

ANNETTE COOPER

Foy & Gibson: from the sheep's back to yours

Foy & Gibson, also known as Foy's, was an early department store in Melbourne. The entire life of the store, which was in business from the 1880s to the 1960s, can be traced through State Library Victoria's collections of photographs, catalogues, architectural drawings, advertising posters, postcards, ephemera and newspapers. The collection provides a window into Melbourne's retail and social histories.

Stirring things up

The story begins when a young Irishman, Mark Foy, arrived in Melbourne in the 1850s. In 1859, he moved to the goldfields and worked in a variety of shops. One of these, in Sandhurst (now Bendigo), with storekeeper Robert Bentley, was a drapery company called Bentley and Foy and was in business by August 1866.¹

A curious article by the 'Almanac' that appeared in *The Bendigo Advertiser* in 1908 suggests that Foy was a bit of a character. He apparently held constant clearing sales of goods slightly damaged by saltwater from shipwrecks, though where the wrecks came from was something of a mystery. The dripping goods would spill out of the store, and 'there was hardly a week that he was not up at court for encroaching on the footpath'.²

Bentley and Foy was dissolved in February 1870, and later that year

V Aldred, *New season's bathing accessories*, in *Foy & Gibson spring & summer catalogue*, no. 80, Melbourne: Foy & Gibson, 1929–30, p. 38c, RARELT 658.8710994 F83S



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Foy returned to Melbourne and established a drapery shop in Smith Street, Collingwood. At that time, according to Melbourne's *Herald*, Collingwood 'boasted some of the leading homes of the day ... [and] was the oldest and largest suburb'. In November, *The Advocate* signified the arrival of the 'new drapery establishment', and by December, Foy was using his full name, Mark Foy, in advertisements.³

Despite telling the writer at *The Bendigo Advertiser* that he was intending to 'stir things up' in Collingwood, Foy was also a justice of the peace and supported the early-closing movement, which sought a reduction in work hours. His business thrived, and late in 1882 he transferred ownership to his son Francis. Francis was subsequently joined by William Gibson, described by *The Herald* as a 'well trained and sound minded Glasgow man', who had arrived in Australia that year. The partnership marked the beginning of Foy & Gibson and was signed early in 1883. Possibly the first reference to the new company appeared in *The Argus* that July: 'Man, smart, young, as light porter, wanted. Apply this day, Foy and Gibson, Mark Foy's, Collingwood'.⁴ References to its former name, Mark Foy's, continued for at least another year.

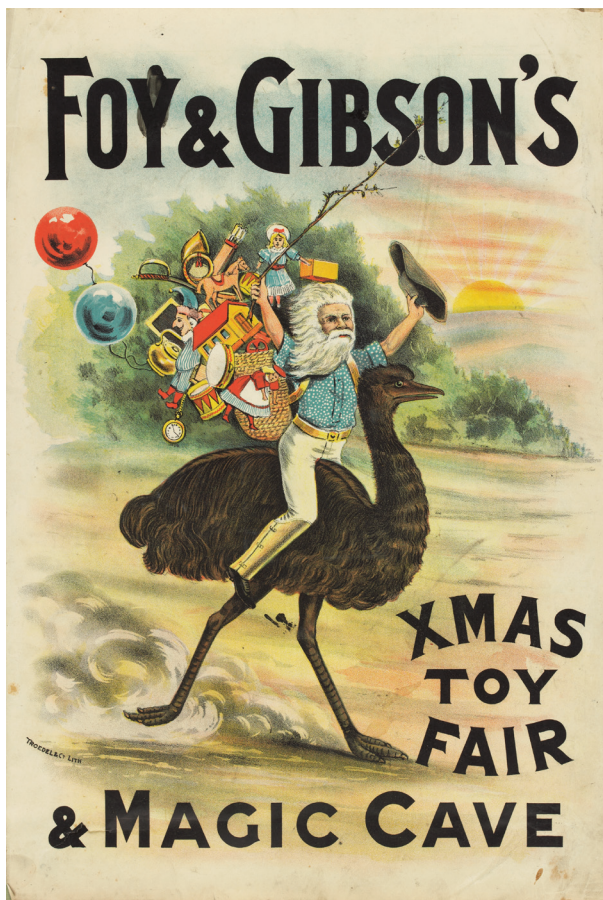
In September 1883, tenders were called to build a showroom to the design of renowned Melbourne architect William Pitt.⁵ This appears to have been a large furniture warehouse; it marked the start of an enduring relationship between the architect and the firm.

