

Chapter 5



Ewell Vineyards and the Development of Viticulture

*And they shall build houses and inhabit them
And they shall plant vineyards
And eat the fruit of them.*

(Isa. 65, v.21).

If the great company of vinegrowers and winemakers in the Sturt-Marion district were alive today they would doubtless raise their glasses to the remark once made by vigneron Sydney Hamilton, to a Roseworthy oenology student:

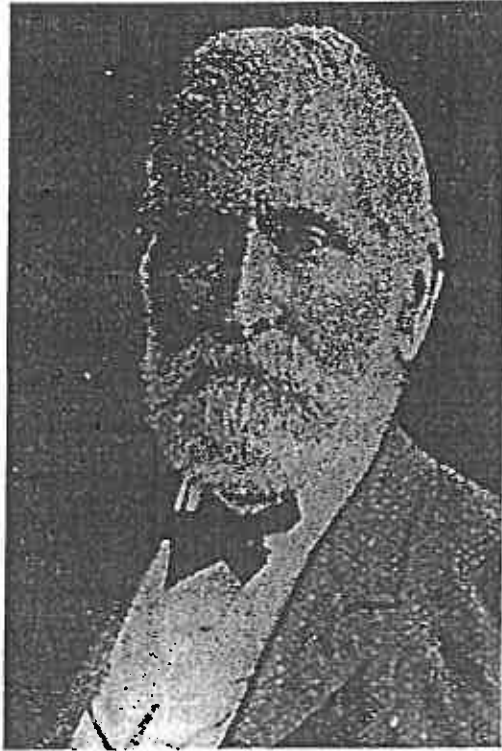
Young man, if a wine doesn't taste good enough to drink at three weeks, it will never be any good.

It was a remark which summed up a lifetime in the wine industry at *Ewell Vineyards*, Warradale.

Grape growing in the Marion district dates from the first settlement in the area in 1838. Early vine plantings were intended mainly for wine production, but by the 1870s grape growing had developed in two different directions—table grapes and wine grapes. These two kinds of productions continued for the next eighty years, that is, until the 1950s, when the Marion vineyards gave way to urban expansion. Of all the grapegrowers in the Marion district the Hamilton family had the largest area under cultivation.

On 7 June 1837 Sydney Hamilton's great grandfather, Richard Hamilton (1792-1852), took out Land Order 449 in London with a view to settling in the Province of South Australia. After a fast voyage in the *Katherine Stewart Forbes*, he arrived with his wife and five of his children on 7 October 1837. His sixth child, Henry, joined the family after completing his schooling at the Bluecoat School, London.*

* Immigration records state that he arrived in the *Christina*, one of two ships bearing that name. Of these one went direct to Sydney in 1839, 1841 and 1842 without calling at Adelaide; the other is listed in Lloyd's Register as arriving in Adelaide on 31 July 1841, with a Mr Hamilton on board.



Henry Hamilton.



Frank Hamilton.

For some months after their arrival the Hamiltons lived in a camp on the River Torrens, but when it was set fire to by Aborigines one hot and windy autumn morning, they made an unexpected move to their land on the Sturt River. This was in May 1838: on 6 June Richard Hamilton's ownership of the property was confirmed. In the official returns of 1840 it is listed as *Curtis Farm*, though it is uncertain who named it or why.

It soon became clear to Hamilton that his money would run out before the farm could support his family so he wrote to a friend in South Africa outlining his position. He did not forget to add:

And would you kindly send a few vine plants as the health of the family requires a little wine—

himself in particular! The vines arrived less than three months later and were planted in the winter of 1838.

His example was followed by his son Henry who had joined his father after two years on a Burra sheep station. In July 1854 Henry purchased the northern 36¾ acres and eastern 10 acres of Section 176* from Mary Cooke and James Smith, both of Adelaide, who had inherited the whole 80-acre section from the estate of the original owner, Joseph Stuckey of Lopen, Surrey.

It was on this eastern 10 acres that Henry was to build his wine cellars. This property, which was named *Ewell* after a village in Surrey, became the home of Henry and his bride, Mary Bell, the girl next door.** Their house, built of

* A further 5 acres of Section 176 was bought in 1881 by Henry's son Frank, but it was not until 1910 that the entire section came into possession of the family. In that year Frank purchased 20 acres of land which since 1893 had been leased to Thomas Harding by the widow of the Rev. William Nicholls.

