

Exhibition Boot Co History

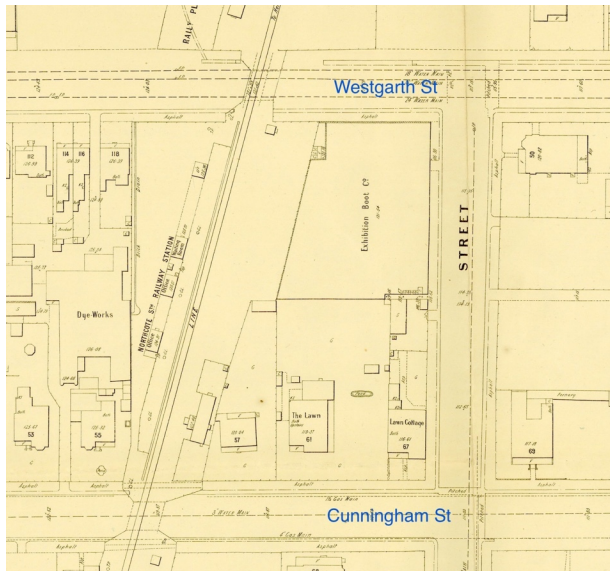
P Michell, 2019

Now somewhat forgotten, for some fifteen years arguably it was Northcote's second largest employer. From 1902 to 1916 the Exhibition Boot Co occupied a factory between the former Northcote South Railway station and Ross St. At its peak it was employing some 160 people. In addition to manufacturing boots and shoes Exhibition (EBC) operated a string of retail stores across Melbourne and into the larger country towns.

[Advt - Advocate 25 Mar 1899]



EBC was formed by Francis Burdett and Julian Roelens in Fitzroy in 1872. Initially called Roelens & Burdett. Both were experienced boot makers. They soon built a three storey building in Brunswick St to manufacture high quality boots and shoes. They exhibited at the Great Melbourne Exhibition in 1880 and thus took on that business name. In 1891 Burdett bought out Roelens. The business thrived with advertisements for staff.



The Burdett family lived at 'The Lawn' at 51 Cunningham St in Westgarth, near the original Northcote South railway station from at least 1873. The house was quite large - eight rooms, garden, yard, coach-house, stable, paddock, gas and water. Originally the block took up most of the land to Ross St.

[MMBW plan - Factory & 'The Lawn']

The family often advertising for help to run the house. *'Wanted: man to dig the garden - about 1/4 acre'*; *'Wanted: Steady general servant - able to cook*

and washing pot out.' Seemingly the wife, Catherine Burdett either had another servant or was happy to make beds. A few years later advertising *'Woman Wanted: Housework, plain cooking, no beds or washing'*.

Francis Burdett, the boot manufacturer was well regarded and served on a jury in 1876. With the others went to Ballarat in 1876, regarding a mining incident.

[Advt: The Herald, 20 Jan 1909]

1891 was significant year for women. The 'Women's Suffrage Petition' of some 30,000 signatories was presented to parliament and helped gain the women's vote. Burdett family in Cunningham St signed the petition: Catherine Mary, (not as Mrs Burdett), Francis (husband), William F (son) and Rachel Bell. The latter probably being a servant.

In 1895 Francis Burdett dies and his wife Catherine Mary takes over the business. The business was successful as Francis left an estate worth over £25,000. Quite a sum for the period.

