

Charles Ruwolt Pty Limited

A Brief History

Charles Ernest Ruwolt (1873-1946), engineer and industrialist, was born on 19 March 1873 at Mieckenhagen, Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Germany, son of Ernst Johann Christian Ruwoldt, farmer, and his wife Maria Catharina, (née Engel). The family migrated in 1878 and took up wheat-farming at Mount Gambier, South Australia. Charles was educated at Yahl Paddock and Mount Gambier Public schools. During his apprenticeship in 1886-90 with James Martin & Co., a machinery manufacturer at Gawler, he attended the State technical school. For the next decade Ruwolt worked with various Victorian foundries and engineering manufacturers, including James Alston & Co., Warrnambool, the Phoenix Foundry, Ballarat, Austral Otis, South Melbourne, and Thompsons, Castlemaine.

Ruwolt

In 1902 he opened his own iron foundry listed at Parfitt Road, Wangaratta, making windmills (1903 – 1911) and carrying out agricultural machinery repairs. In 1908 the company merged with Isaac Stevenson of New Zealand and became a leading manufacturer of gold mining dredges, used throughout Australia and exported to the Malay States, Siam (Thailand), the Philippines, South Africa and New Guinea.

In 1912 he started an engineering and steel foundry business in Richmond, Melbourne. The company moved into mining machinery, spares and industrial products.

In 1914 Charles Ruwolt Pty Ltd (registered in 1910) transferred to Victoria Street, Richmond, Melbourne, becoming a public company in 1920 under the name Ruwolt & Co., but with shareholding retained by Ruwolt and his original backer Isaac Stevenson of New Zealand. By 1920, the Wangaratta business was closed and in 1922 Ruwolt diversified into heavy industrial work, producing road-making equipment, crushing machinery for mine-work, brewing machinery and hydraulic presses for the nascent car industry. The company's last dredge from Richmond was delivered in 1929 and by this time they were heavily involved in mining and industrial products.



Charles Ruwolt Pty Limited - Richmond Works.



Standard 25 pounder with the first short 25 pounder (shortened barrel), produced at the works of Charles Ruwolt Pty Ltd.

By 1938 it was one of the largest engineering companies in Australia, occupying 20 acres (8 ha) and employing 600-700 workers. Its steel foundry was one of the largest and best-equipped in the country and it manufactured the most important machinery in Australia, which Ruwolt, a tall, earnest man of heavy physique, promoted personally.

With the advent of World War Two the firm was deployed to manufacture field artillery and Mr Ruwolt held a senior position in the wartime administrator of home-front resources. Many 25-pounder guns and other items were produced at his Richmond works. The works was a 24-hour operation at the height of wartime production.

Ruwolt died on the 4th November 1946 and by 1948 Vickers Limited (UK) had purchased Ruwolt and became Vickers Ruwolt Pty Limited. The works was a 24 hour operation at the height of wartime production. Later, Hoskins and HADWA, both companies in Perth, were purchased and a new public company, Vickers Australia Limited was formed, although Hoskins continued to operate as Vickers Hoskins. Vickers Ruwolt, a Division of Vickers Australia Limited., was a company incorporated in the Australian Capital Territory and was listed on major stock exchanges. It was over one-third owned by the Australian public and employed about 4,000 people around Australia.

Cockatoo Docks & Engineering Co. Pty Limited in Sydney Harbour was also part of this public company, but the assets were held by the Federal Government with Vickers Holding Pty Limited having management rights. Vickers had a two third holding and the public one third in Vickers Australia.

In December 1973, Vickers Ruwolt purchased Scotts of Ipswich, Queensland and formed Vickers Scotts. After the floods in January 1974 which destroyed the Scott's Foundry in Wharf Street, Ipswich, 30 acres of land at Karrabin was purchased and construction of an iron foundry began. In 1977, Vickers Australia purchased Exatal, a fibreglass manufacturer at Wyong in New South Wales and formed Vickers Exetal.

Between 1982 and 1983, the HADWA steel foundry in Perth and the Ruwolt steel foundry in Richmond were closed and an agreement was made with Bradken, then part of the ANI Corporation Limited, to purchase steel castings.

In late 1983, Vickers Australia merged with BHP's Commonwealth Steel Company Limited in Newcastle and a new company Comsteel Vickers Limited was formed with BHP holding one third, Vickers holding one third and the public holding the other third. At this time, Comsteel Vickers consisted of five divisions namely, Vickers Ruwolt (Melbourne, VIC), Vickers Scotts (Ipswich, QLD), Vickers Exatal (Wyong, NSW), Vickers Hoskins (Perth, WA) and Vickers Keogh (Kalgoorlie, WA) and the dockyard's name was changed to Cockatoo Dockyard Pty Limited.

In 1985 it was decided to close the Ruwolt facility and move the heavy fabrication, machine and fitting factories to Karrabin. At the same time Scotts fabrication, machine and office block in Brisbane Street at Ipswich was closed. A new office block was constructed at the Karrabin site and on the 1st January 1986, ANI took over Comsteel Vickers calling it ANI Ruwolt. The move to Karrabin was completed in June, with the Bradken Division assuming management responsibility of the works.

ANI Ruwolt continued to operate under this name until 1995, at which time it was merged into ANI Engineering as part of a major overhaul of ANI's manufacturing business. The active use of the name ceased at this time. The Karrabin works is today a principle manufacturing facility for the Bradken Group and currently employs 550 people.

Sources: Richard Thomas Wightman, D. M. Whittaker, Wangaratta (1963); Institute of Engineers, Australia, Journal, 6, No 10, Oct 1934; G. D. Hayes, Charles Ruwolt, a History to 1927 (M.Eng.Sc. thesis, University of Melbourne, 1981).

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