** Mary's uncle, Joseph Bell, farmed *Cobham* (Sections 175 and 149 and 15 acres each of Sections 174 and 176).

limestone ballast carted by bullock dray from Holdfast Bay, comprised a kitchen and living room with bedrooms built of mud and timber.* Water was drawn from an underground rain-water tank in the courtyard.

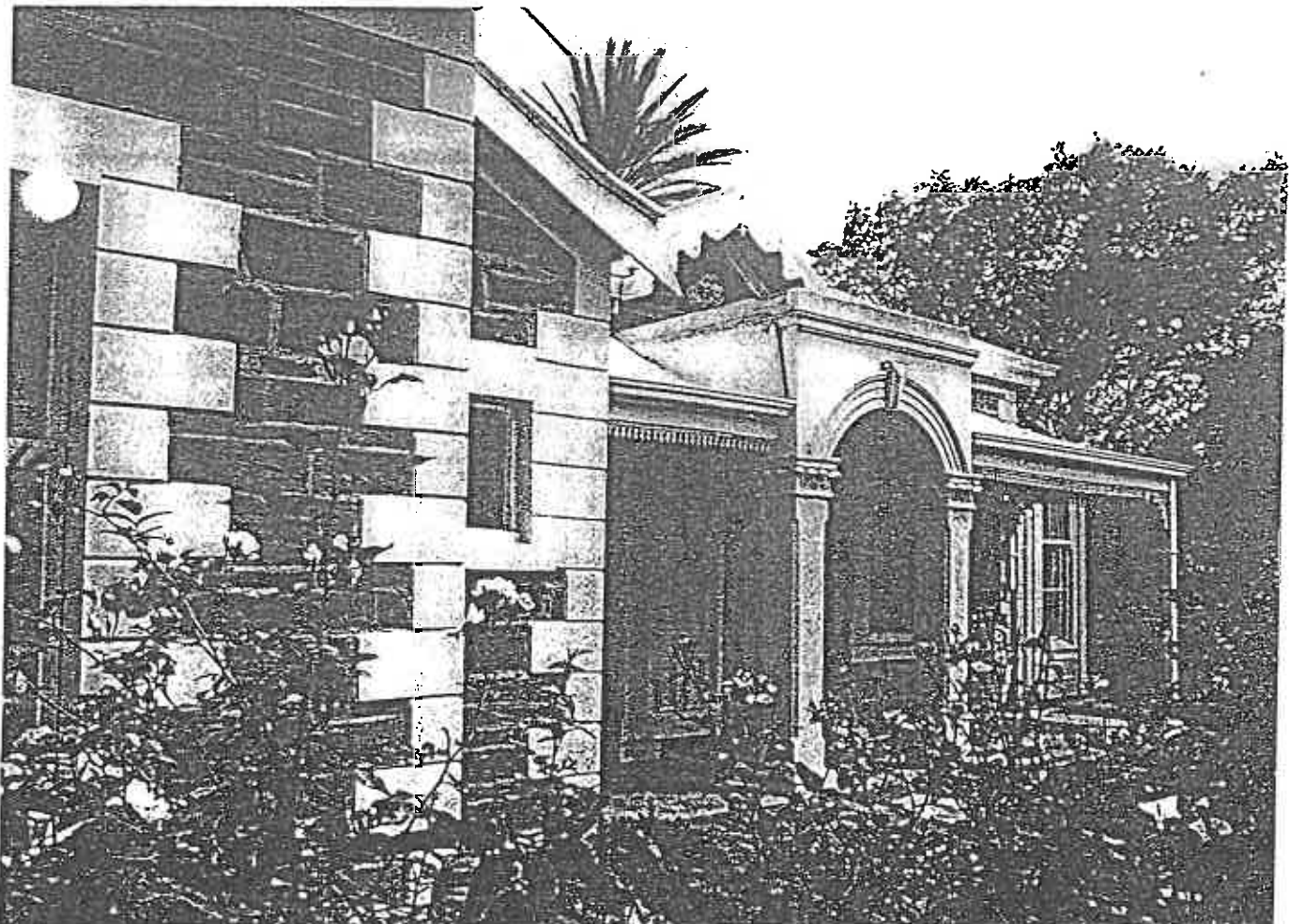
In 1854 Henry planted 2 acres of vines after sub-soiling the ground by hand, little realising that some of these vines planted in north-south rows near his house, would still be bearing in 1980! In 1870 he added a bluestone front to his house, thus marking another milestone in his colonial endeavours. Within twenty years (in both 1890 and 1891) Henry had won the Angas Award for agricultural farms, awarded annually by the Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society. It is interesting to read the description of his property in 1891:

Mr Henry Hamilton's farm contains 140 acres, and is known as Ewell Vineyard and Farm. It consists of paddocks, fenced with posts and wire (some barbed): good house and garden, well kept. He has 48 acres of wheat, a good portion of which is a very fine crop of Steinwedel, and 16 acres of fallow, well got up.

