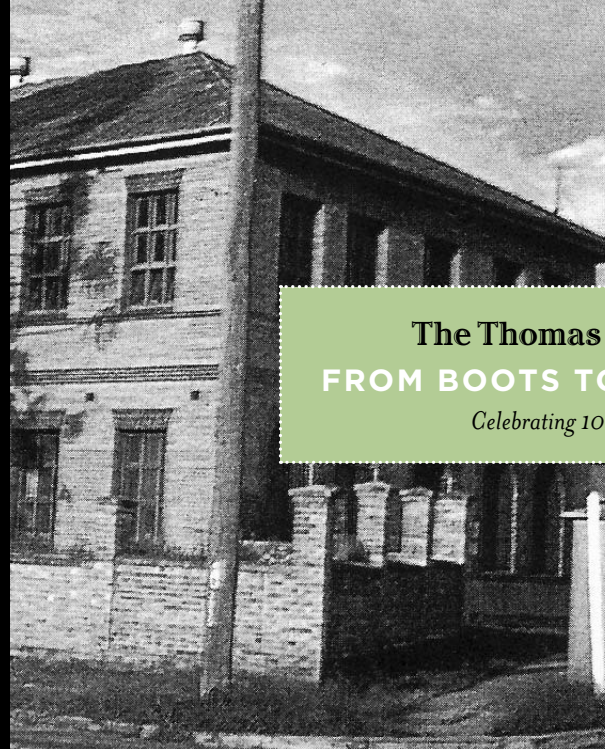


Thomas Dixon



The Thomas Dixon Centre
FROM BOOTS TO BALLET SHOES

Celebrating 100 years in 2008

1908 to 2008



MESSAGE FROM THE PREMIER OF QUEENSLAND



Known locally as the 'grand old lady of West End', the Thomas Dixon Centre, permanent home of Queensland Ballet and the Queensland Dance School of Excellence, has reached the venerable age of 100.

Originally commissioned by Mr Dixon in 1908 to house a shoe and boot factory, this beautiful Georgian Revival-style building now thrives as a hub of artistic life.

Listed on the Queensland Heritage Register in 1998, the Centre is a rare surviving example of an early twentieth century industrial factory in West End.

The significance of the building is enhanced by the incorporation of unusually decorative features for a

building of its type, including the use of dark blue salt-glazed bricks which greatly add to the building's street appeal.

When leading architect Richard Gailey designed the building, he incorporated king trusses, spanning the width of the building and producing an open space, unobstructed by pillars.

Gailey could not have foreseen that, a century later, there could be no better marriage of function and design for a suite of ballet studios.

Thanks to the extensive refurbishment undertaken by the Department of Public Works in 1991, the Centre's sprung floors are humming with the sounds of dancers hard at work honing their skills.

With its perfect balance of art, aesthetics, functionality and smart design, the Centre certainly deserves to be recognised as one of Brisbane's iconic buildings.

Congratulations to everyone involved with the Thomas Dixon Centre, in this, your centenary year.

Anna Bligh MP
Premier Of Queensland





THE DIXON FACTORY IN 1953

Photo courtesy National Trust of Queensland, Image S3785

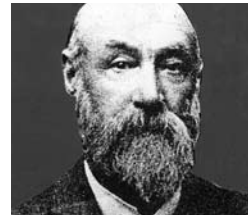
Thomas Dixon

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE THOMAS DIXON CENTRE

Bounded by Drake Street, Montague Road and Raven Street, West End, Brisbane.

The land surrounding the small town of Brisbane was opened up for free settlement in 1839. While the first South Brisbane land was sold in 1842, the West End Estate of 200 allotments was not opened up until 20 years later. A further 45 allotments soon became available as the 'Bunkers Hill Estate' and West End quickly became the fashionable choice of squatters from Toowoomba and the Brisbane Valley for their town houses. West End's first hotel (the Boundary Hotel) appeared in 1863 and it was not long before farming properties extended as far as Hardgrave Road and Dutton Park. In the early 1870s, West End began to change from a farming community to a residential area.

Thomas Coar Dixon was born in Bradford, Yorkshire, in 1845, and arrived in Sydney aboard the *Peerless* in 1866, settling in Moruya, south of Sydney, where he set up a small tannery. His older brother, Joseph Chapman Dixon, had arrived in Australia two years earlier and selected land on the Mooloolah River, north of Brisbane, later settling in Buderim where he grew sugar and ran beef cattle. Some time between 1869 and 'Tom' Dixon's visit to Brisbane to act as best man at Joseph's wedding (July 24, 1873), Joseph persuaded his younger brother to relocate his tannery to Brisbane.



