

1860 - 1900

Pioneering the first plantations

The first *Acacia Mearnsii* seeds were imported to South Africa in the 1850s from its native Australia. Early experiments revealed tannins within the bark at comparable levels to the slow growing quebracho tree, and it was then decided to cultivate the first black wattle plantations in South Africa for use in leather tanning.

Black wattle was ideally suited to Natal's subtropical climate and thrived where the fertility of the soil was insufficient for other crops. In 1864, a settler named John Vanderplank was granted land in Camperdown, where he planted black wattle seeds he had brought with him from Australia in a matchbox. After convincing his brother Charles to join him, the pair propagated and grew the scale of their plantation that ultimately gave rise to the industry we benefit from today.

Another key player in the development of Natal's wattle industry was Sir George Sutton, a successful farmer and politician who

served as Prime Minister of the British colony between 1903 and 1905. Sutton was a leading advocate of wattle. Records from the time show that Sir George sold a few tonnes of wattle bark to Mr. Hallen of Lyles Tannery in Pietermaritzburg in 1884, so that experiments could be undertaken on wattle as a tanning agent. Initial results were a runaway success. Recognising the opportunity, Sir



Bringing timber to rail



Weighing barks



George expanded his interests in the plantations considerably. Soon thereafter, he published a booklet called *Wattle Bark: A Paying Industry in Natal*, which he distributed widely. The book provided detailed instructions on how to germinate, cultivate and harvest wattle bark and prepare it for export, as well as the returns a farmer could expect at market.

Sir George had investigated prices of wattle abroad, and found that the £15 a ton being paid in London was close to four times what could be achieved in Pietermaritzburg, and supply was exceeding demand. Working with other growers, Sir George oversaw the first shipment of wattle bark strips from Port Natal in 1886. Sir George also made the first attempts at developing facilities for chopping bark, but a lack of financial backing and little significant improvement in returns meant it never got off the ground.

The first major commercial success in the export of wattle bark befell the Angus brothers of Noordstroom.



Sir George Morris Sutton

With 2,500 acres under wattle between them, they were also keenly aware of the growing demand for bark on European shores. Freight charges on their first shipment in 1886 meant profits were negligible, but time dedicated to the shipping issue ensured far better rates the following year. The ten tons of chopped bark shipped to London in tight bound hessian sacks fetched strong returns, and it didn't go unnoticed among the growing fraternity of Natal growers. Year on year exports and plantations grew. Profits were far stronger than other crops, and the black wattle gold rush resulted in processing plants and factories springing up across the region.

At the turn of the century, the wattle industry faced challenges with the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899. Trade routes became treacherous, foreign relationships became complicated and many of the farmers were called on to serve. Many of the large concerns continued business as usual, but there were few new entrants. Growth of the wattle industry slowed to a trickle.

The NTE Centenary has provided us with a rare opportunity to look back and appreciate the early roots of a business still going strong well over 100 years later. There is a spirit of determination in those early pioneers that has shaped the values of NTE, which is still very much alive in the company today. The drive to shift and adapt, continually improve and become more efficient while never compromising on the quality of their product shines through in NTE today.

We invite our growers and shareholders, partners, clients and friends to share in the Centenary celebrations throughout the year, and we thank you all for your contributions to our growth and success. Please take a look at the NTE, Mimosa and Bondtite websites for regular updates, events and announcements.

Each month of 2020, the Centenary Celebration newsletters will take a look back at a century of achievement that has forged the company that NTE is today, and the company we're striving to create to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

 **Mimosa**  **Bondtite**

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