

Visionary's death helped shatter mighty plan for WA development

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In August 1886 West Australia stood excitedly on the eve of what was being hailed as its first major scheme of development in 10 years.

At Albany in the south-west and at Beverley, 240 miles to the north, engineers were waiting to begin work on a railway that would link the south-west with the short railway system east of Perth.

In the port of London, 260 skilled carpenters, gangers, masons and blacksmiths, the first batch of thousands who were to be brought out to Australia by the West Australian Land Company, had just embarked for the colony.

Three weeks ahead of them on the voyage to Australia was the company's head, Anthony Hordern, the one man with the ability to fuse all these working parts together and set in motion the machinery that would haul West Australia out of the trough of depression.

All over the south-west, parents in the numerous small farming communities which had been hard hit by declining markets were naming their sons Anthony and Hordern in honor of the financial wizard who was going to lead them back to prosperity.

Then, dramatically, just as the WA Government was beginning to have second thoughts about the colony's capacity to absorb so many migrants, a cable arrived from Colombo — Anthony Hordern had died at sea.

So grieved were the people of WA at the sudden loss of one of the 19th century's most dynamic businessmen that on the day of his funeral in Albany all public business in the colony stopped.

And the WA Land Company barely survived the shock.

Anthony Hordern the third, as he was known, was born in Sydney in 1842. At 18 he returned home from England after five years schooling at Dr. Arnold's Rugby and entered his father's drapery shop in George Street.

New policy

It was a flourishing concern situated strategically near the railway terminus at Redfern and the ferry wharves in Darling Harbor. But to young Anthony its way of doing business was dull and unenterprising.

He could not understand why Sydney was content to be five years behind the latest fashions in Europe or why Sydney business houses were prepared to leave most of their buying in the hands of highly paid agents in London.

Soon he persuaded his father to let him do all the firm's most important buying. He concentrated on stocking the store with attractive looking goods that would draw the crowds in just to gaze at them.

This novel approach shocked the older members of the store but the young man's methods soon began paying off.

He spent much of his time travelling in Europe and America watching the newest trends in fashions and making influential contacts for



Anthony Hordern the third. Although his plan to develop West Australia was not a brilliant success he himself possessed the qualities of greatness.

the firm's central buying-house in London.

In 1876 Anthony and his younger brother Samuel inherited a vast fortune from their grandmother. And the following year when their father died they set about reorganising the entire business on a grand scale.

In Sydney's Haymarket they built the giant Palace Emporium, filling it with an astonishing range of goods from kitchen pots to the latest Parisian bonnets. The new store proved to be a bonanza.

Year after year Anthony Hordern's sent out their illustrated catalogues to the country and gradually built up a rural clientele that reached from the Riverina to the back blocks of Queensland.

Every day in the city a glittering fleet of delivery vans drawn by Hordern's famous teams of horses galloped out of the Haymarket store, whips cracking, to make the round of the suburbs.

By the middle of the 1880s however when Anthony Hordern's was supposed to be the second largest department store in the world, the control of the store had slipped almost entirely into the hands of Samuel Hordern.

For many years the mind of Anthony Hordern had begun to teem with notions that soared far above the humdrum business of commerce. He had visions of

himself as an empire builder. While visiting London, Hordern would hold forth about a sunny Australia swarming from shore to shore with a contented peasantry industriously turning over the virgin soil of the interior.

Well-bred Englishmen listened politely as Hordern expounded his dream of an Australian Utopia with garden, terraced cities rising out of the empty plains of the outback.

But behind the idealist they could see the canny businessman who foresaw a prosperous yeomanry eagerly scanning their Anthony Hordern catalogues and rushing to open new accounts with the firm's country order department.

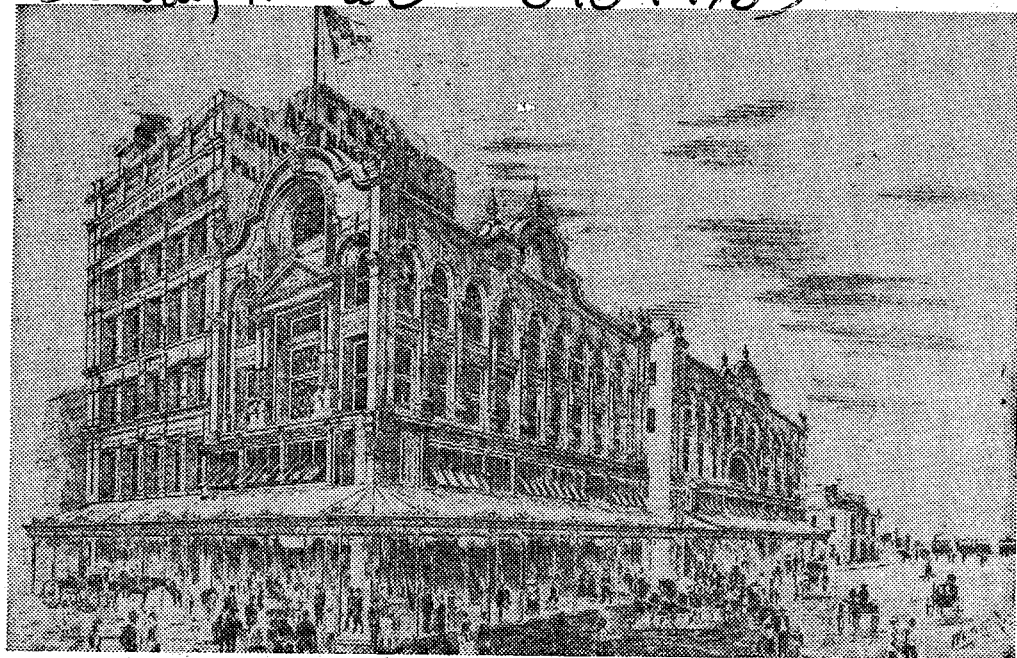
Also his proposals for converting his dreams into reality were practical enough.