THOMAS COAR DIXON,
FOUNDER OF
T.C. DIXON & SONS

Image courtesy Jocelyn Dixon



**STAFF AT THE DIXON TANNERY
DISPLAY A TANNED HIDE**

Date unknown. Image courtesy Kate Priest

Thomas Dixon

Both brothers were Quakers, and Thomas later wrote that a Friend (i.e. a Quaker) had shown him land suitable for his new tannery. It appears that, around 1873, he began his business on this land which today is bordered by Ferry Road, Forbes Street, Montague Road, and the Brisbane River. Thomas later recalled that, at that time, Hill End was a beautiful place with hills covered in bush and with only seven houses nearby.

According to Dixon family records, he dug his own tanning pits and used to row his whaleboat down the river to the hide stores at Bulimba, making the long return journey when the tide turned.¹

In either late 1874 or early 1875, Thomas returned to England, apparently to seek his family's financial help to purchase the five acres of land where his tannery was located.



THE MOST RECENT DIXON TANNERY BUILDING TODAY. THIS BRICK BUILDING IN HILL END HAS SURVIVED AND IS NOW USED AS COMMERCIAL PREMISES.

Photo courtesy Jocelyn Dixon

THE EARLY DIXON FACTORY

Courtesy Jocelyn Dixon



He arrived back in Brisbane aboard the *Francis Calderon* on November 30, 1875, and, within a week, purchased the land for £300 and was given the Title Deed, dated December 5, 1875.

In 1878, Dixon expanded his tannery business to incorporate a boot and shoe manufacturing business in Russell Street, bringing equipment, machinery and lasts for the new factory from Sydney. His advertisement in *The Queenslander* of July 6, 1878, read:

South Brisbane Boot Factory. T.C. Dixon has the pleasure of informing the trade generally that he has just opened his new factory in Russell Street, South Brisbane and will be happy to execute all orders entrusted to him, with despatch to the satisfaction of his customers, and at prices which defy competition. The machines employed being of the latest and most approved construction, and the best materials only being used, he can

confidently guarantee his TCD brand as equal to any boot manufactured.

He then built a large two-storey factory facing Montague Road, reminiscing in 1908 that he had "sent it down the paddock on a roller" to its site on the river flats. He later added a further factory on this site. However, all were destroyed by fire which, as Dixon noted "gave me a great setback, as I was not half covered".

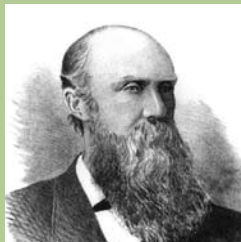
Despite these difficulties, the business thrived. In 1882 a retail store was opened in George Street and by 1888 T.C. Dixon was turning out 200 sides of leather and 800 pairs of boots per week. Sixty hands were employed in the factory.

The business suffered a further reverse when the 1893 flood "damaged £1,500 of boots and swept the Tannery shed away", requiring a fresh start.



THOMAS C. DIXON'S
TRADEMARK, REGISTERED
ON 30 MARCH, 1897

In 1906, Thomas Dixon, at the urging of his sons, acquired the land bounded by Montague Road, Raven and Drake Streets for a new factory. After purchasing the land, he travelled to Sydney to view the most recently constructed boot manufacturing premises and, on his return to Brisbane, engaged architect Richard Gailey to design the magnificent building which faces Montague Road today.²



RICHARD GAILEY

Courtesy John Oxley Library, Image 63597

Richard Gailey was one of Queensland's most prolific architects. Born in Ireland, he emigrated to Australia in 1864. Described as the 'doyen of Brisbane's architects', he was responsible for designing a number of grand buildings in Brisbane. These included the Baptist City Tabernacle and a number of hotels, notably the *Regatta* across the river at Toowong. Among other buildings designed by Gailey was the magnificent home he called *Glen Olive* which he built for himself on the river near Toowong Creek in 1890; *Moorlands*, the Mayne family home which still stands in the grounds of Wesley Hospital at Auchenflower; and *Verney* (now *Beth Eden*) at Graceville. He also designed a number of commercial buildings and warehouses, including Smellie & Co. and the Metro Building in Edward Street, and Finney Isles and Co. in Queen Street.

Thomas Coar Dixon lived to see the realisation of his dream when the building was completed and officially opened on April 11, 1908, but died the following year at the age of 62.

