

# THE PIONEER

THE BUDERIM HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

## OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Historical accounts from the Buderim – Mooloolaba area

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### A Cup of Buderim Coffee

by Bill Lavarack

Today a stroll down Buderim's main street will reveal at least nineteen shops selling cups of coffee, either to be consumed on the premises or taken away to drink elsewhere. Supermarket shelves are full of various forms of coffee for sale and many homes have a coffee machine or peculator. It really is a coffee-loving society. Yet in 1960 when I first came to Buderim, there was nowhere a customer could purchase a cup of coffee. Mind you there were none selling cups of tea either. Up to about the 1970s, the people of Buderim and other areas, including the cities, were tea drinkers and coffee was almost unknown to local people except perhaps in 'upper class' circles and then it was largely a beverage served after a meal.



My wife, Beverley says that her father, born on Buderim in 1905, would never have had a cup of coffee in his life. Other friends tell a similar tale and up to the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, tea was preferred by most Australians who were deeply committed to the Australian tradition of boiling the billy. How times have changed. Yet in the 1890s through to 1946 coffee growing was a major industry on Buderim and Buderim coffee was renowned for its flavour.

The coffee culture is by no means a recent phenomenon. Coffee drinking was first introduced into England from Arabia in the 1600s and coffee houses became a feature of community life through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were places where men gathered for discussions

and to conduct business away from the rowdy atmosphere of public houses. By the mid 17th century, there were over 300 coffee houses in London, attracting like-minded patrons, including merchants, shippers, brokers and artists<sup>1</sup>. In England coffee houses eventually declined and were virtually gone by the end of the eighteenth century, perhaps replaced by the rise of gentlemen's clubs.

## Coffee on Buderim

In Australia coffee came with the first fleet which carried plants and beans collected on the way at Rio de Janeiro<sup>2</sup>. However no plants survived the early days. Coffee was costly to import and was not a popular beverage before about 1970, although immigrants from Italy helped develop a taste for coffee and the first espresso machines were imported by Italian migrants to inner city Melbourne in the early 1950s. But there was a small but significant Australian market for coffee over 120 years ago and Buderim farmers were quick to take advantage. In 1872 Buderim pioneer Joseph Dixon brought coffee plants from Dutton Park in Brisbane. Coffee flourished in Buderim's climate and on Buderim's rich volcanic soil. In the 1880s G.H. Reibe was the first to grow coffee commercially on his farm what is now Orme Road, and was probably the first commercial grower in Australia<sup>3</sup>. Sugar was a major crop but declined the early 1890s, replaced by bananas and citrus.



Left: : Coffee bushes amongst the bananas.

Right: : The Buderim Tram passing through a stand of coffee bushes on top of Buderim about 1916.

Coffee was found to grow well in the shade of bananas. When the coffee plants grew larger the bananas could be removed leaving the coffee plants to flourish in full sun. On Buderim, farmers reared the young plants in a nursery and up to 1000 coffee plants per acre were planted, but sugar cane and bananas dominated in the latter half of the 19th century. The legislation that allowed cheap labour from the South Sea Islands was changed, making sugar less attractive for small holdings as the labour costs increased greatly. As a result, Queensland farmers were looking for other crops to grow and many turned to coffee.

## Transport

The rail from Brisbane reached Palmwoods and Woombye in 1891, but relatively speaking, Buderim was still somewhat remote and crops had to be transported to the railhead, often on steep, muddy, red-soil roads.

Sacks of dried coffee at Woombye rail station about 1910.

Before the Palmwoods to Buderim Tram in 1914, transport of heavy crops, such as bananas, was



<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, English coffeehouses in the 17th and 18th centuries.

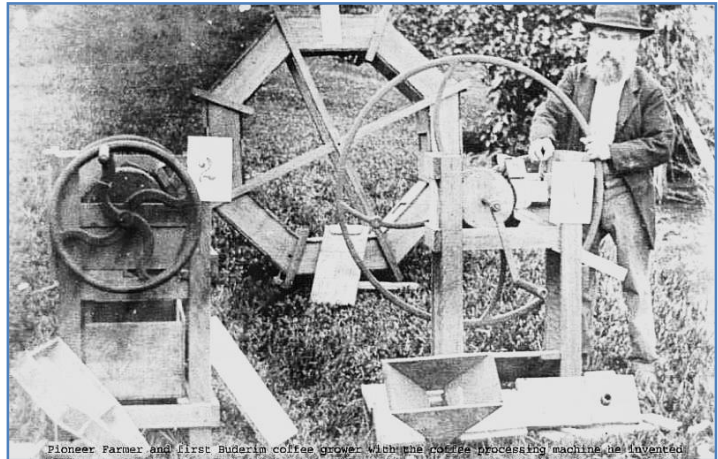
<sup>2</sup> Anon, 2019, *A brief history of Australian Coffee*, <https://www.corporatecoffee.com.au/blog/a-brief-history-of-australian-coffee>.

