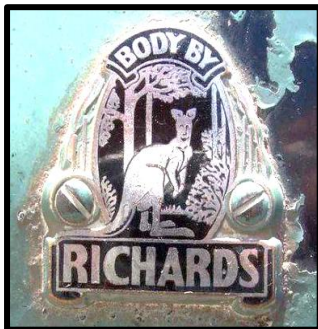
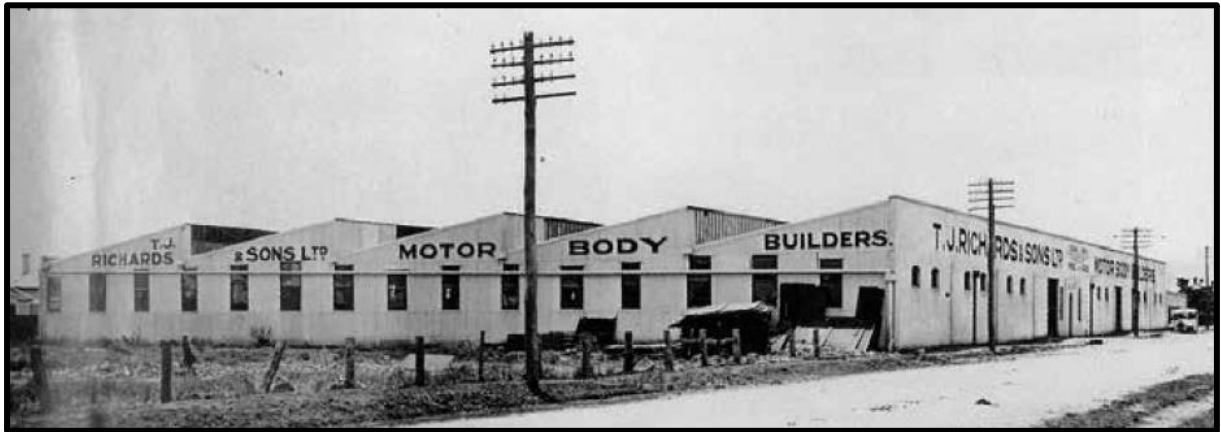


Richards & Chrysler Australia (Keswick & Mile End South)



[forums.aaca.org]



West Torrens Historical Society Inc.
(G. Grainger, 2023)

*Every effort has been made to provide complete and accurate information,
please advise of any errors or omissions.*

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TOBIAS JOHN MARTIN RICHARDS (1850-1939)

Tobias John Martin Richards (3 February 1850-29 July 1939) was born at Montacute, South Australia, the eldest son of sixteen children of Cornish Wesleyan Methodists John Martin Richards (1824-1867), clerk, miner and teacher and his wife Catherine (née Reed) (1823-1908).

In March 1875, when working for a farm machinery manufacturer in Kadina, Tobias married Matilda Emily Freeman (1854-1938). The couple went on to have nine children, including six sons, four of whom eventually worked with Tobias in his coach and motor body building businesses.



TJM Richards [Back to Tonsley, 2012]

BLACKSMITH AND COACHBUILDER

By 1881 Tobias was working in suburban Unley North as a blacksmith and coach hardware maker and fitter. It was at this time that he began learning the craft of coachbuilding from Ludwig Maraun of Pirie Street.



In 1885 Richards opened a small coachbuilding shop at West (now Lower) Mitcham.

Business thrived and in February 1900 Richards set up another coachbuilding premises on the western side of Hindmarsh Square, Adelaide.

Richards was by then a highly respected coachbuilder, winning many awards at national and state shows and producing over thirty designs of coaches and sulkies. His most famous design was the 'King of the Road' coach.

T.J. RICHARDS AND SONS

In September 1907 Richards extended his Hindmarsh Square business to two storeys and 0.46 acres/c. 0.19 hectares. The West Mitcham business was closed in early 1909 and production and sales were concentrated at Hindmarsh Square.



Richards retired in April 1911 and the business was renamed as T.J. Richards and Sons, with authorised capital of £25,000. Richards's second and third sons, Henry (1878-1915) and Claude (1882-1950) jointly took over the running of the company.