Dixon had eight children (two died in infancy) and after his death the business continued under the management of his sons. Ernest Joseph Dixon lived in a large Queenslander on the corner of Montague Road and Ferry Road and managed the factory while his brother, William Victor, lived in Grey Road, Hill End, and was in charge of the tannery supplying leather for the shoes.

When William died in 1944, his eldest son, Victor Charles, became manager, and his youngest son, Donald Coar Dixon, spent some years in the tannery until 1948, when he branched out to build his own tannery at Hemmant.

The contractor who successfully tendered for the new Dixon factory was Mr. Burton. Costing £3,700, the two-storey brick warehouse was described by Thomas Dixon as "second to none in appearance in the Commonwealth". It extended the full length of the frontage along Montague Road and used materials uncommon for factory buildings of the period. Georgian Revival in style, its sills, banding and dressings were picked out in dark blue salt-glazed bricks. The roof had diagonally-laid asbestos-cement slate tiles which were developed in France and imported into Australia c.1904.

The windows on the front elevation feature arched glazing bars, in contrast with the scalloped glazing bars used in the fanlight above the entrance door. Other windows were nine-paned in rows of three which pivoted inwards



THE DRAKE STREET ENTRANCE
TO THE THOMAS DIXON CENTRE

Photographer David Kelly

or outwards. (In 1983 most of these windows were replaced with sheet glass or glass louvres.)

The ground floor included an office and storerooms located at the southern end of the building. A brick fire-wall screened these rooms from the large area housing the workroom. The first floor was similarly divided, with its southern end housing a warehouse for finished shoes and a small showroom. The remainder of the first floor contained presses to cut uppers and an area for sewing the uppers. When the factory opened in 1908, T.C. Dixon wrote that they were putting thirteen new machines into the new factory, making it superior to any boot factory 'in the south'.

The engine room was located in a single storey building attached to the eastern side of the main building.

The original gas engine which drove the power shafts was suspended beneath the first floor. It was replaced with an electric motor c.1920. In turn, this motor was replaced by self-contained sewing machines c.1965.

The entrance to the building in Drake Street is a carefully composed exercise in Georgian Revival. The doorway has a pair of five-panel bolection moulded doors surmounted with a 'Georgian' fanlight³, and above it is a sandstone tablet inscribed 'ESTABLISHED 1873'. Interestingly, it originally read 1878, the year Thomas Dixon commenced his boot-making business in Brisbane, but the story goes that, in 1973, when the business moved from West End to Wacol, one side of the 8 was removed to change the date to 1873, making it appear that the business had operated for 100 years.

THOMAS COAR DIXON
WITH STAFF FOLLOWING
THE OPENING OF HIS NEW
FACTORY IN 1908

Photo courtesy Kerry Viksne

Thomas Dixon



Thomas Dixon



THE DUKE OF YORK, WHO BECAME KING GEORGE VI IN 1937, WITH ERNEST JOSEPH DIXON, AT THE FACTORY IN 1928

Additional buildings were constructed on the site of the factory, including a store for wooden lasts built prior to 1920; an air raid shelter constructed during World War II; and an addition to the south-western corner of the factory, comprising an air-conditioned office and showroom, constructed in 1965. All these buildings survive on the site. A staff amenities block and garage were also constructed, however these no longer exist.

When the company was registered as 'Thomas C. Dixon & Sons Limited' in 1910, the family had a high reputation as a 'family' company with management providing good working conditions for their staff. Over the years, as the business grew, a number of small cottages were built in the streets of Hill End to house many of the factory's workers.



Not all the people who worked at Thomas C. Dixon & Sons lived in West End. Percy Hanlon from Toowong, whose father operated the ferry which ran from the Regatta Hotel to Ferry Road, West End, remembers that quite a few Dixon employees caught the train to Toowong and walked down to the river to cross on his father's ferry to reach the factory.⁴

STAFF OUTSIDE THE DIXON FACTORY

*(Date unknown, possibly 1930s).
Photo courtesy John Oxley Library,
Neg. No. 165836*

As a Quaker, Thomas Coar Dixon helped many people. In 1894 he purchased land for a farm in the Blackall Ranges where the township of Maleny is now situated. As Maleny grew, he donated land for the town's first butter factory and the caretaker's residence, then ten acres for a school, and land for the School of Arts (now the Community Centre). Later he donated another 12 acres for the third Maleny Butter Factory. In 1918 his son, E.J. Dixon, donated more land for the Ambulance Centre at Maleny, as well as its first ambulance car.⁵

THE DIXON ADVERTISING TRUCK

(Date unknown). Photo courtesy Kerry Viksne



E.T.A. 'TOM' DIXON

Photo courtesy of his daughter, Kerry Viksne

E.J.'s son, Ernest Thomas Alexander Dixon, joined the family company after finishing his education in 1931. He began by sweeping floors and had to work his way up in the business because his father believed he could not be a manager unless he could do everything his employees had to do. When his father died at the beginning of World War II, he became the new manager of Thomas C. Dixon & Sons Ltd.