After handing over the reins to his son Francis, Mark Foy had left for Europe, but in San Francisco his health deteriorated, and he died on 14 January 1884 of Bright's disease. In *The Barrier Miner* in 1908, he was described as 'one of the most successful business men Australia has seen'.⁶

The partnership between William Gibson and Francis Foy was dissolved in August 1884, after a disagreement. Foy sold his share of the business to Gibson, Gibson became sole owner (retaining the name Foy & Gibson), and Foy went to Sydney and established Mark Foy's in honour of his father.⁷

Gibson started sending departmental buyers to Britain. According to SW Davies's *Foy's saga*, Gibson had 'long recognised that the success of the business depended firstly and lastly upon buying. The merchandise must be right, bought direct from the manufacturer to avoid the middleman's profit'. He also brought others into the firm: another Scot, William Dougall, in 1885, then his nephews Samuel Gibson and John Maclellan, in 1890.⁸

In 1889, Gibson himself went overseas on a buying trip. In Paris, he visited the Bon Marché department store, which at that time was doing an enormous trade and employing 3500 people. He also toured the main manufacturing centres of Britain.⁹ His experiences helped him to shape the firm into a

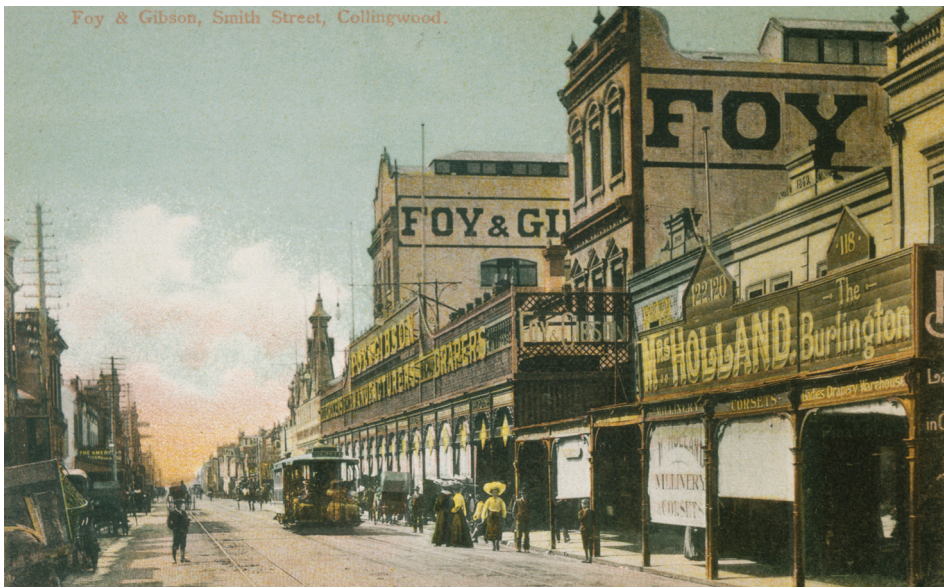


Troedel & Co., *Foy & Gibson's Xmas toy fair & magic cave*, poster: colour lithograph, 44.7 × 30.4 cm, c. 1883 – c. 1892, Troedel collection, H2008.94/19

department store and develop in-house manufacturing. By 1890, a visit to the store had apparently become a very happy event, even morally uplifting!

The young wife who has become possessed of one of those elegant mantles ... will have a sweeter temper and more contented spirit than has hitherto ruled her ... The country gentleman who has purchased his suites of furniture for the home to which he shall presently conduct his bride, is filled with a sense of importance and responsibility, to which hitherto, during his shiftless slovenly bachelor days, he has been an utter stranger.¹⁰

A striking Foy & Gibson poster from around this time, donated to the Library in 1968, can be found in State Library Victoria's Troedel collection. The firm's output included advertising posters for various companies. The poster for Foy & Gibson advertised a Christmas toy fair and magic cave with a distinctly Australian twist: a Father Christmas-like figure dressed in squatters clothes, riding on the back of an emu and carrying a bag of toys (see above). It is signed 'Troedel & Co. Lith', but the identity of the artist is unknown. The toy



