**A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN SERICULTURE (SILK) INDUSTRY?**

The South Australian Company received 16 varieties of mulberry (*Morus alba*) from Marseille in 1844, the South Australian climate being thought suitable for their propagation as the basis of a sericulture (silk) industry.The European silkworm industry had been decimated by disease in the 1840s and the mulberry plantations razed. By the 1870s, the South Australian Chamber of Manufactures was seeking to encourage new fibre industries including wool, silk, hemp for rope, and aloe for paper. A newly created Adelaide Silk Industry Association was extolling the potential for a silk industry.

Mulberries, as well as olives, coffee and tea were being hypothesised as alternatives to wheat, whose yields were declining due to nutritional exhaustion in cropping soils (See Fertilizers link to [https://www.pir.sa.gov.au/aghistory/industries/cereals\_and\_\_grains/wheat/fertilizers](https://www.pir.sa.gov.au/aghistory/industries/cereals__and__grains/wheat/fertilizers)). Growing mulberries and cultivating silkworms would be an employment option for those without work in the colony of South Australia.

Over twelve hectares of white mulberry trees were planted in 1870 at the newly-established Parkside Lunatic Asylum, then having an area of 54 hectares in a rural environment. Asylum residents under the supervision of the Botanic Gardens, undertook the trenching and planting. Along with later picking of leaves, these occupations were thought to be pleasant pursuits for the patients . More were planted in 1871, the assistance of Ernest Heyne of F.B. Heyne and Co being sought to possibly secure additional young trees from interstate. A further 5,700 trees were planted in 1873-74.

A silkworm “Magnanerie” (house) was erected at the Asylum for the production of silkworms and their cocoons for silk. Charlotte Lindsay of Hindmarsh Valley was sent to a Mulberry Farm at Corowa in Victoria to learn to manage a magnanerie. By 1880, sufficient of the mulberry stand had grown to the point that the Resident Medical Officer at the Asylum, Dr W. L. Cleland, was able to exhibit silk cocoons at an exhibition in London.

Four hectares of trees were planted at the Magill Industrial Home (Orphanage) by Thomas Reed, Chairman of the Destitute Board, assisted by Dr Richard Schomburgk, Director of the Botanic Gardens. Reed had previously worked in Derby, UK, for a company that had three silk factories and employed 900 hands. By 1886, Septimus Pizey of Morialta, an early protagonist for the silk industry, had 20,000 silkworms being fed from the Orphanage’s trees.

Meanwhile, the Adelaide Silk Industrial Association leased ten hectares of land from Edward Bagot, adjacent to his boiling down works at Hilton on the site of the former Thebarton Racecourse. Investors included Joachim Wendt (watchmaker) Edward Bagot (stock agent) ,Thomas Elder (pastoralists), Caleb Peacock (parliamentarian, and tanner) Arthur Boyle (miner), Samuel Davenport, J.R. Gurner (dentist) , James Marshall (draper), Richard Baker (solicitor and politician), Edwin Smith (brewer), E.S. Wigg (stationer), Frederick Waterhouse (Museum curator) and John Tyas (later University Registrar). Within four years, the sale of silkworm eggs (“seed”) and rooted yearling mulberry trees would recoup the investors’ expenses. When the Association was wound up in 1874, its trees were transferred to Parkside.

The Conservator of Forests, J Ednie Brown, offered to plant 20-40 Ha of white mulberries in the Wirrabara Forest Reserve from cuttings taken from Parkside. Trees were also planted at Bundaleer, Kapunda, on the Port Road, various railway yards, the Salisbury Cemetery and in school yards where it was assumed the children would tend them.

Samuel Davenport, who successfully encouraged the establishment of an olive industry (see [https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/handle/2440](https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/handle/2440/36582)) had studied silkworm culture in the south of France in his youth, suggested that “cultivating and picking the mulberry leaves and spinning the cocoons would cultivate social cohesion. Prisoners, the indigent and orphans were ripe for employment in sericulture along with the wasted forces of women and children who spend the year in "injurious idleness”. Repeatedly, the mentally infirm, the old and children aged about ten years were singled out as suitable for sericulture.

If sufficient trees were planted, the consequent cocoon production would justify the establishment of a “filature” (a place dedicated to the reeling and spinning of raw silk filaments). However, Reginald Champ had estimated it would take a quarter of a million mulberry trees to establish a viable sericulture industry in the NSW Illawarra region and a similar figure would apply to South Australia.

In 1887, Dr Cleland grew 2 ha of mulberries to feed his magnanerie, calico-lined for ventilation, paling and earth floor, mouse proof, at the back of his residence on the asylum grounds. He sent his cocoons to Calcutta for reeling.

South Australia never secured sufficient mulberry trees upon which to base a sericulture industry – it was easier to develop pastoralism.

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