The vineyard consists of about 40 acres, 20 acres of Pedro Ximenes vines, four years old, and 20 acres of good wine and table grapes, some Zante currants, looking fine, and loaded with fruit. The wine-making plant and buildings are very good, and some fine

* In 1916-17 the southern portion was rebuilt after the original timber had been demolished.

The Hamilton homestead, Ewell Vineyards, 1978, showing bluestone front added by Henry Hamilton in 1870.



large casks in the cellars are full of wine, and if equal to the samples we tasted is of most excellent quality. The vineyard is well kept and free from weeds, and everything about the steading clean and orderly.

The stock consists of 7 horses, 3 head of cattle, 2 pigs, and 50 head of poultry. There is a blacksmith and carpenter's shop.

The Judges award first prize to this farm.

Old and new methods went hand in hand—a pioneer grape crusher and Riddle's model windmill, with cellars, cement tanks and wine vats constructed by his five sons. The hallmark of Henry's success was hard work and good management.

When Richard Hamilton's widow Ann died in April 1886 at the age of 97, the original property (Section 148) in accordance with her husband's will, was divided equally among their nine children. Over the next eight years Henry and his son Frank purchased the land back from the other members of the family.

Frank was already managing the business when his father died in 1907 aged 81, and from that time it operated under the name F. Hamilton Ltd. In that year the vintage was 18,000 gallons of wine and in addition they sold 100 tons of grapes. It was during Frank's time that the vineyards reached their largest acreage (156 acres). By 1915 the Hamiltons were farming 200 acres, while other members of the family owned 100 acres south of *Ewell*, notably Walter A. Hamilton with 49 acres and J. R. Hamilton with 33 acres (both parts of Sections 177 and 178).

By 1929 the storage capacity at *Ewell* was 400,000 gallons. During these years Frank had produced a Chablis, a dry white wine, from Pedro Ximenes grapes grown at *Ewell*. In 1928 his son Sydney used the same variety with 50 per cent Verdelho, to pioneer *Ewell Moselle*.* In order to retain some natural acidity, the grapes were picked early, and fermentation was done in closed wooden vats instead of the usual open cement tanks. This was another milestone in the history of Australian winemaking.

The year 1978 was the fiftieth vintage of *Ewell Moselle*, which until 1975 still contained some Pedro Ximenes and Verdelho grapes from *Ewell Vineyards*.

Hamiltons reputation as winemakers was due to a succession of skilled winemakers—Sydney Hamilton, Russian-born John A. Seeck and French-born Maurice Ou. It was through Seeck that Hamiltons introduced the production of flor sherry, using a strain of the flor fungus, a Spanish wine yeast. The origin of its use at *Ewell*, as told by Sydney Hamilton, is worth noting here:

Dr Harris of Rutherglen, Victoria, when touring the Jerez region of Spain in 1913, was shown the phenomenon of the yeast forming a thick cream on the surface of the wine at the completion of the first fermentation.

He brought back some of this yeast to Australia on gelatine cultures and gave some to John Seeck who was then with Walter Reynell and Sons. Seeck in turn gave some yeast to me which I used with occasional success.

* *Ewell Moselle* is a semi-sweet table wine modelled on the style of a German wine produced in the Moselle Valley.

The yeast was still in use at *Ewell* in 1979.

Maurice Ou joined Hamiltons as winemaker in 1947, three years after the firm had built a controlled temperature cellar. In 1945 the first vintage passed through the cellar, the success of which contributed considerably to the quality of Hamiltons dry white table wines.

In recent years Hamiltons crushed an average of 5,500 tons of grapes each vintage, more than half of which was vintaged at their other wineries at Springton, Eden Valley and Nildottie: their other vineyards were located at Wood Wood, near Swan Hill, Victoria.

