

The Legacy of Benjamin Dunkerley

Benjamin Dunkerley was a man born into a time of great change, born in a time when the Industrial Revolution had its hands firmly clasped around the necks of the cottage industry and the skilled labourers who were left behind. He was one those unfortunate people. New machines and methods from around the world had made their way to the town of Stockport in England, revolutionising its industries. Skills and methods of past generations were constantly being superseded and the skills of thousands became redundant. Usually as the industries changed workers' skills could be adapted for different processes and this allowed for easy changeovers. These changes often occurred quickly and when industries fell into depression unemployment would skyrocket.¹

When Dunkerley was born in 1839 the cotton industry was strong. After the silk-making industry had died out by 1772 large mills were sold off and were converted for cotton spinning. New machinery helped the cotton trade take off.² In 1841 the Stockport census shows that nearly everyone in Dunkereley's household were cotton weavers and that there were hatters living nearby.³ Dunkerley chose to be trained in the art of hat making. This later proved to be a risky decision as the 1871 Stockport census states that he was living with his family as an unemployed hatter.⁴ Things were not looking good, but in the long run it was a great decision because he made the move to Tasmania in search of work. He changed his life for the better, he let Australia meet the world through his inventions, and now his legacy lives on, with Akubra hats.

Benjamin Dunkerley was born in Cheshire, England in the city of Stockport where the arts of hat making and cotton weaving were important within his family and community. He was destined to become a hatter. He would later develop such competence with hat making machinery that he made occasional trips to Germany to help manufacturers set up operations.⁵ Working with machinery for felt and hat making was to be his future.

In June 1858 he married Harriet Smith in Stockport.⁶ In the same year Harriet gave birth to John. They had five more children together before the families move to Tasmania, four of which are; Joseph in 1863, William in 1865, Herbert in 1870 and Annie in 1872.⁷ Dunkerley was unemployed in 1871 and he had obviously exhausted all of his options in Stockport. The hatting industry by that stage was in depression and workers were said to be suffering "great distress and destitution."⁸ The felt hat making industry in Stockport was introduced from the 1650s using tools and processes which would still be recognisable two hundred years later, therefore Dunkerley would have still been using them.⁹ As the

1 Anon, 11-11-2002, 'The Mills are Gone but They Have Left a Legacy of Industry', <http://www.stockportexpress.co.uk> Retrieved 16-7-08.

2 Anon, 11-11-2002, 'The Mills are Gone but They Have Left a Legacy of Industry', <http://www.stockportexpress.co.uk> Retrieved 16-7-08.

3 1841 Stockport census, www.ancestry.com

4 1871 Stockport census, www.ancestry.com

5 Bowen, J. *The Akubra Hat*, Weldon Publishing, 1988, p.11

6 www.familysearch.com

7 www.familysearch.com

8 Anon, 11-11-2002, 'The Mills are Gone but They Have Left a Legacy of Industry', <http://www.stockportexpress.co.uk> Retrieved 16-7-08.

9 Anon, 11-11-2002, 'The Mills are Gone but They Have Left a Legacy of Industry', <http://www.stockportexpress.co.uk> Retrieved

rapidly expanding world came to Stockport everything was to change. Workers were replaced by machines and, as a result, there was less need for hatters. In 1874 Dunkerley migrated to Tasmania¹⁰ in search of somewhere where his skills were needed. His son, James, was born after he left.

He set up a hat manufactory with David Gledhill in Glenorchy near Hobart.¹¹ The business was called Kensington Hat Factory. Once he had established himself in Hobart he sent for Harriet. On the 24th of September 1875 she arrived on the *Lincolnshire* from London with their six children.¹² For the next four years Dunkerley ran the factory with David Gledhill. The factory consisted of a main three-storeyed brick building and two separate single-storeyed buildings. It was situated on a rivulet, so a race had been cut to house a water wheel about thirty feet in diameter. This supplied the power for the all of the machinery. The rivulet contained particularly pure water and served as an extremely useful resource in the dyeing and cleaning processes. The main building housed wool-washing facilities that included a large dyeing vat that was capable of holding forty dozen hats. In one of the detached buildings wet hats would undergo the process of proofing where workers would determine whether the hats were to be soft or not. Machines used included a powerful hydraulic press with a pressure of 156 pounds to the square inch. The factory employed about thirty people and as Dunkerley rapidly brought in new machinery that number was to increase. The factory was running productively and turning out sixty to seventy dozen hats a week in 1878. As Dunkerley tried to push this number they were expecting the rate of production to exceed three hundred dozen in six months.¹³ This was written in *The Tasmanian Mail* in August, 1878. Dunkerley pushed too hard to reach this goal and ironically in January of 1879 David Gledhill and Dunkerley were declared bankrupt. An advertisement was printed in *The Mercury* on the seventh of January for the sale of the factory.¹⁴ It must have been hard for Dunkerley to have this major setback but he was not to give up. He was destined to show the world his inventions.

