

# Dover's Little Known Export

## Part II

— Peter W Sherrad —

*We pick up the story with Frank having died in 1913, age 54, of pneumonia leaving his heirs, sons Eric 17 and Sydney 14. In WWI Eric had enlisted in the army and saw action in Gallipoli and on the Western Front and was severely gassed on at least two occasions necessitating his repatriation to England for treatment.*

In South Australia meanwhile the Public Trustee took control of the Hamilton winery and vineyards over a period of six precarious years. Soon after Frank died in 1913, Sydney aged 15 years, ran off to sea sailing on a windjammer between Port Adelaide and Plymouth. During his time as a seaman he rounded Cape Horn several times thereby joining an elite group of men known as 'Cape Horners'.

In 1919 Eric returned from the war and with Sydney already back from the sea, a partnership between the two brothers began which proved to be extremely beneficial and productive for the health and growth of the business. Eric, the older brother as Managing Director, proved to be a formidable marketing operator and spent up to six months a year travelling in England, and also made some fifteen visits to Canada, promoting Hamilton's wines. The outcome was not only beneficial to the Hamilton family but for all Australian wine producers. In London Eric saw the unrealistically high prices of French wines and realised a market existed for Australian wines at a better price but, importantly, which would still give a healthy return.

Sydney meanwhile took over as winemaker aided by a cultured modest

Russian emigrant, called John Seeck, who was a talented and highly skilled experienced winemaker from Europe. He joined Hamiltons in 1929 and stayed until his retirement in 1944. He had an interesting past having studied winemaking at Heidelberg University in Germany and for several years later in France and Spain. After further travel, including a visit to Australia, he returned to pre-revolutionary Russia but the Czarist secret police made him flee to St Petersburg from where he was able to leave Russia smuggled aboard a British ship. Back in Australia after tasting samples of Sydney Hamilton's wines, John Seeck politely suggested "they are in need of some improvement"! And over the years improvement was pushed to the limits.

Sydney, who was married to Mavis, spent some forty years in the family vineyard and winery improving the business before establishing in 1974, in his retirement, Leconfield Winery at Coonawarra in the south east of South Australia some 250 miles from Adelaide. In 1977 the first crop of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes was



*Leconfield and Richard Hamilton Vineyard & Shed*

harvested at this new site and in 1980 the vintage produced was pronounced to be "terrific".

During the inter-war years Sydney's innovative style pioneered the use of mechanical refrigeration in winemaking in Australia which was hugely important as it allowed control of the rate of fermentation of the wine in the otherwise hot climate. 1935 saw the installation of the first such cooling unit but by 1944 a much larger underground cold fermentation cellar with refrigeration plant was excavated which enabled the winery to handle greater quantities of all types of white wine grapes regardless of the climatic conditions at the time. The business flourished under the name of 'Hamilton's Ewell Vineyards Proprietary Limited'.

A light white wine with a slight spritzig called "Ewell Moselle" was developed in 1929 and became a top seller throughout Australia. Experimentation and inventiveness resulted in closed wooden vats fermentation being developed which excluded oxygen in a key part of the process resulting in the high-quality delicate "Ewell Moselle" that was produced. Previously wine fermentation took place in open cement tanks which created oxidation and hygiene problems. Sydney's experiments with refrigeration led to further pioneering initiatives including huge cellars being excavated at Marion. The net result of Eric and Sydney's partnership period was a seismic shift in wine making, much influenced by temperature control turning the "Ewell Moselle" into a "great wine" and enabling Hamiltons to produce quality dry red wines which they called Burgundy and Claret.

Together Eric, the marketer who was married to Doreen, and Sydney the

innovative engineer, rebuilt and expanded the winery; they installed a distillery and restructured the company in 1935 as 'Hamilton's Ewell Vineyards Proprietary Limited'. This period in the family business produced a veritable wine revolution and by 1955 the "Ewell Moselle" was declared the best white wine in Australia and then came Hamilton's Springton "claret" as Sydney was constantly refining his winemaking processes. Sadly, this halcyon period came to an end when the two brothers fell out and Sydney resigned in 1955 moving to Happy Valley some 15 miles south of Adelaide. There in retirement he planted vines and was to work as a vigneron for another 20 years dreaming of and yearning constantly to make the classic Australian dry red "claret" style of wine.