Following the purchase of F.T. Morris in 1967 and Thomas Footwear Pty. Ltd. in 1971, the company of Thomas C. Dixon & Sons continued to operate from West End until 1973, when a brief partnership was formed with Queensland Retailers and Mathers to facilitate an increase in the production of women's shoes.

To feed the expansion, new and larger premises were planned at Wacol. The new factory, on 3.34 hectares at the Government Industrial Estate Wacol, cost \$1 million and was able to produce 4,000 pairs of shoes per day. Incorporated into the factory was a swimming pool and a crèche for the benefit of staff.



T.C.'s youngest son, Leonard Henry, was also involved in the boot factory in the sales area until his death in 1955. His son, L. Ross Dixon, was Production Director of the factory at the time of the move to Wacol.

After tariffs were lifted in the early 1970s, Thomas C. Dixon & Sons found they were unable to compete with the cheap vinyl imports from overseas manufacturers flooding the market. Employees were upset, many offering to work only three days a week if it would help. However nothing could stop the downward spiral, and by 1980 the company was forced to close.

In 1975, the building at West End was purchased by the Queensland Government and used as a store

until 1991, when it became the home of Queensland Ballet (QB), the Queensland Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Queensland Dance School of Excellence (QDSE), after undergoing a \$1.8 million refurbishment.

After seven years of occupancy by the new tenants, roof leaks as well as plumbing and structural deficiencies began to plague the old building. However, the Heritage Council decision (August 28, 1998) to enter the Thomas Dixon Centre on the Heritage Register under the Queensland Heritage Act 1992 led to a period of major refurbishment of the building, to ensure its preservation as a rare surviving example of an early 20th century industrial factory.

THOMAS DIXON

FOOTWEAR OF DISTINCTION

DIXON SHOES

*Photo courtesy Arthur Palmer, Toowong.
When his father, who was a friend of Tom Dixon, lost his leg in Bougainville in 1945, the Dixon family gave him and other limbless soldiers any shoes they required.*

Thomas Dixon

Thomas Dixon
fine shoes





THE THOMAS DIXON
CENTRE TODAY

Photographer: David Kelly

Thomas Dixon

Refurbishment in the years to follow was undertaken both by the Department of Public Works as the landlord of the building, and by Queensland Ballet through various grants and fundraising activities.

A major improvement to facilities in 1998 was the installation of sprung flooring in the Charles Lisner Studio. This, together with lighting, curtains, and other stage equipment to enhance the studio as a performance space, was made possible through a grant from the Jupiters Casino Community Benefit Fund and through funds raised during *Sharing the Stage*, a collaborative fundraising performance involving Queensland Ballet and dance schools from South-East Queensland.

The departure of the Queensland Philharmonic Orchestra from the Centre in 2000 provided an opportunity to create a dedicated centre for dance with four large studios and more office and storage space. Funding that year from the Jupiters Casino Community Benefit Fund enabled further enhancement of the Charles Lisner Studio through a system of removable rostra, offering audiences an unimpeded view of the performance space.

By the end of 2001, after ten years of heavy use, the facilities of the centre began to show the need for major refurbishment.