On the birth of Dunkerley's seventh child, Ada, in 1877, her birth registration placed the family in Melbourne Street in Hobart. In 1879 the birth registration for his eighth child, Florence, placed them in Cascade Road, South Hobart and in 1881 on the birth of Alice, their ninth child, they were living in Macquarie Street.¹⁵ Their children attended the local school, the Macquarie Street School. By 1885 a valuation roll placed Benjamin as the occupier of the Kensington Hat Factory again, but with the absence of David Gledhill.¹⁶ It was owned by H.J. Hull who had obviously leased it out. Dunkerley continued to run the factory for another ten years with many great things happening during that time.

In 1892 Dunkerley's first opportunity to gain international recognition came when he invented a revolutionary machine for dressing fur.¹⁷ His amazing machine was designed to take the top layer of fur off rabbit skin to uncover the soft fur for use in felt-hat making. This was all previously done

16-7-08.

10 Anon, 'The Fascinating Background of an Aussie Icon', <http://www.akubra.com.au/history.html> Retrieved 14-7-08

11 Hobart Valuation Roll, Tasmanian Archives, Hobart, 1876-1895

12 Free Arrivals Index, Tasmanian Archives, Hobart, 1875

13 Newspaper article, *The Tasmanian Mail*, Local Industries; Hat factory, Glenorchy, Hobart, August 31, 1878

14 Newspaper Advertisement, *The Mercury*, Hobart, January 7, 1879

15 Pioneers Index of Tasmanian Births, Deaths and Marriages, Tasmanian Archives, Hobart, 1877-1881

16 Hobart Valuation Roll, Tasmanian Archives, Hobart, 1876-1895

17 Item folder 10441, original patent documents, machine for dressing fur, National Archives, Canberra, dated 1892

tediously by hand so people had to be retrained, just like what would have happened in Stockport. He knew it had the potential to be extremely useful in the felt hat making industry across the world. The first thing he did was to travel to Manchester in England and apply to take out a patent. Unfortunately correct forms and procedures were not used so there was a delay in the process until August 1893.¹⁸ During the wait he organised specifications for his machine and traveled from Liverpool to New York and filed for a patent at the United States Patents Office.¹⁹ He also sent an application back to Victoria, Australia. In Manchester when the time came he again applied for a patent, including the drawings and specifications and the warrant was granted within three weeks. During October all of his patents were granted. He was successful, he now owned three patents with two in overseas countries and his Australian invention had made it overseas. He was now impacting on a global scale, but with plenty of other inventions to come, his meet and greet with the world had only just begun.

Later in that year of 1893 he proved that he had both the skill and the initiative to further improve the hat making industry. He took out another patent, again in Manchester, but this time with a man called James Dugdale. It was for an invention that improved cones employed in making hat bodies.²⁰ He continued his overseas trip and in July of 1894 he travelled from Liverpool to New York.²¹ The likely reason behind his trip was that he was promoting himself and his inventions. He was definitely an ingenious man who was constantly driven to improve his industry.

Later in 1895 Dunkerley and his family moved from Tasmania to Victoria taking with them a sound background in the hat manufacturing industry.

Dunkerley took a lot of pride in his first machine and in October of 1896 he took the necessary steps to improve it. He delivered the provisional specifications to a Victorian patents office.²² By this stage he was living in Victoria in the suburb of Prahran. Complete specifications for the improvements were not filed until July the following year. Both his machine for dressing fur and his cone employed in making hat bodies were great inventions, revolutionising the art of hat making, but that was not the end of his innovations.

In September of 1898 he and Thomas Shelmerdine of Yarra Hat Works applied for a patent at a Victorian patents office. They had devised a clever method for creating seamless felt covered water bottles used by soldiers. Previously *“water bottles or vessels have usually had their felt covers sewn on, which besides being somewhat unsightly, is unsatisfactory by reason of the liability of the seams to burst or tear away, especially in wet weather. Now this invention has been devised in order to provide a felt covered bottle or vessel particularly intended for military use, which will have absolutely no seams, and therefore be free from the disadvantages just alluded to, and besides being more durable is distinctly neater, by the reason of the felt cover being more evenly and tightly fitted around the water bottle or the like.”*²³ This was a new type of invention showing that he had the skills in both felt and hat making. The two arts are closely linked; in his case he came out with an invention and method that

18 Item folder 10441, original patent documents, machine for dressing fur, National Archives, Canberra, dated 1892

19 Original ship manifests, www.findmypast.com

20 Item folder 10783, original patents documents, cones in hat making, National Archives, Canberra, 1893

21 Original ship manifests, www.ellislandrecords.org

22 Item folder 13361, original patents documents, improvements in machines, National Archives, Canberra, 1896

23 Item Folder 15545, original patents documents, felt covered water bottles, National Archives, Canberra, 1898

were totally unique, greatly improving felt-covered flasks. In 1900 he had more improvements to make on his first invention for dressing fur, this time in the form of improving the exhaust system. He adjusted it so that the exhaust sat further away from the rotating knives that are used to cut the fur, improving the flow of air.²⁴