In the 1970's Hamilton's Ewell Vineyards declined and in 1979 they were bought out and the winery closed. In point of fact much of the original vineyard site fell victim to the spread of Adelaide suburbs being sold for housing, education, a drive-in-theatre, and bus depot among other uses, so winemaking and grape growing in the Marion district which is just 6 miles from Adelaide came under siege.

Meanwhile Frank's fourth son, Burton Wyndham Hamilton (1904 - 1994), who was only eight years old when his father Frank died in 1913, had been carving out a successful life for himself as a viticulturist/winemaker but only after experiencing other aspects of Australian life. At school he excelled in Classics and Athletics but in 1921, at the age of 17, encouraged by his maternal uncle James Burton Ayliffe, he took himself off to the Outback and spent a couple of years of hard physical work on a vast sheep farm called Lairg on the Great Australian Bight. Aged 23 he headed far north to a remote

cattle station in the outback of South Australia. To reach it he had to travel by the historic "Ghan" train to the end of the line at Oodnadatta and then travel the final hundred miles by camel! After these formative years he moved east, this time to the Elm Park sheep property near Albury in New South Wales. Soon after he borrowed a large sum of money, secured against his shares in the Hamilton Ewell Vineyards, to buy in 1927 a large farm nearby called "Stony Ridges" with the intention of becoming a sheep farmer. In the event it turned out to be a calamitous venture because of a great drought and the onset of the Great Depression where prices per pound for wool collapsed almost overnight by 90% from 9/- to 9d (people senior in years will know this as nine shillings to nine, pre-decimal, pence). He found himself in a dire situation and the farm was repossessed within two years and his dream of independence had ended. The farm was purchased by none other than his uncle James Burton Ayliffe. Eventually Burton Wyndham Hamilton returned to Adelaide in 1935 with his young wife Gida Mott from Albury, whom he had married in 1932.

Burton initially became the maltster in the thriving family winery and distillery under Eric and Sydney. In 1947 in a major step, Burton purchased the historic Hut Block vineyard (est. 1892) in McLaren Vale, some 25 miles south of Adelaide, now a cornerstone of Richard Hamilton Wines, and later he bought more vineyard land in McLaren Vale and nearby Willunga. Among his purchases was the acquisition of two acres of Grenache vines which, in due time, would produce a great quality wine called Burton's Vineyard Grenache. He had a strong preference for hand tended vines from planting to pruning and harvesting and as a result of his endeavours he further diversified into

Shiraz, Chardonnay and Grenache vines. Burton had also worked for a 10 year period in the Hamilton's laboratory under Sydney from 1948, then later as a travelling salesman for the business in the late 1950s but much of his time was still devoted to experimenting in laboratory work as he sought to perfect his wines.

He gave encouragement to his second youngest son, Richard, who had expressed an interest in keeping the Hamilton name going in the wine game and who had himself bought a modest vineyard and started a winery in McLaren Vale. The wheel came full circle when Burton sold his vineyard and his grapes and gave his tuition and wisdom to young Richard Hamilton (the name where it all started!) who then produced his first vintage in 1972. It is a family belief that without Burton the Hamilton wine line would have ended but because Burton was so innovative and encouraging today's strong position of Richard Hamilton Wines is due almost entirely to his efforts. He enabled Richard to buy an 80 acre block of land at auction by physically raising Richard's arm for the winning bid! In a tribute to his wife he named a Rosé after her - Gida's Rosé. Richard has made it clear he could not have made the business so successful without his father's help.

The current Richard Hamilton is both a prominent Adelaide doctor, specifically a plastic and reconstructive surgeon, and a winemaker who, after the Eric and Sydney period ended and Hamilton's was bought out and closed in 1979, is responsible for resurrecting the Hamilton name and continuing the Hamilton wine line. Supported by his uncle Sydney Hamilton as well as by a Frenchman, Maurice Ou (who had been offered a job originally by Sydney in 1946), Richard built up the family's McLaren Vale vineyard holdings

initially under the watchful eye of his father, Burton, and Richard Hamilton Wines was opened in 1972.

Maurice Ou was the third European winemaker to offer expertise to the Hamilton family and came to Hamilton's just after the war in 1946; initially for two years but that service extended itself over thirty-two years of passionate winemaking. Maurice had studied Oenology at the University of Montpellier and then learned the skills of the winemaking trade in great French vineyards in places like Bordeaux, Beaune and Montpellier, so he was professionally well qualified to be Chief Hamilton winemaker after Sydney retired and he brought with him his Gallic personality and sense of humour as well!

