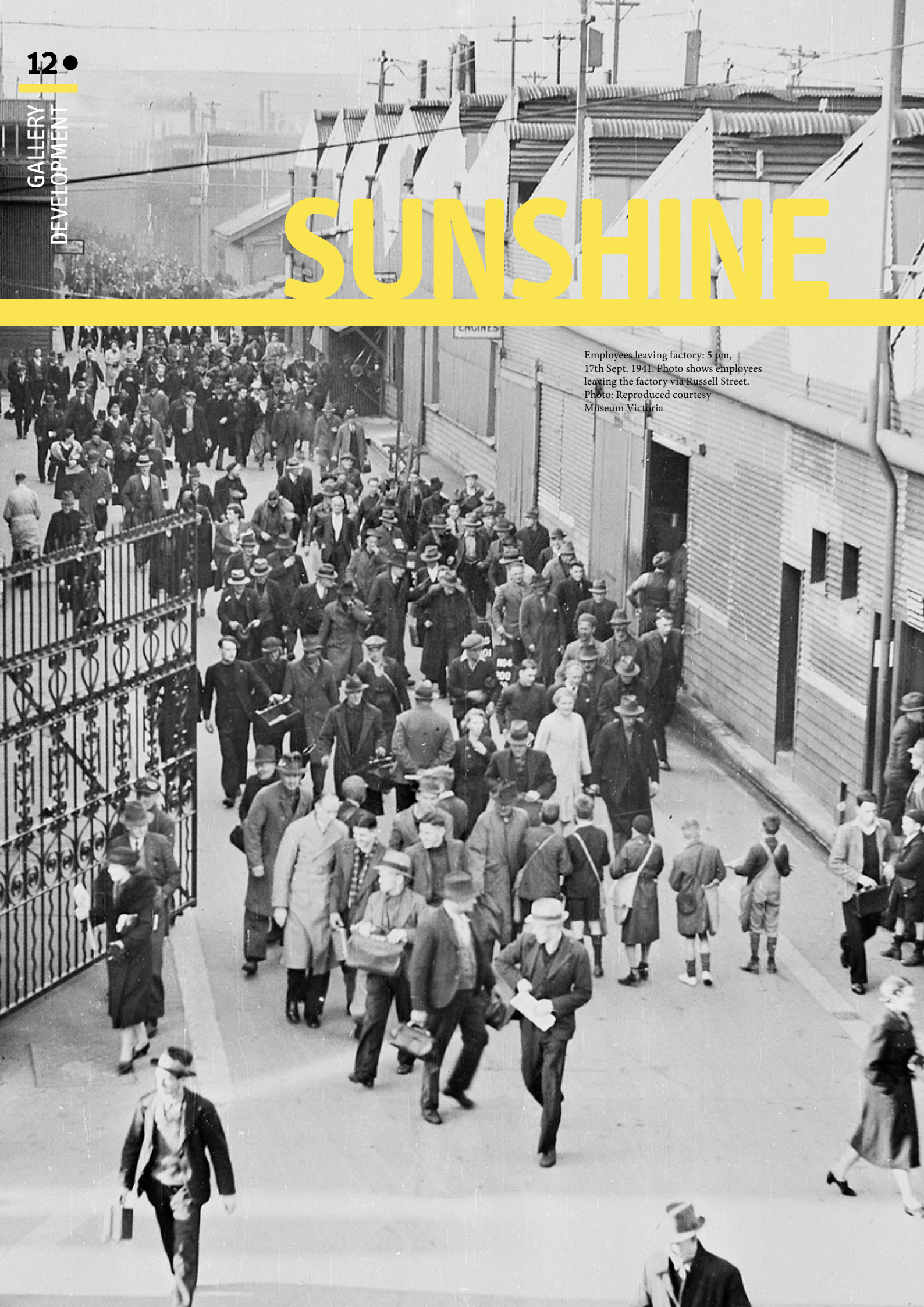


SUNSHINE



Employees leaving factory: 5 pm,
17th Sept. 1941. Photo shows employees
leaving the factory via Russell Street.
Photo: Reproduced courtesy
Museum Victoria