Foy & Gibson, Smith Street, Collingwood, postcard: printed, colour, 8.8 × 13.8 cm (approx.), c. 1906, Shirley Jones collection of Victorian postcards, H90.160/1012

fair and magic cave were advertised in newspapers from around 1891–92, but the illustrations for those depicted a far more traditional Father Christmas.¹¹

A newspaper advertisement in 1891 proclaimed that Foy & Gibson were ‘the largest manufacturers and the largest retail distributors in Australia ... the dress making, shirt, clothing and furniture factories ... turn[ing] out thousands of pounds weekly of colonial manufactured goods’.¹² In 1896, Gibson turned his sights on the manufacture of hosiery, and the first machines for knitting men’s socks were installed.¹³ In the same year, a branch in Perth opened, as did a new store on the Fitzroy side of Smith Street. Designed by Pitt, it was called the Bulk Store but later became the Men’s Store. It was described by Melbourne’s *Fitzroy City Press* as one of ‘the finest business buildings in the street’, but it has since been demolished. The hosiery initiative proved successful, and in 1900, a woollen mill opened for the manufacture of blankets and flannels. In 1902, a new store opened in Prahran, known as Maclellan & Co. (or the Big Store). A store in Brisbane followed in 1903, and one in Adelaide in 1907.¹⁴

Like flies to the honey

By 1906, newspapers claimed that Foy & Gibson were ‘undoubtedly the largest [manufacturers] in the Southern Hemisphere’; no other firm in Australia was manufacturing ‘so many different articles’. It was attracting customers ‘like flies to the honey’.¹⁵

A postcard in the Library’s Shirley Jones collection of Victorian postcards gives an excellent view of the store on the eastern side of Smith Street around



William Pitt, *Proposed warehouse for Foy and Gibson, Smith St., Fitzroy*, architectural drawing: negative photostat print, reversed image on paper, 61.4 × 94.3 cm, Paterson & Co., 1911, Melbourne University architectural collection, WD/SHO/3/1

this time (see opposite). It not only shows the building's considerable frontage; it also provides a snapshot into contemporary urban life, with men, women and children in Edwardian clothes, as well as horse-drawn carriages, open-air trams and early powerlines. Foy & Gibson may have published postcards like this as a way of advertisement. The Library's copy is unused and the original photographer is unknown. Shirley Jones was an avid collector of postcards, and the Library purchased her collection in four parts, including this item in mid-1989.¹⁶

A postcard from a similar time, showing a view of the store looking south during a 'summer fair', is in the Library's WT Pater collection.¹⁷ Street numbers can just be made out at the top of the central section of the store (also present in the Shirley Jones postcard, but very indistinct). Simple in their original purpose, such items now have historical importance as records of an early Melbourne department store and streetscape.

A new Ladies' Store, at 145–63 Smith Street, was built in 1911 to Pitt's design (next to the Bulk Store), along with a subway connecting it to the store on the opposite side. The Library holds four architectural drawings by Pitt depicting designs for this new store (see above). These were a gift from the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning in 2002.¹⁸

The Library also holds a catalogue from this time (see page 12), probably its earliest Foy & Gibson catalogue. (Another in the collection is catalogued as having a date of '1900?', but this is a photocopy, has no cover or dates in the



Front cover, *Foy & Gibson summer catalog*, no. 45, Melbourne: Foy & Gibson, 1913–14, RARELT 658.8710994 F83S

text and appears to be from after 1900 – possibly Edwardian or later.) Although the lovely cover is unsigned, many of the illustrations inside are signed ‘E. Ferris’ and possibly ‘HCY’ and ‘Scott’. The catalogue is beautifully designed, often with evocative background sketches of Melbourne sights such as Luna Park. It is also brimming with merchandise, the sheer breadth of which provides an excellent insight into the fashion and tastes of the time. There are also photographs of the firm’s factory complex, where many of the goods were made.