Such was Uncle Sydney's passion for wine making, at the age of 76 he came out of retirement to plant a vineyard in 1974 with the aim of producing a "damn good" red wine – perhaps the best red wine in Australia based on the Cabernet Sauvignon grape. As mentioned earlier in this article he chose a site in the remote Coonawarra winemaking district some 250 miles south of Adelaide and called the vineyard Leconfield after an English ancestor, Lord Leconfield. Through the 1970's and early 1980's numerous award-winning Cabernet Sauvignon wines were made by Sydney, allowing him to achieve his lifelong dream. The most notable was the 1980 Leconfield Cabernet. In 1981 Sydney sold Leconfield to his nephew, the young Richard Hamilton, so the strands of Hamilton wines (Burton's and Sydney's enterprises) came together under one ownership once again.

Richard Hamilton the tailor of Dover in Kent started it all back in the early-mid C19 and Dr Richard Hamilton his 5th

generation direct descendant (great, great, great grandson) is at the helm today together with his son Richard Thomas Hamilton (aka Tom). Quite a story and it all started in an emigration from Dover to the colony of South Australia!

Perhaps Society members should encourage local wine merchants to support and stock the classic heritage red and white wines produced on these family-owned South Australian vineyards where both traditional and modern winemaking techniques ensure a tasty fruit flavoured quality wine selection – whether it be in Riesling, Almond Grove Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, among others, from McLaren Vale (or the outstanding Shiraz for that matter). Leconfield and Richard Hamilton Wines have the quality and variety developed for every palate reflecting well on the 6 generations of the Richard Hamilton dynasty who created and developed this vineyard and winemaking operation over nearly two centuries of endeavour, innovation and modernisation.

Whether it was caused by the need to dodge the Revenue Officers or simply a need to be a pioneer settler and make wine as well, Dover's legacy to the Australian



*Richard & Jette Hamilton Toast the Family Success*

wine industry is the enduring name of Richard Hamilton!

I am deeply indebted and immensely grateful to Dr Richard Hamilton, Proprietor of Leconfield and Richard Hamilton Wines, and to Kate Mooney, the Marketing and Events Co-ordinator [www.leconfieldwines.com](http://www.leconfieldwines.com), for their invaluable help with providing details of the history of the family and for their patience in answering questions raised in the research for this story. Also my sincere thanks to Martin Gordon, who has researched the Hamilton Wine history and who wrote the scripts for Richard Hamilton's two highly decorated

documentary films "WineLine 1" and "WineLine 2 Odyssey". I would also like to acknowledge information derived from the book "Colony" written by Reg Hamilton in respect of Old Dover and the Hamilton wine making industry as well as providing an interesting insight into the history of the democratic processes and institutions of South Australia. In fact a brief review of the book "Colony" has previously been given by the Newsletter's illustrious Editor in March 2011 issue number 70 page 27. Reg Hamilton is a sixth-generation descendant of Richard Hamilton and a grandson of Sydney Hamilton. He lives in Melbourne and is Deputy President at Fair Work Australia, being a judge of that court.

## The Dover Millionaire

Derek Leach

In the 1970s a box containing 100 love letters from Helen to Frank was found in a Lloyds Bank safe, having been deposited some time during the First World War. The finder put them in his loft for 40 years before passing them on to an author living in Toddington.

The incredible story of Helen Nelson was pieced together from the love letters and some research. Her colourful life included running a pub in Toddington for 34 years. Before she was 21 she married Edward Randell, proprietor of the Dover Empire Palace of Varieties in Market Square. Helen's father was absent and she was given away by her brother; the best man was ill and was replaced by a local man. There were no relations of the groom present. Even stranger, the married couple did not attend the reception for 60 people, but left straight away from the church for

their honeymoon in Scarborough.

What do we know about the groom who was born Edward Randell Smith in 1878; Smith being the surname of his unmarried mother, Emily Jane, who married the father three years later despite her being 32 years younger. Father was a City businessman who left £12,699.11s.1d to his widow (worth about £1million today), who died three years later aged 43, leaving £1558.15s.2d to her son, Edward, then aged 16, when he became 21. Before he married Helen and less than six months after his 21st birthday in 1899, he and Mr. J. Engleman took over the management of Chevers Palace, Dover's music hall on a seven year lease and changed its name. Edward soon became known as 'Dover's Millionaire'.

Helen and Frank lived at 3 East Cliff, but