<sup>3</sup> S.P. Weir, *Gustav Reibe*, in the Pioneer series written for Buderim Historical Society, September 1989.

always a problem. Sea transport was also an option, but weather made sea transport unreliable and bananas were sometimes known to rot while awaiting a ship. Dried, ground coffee beans were a more compact commodity, much easier to handle and did not perish rapidly if not dealt with promptly. So, as sugar declined as a profitable crop about 1900, the mix of coffee shrubs grown under bananas became profitable.

**Coffee growers on Buderim [The first part of the following in *italics* is from the files of the Buderim Historical Society. Author unknown, possibly Stuart Weir or Esme Oliver.]**

*Gustav Riebe brought some shrubs from the gardens of the Queensland Acclimatization Society in Brisbane and the coffee flourished and was subsequently planted on many farms. Harry Board began the manufacture of roasted coffee on Buderim in the 1890s, packing the finished product in 6oz. and 12oz. tins. He had 10 acres (4 hectares) planted at that time and supplemented his crop by purchasing parchment coffee from the local growers. He carried on the business with the help of his wife and son until he died in 1919. His family continued to produced coffee until 1926 when J.J. Simpson bought the farm. Simpson produced coffee until 1946. The coffee making machinery in the slab hut attached to Pioneer Cottage was donated by Mr Simpson. He produced coffee until 1946 The last coffee from Buderim sold commercially was in 1939.*



Gustav Riebe with his coffee machine.



Coffee beans drying in the sun 1912.

Gustav Reibe grew coffee in 1901 on the farm which later was sold to the Wise family. He built a machine to remove the skin from the bean. Price Jones improved on

his design.

The seeds from the bean were then sun dried in shallow trays. About the same time Harry Board and his wife began the Buderim Mountain Coffee Company, with imported roasting equipment.



Gold Medal Diploma awarded to E.J. Burnett in 1899. On the certificate is the name 'Mr Ernest Jones Burnett' and the fact that it is for Coffee.

There were several other local growers including Ernest Burnett who was awarded a Gold Medal for an exhibit of ground coffee in the Greater Britain Exhibition in London in 1899, competing

against similar exhibits from around the world.

On October 19, 1906 on page 6, the *Brisbane Courier* reported as follows:

*'The coffee growers at Buderim Mountain are now busy harvesting and pulping the coffee crop. There is great difficulty in getting the pulped coffee dried, because of the absence of sunny days, and properly dried coffee is necessary to obtain the best market value. This season's crop is one of*

*the heaviest the district has had. The berries are large and of good quality. The demand for this coffee by the manufacturers is largely on the increase, and inquiries have been received from Sydney and Melbourne. This tends to show that Queensland coffee is making a market for itself. The prices have risen correspondingly, and growers should reap a good reward for their outlay. For several years past coffee was not a very payable crop, but it would now appear that its cultivation will be profitable. Labour for harvesting is difficult to obtain. The work of picking is more suitable for women and children, and it is not always possible to procure a sufficient number to enable the work of harvesting to be continually kept going.'*

By 1911 Buderim was the largest coffee growing area in Queensland and up to 20 tons of coffee was produced each year from Buderim. In the early days, there was a tax on imported coffee of tuppence per pound, placing the local industry in a very good position, together with the fact that the imported product was inferior to the high-class Buderim coffee.

In the second and third decades of the 1900s coffee became less important due to rising production costs. In 1924, it cost one shilling and three pence for a kerosene tin and constant work was needed to fill 10 tins per day<sup>1</sup>. There was a shortage of workers to pick the beans<sup>2</sup> and increasing competition from overseas areas with cheap labour, such as South America. In addition fruit crops such as citrus, bananas and pineapples became more competitive when the Palmwoods to Buderim tramway was built in December 1914. Between the wars the coffee crop was reduced on Buderim as it was too labour intensive and other crops were more profitable.