After Henry's death in a motor cycle accident in May 1915 Claude became sole managing director. Claude served in the role with great distinction until his retirement in mid-1939.

1911 CAR BODY MANUFACTURING

With motor vehicle use increasing, from March 1911 T. J. Richards had begun manufacturing motor car bodies, pre-dating Holden and Frost of Adelaide by six years.

The company had made its first experimental car body in 1905. However, like many horse coachbuilders Tobias Richards had been reluctant to take up motor body manufacture and it was only at the urging of his sons, particularly Claude, that the company eventually moved in that direction.

(To the end T. J. Richards insisted that horse transport would make a comeback; he never owned a car).



At first Richards and Sons made bodies mainly for individuals or for company vehicles – clients in the latter category including agricultural machinery firms H. V. Mackay and Clutterbuck Bros and local retailer John Martin and Company Limited.

Richards and Sons also occasionally made bodies for imported chassis, among them the German 'Dixi' (1914), the lightweight 'Swift' (England, 1914) and the 'Salmon' (England, 1916). (A Richards-built body for a Dixi motor car from 1914 is held at the National Motor Museum, Birdwood).



1914 Dixi R12 Tourer [artsandculture.google.com]

During these years however the company's major revenue came from the sale of imported motor vehicles, including Palmer-Moore and Studebaker cars (both US), Herff-Brooks trucks (US) and Pope (US) and Rudge-Multi (England) motor cycles. Richards made its last horse drawn vehicle in 1915.

The crucial breakthrough for Australian motor body builders came in August 1917 when, mainly because of a scarcity of cargo space in time of war, the Australian government banned the importation of complete motor vehicles into Australia but not of unassembled chassis (in October the restriction was eased slightly to one complete car for every three chassis).

The local motor body building industry immediately flourished, its long term post-war growth facilitated by continuing tariffs on imported vehicles.

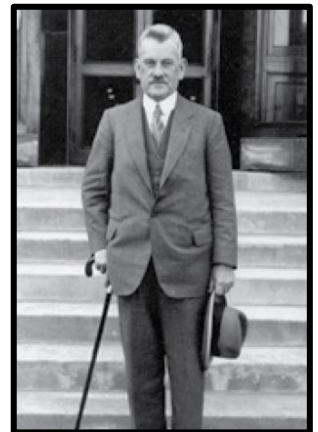
In the decade from 1918 Richards gained contracts for the construction of bodies and the distribution of completed vehicles for a wide range of brands including Austin, Bianchi, Citroen, Dodge, Dort, Durant, Essex, Fiat, Hudson, Huppmobile, Jewett, Maxwell, Morris, Oakland, Rover, Rugby and Studebaker.

By 1928 Richards was the second largest motor body builder in Australia behind Holden Motor Body Builders of King William Street, Adelaide: between them the two were making around 80% of Australia's car, truck and tram bodies. About 95% of Richards's sales were to interstate markets and by 1925 the company had distribution branches in every state capital.

HERBERT CLARENCE RICHARDS (1876-1949)

In July 1921 Richards's eldest son, Herbert Clarence Richards (1876-1949) – who had had a difficult relationship with his father and who from 1904 had set up his own motor car retail business in Currie Street – became Richards's chairman of directors.

Herbert maintained his own business until 1939 and was also a Liberal member of parliament (1921-30) and mayor of Unley (1921-22).



1920s FACTORY EXPANSION

As Richards's business grew the need for more factory space became clear. In February 1920 the company bought a 3.16 acre/c.1.28 hectare site at the northern corner of the Bay Road (from 1924 Anzac Highway) and Leader Street, Forestville for £1,900.

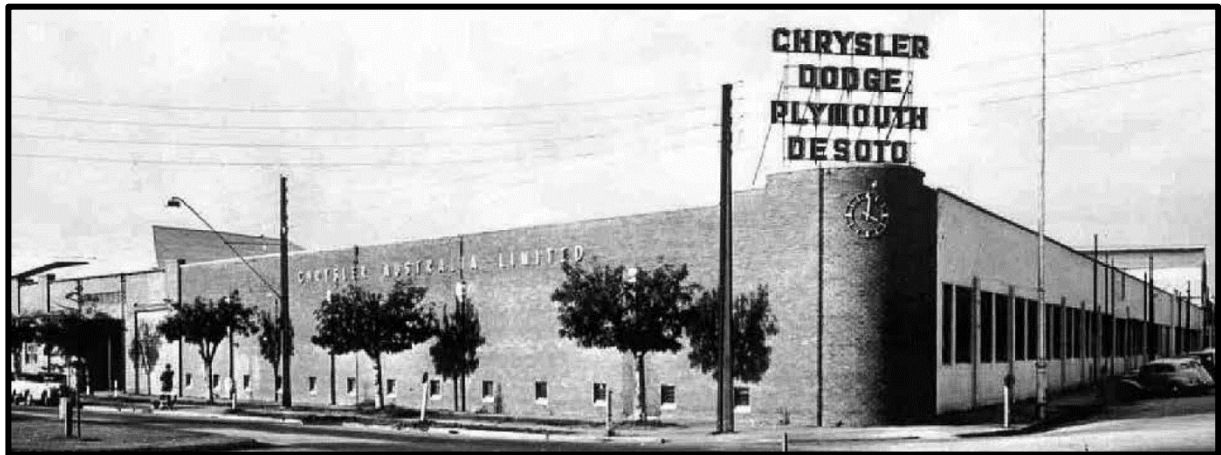
In May Richards announced that it was selling all of its city premises – which now occupied substantial frontages on Hindmarsh Square, Pirie Street and Hyde Street and included two 3-storey buildings – and moving to the new site.

Although the plant subsequently built on the site was in Forestville it was invariably referred to as being located in Keswick, probably because it was directly south of the Keswick Army Barracks. Later extensions to the factory were technically in Goodwood West and Horncastle.

By April 1925 the plant had been extended east along Leader Street to cover 6.75 acres/c.2.73 hectares.



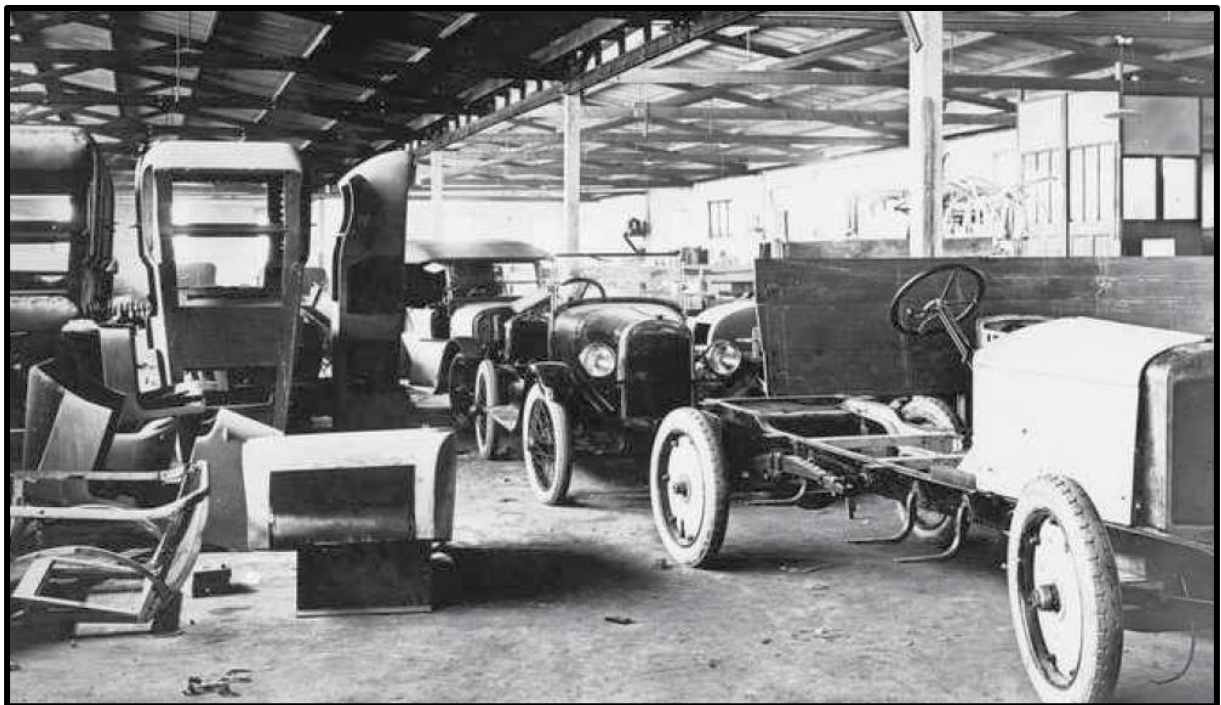
The plant eventually expanded to 8.53 acres/c.3.45 hectares; for many years a huge 'Chrysler-Dodge-Plymouth-DeSoto' Art-Deco neon sign fronted the business at the corner of Anzac Highway and Leader Street.



1926 MASS PRODUCTION

By mid-1926 Richards employed around 425 workers at the plant, working around the clock seven days per week on simple mass production lines.

The company was by now producing around 5,750 bodies each year leading to annual sales revenues of about £200,000.



At this time Richards's motor bodies were built mainly of timber (usually oak), the company using around two million feet/c. 6,100 metres of timber annually – the Keswick plant had its own wood mill and a kiln for seasoning the timber. Certain construction requirements, including hood and trim materials, were imported from the US and UK.

Although Richards's profits were somewhat variable during the 1920s as the industry tightened, the company remained optimistic about the future. By the end of the 1920s Richards's Keswick premises had become too small to accommodate the company's growth.

1930 MILE END SOUTH SITE

In January 1930 Richards signed a £500,000 contract with the US Chrysler Corporation for the manufacture of 5,000 Dodge and DeSoto bodies.



DeSotos and Plymouths on the Trim Line in the late fifties.

As a direct result of the contract, in February 1930 Richards bought a 5.7 acres/c. 2.3 hectare site (plus rights of way) on the northern side of Scotland Road, Mile End South from Duncan and Fraser Ltd (a liquidated motor body manufacturer) for £17,500.



The site, running between Railway Terrace and the Holdfast Bay rail line (today's James Congdon Drive), was close to the Mile End goods yards and the city and also housed a building which could be modified for motor body assembly. The plant opened in early 1931.

DEPRESSION YEARS TO IMPROVING ECONOMY

The onset of the worst of the Depression abruptly halted Richards's expansion plans.

As the Chrysler Corporation drastically wound back production, imports of chassis to Australia dried up. For a time Richards's survival seemed to be in doubt.

The company recorded combined losses of over £31,000 in 1930-31 and 1931-32 and in 1932-3 made a net profit of just £458; in December 1931 the company had employed only ninety-eight workers, all at Keswick.

As the national and world economies slowly improved into the mid-1930s Richards rebounded quickly, helped significantly by an August 1932 contract worth £100,000 to manufacture 1,000 bodies for the Standard company of Britain.



[southaustralianpolicehistoricalsociety.com]

As in later years, the Keswick plant concentrated largely on metal fabrication and pressing functions – the use of metal was by now widespread in body manufacture – while Mile End South was dedicated to assembly.

By mid-1934 Richards's employment was up to around 1400 – nine hundred at Keswick and five hundred at Mile End South. In 1935 Richards was producing more than forty bodies per day (and over 11,000 per year), with output steadily increasing.

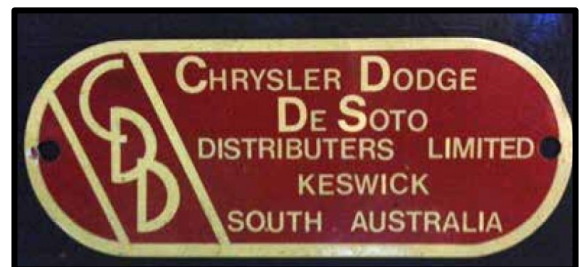
At about the same time Richards's rival Holdens was employing around 5570 workers and producing about seventy bodies per day.

In 1934-35 Richards paid its first dividend to shareholders since 1930; its 1936-37 net profit of £45,106 was its highest of the decade while output was up by a third from the previous year.

CHRYSLER DODGE DISTRIBUTORS (AUSTRALIA) P/L

A key change for the company came in May 1937.

In December 1936 the eighteen largest Chrysler distributors in Australia had resolved to increase their bargaining power with US Chrysler by uniting to form a new company, Chrysler Dodge Distributors (Australia) Pty Limited.



In May 1937 the company acquired majority control of Richards through share acquisition and assured its workers that Richards, which was already the largest supplier Chrysler bodies in Australia, would continue in that role.

In mid-1938 Chrysler Dodge Distributors Ltd moved its headquarters from Melbourne to Adelaide. In 1937-38 Richards also won or renewed contracts with the Packard, Standard, Studebaker and Willys car companies.



Willys Overland 2-door Deluxe [motorcities.org]

PLANT EXPANSION

In the wake of these windfalls, in 1937-38 Richards increased capital investment at its Keswick and Mile End South plants. In 1937 Richards's paint shop and upholstery and finishing departments were relocated to Mile End South.

By May 1938 Richards employed 3280 workers, had turnover close to £2 million (up from £200,000 in 1929-30) and was producing twenty-one different types of car body.

In the 1937-38 selling season Richards also beat Holden's to the punch by producing Australia's – and one of the world's – first all steel sedan car body.

Maurice Richards (1910-1997), a grandson of T.J. Richards, had played a key role in developing the Safe-T-Steel body, consisting of a one-piece steel roof, one-piece steel body panels and doors and a steel floor, all welded into a single all-steel unit.

From 1937 all of the Adelaide-made bodies for Chrysler chassis were constructed of steel. W.E. Donnell was the manager of the Mile End South plant during much of the 1930s.

SECOND WORLD WAR

The second world war brought fundamental changes for Richards, as for most Australian manufacturing businesses.

Richards moved almost entirely into the production of munitions accessories, including land mine cases, cartridge and ammunition boxes, cable drums and mountings for two-pounder anti-tank guns.



In September 1941 the company renamed itself as 'Richards Industries Limited' which then chairman Mr R.S. Thomson described as being 'more in keeping with the expanded activities of the company' and 'more euphonious' than the previous name.

From mid-1942 Richards moved almost exclusively into the production of aircraft parts, in particular wing panels, centre sections and fuselages for a range of aircraft including the Bristol Beaufort bomber, Lancasters and the CAC Wirraway trainer.

From 1946 until May 1963, when its contract with the federal government expired, Richards/Chrysler operated a 1.88 acre/c. 0.76 hectare plant at the Finsbury Munitions Factory to build inter alia main fuselages for the Jindivik target drone and jet engine turbines for the Canberra bomber.



Chrysler Australia was during these years the largest private aircraft contractor to the Australian government. From 1963 to the late seventies Chrysler used the Findon factory for truck assembly.



Overall Richards improved its financial health during the war, increasing authorised capital to £600,000 pounds in 1942 and averaging net profits of almost £62,500 in the three financial years to 1944-45.

In 1944-45 Richards Industries Limited averaged just over 2000 employees.

POST WAR

With its long term agreements with chassis makers still in place Richards' reconversion to body manufacture began in late 1945.

In early 1946 Richards announced three major changes for its Mile End South site: the extension of the company's existing plant by 0.57 acres/c.0.23 hectares; the leasing of an adjacent 1.72 acre/c. 0.69 hectare factory which the federal government had used during the war for aircraft production and its conversion to motor body assembly (Richards bought the factory in September 1949 for £37,175); and the acquisition of almost two acres/c. 0.81 hectares of new land on Scotland Road – Richards bought the land from William Charlick Limited for £5,429.

By 1953 the Mile End South site had reached what would be its maximum size of 9.27 acres/c. 3.75 hectares incorporating 6.2 acres/c. 2.5 hectares of floor space – slightly less factory space than at the Keswick plant.



Scotland Road / London Road 1959 [West Maps Public]

After the war Richards (and later Chrysler Australia) also leased two more plants at Finsbury. One, acquired in 1946, was used mainly to produce motor vehicle seating while the other, leased from 1950, was home to a company subsidiary, Steel Pressings Ltd.

After 1957 the latter plant was used to manufacture Chrysler Air Temp air conditioners.

Although early post-war progress was somewhat slow because of resource shortages and the expected reconversion issues, by mid-1946 Richards was already producing 500-600 bodies per week and by October the following year was employing 2650 workers.

1947 CHRYSLER DODGE ACQUISITION

In mid-October 1947 Chrysler Dodge De Soto Distributors (Australia) Ltd acquired 100% of Richards Industries Limited, ending the Richards family's direct association with the business.

At one point in the 1930s around twenty members of the family had worked for the company in some capacity.

The takeover was seen by many observers as being beneficial for the company since it came with the guarantee that in future its factories would be used to source all Chrysler Dodge De Soto Distributors (Australia)'s motor bodies (the company stopped making most of its non-Chrysler marques from around this time).

The new company blossomed over the next couple of years. With earlier difficulties now mostly settled, by 1949-50 net profit was £156,330 – almost double that of two years before – while the 1949-50 turnover of £4.75 million was more than twenty times that of 1938-39.

In mid-1950 the company employed around 1200 at Mile End South and 1400 at Keswick. In 1950 the assembly of an almost complete vehicle from sub-assembled panels at the Mile End South factory could be achieved in about thirteen minutes.

1951 CHRYSLER AUSTRALIA LTD

From at least 1949 rumours began to circulate locally that the U.S. Chrysler Corporation was keen to assume full control of Chrysler Dodge De Soto Distributors (Australia) Ltd.

After the latter rejected a £700,000 takeover offer in November 1950, in early June the following year the Chrysler Corporation succeeded in buying 85% of CDD's ordinary shares and thereby gaining control of the company, which it renamed Chrysler Australia Limited.



In October 1951 the Chrysler Corporation announced a £1,000,000 expansion plan for its South Australian plants, including the progressive reorganisation of the Mile End South plant to incorporate an assembly line based on US mass production principles.

Building upon the success of its predecessor, Chrysler Australia's first five years were bountiful.

The company's most popular cars during this time were the Plymouth Cranbrook, Dodge Kingsway and De Soto Diplomat, each based on the 1954 US Plymouth.



1951 Plymouth Cranbrook [classic.com]

In the four financial years from 1950-51 Chrysler Australia's consolidated group sales rose from 6.54 million units to 19.3 million while over the same period consolidated net profit rose from £154,805 to £858,388.

From 1954 Chrysler Australia's vehicle assembly requirements for all of Australia were completed in Adelaide (previously some additional assembly including the fitting onto chassis had been carried out interstate).

Most Chrysler Australia engines from this time were sourced from the Chrysler factory in Kew, England and assembled at Mile End South, while a range of parts (e.g. steering boxes) were made at the Perry Engineering foundry and stamping plants adjacent to the Mile End South plant.



Perry Engineering Mile End South [westtorrens.sa.gov.au]

By 1954 the reorganisation of the Mile End South assembly line was almost complete and a new paint shop and finishing line were in operation.

The Australian-made content in cars was progressively increasing whilst the content of the Fargo truck – Chrysler Australia had begun making Dodge and Fargo trucks in 1953 – was 100% Australian.



In August 1954 Chrysler employed around 4300 workers at its three Adelaide locations, including nine hundred at Mile End South, many of them newly arrived migrants.

By mid-1955, when the company invested a further £275,000 in new plant at Mile End South and £500,000 in a spare parts division at Keswick, Chrysler Australia was turning out more than fifty vehicles a day (about 13,500 per year), double its output of eighteen months before.

In 1955 Chrysler Australia had total Adelaide factory space of 28.7 acres/c.11.6 hectares on around thirty-five acres/c.14.1 hectares of land (mostly at Findon).

HOLDEN AND FORD MARKET IMPACT

After the promising start to the decade the years from 1956-61 were bleak for Chrysler Australia. Net profits fell for three years until a loss of £145,195 was recorded in 1958-59.

The primary cause was the enormous popularity of the Holden FE and Ford Fairlane sedans which were lighter and more economical than Chrysler vehicles.



Holden FE [whichcar.com.au]



Ford Fairlane [shannons.com.au]

The commercial failure of the cumbersome and relatively expensive Chrysler Royal series of cars, introduced in May 1957, exacerbated the losses.



All-Australian Chrysler Royals on the Final Assembly Line at Keswick, 1967

Chrysler's vehicle output fell by one-half in the year to 1957-58 and its labour force from 4500 to 2500.

The success of the lightweight Simca Aronde, marketed from mid-1959 and partly assembled at the Mile End South plant, led to a brief revival in Chrysler Australia's fortunes.

The skeleton of a Simca Vedette coming to life on a rather intimidating jig. In its day, Mile End was renowned for cutting-edge technology.



A Simca Vedette going through a drying booth at the paint shop back in the day.

But after the release of the popular Ford Falcon XK in September 1960, a sales tax rise in November 1960 and the impact of a national recession, Chrysler Australia recorded a calamitous net loss of £598,750 in 1960-61. In 1960 Chrysler Australia had only 1% of Australia's retail new car market; Holden had a 45% share, Ford 16%, British Motor Corporation 11% and Volkswagen 10%.

Mr David Brown, managing director of Chrysler Australia from March 1960, was told by his US superiors to either improve Chrysler Australia's fortunes quickly or shut the company down.

THE VALIANT SUCCESS

The Valiant saved Chrysler Australia. The first Valiant car, the RV-1 – a variant of the US Plymouth Valiant – was released in Australia in January 1962 and sold out within days.



1962 Valiant S Series [reddit.com]

Its successor, the Valiant SVE-1 was just as popular.

The cars were viewed by consumers as compact, stylish and powerful; the 10,000 Valiants Chrysler Australia assembled in 1962 lifted the car's registration figures by 146% in one year.

All of the main assembly work on the first two Valiant cars was carried out at Mile End South; the Valiants' engines were sourced from Canada. (Chrysler Australia opened its own engine manufacturing plant at Lonsdale, Adelaide in November 1967).

In the year to November 1962 Chrysler Australia recorded a net profit of £505,940, a more than one million pound turnaround from the previous year. The series of Valiants released over the rest of the 1960s led to a never-surpassed 13.5% market share in 1966-67 and a record net profit of \$7.226 million in 1968-69.

There were eventually thirteen series of Valiants released, the last in August 1981. Chrysler Australia sold a total of 565,338 Valiants.

A vintage advertisement for Chrysler Australia Limited. At the top is a logo consisting of a white five-pointed star inside a black pentagon. Below the logo, the text reads: "THE DEMAND FOR VALIANTS BRINGS ADDITIONAL JOBS FOR MEN at CHRYSLER AUSTRALIA LIMITED TONSLEY PARK". It then lists two shift options: "SHIFT WORK PRESS SHOP OPERATIONS" (Press, Guillotine and Rotary Shear Operators) and "DAY SHIFT Motor Mechanics". The ad also states: "YOU WILL BE TRAINED TO BECOME A SKILLED OPERATOR. EXTRA WAGE RATES PAID FROM COMMENCEMENT OF EMPLOYMENT. SUPERANNUATION AND CAR PURCHASE PLAN AFTER QUALIFYING PERIOD." It concludes with: "This is your opportunity to work in Australia's most modern and well equipped automotive plant. Why not call in and discuss these positions with our Employment Office? CHRYSLER AUSTRALIA LIMITED SOUTH ROAD, TONSLEY PARK".

1955 TONSLEY PARK

In early 1955 Chrysler Australia had acquired through an agreement with the South Australian Housing Trust a 145 acre (around 58.68 hectare) site at Mitchell Park. In June Chrysler Australia announced that the site, which it called Tonsley Park – the company had tried unsuccessfully to have the site named Chrysler Park – would be the focus of its future expansion.

Although there was some development at Tonsley Park over the next few years Chrysler Australia's profit struggles at the time slowed progress. It was only after the success of the Valiant that the company could in August 1962 announce that an £18 million expansion would go ahead at Tonsley Park.

In the event the company built a plant there covering more than 22.96 acres/c. 9.29 hectares of building space and featuring the then largest ground floor under one roof in the southern hemisphere. (The Tonsley Park workforce eventually rose to around 7,500 in 1974 and output to over 58,000 vehicles in 1997).

After a gradual transfer of equipment from Mile End South to Tonsley Park from early 1963, the first complete Valiant cars came off the Tonsley Park assembly line in late March 1964. The Tonsley Park plant was officially opened by the prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies, in early October 1964.



In 1956 before any of the original fences and gates had been taken down.

1964 MILE END SOUTH PLANT CLOSURE

The Mile End South plant closed in mid-1964.

After the earlier disposal of some land by this time the 5.51 acre/c. 2.23 hectare main plant was on a 6.5 acres/c. 2.63 hectares site. In March 1965 Chrysler Australia sold a small portion of the site to its Mile End South neighbour Perry Engineering Company Limited for £12,000.

The major sale was intended to be by public auction on 28 July 1965, but the site was passed in at £225,000. It was bought by Perry's at the same price in late September.

Perry's eventually sold most of the property in sales of April 1985 and December 2001.



Scotland Road / London Road 2022 [West Maps Public]

1980 MITSUBISHI CORPORATION

Chrysler Australia struggled in the 1970s as Australian car buyers moved to smaller more economical vehicles, particularly from Japan.

In April 1980 the Mitsubishi Corporation of Japan took control of Chrysler Australia – the Chrysler Corporation was in bail out negotiations with the US government – and in October the company was renamed as Mitsubishi Motors Australia Limited.



After some strong early years Mitsubishi Motors Australia was eventually burdened by poorly received new models and falling public confidence in its product.

2008 END OF PRODUCTION

The company ceased production of motor vehicles at Tonsley Park in March 2008.

Chrysler Australia Ltd returned to business as an importer of motor vehicles in 1994 and is currently (2021) owned by the international Stellantis group.

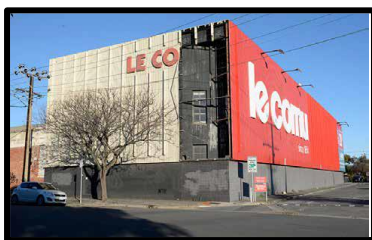
The Tonsley Park site has been given over to the development of innovative high-tech businesses and research and the construction of energy-efficient residential housing.



MILE END SOUTH AND KESWICK SITES TODAY

Today the Mile End site is occupied by several businesses, in particular two car dealerships. Part of the site was sold again in October 2015 for \$5.85 million. Some of the exterior of the Richards/Chrysler plant remains intact.

Chrysler Australia's Keswick site, after being used briefly for administration, closed in late 1965.



Much of the property was sold to Le Cornu Pty Ltd in February 1973 for \$725,000; a Le Cornu furniture store operated there in 1974-2016.

The site was sold in October 2017 for \$25 million and again in October 2020 to Renewal SA, a state government agency, for \$38.23 million. The site was sold again in 2021.



Anzac Highway / Leader Street 2022 [WestMaps Public]

Uncredited images from:

Back to Tonsley, Official Souvenir Program of the 2018 Shannons Adelaide Chrysler Festival - Chrysler Club of SA https://cccsa.net.au/wp-content/uploads/BTT_web_single.pdf

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West Torrens Historical Society Inc

Updated 11/5/2023

Website: westtorrenshistory.org
Email: westtorrenshistory@gmail.com
Address: 327 Marion Road, North Plympton (BUS STOP 9B)
Post: PO Box 43, Marleston 5033



West Torrens Historical Society