Shortly before World War I, Gibson went to London for a six-month visit, but difficulties in ocean transport detained him there. In 1917, his son James was killed in action, and in 1918, both his nephew Samuel Gibson and son William died. On 5 November 1918, Gibson himself died, of heart failure, aged 76. According to Davies, ‘The whole staff mourned his loss; they had lost not merely a great leader, but a real friend ... Beneath all his triumphs and successes, he still remained a kindly, very human Scottish gentleman, generous and sympathetic’. His nephew John Maclellan carried on the business.¹⁹



Gibsonia woollen goods and garments, back cover of 'Gibsonia' woollen and hosiery mills: 'two miles of mills', pamphlet (photocopy), Melbourne: Foy & Gibson, 1921[?], RARELTP 338.476773 F83G

'Two miles of mills'

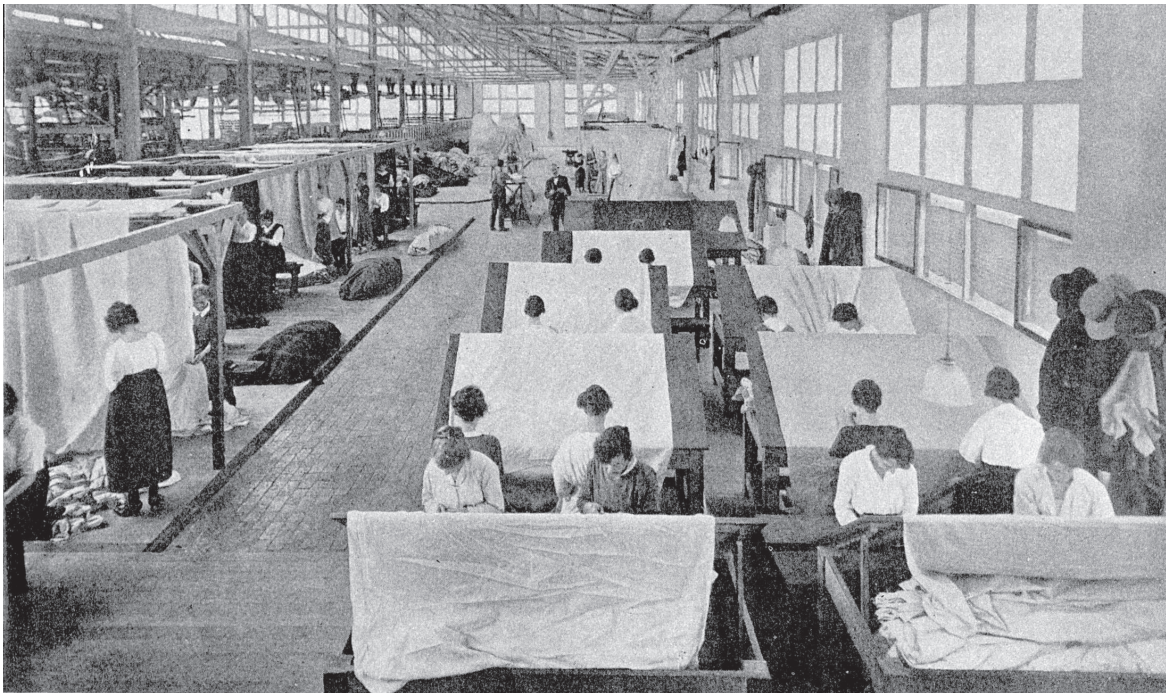
In an advertisement in 1922, there is possibly the first reference to Foy & Gibson's proud claim of 'two miles of mills', demonstrating the extent of their Collingwood site. It included the Gibsonia woollen mills, hosiery mills, white work factory, mantle and costume factory, men's tie factory, straw hat factory, men's tailoring department, cabinet and wood-working factory, leatherware factory, wire mattress factory, engineering workshop, wicker-work factory and jam factory. In 1923, they were even offering free tours:

Accept this invitation for a free trip around Australia's greatest and biggest array of Mills – TWO WHOLE MILES OF STREETS THEY COVER. Don't fail to see this impressive sight ... Free motor trips start from Foy and Gibson's doors every few minutes. Take Red Tram in Bourke Street.