Urban development and compulsory acquisition eventually reduced *Ewell Vineyards* to about 10 acres. In 1968 Hamiltons lost 23 acres of vines to the Education Department for Glengowrie High School, and another 15 acres in March 1975, to the Morphetville Bus Depot. Their last plantings—18 acres of mainly Rhine Riesling—were sold in April 1977. The remaining *Ewell* vines are mostly the cultivars Verdelho, Pedro Ximenes, Palomino and some gnarled 120 year-old Grenache vines, retained by Eric Hamilton for their historic interest.

It is generally acknowledged by those interested in wine production and marketing that it was Eric's business acumen as managing director and his promotional tours—he is said to have visited Canada no fewer than fifteen times— which encouraged wider acceptance of Australian wines overseas.

With such achievements to their name it was a sad day when in June 1979, after 141 years in the Hamilton family, *Ewell Vineyards* were sold to Mildara Wines Ltd, of Mildura, Victoria. As well as the *Ewell* property, Mildara also purchased the Springton and Eden Valley properties and the Old Mill Bond Store at Bridgewater in the Adelaide Hills. Hamiltons winery at Nildottie, and vineyards at Nildottie and Wood Wood were auctioned separately in July 1979.



FOUNDED
1837

HAMILTON'S EWELL MOSELLE

EXTRA FINE
EWELL VINEYARD WINE

GLENELG
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

After retiring from the family company Sydney Hamilton (who was 82 in 1980), established his own winery, *Leconfield*, near Penola, making wine from grapes grown in the Coonawarra district. Other members of the family interested in the winemaking tradition are Robert Hamilton, a great-great grandson of Richard, and former Managing Director of Hamiltons Ewell Vineyards Pty Ltd and Dr Richard Hamilton (Sydney's nephew) at Willunga, where his father (Burton) and uncle (Dr Ian) have vineyards.

Another pioneer vineyard, earlier known as Trimmer's, is the property still called *Fairford* as it was in the time of William Henry Trimmer when he first leased it in 1843. It is known as *Laffer's Triangle* and comprises the area of land (mainly Section 78) opposite the Flinders University on the seaward side.

In 1862 the land was transferred to Trimmer from the South Australian Company of London for £1,118, excluding the line of South Road—slightly more than 3 acres—which traverses it. Trimmer's house, wine cellars (possibly the work of colonial architect, Edmund Wright) and some panelled Baltic flooring, are still intact. Today, anyone standing in the surrounding garden may for a moment recapture something of the atmosphere of an earlier rural Marion, landscaped with vines, fruit trees and river red gums. By 1862 Trimmer had 13 acres under vineyard planted with the cultivars Verdelho, Gouais, Black Portugal and Grenache. Much of his vineyard bordered the Sturt River and the depth and fertility of the alluvial soil produced in one season 1,000 gallons from 3 acres of Gouais and Verdelho cultivars.¹ In 1909 one old patriarch with a trunk more than eight inches in diameter, yielded two cases or 120 pounds of grapes, the result of a biennial boost to the vines of two tons of bone dust.

From all accounts Trimmer was a meticulous vinegrower, not allowing his vines to bear until 5 years old. He used a grape mill, its cylinders covered with treated leather to crush his grapes, and a linen-wrapped stopper in his casks, which were always limited to two-thirds capacity.

Apart from being treasurer of the South Australian Vinegrowers' Association, he was also a breeder of thoroughbreds, a local J.P., Chairman of the District Council of Brighton and Captain of the South Australian Free Rifles. In the 1865 Parliamentary elections he narrowly missed representing the district of Noarlunga, being declared not duly elected by the Court of Disputed Returns. This was one of a series of blows. Heavy mortgages and the death within a short space of two young daughters, aggravated his addiction to his own vintage, which led eventually to attacks of delirium tremens in the last eighteen months of his life. When he died in December 1867, he left the property to his wife Eliza Catherine and Edward Amand Wright, brother of the architect Edmund Wright. In 1876 *Fairford* was sold to Henry Laffer.

Another early vineyard with plantings dating from 1846 was that of Samuel Kearne of *Oaklands Estate*, comprising in later years 'one square mile of beautiful land' (as described by Sydney Hamilton). Kearne, whose interest in vinegrowing took him to William Macarthur's *Camden Farm* in New South Wales, originally planted 2 acres of vine cuttings from that colony in the mistaken belief that the carefully-labelled samples were the choicest cultivars. However, they all turned out to be Sweetwaters, which his man-

ager, the Rev. John Kelsey, put to good purpose by grafting them over to more useful cultivars.

