

Chicory and the Island

Grown on the Island for over 100 years



The root vegetable chicory is synonymous with Phillip Island, with the first crops being grown on the island as far back as 1869. It is said that the famous botanist, Dr Ferdinand von Mueller who established Melbourne's famous Royal Botanic Garden, advised a number of the early settlers on Phillip Island to avoid planting crops such as wheat and barley and instead grow crops of either chicory or mustard – which would be either too bitter or too hot for the destructive pests such as caterpillars.

Many took his advice and chicory, which was used as a substitute for coffee or as an addition to coffee essence, became the staple crop of the island for about 100 years.

In the early days, chicory harvesting was performed by hand, which meant digging the

chicory root out of the ground and then removing or 'topping' the green head. This was a backbreaking job, and often involved being out in the paddocks in winter, suffering from the cold, wet and muddy conditions. Help arrived when local man, Duncan McGregor, working as a blacksmith, invented a purpose-made hand-harvesting device called the 'Chicory Devil' in the 1880s which assisted farmers digging out the chicory roots. It wasn't until the 1930s when a horse-drawn single furrow plough began to be used to lift the crop that Chicory Devil's use declined, although some use was still made of the Devil when the ground was too wet



to use other implements or where roots had been missed by the mechanical equipment. For the

smaller growers, the Devil was in use right up until the 1960s.

The difficulties experienced in transporting the chicory crops to Melbourne were eased with the building of the first jetty in Cowes in the latter part of 1870. Initially the chicory crops were shipped to Melbourne green (that is undried), in the schooner the *Stephen*. But it wasn't long before the resourceful farmers developed a primitive drying method, which involved keeping a fire burning in a hole in the ground, and fixing a wire mesh over the hole, on which the chicory could be placed and dried.

This drying process became obsolete on 4 June 1878 with the construction of the first chicory kiln on Phillip Island

by brothers John and Solomon West. They also ran the West's General Store, located in what we know today as Thompson Avenue.

The kiln was opened with great fanfare. A sumptuous banquet for some 70 guests was thrown at the renowned Isle of Wight Hotel. The kiln was described in the press as a 'handsome brick building containing a steam engine and all the necessary appliances for cutting and drying chicory on a large scale.

When coffee was in short supply during World War II, the chicory industry flourished. In the 1940s, the Western Port area was responsible for producing more than 75% of Australia's chicory needs. In 1947 there were 117 registered growers with an average area of 4½ acres of chicory. A typical harvest on Phillip Island yielded about 3-4 tons of green chicory per acre.

Although the crop is no longer grown on Phillip island, the shells of the old chicory kilns with their distinctive pyramid shaped roofs are today iconic sights dotted around the Island.

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Aside from chicory, there were also a number of farmers on the Island who grazed cattle and sheep. Getting the stock to the Island presented its own challenges. While sheep could be shipped via steamer, mobs of cattle had to be herded first to Griffith Point (San Remo) and then, when the tidal flow was suitable, swum behind the punt across the Eastern Channel to Newhaven.

The last chicory crops to be grown on the island in 1987 were the McFee Family in Rhyll who had been farming chicory for three generations, but luckily many of the Chicory kilns have been restored and survive to this day.

