

Reclaiming Taranaki's fashion shirt

Retired New Plymouth man Bob Bowler became a little irritated when he read an article in a Sunday newspaper recently. There, in black and white, was a claim that the iconic rural New Zealand garment Swannndri had its beginnings in the South Island. That's rubbish, says Mr Bowler — Swannndri is a Taranaki product. We background.

HOW did he know? How did English-born William Henry Broome know how to treat fabric so that it became showerproof?

That's a question that puzzles Broome's descendants. It's known that he was born in Staffordshire in 1873, and that when he immigrated to New Zealand at the age of 21 he had developed skills as a tailor.

What they don't know is whether he had been taught a method for showerproofing fabric, or whether he developed some unique formula himself.

All that is known is that on December 23, 1913, William Henry Broome, resident of New Plymouth, registered Swannndri as a trademark.

It's not even known why that particular name was chosen. But there is no doubt that it was an inspired choice. Its accompanying logo, which was a stylised swan in a circle, conveyed the message that Swannndri garments were capable of repelling water.

Almost 90 years later, the message is still there. In fact, Swannndri has become a New Zealand icon — part of this country's outdoors, clean, green image that each year attracts growing numbers of tourists.

While Bob Bowler is proud his grandfather was responsible for the creation of this great New Zealand product, he is annoyed with claims it had its beginnings in Milton, south of Dunedin.

The Sunday Star-Times perpetuated this myth with an article on Swannndri entering the mainstream fashion market.

"The first Swannndri was made by William Broome at Milton in 1871," the article read — two years before he was born!

"Our grandfather settled in New Plymouth and did not live anywhere else," says Mr Bowler.

"That, we do know. What is hazy is just how he introduced the method of making fabric showerproof. An aunt of mine is quite certain that when William Broome immigrated to New Zealand, he brought with him some sort of formula for waterproofing. But an uncle says William developed the formula himself after he had arrived in Taranaki."

Mr Bowler thinks the formula was simply a development of what at that stage was a well-known method of making fabric water-repellent, using a mixture of sugar of lead and alum.

The two ingredients were dissolved separately, and the solutions then mixed together, producing a clear solution containing alumina in the form of acetate. The fabric became water-repellent when the solution was applied.

"I remember when I was young I had to help my grandmother treat the fabric. Quite obviously one of the ingredients was alum, because it used



BUSINESS MAN: Swannndri founder William Broome, pictured walking along Devon St. New Plymouth, in the 1950s.



SWANNNDRI'S NEST: A young William Broome (centre) poses in front of his Devon St. New Plymouth business, The Palatine.

to make your fingers dry when you handled it," says Mr Bowler.

"This tends to back up my aunt's supposition that William Broome brought the formula with him when he immigrated to New Zealand."

Broome was a tailor, and he established a clothier and outfitters business called The Palatine on Devon St. New Plymouth. Part of his business involved sewing woollen fabric from mills in Wanganui, Kaiapoi and Wellington, into the original Swannndri garments. These were short-sleeved, long in the back, and designed to be worn over the top of work clothes for warmth and showerproofing.



OLD FASHION: Bob Bowler with a Swannndri similar to the early versions made by his grandfather, William Broome. Photo: MARK DWYER

Monday Business



with ROB MAETZIG

"They'd be dipped in the dissolved chemicals, then dried. The problem was that the process caused the garments to shrink, so you could never sell them to any particular size — one size fitted all," says Mr Bowler.

In 1938, William Broome transferred the Swannndri business to his wife Ivy. He died four years later aged 69, and in 1952 his widow sold the business and the trademark to businessman John McKendrick, who operated a clothing factory at Waitara.

"It was McKendrick who saw through changes to the waterproofing process,"

says Mr Bowler. Instead of putting the garments through the chemical process, he began buying in cloth that was closely woven and pre-shrunk. That meant he could make different garment sizes and patterns.

"That's when Swannndri changed from being solely a bush-workers' garment to a fashion item," says Mr Bowler.

McKendrick sourced his cloth from South Island-based Alliance Textiles, and the business expanded — with factories in Waitara and Opunake. It was a standing joke in the final years of the Waitara operation that sufficient cloth was used each year to stretch from Taranaki to Wellington.

Alliance purchased Swannndri in 1991 when McKendrick retired, and manufacturing continued for a few

years until production centred on Timaru and the Taranaki factory operation was closed.

This closure was a blow to Waitara, because in its heyday the factory employed close to 100 workers. All that remains are memories — and South Island-made Swannndri products. That's why Mr Bowler considers it important that it remains known that this great New Zealand icon had its beginnings in Taranaki.

● **PUKE ARIKI** is on the hunt for old Swannndri memorabilia and the museum's opening exhibition next year. Puke Ariki business development manager Eve Kawana-Brown said the history of the Swannndri was an important Taranaki story that needed to be told.

"You could never sell them to any particular size — one size fitted all."