His idea was to seek out colonial governments whose development was retarded for want of population and offer them migrants in return for a substantial grant of land.

WA venture

In 1873 he had approached the West Australian Government with a proposal to bring out 2000 immigrants in exchange for land in the south-west.

But though the westerners were interested they were a bit wary of the dazzling young Sydney financier.



Hordern's old building at the time of Anthony Hordern the third. The young man's methods of buying and stocking shocked some of the older employees but paid dividends.

Then Hordern heard that West Australians were considering the idea of building railways by offering contractors land along the route in proportion to the amount of track laid down.

Hordern saw his chance. He knew of WA's great empty spaces and realised vast sums of money were being held in Britain waiting to be invested in the right land.

First he sought the advice and assistance of the young surveyor-explorer, Alexander Forrest. Then having decided on the most likely area for development he made a specific offer to the Government.

He would finance the construction of a railway from Albany to join the Government line east of Perth and bring out 50,000 migrants conditional on a crown grant of 120 acres for each immigrant delivered.

This was something along the lines on which the great transcontinental railway had been built in Canada but Hordern's idea was even more ambitious.

It was not just a land grant scheme but a thorough going scheme of colonisation.

The immigrants would not only have their passage paid to Australia but would be actually settled in the land and started off with homes, fences, dams, tools and seed.

They would also be given plenty of time before making the first repayments.

And Hordern's assisted immigrants would not be the kind brought out to Australia in the early days — agricultural laborers, parish paupers, scourgings from the streets of London. They would be artisans.

In 1884 Hordern sailed for England to organise a syndicate while Forrest stayed behind in Perth to act as his agent and parliamentary lobbyist.

British investors were especially interested in the idea of sending out the superior kind of married artisans who would settle in communities instead of stringing out in the bush.

This would help to push up land values all along the railway line.

However in Perth Forrest was having trouble competing with a number of

powerful rival interests who had also submitted schemes. But eventually Hordern's proposals after being slightly modified were accepted and the West Australian Land Company was floated in London.

With capital being rapidly subscribed Hordern grew more and more excited. He talked about factories, an agricultural college, a university, while all this time his agents were busy buying up property in Perth and throughout the south-west.

Miller Brothers of Melbourne, the engineering firm which had just built one of the world's first torpedoes, was engaged to lay down the track.

Hordern himself interviewed many of the immigrants who would help build the railway and then settle down as farmers and tradesmen.

In London in August 1886 Hordern boarded the P and O steamship Carthage bound for Perth to arrange for the reception of the first immigrants.

But he never arrived. Ashore at Aden in the hottest month of the year, he suffered sunstroke and died at sea.

The news threw Perth into confusion. Nobody knew what to do with the immigrants when they arrived. The English directors of the company had no interest in them except to drop them on the wharf at Albany.

Leaderless

The WA Immigration Board had already written to the Government disclaiming any responsibility so that when the 260 finally reached Australia they received a cold welcome.

But the Immigration Board did provide rough accommodation.

The Government could find no work for them and, disillusioned and leaderless, the Englishmen began leaving the colony in batches.

For years the English directors of the Land Company sat on three million acres of land waiting for development to make it valuable.

Generally they refused to

part with any of the land except to large-scale farmers with plenty of capital to spend on improvements.

One director resigned, bought 5000 acres and began breaking up the land with a giant steam plough that drew four furrows.

When the soil was ready for crops he was able to lease the land to a handful of settlers.

But for the company the key to eventual success lay in the development of the eight selected town sites scattered along the route.

Even after the opening of the Great Southern Railway from Albany to Beverley in 1889 the little villages of Narrogin, Wagin, and Lakelands continued to slumber peacefully in the sun. Only in Katanning was there any sign of progress.

Gold found

The railway staggered along, operating at a bare subsistence level. There were no porters, few gangers or fettlers, and the station-masters' wives had to sell the tickets while their husbands did everything else.

Then, suddenly gold was discovered first at Coolgardie then at Kalgoorlie. Almost overnight the railways became a vital artery of traffic bringing thousands of diggers from Albany.

Narrogin, Lakelands and the other little settlements began shooting ahead.

Eventually when the Government resumed most of the company's land to provide for the increasing population the syndicate was wound up. The British shareholders were well satisfied with the prices they got.

Today history passes lightly over Anthony Hordern's empire-building talents. But if the plan became a fiasco, the planner himself possessed the qualities of greatness.

• Sir George Dibbs was an amazing mixture of business tycoon, politician and adventurer. The story of Dibbs, one of the most controversial figures in NSW's history, appears in tomorrow's Daily Mirror.