

## **The influence of an Individual – Arthur J Burns**

For most people, the connection of the surname “Burns” with our past history brings to mind the statue of Robbie Burns in the Octagon and the impact of Reverend Thomas Burns in the development of Dunedin city. However, often overlooked is the vital role of another member of the Burns family – Arthur Burns. If we look at his life we can see why he is widely thought of as the “founding father of Mosgiel” (1 p71) and the heritage that he has left.

Arthur John Burns was born in Scotland in 1830 and travelled with his parents to Port Chalmers in 1848 aboard the “Philip Laing” when he was 17 years old. He was the eldest of eight children. His father was Reverend Thomas Burns, a Presbyterian minister, who was one of a group from the Free Church who came to Dunedin to establish a Presbyterian settlement. (2 p13) His great uncle was the famous poet, Robert Burns.

Initially settling and farming with his family at Grant Braes on the Peninsula, Arthur soon moved to the plains and established a farm at East Taieri. He married Sarah Dickson in 1861 at East Taieri and had eleven children.

Arthur Burns was a highly influential figure in the development of the Taieri. One of the major reasons for this was that he had the foresight to see opportunities for both agriculture and industry on the Taieri. Although initially largely swampy, the Taieri plains were fairly quickly drained and cultivated and became an established agricultural area with the fertile soil producing good crops of grain and providing pasture for sheep and cattle grazing. Stands of local native forest were used for timber for the growing settlement. Arthur came from an influential family and the Burns family must have also been reasonably wealthy because they were able to buy land in Dunedin as well as large areas on the Taieri.

Arthur appears to have been an ambitious hard working man, who is described as having “foresight and ...enthusiasm”. (2 p15) He saw the potential that the Taieri had to become a successful agricultural area and prospered and became an employer of many people. (3 p21) His farm on the Taieri was named Mossgiel, after his family’s farm in Ayrshire, Scotland and this legacy lives on in the name of Mosgiel Township, proudly displayed today in “Hollywood” style on the edge of the town.

In addition to farming, Arthur also ran a flour mill, a saw mill, a woollen mill and became active in politics. By the age of 26 he was on the Otago Provincial Council as the representative of the Taieri and he became a Justice of the Peace a year later. He was on a number of other committees that were involved with developing roads, the port and by the age of 35 was elected to the General Assembly (Parliament). (2 p15-16) Arthur

Burns' influence on the Taieri area was not only because of his farming and industrial activities but also due to his involvement in local and national politics. He was also active in the Church and in cultural pursuits such as the Burns Club celebrating the memory of his uncle, the poet Robert Burns.

His establishment of a woollen mill had the most significant impact on the growth of the Taieri area and was the reason for the formation of the town of Mosgiel. Towards the end of the 1860s, the province of Otago was looking to find new business opportunities because the influence of the gold rush was decreasing. In 1868, the Otago Provincial Council offered a bonus of 1500 pounds for whoever produced the first 5000 yards of woollen cloth in the district. At this stage in Otago there were large numbers of sheep but only a very small scale weaving industry and most woollen cloth was still imported. (2 p17-18) The offer was not taken up by anyone at first, but by 1870 Arthur Burns decided to travel to Britain to buy machinery to run a woollen mill on the Taieri. He also wanted to bring experienced workers back to work in the factory. (2 p12) When he returned to New Zealand, he immediately started building a woollen mill in Mosgiel, next door to his old flour mill with the plans he had brought back. He also built housing for his workers because he had a reputation for being a fair employer and a supporter of the "8 hour day". (4) By the 27th of October 1871, woollen cloth was being produced and Arthur Burns had a pair of trousers made for himself from the first fabric. Burns had taken quite a big financial risk in deciding to establish a woollen mill on the Taieri, but with time it paid off, for him personally and for the Taieri.

It took a few months for the local woollen product to be accepted by customers but then demand grew rapidly. Over the next few years the mill gradually expanded with more machinery being imported, more buildings built and more staff hired. Having a woollen mill in Mosgiel contributed significantly to the development of the Taieri. Local Taieri farmers benefited by having a place to sell their wool and gradually became richer. The mill attracted workers not only to work in the mill itself, but also builders, tradesmen and transport operators. (2 p44) In the growing township of Mosgiel, "there were new people, new houses, more businesses, larger opportunities for employment." It was said that sooner or later every "branch of trade or commerce" would benefit from the woollen mill on the Taieri. (5 p58)

Roads and railways rapidly expanded as the woollen mill required good transport services and generated more money for the area. In the mid 1870s a new railway station was built close to the woollen mill and the centre of town, which made it easier for workers to get to the mill and goods to be transported to Dunedin to be sold or exported. (5 p61) The woollen mill encouraged more people to come to the area, which meant more children requiring more schools. The mill also had its own "preaching station" perhaps reflecting Arthur Burns' religious background and his continued involvement with the Church on the Taieri. (6 p179) The Church has always been involved in the

development of Dunedin, Mosgiel and Otago. Settlers from Scotland's Free Church under men like Thomas Cargill and Reverend Thomas Burns wanted to have a society where the habits and principles of Presbyterians were important and the Church would give moral leadership. (7 p34&39). They wanted settlers to help build a community where there were good working conditions and housing and actively promoted the idea that if you worked hard you could make a better life for yourself and your family. Arthur appears to have taken on his father's ideas and succeeded. Arthur Burns looked after his workers, for example, by paying fair wages, helping with housing and providing spiritual support. His woollen mill and the wool industry that supplied the mill were directly responsible for much of the growth and development of the Taieri. The mill provided employment and income for Mosgiel for years.

The woollen mill started by Arthur Burns ran for over a hundred years until the year 2000 and it produced woollen goods famous throughout the country and overseas. It attracted workers and an increased investment in sheep farming to supply the wool for the mill. This meant that it was responsible for generating wealth for the Taieri. It supported people by providing jobs in the mill itself until quite recently and also attracted other businesses and infrastructure such as roads and railways, which then encouraged the development of the Taieri further. Some of the mill buildings are still standing off Factory Road and are used by other businesses today, therefore continuing to contribute to the economy of Mosgiel. A homestead built for Arthur in 1876 still stands in Church Road and was used as part of a Catholic Seminary from 1899. It is now Burns Lodge and is part of a conference centre. (8) His earlier home no longer stands but was located in what is now Duke Street, Mosgiel.

Arthur died at his home in Heriot Row, Dunedin on the 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1901. He is buried in the family plot in the Southern Cemetery. Arthur Burns had a lasting impact on Mosgiel and the wider Taieri area. His vision of the Taieri as a productive agricultural area has been fulfilled. His legacy remains – amongst these, the name of Mosgiel Township, the buildings from his woollen mill on Factory Road, Burns Street, the former Arthur Burns School, the Arthur Burns Early Learning Centre and Burns Lodge on Church Street. He truly was a founding father who has left us with an impressive heritage.

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## References

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