All this manufacturing activity required a high consumption of coal, water and electricity and necessitated the installation of a power house in 1908 – one of Melbourne's first.²⁰

Gibsonia had become a brand name and signified quality woollen goods made by the firm, the most famous of which was the Gibsonia blanket, with 'only the fleece of pure-bred Australian merinos and "long wools"' being used.²¹

In the early 1920s, the company started to use the slogan 'From the sheep's back to yours'. It signified that everything was done on the Collingwood site



Cloth-examining department, 'Gibsonia' mills, in 'Gibsonia' woollen and hosiery mills: 'two miles of mills', pamphlet (photocopy), Melbourne: Foy & Gibson, 1921[?], p. 27, RARELTP 338.476773 F83G

and sold direct to customers, thereby cutting out the middleman's profit and keeping prices low. Imported goods were sold as well, but the firm's in-house manufacturing was significant. A Foy & Gibson brochure in the Library's collection gives a detailed account of the woollen mills at this time and contains some excellent photographs of the buildings, workers and merchandise; the famous slogan is on the back cover (see above and on page 13).

It is perhaps difficult to imagine the extent of the site. The shops were in Smith Street; then, to the east, in an area bounded by Wellington, Stanley and Peel streets, were the mills, factories, workshops and power house – eye-catchingly uniform in their red-brick composition. Built by the firm's own staff of tradesmen, most, if not all, were designed by Pitt.²²

The crossroads of Melbourne

In the 1920s, Foy & Gibson decided to open a store in the city. Land was purchased in 1926 on the corner of Bourke and Swanston streets: 'the crossroads of Melbourne' (see opposite). The existing buildings (including the Orient Hotel) were remodelled, and the store opened in 1928.²³

In the 1930s, however, these buildings were demolished to make way for a new store designed by Melbourne architect Harry Norris, which opened on 31 October 1936. An advertisement in *The Herald* claimed that, 'modern in its



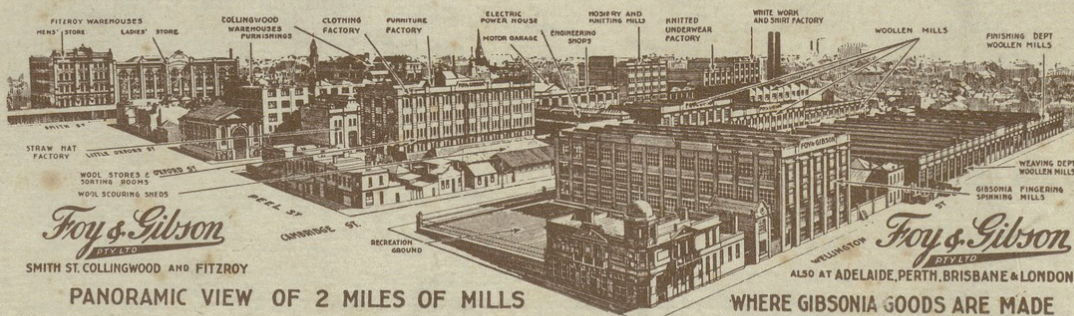
CR. BOURKE & SWANSTON STREETS, MELBOURNE.



SMITH STREET, COLLINGWOOD.



CHAPEL STREET, PRAHRAN.



Foy & Gibson
DIV LTD

SMITH ST. COLLINGWOOD AND FITZROY

PANORAMIC VIEW OF 2 MILES OF MILLS

Foy & Gibson
DIV LTD

ALSO AT ADELAIDE, PERTH, BRISBANE & LONDON

WHERE GIBSONIA GOODS ARE MADE

The top picture shows the former Orient Hotel and other buildings on the corner of Bourke and Swanston streets having been incorporated into the new Foy & Gibson store. The picture below on the left shows the former Men's and Ladies' stores in Smith Street. Back cover, *Foy & Gibson spring & summer season catalogue*, no. 82, 1930–31, Records of Coles Myer Ltd and its predecessors, MS 13468 FOYGS001 COMY16708



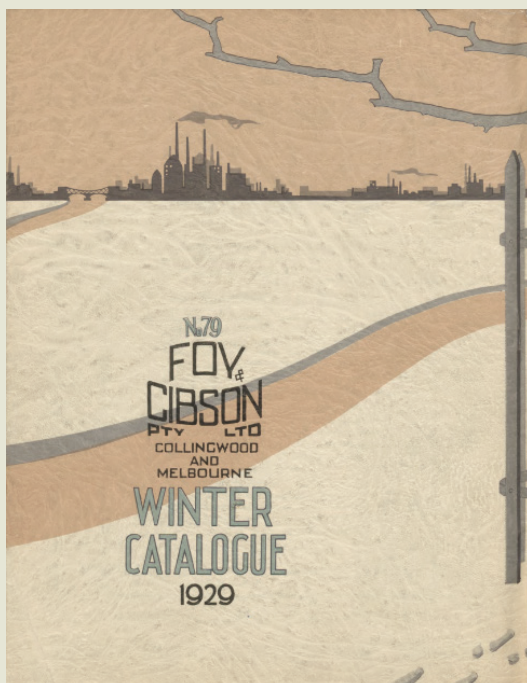
Foy & Gibson department store, corner of Bourke and Swanston streets, Melbourne. A sign for the Gibsonia woollens brand can be seen above the entrance. Lyle Fowler, negative: flexible base, c. 1936 – c. 1941, Harold Paynting collection, H92.20/15686

