

The H. V. McKay Collection

The H. V. McKay Collection relates to archival material of Hugh Victor McKay (1865–1926) and the companies that carried on his successful agricultural manufacturing enterprise. It charts the remarkable business career of McKay and the rapid development of Australian agriculture and industry in the 20th century.

Since the 1960s, Museum Victoria has received material from family members and past employees as part of its Technology Collection. In 1993, Massey Ferguson Iseki donated a large collection of documentary material to Museum Victoria and to The University of Melbourne's Business Archives.

The H. V. McKay Collection documents key events in the business and personal life of McKay through private notes, legal papers and newspaper articles. The Collection also houses a number of important objects relating to the company. These include a fully restored 1906 harvester and the original McKay bush 'smithy'. The audiovisual part of the collection contains over 13 000 images and 700 films.

Museum Victoria's Trade Literature Collection provides information on all phases of the McKay manufacturing process. It holds design plans, field test results, operation manuals and product catalogues.

H. V. McKay

Hugh McKay was a farmer who became one of Australia's leading industrialists. During his long business career he also devoted time and energy to advancing national interests. McKay was consulted by the Federal Government in matters of defence and economic policy, and contributed financial support to the Royal Flying Doctor Service.



Hugh Victor McKay in about 1912
Source: Museum Victoria

McKay grew up on a farm in Drummartin near Elmore, Victoria. At the age of 18 he responded to Government incentives to produce an agricultural harvester that combined the functions of stripping, threshing, winnowing and bagging. In 1884 he developed the successful stripper harvester in a log smithy. He capitalised on its efficiency and established manufacturing works at Ballarat, before moving to Braybrook Junction near Melbourne in 1906.

The new factory, known as the Sunshine Harvester Works, produced a range of agricultural equipment and was the largest industrial plant in Australia. At its peak the company employed 3000 workers and the work site covered more than 30 hectares.

The complex was completely self-sufficient, manufacturing every item required including metal tubing, nuts and bolts, woodwork, and even the bikes used by plant supervisors. Mass-production techniques reduced labour costs and increased McKay's competitive edge.

The 'Sunshine Family'

In 1907 the name Braybrook Junction was changed to Sunshine in recognition of the importance of McKay's industrial works to the locality. McKay's business vision encompassed not only the creation of an industrial

complex at Sunshine but the development of a thriving community.



Advertisement for 'The Sunshine' harvester
Source: Museum Victoria

McKay implemented major infrastructure projects, including public buildings, parklands and a school and library. He also organised access by his workers to housing, which could be purchased on freehold title through interest-free loans. These were important schemes for social and industrial harmony and helped the company foster the concept of the 'Sunshine Family'.

Visitor Information

An appointment to access the H. V. McKay Collection may be made by arrangement with the appropriate curator.

Further Reading

Lack, J. 1986. 'Hugh McKay'. In B. Nairn and G. Serle (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne University Press.

Lack, J. 1990. The Legend of H. V. McKay. *Victorian Historical Journal* 61(2,3), 124–157.

In reality, McKay had a complex relationship with his workers and organised labour. He respected his employees as individuals but was strongly opposed to radical unionism. Conflict erupted with the Harvester Works Strike in 1911, when McKay supported 12 of his workers who refused to join the Agricultural Implement Makers Union.

Global relations

McKay farm machinery was sold internationally. Sunshine Harvester Works developed Australia's early export markets to Argentina, Chile, New Zealand, Russia and South Africa.

The company competed successfully with local manufacturers but found itself in difficulty trying to compete against industrial conglomerates of the United States. McKay's response was to fight vigorously to obtain tariff protection for Australian industry, putting his case before a Royal Commission. In 1906, largely as a result of McKay's efforts, the Federal Government passed legislation giving some tariff protection.

The last 100 years have seen changes to the name of the McKay Company, highlighting the shift towards a global economy, changing fortunes in the agricultural industry, and increasing foreign ownership and control. After McKay's death in 1926 the company was gradually absorbed by various global corporations (Massey Ferguson, Iseki and Agco) and stopped manufacturing equipment in the 1980s.