

Aitkens Concrete Ltd

- 100 Years in Concrete and the Gisborne Building Industry

In 2008 Aitkens Concrete Ltd, a name synonymous with concrete masonry and more recently ready mixed concrete, celebrated its centenary. Three generations of Aitkens - George, John and David have guided the business through different areas of concrete manufacturing. George worked with roofing tiles, Konka board and Terrazzo, John with masonry, and David with masonry and readymix.



George Aitken's winter show display 1925



Transporting blocks manufactured on a Fleming block machine 1958

The founder George Aitken was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1880. The family emigrated to Australia in 1884, and George served his apprenticeship as a carpenter with the Mount Morgan Gold Mining Co. He moved to New Zealand in 1904 after a prolonged drought in Queensland had crippled the economy.

George commenced business in partnership with D.M. Wilson in 1906, building a workshop and buying property in Carnarvon Street in Gisborne. The plant accounts show purchase of a horse trap and harness in March 1914 for £21, and a Briscoe motorcar in February 1918 for £165, depreciation was 10% per annum.

Following negotiations with Penmaned & Jeffrey of Auckland in 1920, an arrangement was reached for George to manufacture their pattern of concrete roofing tile. Plant was purchased in 1921 and installed in a new building.

In 1925 George was involved in dismantling the Taruheru

Freezing Works in Gisborne, recovering a large quantity of pumice that had been used for insulation in the walls of the freezing chambers. This was used for many years in the manufacture of concrete coppers, septic tanks and Konka board precast units.

In March 1925 a shed for the manufacture of "Konka" board was built. Konka board was a sheet of pumice concrete backed up with building paper, was about 50mm thick and 900mm x 900mm square. The sheets were fixed to the timber frame of a building with galvanised clips and nails, the joints were covered with cement impregnated Hessian and the whole surface was rendered, often rough cast. There are many fine homes with Konka exterior cladding and tile roof that are still admired today.

1934 saw George start to manufacture terrazzo sinktops, fire surrounds and stall boards for shop fronts. The Labour Government's State Housing policy in the mid



John Aitken circa 1967

1930's created a boom in concrete roof tiling in addition to the many private houses, which opted for a tiled roof. Most of these roofs are still in excellent condition after the passage of 70 or more years.

In 1946, 23-year-old Flight Lieutenant John Aitken DFC started working for George after spending 4 years with the Royal New Zealand Air Force, based in Britain in Bomber Command. While there John saw how masonry blocks were being used and realised how versatile they were.

A new block plant building was built in 1954 to house the manufacturing operation of hollow core masonry blocks using a Fleming block machine imported from America. Sales of masonry blocks increased significantly, almost doubling every year for several years.

George died in 1958 and John became the sole owner in 1962. As the original plant on Gisborne's main street was re-zoned commercial in 1964, land was purchased in the new industrial area, Awapuni Road.

A new block plant was built in 1965 with a Columbia Model 8 block machine purchased from America. The masonry blocks on the Model 8 were a better quality unit and more dimensionally true as compared to the Fleming.

Masonry units were supplied to an ever-expanding commercial and industrial sector in Gisborne, with Watties being a major customer. In addition to the manufacturing operation, John also formed a blocklaying operation with up to 15 staff employed.

John's eldest son, David joined the company in 1973, aged 22 as a trainee blocklayer, and helped phase out the blocklaying operation in order to concentrate on the manufacturing of masonry, to meet increasing demand.

In 1980, a Model 22 was purchased and installed to help keep up with demand taking place due to the expansion of Watties' food processing operation, and the Gisborne freezing works.

Around this time Pacific Pine built a timber mill in Gisborne. A tender was won to supply 12,000m² of 80mm interlocking paving. 500,000 units were manufactured over a period of 28 days with a double 8 hr shift. A third mould had been introduced by the time production was complete.

The early eighties saw many changes in company ownerships. The Goodman Brothers bought Watties, which along with the sharemarket crash in 1987 saw Watties split up and sold off over the next eight years. The Gisborne freezing works closed and a significant part of the masonry hollow block sales was lost.

Immediately following this period the Gisborne District Council undertook a footpath renewal program near the CBD using 60mm Cobbles. During these years paving production increased to 60% of total masonry production.

John Aitken retired to his small persimmon orchard in 1987, but remained a shareholder and director. His sons David & Ron continued running the business until Ron left in 1989.

In the early 1990's without Watties or the freezing companies, masonry production declined, and David made the decision to start in readymix.

A plant was built in 1993 next to the masonry shed and a couple of old trucks were also purchased. Readymix production began in 1994.

Today Aitkens Concrete Ltd operates a masonry plant and readymix plant on the Awapuni Road site, with readymix accounting for 78% of annual sales, and masonry 10%.

In 2008 Aitkens Concrete celebrated 100 years of business in the Gisborne building trade. That same year John sold his remaining shares and retired as a director. At 86, he is still actively involved in his persimmon orchard. David and Trudy Aitken remain as present managing director and director, with Mike Long as an outside director.



Russell Street built around 1925.



Stout Street also built around 1925.

