

The Demise of the Heathcote Maltworks

By John Squibb

John Squibb was a meteorologist for most of his life and is now happily retired living at the old Maltworks site which has been developed into the Maltworks Villas.

In the 1980s the Heathcote Malting Company, owned by NZ Breweries, made an application to the Canterbury Regional Council to convert their power source from rapidly rising electricity to cheaper coal. But at the same time there was an increasing concern in Christchurch about the decreasing quality of air, particularly in the autumn and winter months. Pollutant levels approached – or even exceeded – world standard guidelines and Christchurch was widely referred to as the “Smog capital of New Zealand”.



The Heathcote Maltworks in the late 1970s

The Malting Company hired a private meteorological company to substantiate their application. This company carried out their investigations in late spring – autumn months, but not in winter. The Malting Company’s case revolved around the fact that, in the 1970s, they spent considerable money building six 200 foot silos to expedite the expulsion of pollutants from the site. By doing this, and aided by the topography of the south to north contour of the valley (from the Summit Road), the southerly wind would largely carry the pollution over Woolston etc and out to sea at Brighton.

The case was considered in spring 1997, presided over by Judge John Fogarty QC for two days. The evidence presented against the Maltworks’ proposal was meteorologically based. It was explained that the only specific research in Heathcote had been done in 1970 by A.P. Ryan of the Christchurch Met. Service. He found that only 18% of the valley’s winds were from the south. It was known for more than a century that the

prevailing wind in Christchurch was ENE (East – North – East) – 70 degrees on the compass).

But Ryan’s research also found that the contour of the valley gave the wind an even more easterly slant (90 to 100 degrees on the compass). This meant that the winds came across the valley from the Mt Pleasant side and then proceeded over the northern and western suburbs.

Before the escalation of global warming, Christchurch weather experienced 85 frosts a year. Temperature inversion also featured. This is where a layer of warm air is above a layer of cold air; the cold air having been cooled in the winter by contact with the cold ground. The inversion acts as a lid on the lower layer and traps the pollutants.

Cold fronts from the south traverse Christchurch at (roughly) seven day intervals during the May – October period. These fronts can temporarily clear the pollutants but they quickly reform. Fogs and dews also exacerbate the smog situation.

The meeting stirred plenty of interest. Several local residents spoke against the Maltworks’ proposal. It was no surprise that the application to utilise coal was denied.



Demolition underway in 2012

NZ Breweries decided to close down their operation and transfer to a second smaller plant in the North Island. The business here ceased in the early 2000s. The silos were eventually demolished in early 2012.