Kelsey, an Independent minister and judge of the Winegrowers and Winemakers' Association knew his job, and in one season had such success that 2 acres yielded 5,130 gallons of wine, 'no water or bought grape added'. Kearne estimated that in 1858 the annual cost of maintaining the vineyards was about £75 an acre, and 2s. 6d. to produce a gallon of wine. Both his orangery and vineyard were sheltered with fruit trees, so that when John Crozier bought the property in 1866, *Oaklands* was flourishing with 'green hedgerows and well-tilled fields', not to mention an extensive cellarage.

As a promoter of the South Australian Wine Company it was to be expected that Crozier's cellars were numbered among the best in the colony, large enough to store 50,000 gallons, with the lower section deep enough to preserve an equable temperature. Crozier maintained that wine should be put in a dry, well-aired cellar the first year and in a cool dry cellar afterwards, with casks always full.

It is interesting to read the diary* of his manager, Michael Dwyer, in which he describes the process of making white wine for the *Oaklands* vintage of 1882 which began on 21 March:

*The white grapes are crushed and immediately drawn off and pressed and put into clean well-sulphured casks there to ferment and must be filled up so as to allow the fermentation to overflow and run over and thereby get rid of a lot of silt and sediment which otherwise deposits and settles in the bottom of the cask. ***

On 4 April 1884, Dwyer records that the Italian, Paulo Villanis, came down to test the strength of the new white wine and found 22½ per cent of natural spirit in it; he advised not to fortify it with more than 2½ per cent additional spirit.

Villanis, a regular visitor to *Oaklands* in the early 1880s, added colour to the local scene, and as a free-lance winemaker gave impetus to winemakers in Marion and elsewhere. A graduate in Civil Engineering from the University of Turin, he had served in the Italian Army (1846-7) before training in winemaking and marketing at the vineyards of M. de Corbiar Perigard in the Dordogne. He came to Australia as a representative of the Italian Government at a Melbourne Exhibition (possibly that of 1880), and remained in Victoria for two years. When he moved to Adelaide he wrote prolifically for the horticultural journal *The Garden and Field* on the subject of winemaking and olive culture. In 1884 his book *Theoretical and practical notes upon winemaking and the treatment of wines, exclusively applied to Australian Wines* was published in Adelaide by Webb, Vardon and Pritchard. It is a remarkable work for the period, and in view of Dwyer's entry on the fortification of white wine, comments from his book throw further light on the understanding of winemaking under local conditions:

We particularly direct the attention of the reader to the power possessed by alcohol of preserving the ferment, since in this country the vintage occurs during a very hot season

* Loaned by Jim Smith of Winetasters Pty Ltd, Kent Town.

** An ancient and dangerous custom according to winemaker Sydney Hamilton.



Fairford wine cellars built by William Henry Trimmer; later used as coach-house.

and the grapes are so thoroughly ripe as not to need any addition of sugar, and this property of alcohol to preserve the ferment may be of great value in preventing the loss of wine in many cases.

It may happen that the excessive heat will suddenly stop the fermentation before the sugar is completely dissolved, and in this case the addition of alcohol neutralizes the power of the ferment, and prevents it starting again, which would in a longer or shorter time completely destroy the wine. As a general rule the wines that are rich in sugar and alcohol very seldom become sour.

Another entry of particular interest in Michael Dwyer's diary is his method of making champagne:

For each gallon of wine add two lbs of pure water and 9 ozs of white sugar mixing well with a little fining and bottle as soon as it is clear. With good sound large corks not driven quite fully in leaving about 2½ inches between the cork and the wine wiring well the corks then lying the bottles on the side in a cool place.

After Dwyer's death in 1890, his son William became manager of *Oaklands*. Before and during the management of Dwyer senior, Crozier's wines,

mainly sherry and port, won medals at exhibitions in Paris, Philadelphia and Bordeaux. Crozier, while professing to be no authority on vinegrowing, took a practical interest in his vineyards and in winemaking. In 1869 he combined with four other local vigneron to send ten different samples of wine to India, but they were hardly well received, judging from a remark worth recording.