Coffee bushes growing in full sun on Buderim. Ca. 1920.



One who continued it on was J.J. Simpson and his family who purchased Harry Board's farm, growing and processing Buderim coffee from 1926 to 1949. In 1997 J.J. Simpson reported to Esme Oliver of BHS concerning the busy years of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as follows:

*Good pickers could pick 10 keroscene tins per day (daylight to dark). There was approximately 85% loss in weight from cherry coffee to roast beans. Approximately 600 trees are planted to one acre. The trees were topped at shoulder height and started to bear at seven years. Buderim large growers were: F. Wise, Lindsay brothers, E.J. Burnett, A. Jakeman. They grew about four acres each. Smaller g growers included: Huet, Beamish, Short brothers, Chadwick, Sorensen, Bishop. These growers grew coffee with other crops, mostly bananas and sold the cherry coffee to J.J. Simpson for processing<sup>3</sup>.*

### **How coffee was made on Buderim [The following in *italics* is from the files of the Buderim Historical Society. Author unknown.]**

*'Six to eight months after flowering, green, red and dark red 'cherries' are on the same branch: hand picking is needed to select the dark fully-ripe fruit. The lack of cheap, plentiful labour on Buderim made it uneconomical. The two beans in each fruit are squeezed from fleshy pulp which is discarded. The beans are covered with water and fermented for up to five days until fermentation ceases. This removes a sticky coating and also develops and enhances the flavour. The fermented*

<sup>1</sup> Sunshine Coast Council Heritage, *Backward Glance: Behind the Latte*, March 20, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *Nambour Chronicle*, December 21, 1923, p.6, Buderim the Beautiful.

<sup>3</sup> Esme Oliver 1997, *Coffee Industry Buderim 1885 – 1949*, Information given to Esme Oliver, June 1997, by Mr Alex Simpson, 112 Winston Road Sheldon, Queensland, Buderim Historical Society files.

*beans are then dried in the sun and regularly turned until a hard inner shell can be cracked off easily. This can be done tediously by hand but for domestic quantities a grist mill can be converted to remove the shell without damaging the bean. Next, a thin papery coating is rubbed off, leaving 'green' coffee which can be stored for up to 12 months without deteriorating. 'Purists' insist that coffee should be kept 'green' until shortly before use. Roasting at around 180° celsius should take place with beans in constant motion to prevent burning. Judging the degree of darkness is an acquired skill; beans roasted nearly black produce a bitter coffee. Roasting releases the aromatic oils which give coffee its flavour and therefore the beans should be ground and used within a few days.'*

In 1901 Gustav Reibe sold his farm to the Wise family and Peter Wise has continued the family tradition of coffee growing to the present day, but on a more limited basis. The Wise brothers had a business selling coffee and ginger products on the corner of Gloucester Road in the 1970s (see right.) At the time of writing, Peter Wise is still producing



limited quantities of coffee mostly for local sale. The major coffee growing area in Queensland is now the Atherton Tableland.

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### Further reading

**Anon**, 2019, *A brief history of Australian Coffee*, <https://www.corporatecoffee.com.au/blog/a-brief-history-of-australian-coffee>.

**Anon**, *Queenslander*, Coffee growing at Buderim Mountain, October 19, 1906, p.3.

**Crema Coffee Garage**, *The origins and a brief history of coffee*, <https://cremacoffeegarage.com.au/blog/origins-brief-history-coffee>.

**Ealing-Godbold, Christina**, 2021, *Buderim: The source of dream coffee beans in 19th century Queensland*, John Oxley Library, Brisbane, 30 November 2021.

**Sunshine Coast Council Heritage**, March 20, 2019, <https://heritage.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/About/Media-Releases/Backward-Glance-Behind-the-Latte-20/03/2019>.

**Wikipedia**, English Coffeehouses in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

### Sources

Much of the information included here came from the files of the Buderim Historical Society Inc. and from newspapers via Trove as mentioned in the text and above.

### Photographs

All photographs are from the collection of the Buderim Historical Society Inc. with the exception of the last image of the Wise Brothers' shop on Gloucester Road which is from a newspaper cutting.

### Acknowledgements

Peter Wise provided useful information on coffee growing on his property.