every feature, majestic on its dominating corner site, the New Foy's is destined to add new lustre to an already famous name'.²⁴ A photograph by commercial photographer Lyle Fowler in the Library's Harold Paynting collection encapsulates the grandeur of the building, with its vast expanse of windows, curved tower and dominant presence on an intersection bustling with open-air and W-class trams, pedestrians and early motorcars (see above). The date of the photograph is between 1936 (when Foy's opened) and 1941 (before the adjacent Manton's store extended further east). The Harold Paynting collection was purchased by the Library in 1985. Another avid collector, Paynting had acquired Fowler's archive, which consisted of around 15,000 negatives depicting commercial life in Victoria, largely taken between 1932 and 1972.²⁵ It represents an invaluable and beautiful record of Victorian life.

Some of the most striking Foy & Gibson catalogues in the Library's



Front and back covers, Foy & Gibson spring and summer catalogue, no. 78, Melbourne: Foy & Gibson, 1928-29, RARELT 658.8710994 F83S



Front and back covers, Foy & Gibson winter catalogue, no. 79, Melbourne: Foy & Gibson, 1929, RARELT 658.8710994 F83W



A Bowman, front cover, *Foy & Gibson autumn & winter fashion styles & general catalog*, no. 66, Melbourne: Foy & Gibson, 1923, RARELT 658.8710994 F83A

collection were produced during the 1920s and 1930s (see page 17 and above). While Foy & Gibson was not an upmarket store, it did produce some stunning imagery and stylish design. Although there are a few photographs in the catalogues, most goods are illustrated, with a number being signed 'A. Bowman' or 'V. Aldred'. At times, the artwork on the front cover extends to the back, creating a lovely panoramic view. In the 1923 autumn and winter catalogue, there are some photographs of the interiors of the Collingwood stores, including the manchester and carpet departments, showing shopfloor display techniques. Again, the catalogues provide a window onto contemporary tastes, including very modest bathing suits, corsets, commodes, meat safes and countless handkerchiefs. A number of these catalogues form part of

SEPTEMBER 29, 1927 *The Bulletin* 21

For Better Clothes

LIBRARY
30 SEP 1927
OF VICTORIA

MEN who take pride in their dressing are quick to appreciate Foy & Gibson-made clothes—from the hat to the shoes there are better materials, better making, better styling. These nation-wide stores ask men to compare Foy & Gibson's quality, workmanship and value in any garment that men wear—the result will be to mutual advantage.

FOY & GIBSON Pty Ltd
SMITH ST COLLINGWOOD MELB

ALSO ADELAIDE PERTH & BRISBANE
Write for New Suiting Patterns.

Advertisement for Foy & Gibson menswear, *Bulletin* (Sydney), 29 September 1927, p. 21, 052.94 B87A

the Library's Rare Books Collection (some of them may have been acquired under the Library's legal deposit policy, whereby copies of works published in Victoria must be deposited with the Library), and others are part of the Coles Myer archive, donated to the Library in 2000.²⁶ Coles attempted a takeover of Foy & Gibson in 1955 – hence the latter's inclusion in the archive.

An advertisement for menswear in *The Bulletin* of 1927 includes a very elegant illustration of a stylishly dressed man, complete with cigarette, possibly with the initials of the artist under the lamp post on the right (see above).