*Fancy six cases of champagne being knocked down in Parr and Luxmore's for half a crown! That's how they appreciate Australian vintage in Bombay!*²

On the home front Crozier thought the wine industry suffered a poor image in the minds of the people because of the 'bad deleterious stuff sold in wineshops'. However, three years later, in 1878, he was more optimistic:

Winemaking is beginning to be looked upon with more favour and appears to be getting into the hands of persons who understand it and make it a trade.

It had been an uphill battle for forty years, since Richard Hamilton planted his first vines, but what grower worth his wine was willing to capitulate?

During those experimental years some of the local growers who had paved the way were William Foster Sergeant—whose Cape Currants reputedly bore better than the Zante Currant—David Sutherland and clergyman William Nicholls.

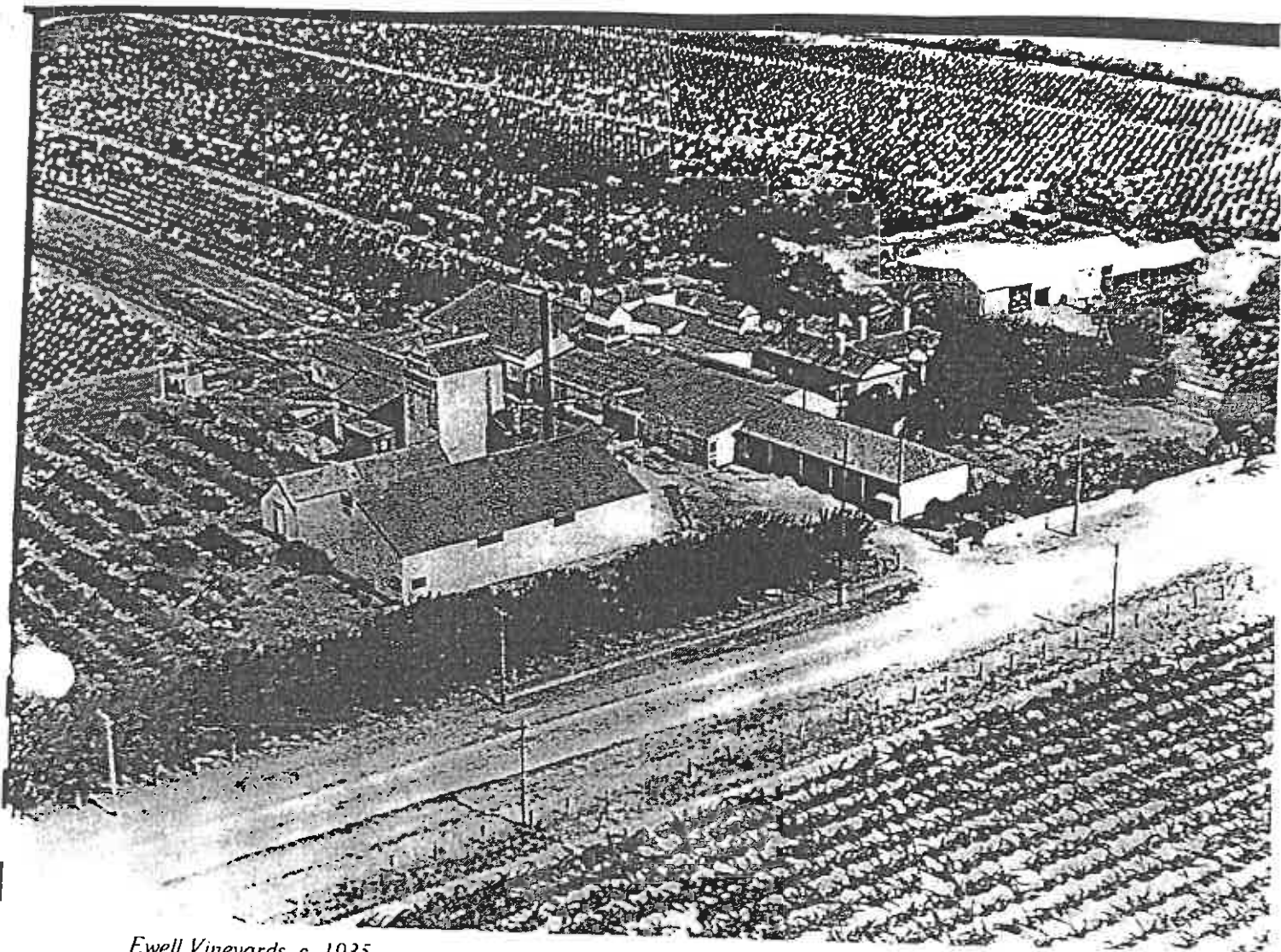
Along South Road those who held their own were Captain William O'Halloran, Benjamin Herschel Babbage and Richard Ragless, some of whose vines planted in 1889 were, in 1979, yielding equally as well as some of the younger vines on *Wattiparinga*, the property of his grandson K. B. Ragless. Two other South Road growers, Alfred Weaver and Frederick Mitchell, the agent for Colonel George Wyndham, were foundation members of the Association for Introducing Vine Cuttings into South Australia, which by 1841, had received 57,200 cuttings from Cape Town.

At *Marino*, George Kingston planted about 12 acres of valuable Spanish cultivars in 1849, but as they were too near the coast to do well they petered out after several decades. His massive blue gum press was sold by auction in 1888.

Around O'Halloran Hill, Thomas O'Halloran, James Freebairn, Thomas Young and Henry Douglas were among growers whose perseverance encouraged the formation of the Southern Vinegrowers' Association which held their first wine show on 8 November 1864, at the *Alma Hotel*, Willunga.

As early as 1852 Thomas O'Halloran had sent samples of red and white wines to England and India and was advised to correct the fruity flavour (which he preferred) by using a little brandy. In 1862 Thomas Young also sent samples of claret and Shiraz which, according to overseas experts, promised to become a superior article in a few years. In spite of these preliminary efforts in promoting their colonial product overseas, there were, as Crozier declared, 'a host of prejudices to be overcome', and by 1880 there was still no satisfactory market. Some growers, after expending much time, labour and capital uprooted their vineyards.

Crozier believed that the wine industry would become of considerable importance to South Australia if the Home Government gave 'fairer con-



Ewell Vineyards, c. 1935.

sideration to colonial wines' and if neighbouring colonies (New South Wales and Victoria) lifted their duty which growers regarded as prohibitive. He pointed out that they suffered from lack of expert advice from growers in such countries as Spain and Portugal who could have been brought to the colony with 'a few hundred (pounds) judiciously laid out'. The State Government had done little to further the cause of vinegrowers, though Crozier blamed this partly on the growers themselves for not having obtained assistance. According to B. H. Babbage of St Marys, the Attorney-General was 'dead-set' against the wine interest. Wines, he said, should be sold over the counter as in England 'by any respectable storekeeper', without a licence, except for booths at fairs and races and in refreshment rooms. As for Wark's Act* which limited growers to a still holding no more than 50 gallons, this was an invitation to a man to be a rogue, and inevitably led to smuggling.

Apart from these problems, the fungus disease *Oidium* (or Powdery Mildew) periodically attacked Marion vineyards, necessitating the treatment of vines with a dilute solution of lime sulphide or a dusting with powdered sulphur.

* *Wark's Act* (No. 16, 1857-58) was designed to facilitate the operations of winemakers and to encourage the culture of the vine. The Act was repealed by *Act 53*, 1876.



Sydney (left) and Eric Hamilton with the original land grant of Richard Hamilton.

Sparrows too, wrought such havoc that James Ralph of Marion harvested no more than 150 pounds from 1½ acres in the season of 1880-1881, and Crozier related how in one day two boys had collected 1,900 sparrow eggs from his property. He rated the depredations of the sparrow as a national loss and therefore a matter to be dealt with on a national scale. Some of the blame for this predicament seems to have been cast on Major O'Halloran's son Henry, who in 1871 was said to have imported:

a cage of these British birds . . . liberating the feathered strangers at O'Halloran Hill. Well and good if Mr O'Halloran's importation would be satisfied with grapes at Lizard Lodge.¹

One thing which did not attack the vineyards of these mildly harassed vinegrowers was the insect pest *Phylloxera vastatrix*, which had destroyed many Victorian vineyards between 1870 and 1900. This serious pest was kept out of South Australia by strict quarantine measures which were made possible with the passing of the Phylloxera Act of 1899.*

With these and other assorted problems it would have been surprising if the men did not leave their women-folk high-and-dry on the social scene to discuss soil types, the merits of trench ploughing, grafting below soil level, rod or spur pruning, suitable planting distance between vines, the advantages of high or low trellising, aspects of irrigation and fermentation, not to mention the pros and cons of free distillation.

* Today South Australia leads the field in Australia in wine fruit production, with an annual output of 114 million litres (25 million gallons). The total national output is 160 million litres (35 million gallons)