THE FACTORY: BEFORE US VAST HALLS APPEAR, EAGER MACHINES FUME AND RATTLE, DUST AND SMOKE BILLOW INTO CLOUDS, SOOT COVERS THE WINDOWS AND GLAZED ROOF DENYING THE SUN ENTRY. A PALLID SEMI-DARKNESS HANGS OVER EVERYTHING. ALL AROUND THE BUILDINGS ARE WIDE COURTYARDS ... RAILWAY TRACKS FAN OUT LIKE STRANDS OF A SPIDER'S WEB. ON THEM RAW MATERIALS ARRIVE AND FINISHED PRODUCTS ARE CARRIED OUT INTO THE WORLD. EVERYWHERE THERE ARE MONOTONOUS, TOWERING WALLS OF SORTED MATERIALS. HERE AND THERE IS A PATCH OF BLACK GREEN GRASS. A SILVER CORRUGATED IRON FENCE LIMITS THE VIEW.

FACTORY WORKERS: THEY STAND AT THE FURNACES AND THE LATHES, TAKING THE MOLTEN MASS THAT FLOWS REDDISH GOLD OUT OF THE CRUCIBLE, HAMMERING AND FINISHING IT INTO BARS AND RODS, WHICH THEY ANNEAL IN THE FORGE. THEY RUSH TO AND FRO IN THE COURTYARDS, MOVING WAGONS, BURDENING THEIR SHOULDERS WITH RODS AND INGOTS, THEIR BACKS WITH SACKS, STACKING MATERIALS, FEEDING FURNACES, SUPPLYING THE REQUIRED MATERIALS TO THE HANDS INSIDE.¹

Sunshine, located in Melbourne's industrial west, was once home to the largest agricultural implements manufacturer in the southern hemisphere, the Sunshine Harvester Works. The Sunshine Harvester Works produced an extensive range of agricultural implements, including the Sunshine Harvester.

Sunshine is one of the places which will be explored in the new *Creating a Country* gallery, planned to open in 2011. One of the exhibit's central objects will be a magnificent Sunshine stripper-harvester manufactured in 1911 at Sunshine.

Sunshine was first known as Braybrook Junction. A number of important rail lines met there, the Melbourne to Bendigo and Ballarat lines. By the 1880s Braybrook Junction was a small but thriving community, but the economic crash of the 1890s affected many of Braybrook Junction's industries, and thus the people employed and living there. One of Braybrook Junction's failed factories, the Braybrook Implement Company, was purchased in 1904 by Hugh Victor (HV) McKay, a successful agricultural implements manufacturer from Ballarat. McKay is best known for his 'Sunshine' Harvester, a stripper harvester which could strip, thresh, winnow and bag in one action, radically reducing the time and manpower needed to harvest a grain crop.

In 1883 the Victorian government issued a monetary reward for the first successful combined stripper harvester. McKay was one of a number of people to successfully design and construct such a machine. The son of a farmer from Drummartin, McKay built a harvesting machine with assistance from his family, using parts from other harvesting machinery. During the harvest of 1884 he tested his stripper harvester, and after making some alterations, set about raising the finances to patent it. On 24 March 1885 McKay's patent for *Improvements in and connected with harvesting machines* was lodged.

Having secured the patent, McKay began taking orders and looked for a manufacturer to build his stripper harvester. The first five machines were made under contract by McCalman, Garde and Co., plough makers from North Melbourne. McKay opened an office in Ballarat in 1888, and from 1890, began trading as the McKay Harvester Company. In 1892-3, the company was forced into liquidation due to the economic crisis. Assisted by family and friends, McKay bought the company's assets and began trading again. By 1894 he had improved the design of his harvester. Inspired by a lecture given by visiting evangelist Dr Thomas De Witt Talmage, McKay called his improved harvester 'the Sunshine'.



Sunshine harvester used on a property near Cootamundra, NSW.
Photo: Lannon Harley, National Museum of Australia

McKay's harvester company expanded rapidly. By the early years of the new century, it was apparent that a new factory site was needed. In 1904 McKay purchased the Braybrook Implement Works and surrounding four acres of land for £3651. The Braybrook site offered McKay room to expand his burgeoning agricultural implements factory. There was ready access to multiple railway lines, to supply both McKay's domestic and international customers. As Braybrook was in a shire, it did not fall under the control of the Wage Boards, and so offered McKay protection from that system.

