

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, explores the history of Australia since European settlement.

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

Sunshine Harvester

In 1911, Victoria's Sunshine Harvester Works manufactured 2161 sunshine stripper harvesters. the Sunshine Harvester Works. This harvester, with the serial number 41452, was the 508th harvester manufactured at the Works that year, and is featured in Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, exploring the history of Australia since European settlement.



The Sunshine Harvester was the 508th harvester manufactured at Victoria's Sunshine Harvester Works. Photo: Lannon Harley, National Museum of Australia.

In 1992, the National Museum of Australia acquired this Sunshine harvester from Wood Dale, a farm in New South Wales. Here, the harvester was used until the mid-1950s when the family upgraded some of their farming equipment. For the next forty years, it was stored in a shed on the property before becoming part of the Museum's National Historical Collection.

Located west of Melbourne, the Sunshine Harvester Works was an agricultural implements factory established by Hugh Victor (HV) McKay. The factory was named after McKay's well known stripper-harvester, the Sunshine harvester. In 1908, the township of Braybrook Junction, where the factory was located, was renamed Sunshine after the factory.

The stripper-harvester changed Australian grain harvesting techniques. This machine could strip, thresh, winnow and bag grain. The stripper-harvester increased grain yields and cut down on the amount of physical labour, as well as the time needed to harvest.

Each harvester was built using hundreds of parts, many of which were manufactured at the Works. These ranged from nuts and bolts to specially seasoned timber and pieces of sheet metal cut for specific purposes.

As well as harvesters, the Sunshine Harvester Works produced many other types of tools and machinery. They constantly strove to improve the machinery being produced at the factory and design new technology. By the 1920s, the Sunshine Harvester Works was a leader in agricultural implements manufacturing. The latest labour saving machinery, often requiring very little skill to operate, and scientific time management techniques were employed to keep the factory at the forefront of Australian manufacturing.

Sunshine Harvester Works founder, Hugh Victor (HV) McKay came from a farming family. During the mid-19th century, he was one of a number of Australians to successfully build and test a stripper-harvester. With help from his father and brother, McKay built a harvester using parts of other machines and scraps of material he found on the family farm at Drummartin in country Victoria. After successfully testing the harvester, McKay patented his design in March 1885.

The economic depression of the 1890s ruined McKay's fledgling agricultural implements manufacturing business. In 1893, he set about improving the design of his harvester and rebuilding his devastated company. McKay named his improved harvester, the Sunshine. By the end of the 1890s, his Ballarat based business was a success. Harvester production increased from 12 in 1895, to 50 in 1896, and 500 in 1901. By 1904, McKay was looking for opportunities to expand his factory, and purchased a site at Braybrook Junction.

During the 19th century, Australian workers began to band together, forming trade unions to gain better working conditions. Union representatives bargained with employers to negotiate for conditions like better wages, more lenient workplace rules, and a safer workplace environment. With the rapid increase of the number of people employed by the Works, the factory's management style changed, with stricter workplace rules being implemented. With these changes, more and more Sunshine workers turned to the union to ensure their rights as employees were protected.

During the first months of 1911, the Sunshine Harvester Works was among a number of Melbourne agricultural implements manufacturers to be affected by industrial action. Members of the Agricultural Implement Makers Union (AIMU) went on strike on February 16 when some employers, including McKay, refused to enforce a closed shop by employing only union labour. McKay, who disliked any interference in the way he ran his factory, believed that each of his workers should have the freedom to choose whether or not they would support the union. So that morning, around one thousand of his workers went on strike because 42 agricultural implements workers across Melbourne refused to join the union. This included 12 men from the Sunshine Harvester Works.

After 13 weeks, the strike ended. While this would not be the longest or most crippling strike, it was the first strike taken by a union to affect production at the Sunshine Harvester Works. It also left the AIMU in dire financial circumstances, unable to pursue any significant industrial action for over a decade.

Today, the Sunshine Harvester Works site has changed beyond recognition. Instead of a sprawling factory site, filled with saw-toothed roof workshops and storage sheds, as well as offices and internal train lines, the space is now filled with shops, car parking and offices. Manufacturing at the factory ceased in the 1980s and many of the buildings were subsequently demolished. However, little pieces of the Works still remain through street names and preserved buildings, together with pieces of old machinery that can be found across Australia and the world with 'Sunshine' emblazoned across them.

Object biography prepared by Leah Bartsch, Curator, National Museum of Australia.

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia is the National Museum's newest and most ambitious gallery to date, bringing together over 1500 objects to create a history of Australia since European settlement.

For more information about the exhibition visit
<http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks>