

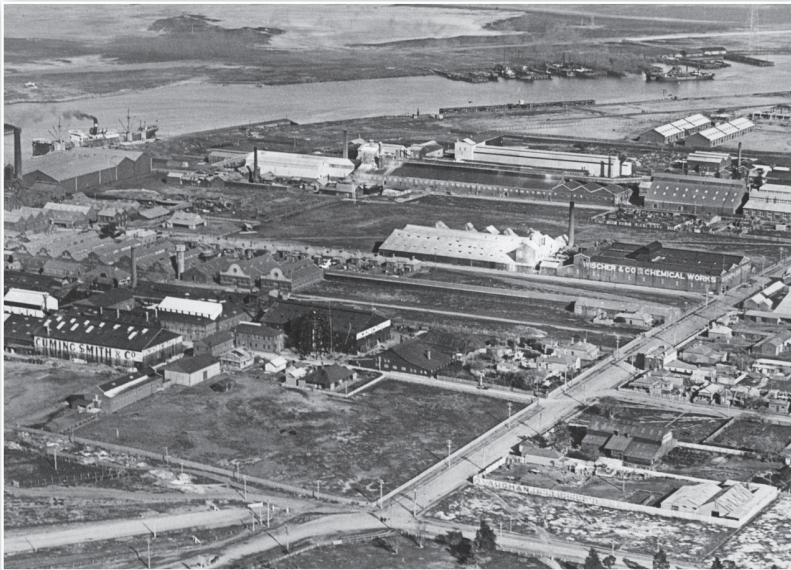
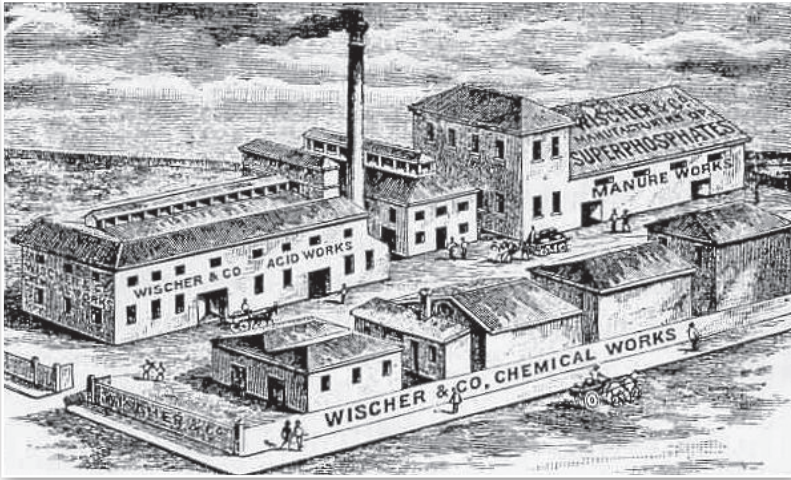
*Wischer and Co. lime, cement and plaster business, 1880.*

## **Land speculation**

Melbourne experienced a major land boom in the 1880s, driven by wealth generated from the discovery of gold in Victoria. The boom led to an atmosphere of great optimism, expansion and speculation.

Wilhelm involved himself in this movement in 1885 when he purchased several blocks of land in Salisbury Grove and Churchill Grove, Hawthorn, being part of the subdivision of T.B Payne's Estate, otherwise known as Payne's Paddock. This estate was located at the corner of Glenferrie and Barkers Roads in Hawthorn, opposite the site where the Methodist Ladies College (MLC) stands today.

Hawthorn historian, Gwen McWilliam, in her publication *Hawthorn Streets Index*, notes that house lots of about 40ft. frontage and 100ft. depth in these streets, which sold for three pounds a foot in 1885, increased in value to five pounds a foot by February 1887, with blocks in Barkers Road and Glenferrie Road selling for seven to ten pounds a foot.



*Wischer and Co. chemical and fertilizer factory,  
Whitehall Street, Yarraville, 1920. Sketch and aerial photo.*

## Chemical and fertilizer factory in Yarraville

In the economic crash following the land boom in 1890 Wilhelm fared badly, losing a considerable amount of money to failed banks. However, out of that turmoil sprang the beginnings of a new business in 1895 – the manufacture of chemicals and fertilizers. The first step was the manufacture of sulphuric and hydrochloric acids, with Robert A. Whiting and Sir William Clarke as silent partners. This was followed by importation of rock phosphate from Nauru and Ocean Island for the manufacture of superphosphate, a fertilizer widely used to improve Australia's phosphate deficient soils. The business prospered and the firm of Wischer & Co. Pty Ltd was registered on 21 October 1896 to take over from the partnership. Shareholders were listed as Wilhelm H. Wischer, William J. Winter and Robert A. Whiting.

This company was very successful and became a major supplier of superphosphate to the Victorian farming community, initially in competition with the established business of Cuming Smith and subsequently with Federal Fertilisers (1904) and Mt Lyell Mining and Railway Co. (1905). In his autobiography (4), James Cuming discusses the pricing



*Trademark of Wischer & Co. registered by Wilhelm in July 1905 for a fee of five shillings.*



*S.S. Windsor at the buoy.*



*Ocean Island phosphate field and workers bringing rock to the point of loading.*

*Photos taken at Ocean Island in 1904 at the rock phosphate deposit mined by the British Phosphate Commission. Wilhelm Wischer imported rock phosphate from Ocean Island to his factory in Yarraville for processing into superphosphate, a widely used fertilizer. These photos are held at the National Archives of Australia, Burwood, Victoria.*

of sulphuric acid, a basic ingredient used in the manufacture of superphosphate, and notes that in the 1890s:

‘...we kept the price of acid just under what it could be imported for, which left us a good profit: but this was too good to last long. An old traveller of ours (William Herman Wischer) got some capitalists to back him and started opposition. There followed a cutting of prices till acid dropped to 6 pounds. There was nothing for it but to push manures. He did likewise and as he was an industrious German soon had a following all his own and a good business going’.

An entry in the *Cyclopaedia of Victoria* for 1903 describes W.H. Wischer and Co. as:

‘...Importers, Indentors and Chemical Manufacturers, 50-52 Market Street, Melbourne. Associated with the manufacture of fertilizers in this State of later years, the name Wischer and Co. stands most prominently before the general public. Although only established since 1896, this firm is now recognized and celebrated throughout the whole of the Australian States for the excellence of its manufactures. Combined with the manufacture of high grade fertilizers is an extensive plant for the production of all kinds of acids and chemicals on an extensive scale. The accompanying illustration serves to show a proportion only of the firm’s large works, situated at Yarraville’.



*Extraction of rock phosphate, a product of bird droppings, left a field of pinnacles when the deposit was worked out.*



*Ocean Island shipping jetty truck boys.*

Tues. Oct. 6th. Lat. 43.58 S, long 45.26 E, distance 232 miles. It has been very rough last night. Our mainsail was torn to pieces this morning. Also one of the passengers got a fearful fall on deck and his face was awfully bruised.

Wed. Oct. 7th. Lat 44.7 S, long. 49.11 E, distance 151 miles. Herron Island 58 miles distant, 12 Apostles Island are of the Crosets, 100 miles distant.

Thurs. Oct. 8th. Lat. 44.20 S, long. 54.5 E, distance 230 miles.

Fri. Oct. 9th. A fine run last night. Lat 44.46 S, long 59.12 E, distance 298 miles.

Sat. Oct. 10th. Almost calm this day, going about 2 miles an hour from an early hour this morning. Distance 120 miles.

Sun. Oct. 11th. We had a service in the cabin this morning as it was too cold to hold it on deck. There has not been an observation taken since Friday. Distance about 200 miles.

Mon. Oct. 12th. It has been blowing very strong from an early hour last night. She has been going about 9 1/2 miles an hour. Long. 72.5 E, distance 280 miles.

Tues. Oct. 13th. This has been a fine day, with fair steady wind. Distance 220 miles. Lat. 44.4 S, long. 76.46 E.

Wed. Oct. 14th. We are just 12 weeks left Liverpool this day. Wind very low. Lat. 44. S, long. 80. E, distance 190 miles.

Thurs. Oct. 15th. It is very remarkable here in this latitude.

In the middle of October the days are getting a fine stretch, corresponding to our April at home. Lat. 44.16 S, long. 85. E, distance 245 miles.

Fri. Oct. 16th. This is a very cold wind. Cold day with several showers of snow and sleet. We were throwing snowballs for a short time. Wind from the south west, the cold point. This is the reverse of what we experience at home. Lat. 44.11 S, long. 90. E, distance 240 miles.

Sun. Oct. 18th. Last night and also this morning has been very coarse. Our ship is rolling fearfully and shipping some heavy seas at intervals. I was sick for a couple of hours yesterday. One of the life boats had a narrow escape from being carried away this morning out of the lashing by the violence of the waves. Lat. 43.51 S, long. 99. E, distance 210 miles. No service on board this day in consequence of it being too rough and cold. In fact very few of the passengers are on deck today, except those going to and from the galley. The stove in the saloon galley was broken this afternoon by the motion of the vessel.

Mon. Oct. 19th, Lat. 43.40 S, long. 102.41 E, distance 190 miles. One of the quartermasters got one foot fearfully crushed last night while steering at the wheel of the helm. I believe he will lose one or two of his toes in consequence.

Tues. Oct. 20th. We have had a fine wind all night and this day from the north-west. Towards evening it changed right aft. Lat. 43.5 S, long. 106 E, distance 205 miles.

Wed. Oct. 21st. The sailors are very busy these few days getting the decks scrubbed with holy-stone, also getting any repairs



done that she may require in order to present a formidable and clean appearance when we get into port, as we expect to be anchored before the first of November. The passengers are very busy also getting their berths washed out as usual. This they have to do twice or three times a week. Lat. 42.20 S, long. 110.5 E, distance 196 miles.

Thurs. Oct. 22nd. We are sailing very well today, with several showers of hailstones. We are now in the longitude of Cape Leeuwin, the south-west point of Australia. Lat. 42.50 S, long 114.40 E, distance 211 miles.

Fri. Oct. 23rd. There is a decided change in the atmosphere this day, the sun is warm and the breeze fresh. The sailors are busy getting the boats painted today, so I expect we will look very grand going into port. At 9 ½ o'clock last night the fore top mast stunsail was shivered to pieces. Lat. 42 S, long. 119.42 E, distance 226 miles.

Sat. Oct. 24th. Last night we experienced a squall which came on with the rapidity of a cannon ball. It took away our mizzen royal yard and sail and the main top gallant stay sail. We had another severe squall this morning at 7 o'clock but sustained no loss by it. Lat. 41.20 S, long. 124.2 E, distance 247 miles.

Sun. Oct. 25th. During the last few days the number of birds that we see about the ship has been steadily increasing. They are of different kinds in the different longitudes, except the Cape Pigeon which we have seen every day since we first noticed them. I saw two or three flashes of lightening last night. Lat. 41.7 S, long. 129 E, distance 270 miles.

Mon. Oct. 26th. A fine breeze this day with showers from an early hour. We are very busy getting the anchors out and hauling up the chains to have them ready at a moment's notice to cast out. Lat. 40 S, long. 133 E, distance 198 miles.

Tues. Oct. 27th. This is also a busy day with us. We had to get all our boxes out and the berths washed. Afterwards a quantity of lime was put in them. The first mate got up the lead this evening for soundings. Lat 39 S, long 137 E, distance 240 miles.

Wed. Oct. 28th. At 12 o'clock this day it is calculated we are 90 miles from Cape Otway. All this day has been one of considerable excitement. Two of the cabin passengers and also the priest have been drinking all day and the consequence is that at 6 o'clock this evening the priest is fighting with one of them. The doctor had to help him to his bunk and he fell down the ladder on the attempt. I am told he broke a splendid mirror in the cabin and had to apologise to the captain and pay for the glass before he would be allowed in the cabin again.

Thurs. Oct. 29th. This morning at 6 o'clock we sighted Cape Otway. It looked like a regular wood and all faces beamed with delight when they saw for the first time part of the far famed Australia. At 8 o'clock we signalized the light house. We saw two or three vessels this day and also a screw steamer bound for Adelaide. The mate took soundings several times at 9 o'clock p.m. No bottom at 40 fathoms. At 10 o'clock we burned blue lights on the forecastle as a signal for the pilot, which he answered soon afterwards and came on board. Wind right ahead. We had to about ship several times and take two hours each way.

Fri. Oct. 30th. At 3 o'clock this morning the pilot took soundings

after he had made Port Phillip head and just entered Port Phillip Bay and found he was in 7 fathoms and in a few minutes 4 1/2 fathoms of water. He ordered the anchor to be let go at once and the sails to be reefed up, but before it had any effect she was fast on a sandbank at high water. At 6 a.m. we hoisted a blue flag on the main mast and the doctor came to inspect the ship. We felt we had been let down. A telegraphic dispatch was sent to Melbourne, 45 miles distant for a steamer. At 4 p.m. the steam tug Hercules arrived together with a schooner to assist but had to postpone the attempt till next morning in consequence of the tide receding at the time. Several officials came down from Melbourne on the occasion.

Sat. Oct. 31st. This morning at 4 o'clock two steam tugs arrived and by 7 a.m. we had our ship afloat and steered for Melbourne without the aid of a tugboat. With a good contrary wind this afternoon the sailors were getting up the main top gallant yard when the halyard parted and it fell 60 feet on to the deck without causing any injury. At 7 p.m. we dropped anchor at Williamstown and in a few minutes we hoisted a blue flag. A boat with fresh provisions came to us also, heavy rain falling at the time. We had a good view of Sandridge, Brighton, St Kilda etc. They looked beautiful lighted up as they were with gas and so near the sea.

Sun. Nov. 1st. This has been a very exciting day on board. The Commissioners came on board today and passed or cleared the ship as it is called. Several boats came alongside and took a number of passengers on shore. Others came for their friends. One boat lost her jib boom by striking our ship.

Mon. Nov. 2nd. This morning a tug and lighter came alongside to take the passengers ashore but had to put back as the sea was

too rough. However, about 3 o'clock the sea calmed down a little and the passengers with difficulty got off the *Vanguard* and steered right straight up the Yarra Yarra for Melbourne, arriving at about 4 ½ o'clock. The rain came down in torrents as we steered along. You could row a boat in some of the streets of Melbourne that evening. The scenery along by the river is very good. We could have enjoyed it only for the rain. The two Mr Pattersons and Mr Rutledge and I took up our abode at the Sabloniere Hotel for the present.