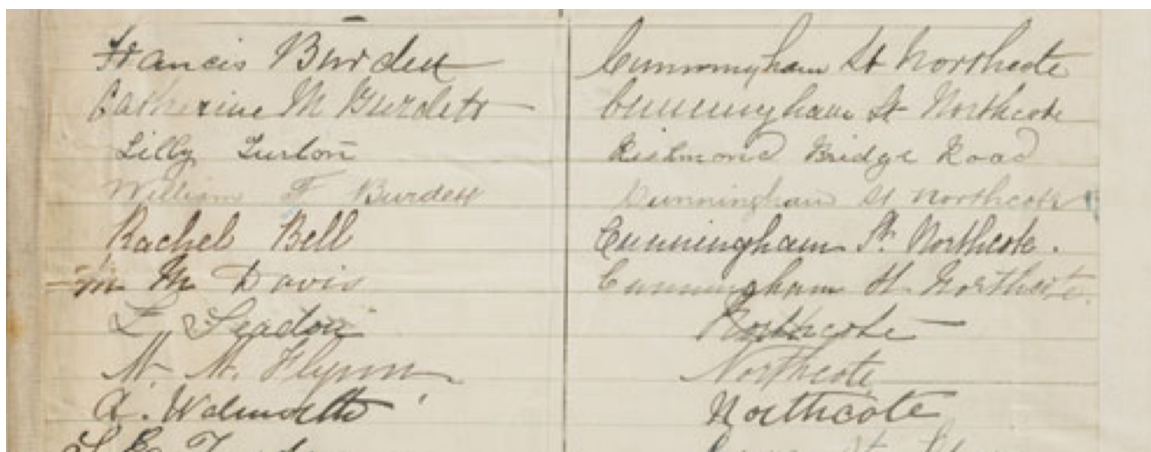
EBC in addition to manufacturing also took the lead in retail. Opening retail shops under their name.



Interestingly in 1902 Catherine builds a new factory behind her house at 54 Westgarth St. Well located next to the railway for distributing goods. Next door was Lawrence's Dye Works. The Burdetts lived in a formidable house 'The Lawn' complete with a pond. Next door to arguably one of the earliest houses in Northcote - No 47 Cunningham St. It is interesting to speculate why she moved the factory in 1902.

Was it because of the planned movement of the railway station to the opposite side of Westgarth St (in 1912), thus freeing up railways tenure of the existing land holding? Or was the land purchased more recently?

Catherine Burdett was interested in woman's rights. Helped establish Northcote Branch of Women's Suffragette Movement. This probably accounts for the good working conditions for women in the new Exhibition Boot factory. Over 40 women / girls were employed. They had their own lunch room, toilets and 'accessories', in the new purpose built factory. A rare example of women being treated with dignity at the time.



The factory had a brick frontage to Westgarth St of some 90 feet and extended down Ross St for 150 feet. The side walls and roof were galvanised iron. Roof designed in 'saw tooth' style with glass to facilitate lighting. A 14hp gas engine powered the overhead pulleys, driving the various machines.

It is highly probable that Catherine Burdett saw the three storey building in Fitzroy as a poor place to manufacture and hence the establishment of a single storey building. More than likely with more up to date manufacturing plant.

The EBC took its employees on picnics and there was a silver trophy for a walking contest. Around 1904, E J Dungan walked from the factory to Heidelberg and back, a distance of some eight miles. Doing the return trip in seventy minutes!

In 1910 a number of fires beset the company. On 16 June, The Westgarth factory burnt down with the fire brigade unable to do much because of the poor mains water supply. Apparently not an uncommon at the time. Extensive to plant, leather stock and building. Estimated at £20,000. Though EBC was fully insured. Luckily the night was still and the flames did not reach nearby Lawrence's Dry Cleaning & Dye Works. Interestingly there were a number of fires at their retail stores all over the state. At least three noted. The Ballarat store was set alight twice! In May and later December a fire spread to the store from the nearby Bull and Mouth Hotel.

From 1907 Catherine moved to 'The Crescent' in Sandringham, overlooking Port Phillip Bay, where she will reside until her death. She would have been around 62 years and perhaps decided to transfer the management to her son William Francis.

In 1912 there was consolidation in the boot manufacturing and retail businesses in Victoria. The state being the dominant manufacturer for boots and shoes in Australia. By now EBC was the second largest retailer in the state with around 20 stores in Melbourne and the country.


In 1914 EBC closed a number of stores. Two years later in 1916 the manufacturing business was advertised for sale as a going concern. In Jan 2017 the business in Westgarth closed and the building and plant auctioned. The building is demolished and houses built down Ross St.

William Francis Burdett had lived at his father's house 'The Lawn', 61 Cunningham St for many years. By 1925 moved to 'Holmcroft' in Ivanhoe at 81 Marshall St, with his family, where he died in 1948 aged 76 years. 'The Lawn' was eventually demolished. The site now a 1960s set of two storey flats.

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[Advt: The Herald, 5 Dec 1908 / Chinese Times, 16 March 1907]]

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 就士大於禮女起每二舖
 近佛金大相童價對號公
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