In 1955, Foy & Gibson was taken over by Cox Brothers, and the city store was modernised. For the most part, the Foy & Gibson (or Foy's) name appears to have been kept. A rooftop fun park opened in 1959, including a ferris wheel



Foy & Gibson's rooftop fun park. Carden Rofe Studios, Foy & Gibson, display dept., Bourke Street, Melbourne, photographic print: gelatin silver, c. 1959 – c. 1967, Australian Publicity Council collection, H88.33/109

and stagecoach rides. A photograph by Carden Rofe Studios in the Library's collection depicts this extraordinary initiative, as well as giving a snapshot of the Melbourne skyline at the time (see above). The photograph was a gift from the Sunbury Heritage Society in 1985.²⁷

'A whole new ball game'

This article was inspired by a chance conversation I had with a friend's father, Salvatore Trantino.²⁸ He worked for Foy & Gibson in the 1960s with none other than Frank Thring, the Australian actor famous for his role in the film *Ben Hur* (1959). Trantino started working in the firm's head office at Collingwood in about 1960, aged around 16 years, having been referred there by the accounting school he attended at the time. He started in the debtors department, processing paperwork and taking microfilm records to an archives room full of dust and cobwebs, which, he was told, was haunted by

‘Anne Gibson’s ghost’: ‘The area was known as Annie’s Room, and I used to get a chill up my spine every time I visited it. If you have ever read *Flash Gordon* comics, well, that was me, in and out in a flash’. I’m not sure who Anne Gibson was, but her ghost seems to have had an impact.

Trantino got very bored with paperwork, however, and asked for a transfer to sales in the Bourke Street store at around the time the rooftop fun park was in full swing. ‘Sales was a whole new ball game – the training was extensive. They had you role-playing ad nauseam – you didn’t get to the sales floor until you got it right.’ His first appointment was in haberdashery.

Ladies (housewives) sewed a lot in those days. They would darn a sock, not throw it out and replace it. The demand was on cotton reels, buttons, ribbons and material. Many women cut and sewed their own patterns to make their own dresses, rather than buy off the hook.

The Bourke Street store had progressed to cash registers, but the Collingwood store still operated on the canister system. You would put the money and the docket in a canister, which was connected to a wire, that whizzed up to an office. It came back with the change and a receipt.

Although the canister (or pneumatic tube) system was intriguing, his most ‘vivid encounters’ were with the Bourke Street store’s ground-floor supervisor Frank Thring.

He had a booming voice and ended sentences on a soprano octave. ‘Be sure to handle the merchandise with your gloves on, Salvatore. You never know where that ribbon is going to go.’ Thring was hired because he was a great drawcard – he worked there when he didn’t have a film on.

Trantino remembered watching fellow salespeople (dressed in black, naturally) holding up garments for customers to inspect.

It was executed with precision ... a work of art to behold. The garment was raised out of the box by the gloved attendant holding it with thumb and pointer, and returned to the box as if it had been ironed.

In 1960, immigration had not really taken off in a big way, which meant the principal clientele was white Australian Caucasian. The population was in some ways conservative and orderly, and serving customers was slow and methodical, with the accent on customer satisfaction. The gloves came off at sale time, however. It all became like a shark-feeding frenzy. I witnessed better bumps at sale time than one would see on the football field.

The beginning of the end

The firm had already closed its Brisbane store in 1931, but the 1960s marked the beginning of the end for Foy & Gibson. During this time, the store on the eastern side of Smith Street was demolished, stores in Western Australia were taken over from Cox Brothers by David Jones in 1964, and, in 1966, Cox Brothers went into receivership. Six Foy & Gibson stores in Victoria were bought by Woolworths in 1967, including the Bourke Street store, and later converted to Big W stores. After Cox Brothers' takeover, the Adelaide store became Cox Foy's; it closed in around the 1970s.²⁹

Today, the Bourke Street site is occupied by a Telstra store. Although no sign of the Foy & Gibson name is apparent, and three storeys have been added, glimpses of the original store can be seen in the form of stylised pilasters on the sides. It's also possible that the high central advertising board may hide original detail.

Less ambiguously, much of the firm's factory complex in Collingwood exists today, with many buildings still displaying the Foy & Gibson name. The complex is listed on the Victorian Heritage Register as having significance to the state of Victoria.³⁰ The Ladies' Store and subway in Smith Street, and the Big Store in Chapel Street, also still survive. Cafes and apartments now abound in the Collingwood complex, advertised in real estate pages as 'inner-Melbourne's premier warehouse precinct'.³¹ I am sure Foy & Gibson would agree.