Between 1906 and mid-1907 McKay moved his factory base from Ballarat to Braybrook Junction. Many of his loyal factory workers from Ballarat followed with their families and settled in Braybrook Junction or in nearby suburbs like Footscray. In April 1907 Braybrook Junction was renamed Sunshine, after the Sunshine Harvester Works that dominated the township.

Sunshine today is a very different place to the bustling factory town which existed there for much of the twentieth century. The Sunshine Harvester Works eventually covered 30.4 hectares and employed over 3000 workers. In 1955 the factory was taken over by the Australian interests of Massey Ferguson. It ceased manufacturing in 1989, and the factory was demolished by 1992.

My own journey in Sunshine began at the site of the factory that was once the largest agricultural implements manufacturer in the southern hemisphere. Today, instead of being a bustling, noisy factory, the site houses two shopping centres, a cinema and a car park. There are few remains that reflect the history of the site, and one can only try to imagine the Sunshine Harvester Works.

Built in 1924, and one of the factory's smaller buildings, the Bulk Store is now a youth centre. Still evident on the outside of the building are the saw tooth roofs which butted against it for decades. Inside the building, the remains of the large gantry crane, which moved supplies and machinery, can be seen.

Other remnants of the factory include the decorative wrought-iron factory gates made by Scottish blacksmith Charlie Pippett in 1922. They now stand as a memorial to times past, with no factory behind them. Opposite the gates on Devonshire Road, the 1927 factory offices stand proud in their original art deco styling. Walking through the wood-panelled revolving door and upstairs to the executive offices was an experience to be remembered. The original table and chairs in the boardroom are still used by the current tenants.

The railway tracks, essential to the factory and town's success, divided the factory from the housing estate established by McKay for his workers. A footbridge was built over the tracks, connecting the factory with the town.



Left: Footbridge with the 1927 factory offices on the right.
Below: Bulk Store, built in 1924 and one of the last remaining buildings of the Sunshine Harvester Works.
Photos: Jennifer Wilson



The roads throughout the housing estate are named after places and people significant to McKay, such as Drummartin Street, Talmage Street and Adelaide Street. Across the railway lines, on the factory site, the roads have names such as Harvester Road and Foundry Road.

Sunshine of the 1920s, '30s, '40s and '50s can only truly be felt through the reminiscences of long-time Sunshine residents and former workers. I've been lucky enough to meet a few of those people. Ruby came to Sunshine with her parents in December 1910, when she was 18 months old. Her father worked as a blacksmith for the Sunshine Harvester Works, and also purchased a house in McKay's Sunshine Estate. Ruby now lives with her sister Betty, in the house built by Betty's husband. They recount the fun they had at social events, such as the annual Works Picnic. The sisters both worked at the Sunshine Harvester Works. In fact, Betty met her husband she was while working in the wage department. He was a draftsman in the drawing office, and according to Betty, they would make eyes at each other through the window that divided their offices.

Jim's family moved to Sunshine in 1910 from rural Victoria. Among the members of his family who worked at the factory, there are over 220 years of service. Jim's father was among the first apprentices to attend the Sunshine Technical School when it opened in 1913. Jim started at the Sunshine Harvester Works in 1941. Like many who grew up in Sunshine, he was a paper boy on Friday nights, selling the *Herald* to workers coming out of the factory.

Then one Friday night, after selling newspapers, Jim was told by his father that he would be starting at the factory; three days later, he started as a trial apprentice.

As well as tracing these wonderful stories of life in Sunshine during the factory's heyday, I've explored the history of the factory through the extensive collections of Museum Victoria and Melbourne University Archives. Museum Victoria has a large collection of material, which includes trade literature, photographs, and films, as well as models of farming implements, while the Melbourne University Archives hold staff and company records dating back to the early 1900s.

While the physical presence of the factory is no longer as dominating, the past remains in a few buildings, memorials and street names, and the reminiscences of people like Ruby, Betty and Jim. Beyond the town, the history of the Sunshine Harvester Works has been distributed far and wide. Throughout Australia, in country towns, you may just see the odd piece of Sunshine machinery, like a harvester ...

Leah Bartsch
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¹ R Schachner, *The workers' paradise? Robert Schachner's letters from Australia 1906-1907*, edited by J Lack, F Ohles and J Tampke, translated by F Ohles, Parkville: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1990, pp. 53-54.