By the early 1900s Dunkerley had moved on from Victoria as well. He established himself in Sydney and set up a small hat factory in Crown Street, Surrey Hills.²⁵ He supplied rabbit fur and machinery to hatters all across Australia. This proves that he was well and truly set for life. In 1904 Stephen Keir, an English hatter, in Sydney decided to work for Dunkerley. Keir was a hard-working employee who impressed Dunkerley. Dunkerley's daughter, Ada, worked at the factory and she and Keir married in 1905. Dunkerley was happy to have her working in his business. When people placed orders for his hats they often added: *'I'm happy to have them if the daughter (Ada) hardens them.'*²⁶ Soon after their marriage Benjamin made his son-in-law, Stephen Keir, general manager of the hatting company.²⁷ Business now prospered with no chance of bankruptcy.

In 1911 the business became Dunkerley Hat Mills Ltd. At that time they employed nineteen people. Dunkerley's base wage was the same as Stephen's at 4 pounds a week.²⁸ The following year saw the introduction of the hats being branded Akubra. It is an interesting fact as to why they chose the name Akubra. At the time it was generally thought that the word 'Akubra' was an Aboriginal word for hat or head covering. This is disputable today as it is not proved what tribe or dialect it comes from.²⁹ All of the hats that were produced at the factory were sold by Arthur P. Stewart who was a trader-merchant who had an association with the firm until his death in 1925. It wasn't until after Dunkerley's death that the company started to be known as Akubra.³⁰

World War I saw roaring production as the company was asked to supply slouch hats for the army.³¹ This was the last international connection Dunkerley had before his death at 582 Bourke St, Surrey Hills, Sydney, on February 20th 1918.

From being born into a rapidly changing world, witnessing the Industrial Revolution introducing new machines that were constantly improving numerous industries, he was certainly set to embrace the change. He took experiences from his hometown of Stockport and applied them on a global scale. He became an expert in hatting machinery that would later take him to higher places. He found a place where there was a gap in the market and he filled it. He employed local people of all walks of life and he installed all the cutting-edge technology that the world could supply him. He was more than a factory owner that could turn over a good profit and maintain efficient productivity. He would go further and design his own-cutting edge technology that he, in turn, could offer the world.

24 Item folder 17226, original patents documents, National Archives, exhaust improvements, Canberra, 1900

25 Bowen, J. *The Akubra Hat*, Weldon Publishing, Willoughby, NSW, 1988, p.11

26 Bowen, J. *The Akubra Hat*, Weldon Publishing, 1988, p.12

27 Bowen, J. *The Akubra Hat*, Weldon Publishing, 1988, p.12

28 Bowen, J. *The Akubra Hat*, Weldon Publishing, 1988, p.13

29 Bowen, J. *The Akubra Hat*, Weldon Publishing, 1988, p.9

30 Bowen, J. *The Akubra Hat*, Weldon Publishing, 1988, p. 9, 13

31 Bowen, J. *The Akubra Hat*, Weldon Publishing, 1988, p.13

Because of him better technology could be exported from Australia contributing to our credibility as a serious nation in a competitive world. Despite early financial setbacks, he bounced back with his characteristic persistence. After his years of international success he would settle into a productive little factory that he would see produce an Australian icon. When people from foreign countries imagine a typical Aussie bloke they'll imagine him with an Akubra sitting on his head.

Australian golfing legend, Greg Norman, has loyally sported an Akubra for years in the international spotlight and without one Crocodile Dundee wouldn't have been the same. Our Australian Olympic team wore them proudly as they marched in the opening ceremony at Los Angeles games in 1984 and our former Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, cheerfully presented one to American Skipper, Dennis Conner after his America's Cup victory in 1987.

Whether you were Slim Dusty or a typical Aussie farmer you'd be happy to be Australian when you are wearing an Akubra. Benjamin Dunkerley founded the very basis for this iconic legacy. He was an important player in creating our national identity as he helped to form what a quintessential Australian looks like. What a wonderful legacy for an Australian to leave the world.

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- Item folder 10441, original patent application for Dunkerley's fur-dressing machine, October 1892-August 1893.
- Item folder 10783, original patent application for Dunkerley's improvements in cones used in hat making, June 1893.
- Item folder 13361, original patent application for Dunkerley's first set of improvements for his fur-dressing machine, October 1896.
- Item folder 15545, original patent application for Dunkerley's seamless felt covered water bottle, September 1898
- Item folder 17226, original patent application for Dunkerley's exhaust system improvements for fur-dressing machine, June 1900.

These were all useful for researching the business operations and inventions of Benjamin Dunkerley.

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- Original, unpublished document viewed at www.ancestry.com. Useful for finding out Dunkerley's date of birth, place of residence and occupation

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