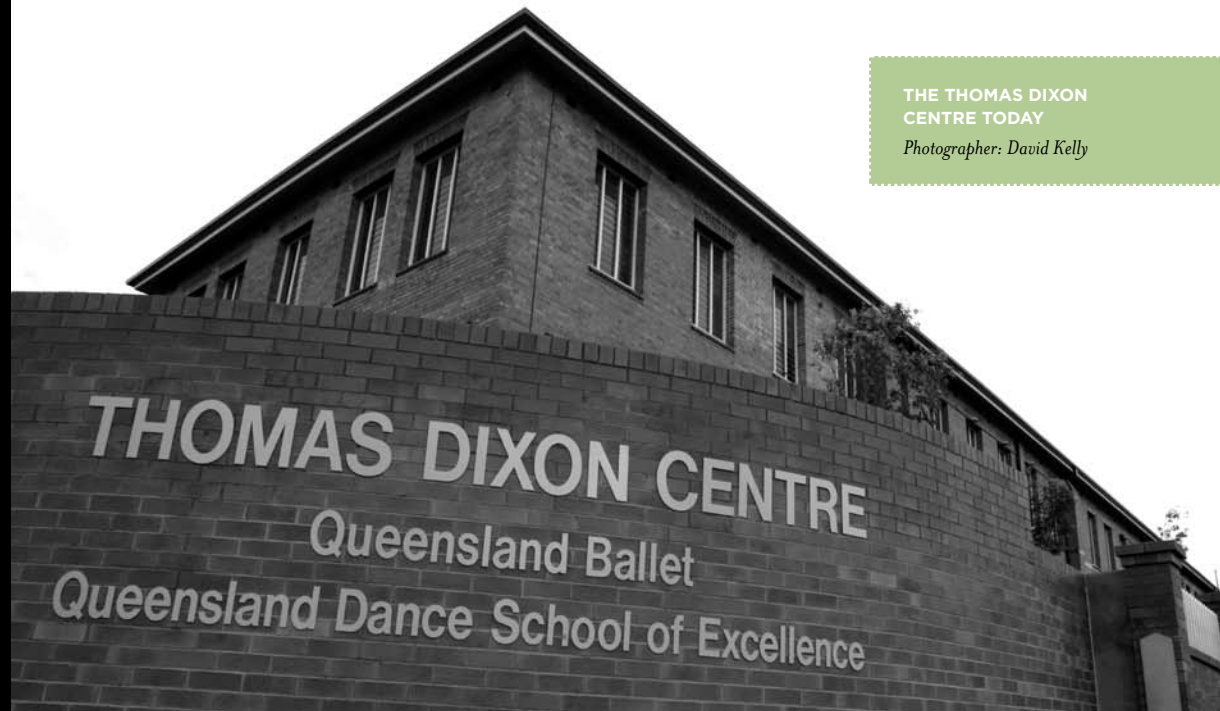
Thomas Dixon

In 2003, the Department of Public Works installed sprung flooring in Studios 2 and 3, and made major repairs to the heritage-protected storage shed in the grounds. Further improvements were also made to the Thomas Dixon Centre facility, including repainting of the interior and repairs to change rooms.

Floor coverings throughout the building were replaced in 2004, and in 2005, major works were undertaken to extend change rooms, improve access to Studio 1 for performances, and to install air-conditioning in Studio 1, a sprung floor in Studio 4, and a wheelchair ramp and lift to give access to the first floor for patrons and visitors with a disability or limited mobility.

The lift tower was designed with consideration to the heritage status of the Thomas Dixon Centre, and historic photographs of the Centre were mounted inside the lift cage. A function was held on July 8, 2005 to launch the refurbishment, attended by representatives of the Department of Public Works, QBuild, and Queensland Ballet.

The Thomas Dixon factory was one of the first buildings in the country to use asbestos roofing, supplied from France by James Hardy. As part of the Queensland Government's ongoing commitment to asbestos removal from public buildings, the existing roof of the Thomas Dixon Centre was removed in 2006 and an attractive, heritage red Colorbond® roof installed in its place.



THE THOMAS DIXON
CENTRE TODAY

Photographer: David Kelly

In the following year, a roof was installed over the bridge linking the passenger lift and the studio theatre, and vertical banners erected to protect the lift entrance.

A major project to fully restore the perimeter wall of the Thomas Dixon Centre was undertaken in 2007. This involved significant earthworks to bring the 100 year-old wall back to a vertical position, reinstatement of the original decorative pickets on the top of the wall, planting trees and turf, and erection of imposing new signage on the corner of Raven Street and Montague Road.

Finally, projects were undertaken by the Department of Public Works to replace air-conditioning units serving the Administration area of the building, and to install an extraction

system in the laundry area of the storage shed to improve the health and safety of staff undertaking fabric dying.

For one hundred years now, the 'grand old lady of West End', the Thomas Dixon Centre, has continued to be a focus of the local community. Ballet shoes have replaced boots, and music has replaced the sound of machinery. Once housing a prosperous family business, the building now proudly continues its life as a creative hub within Brisbane's arts community.

As Thomas Coar Dixon wrote in 1908:

This building will be here when I and my sons have long passed away, as a monument of pluck and indomitable perseverance.

¹ Newspaper cutting headed 'Firm won't turn up its toes' written by Kerry Reeves (undated) John Oxley Library.

² T.C. Dixon unpublished story, Marie Holland, Research Officer National Trust of Queensland.

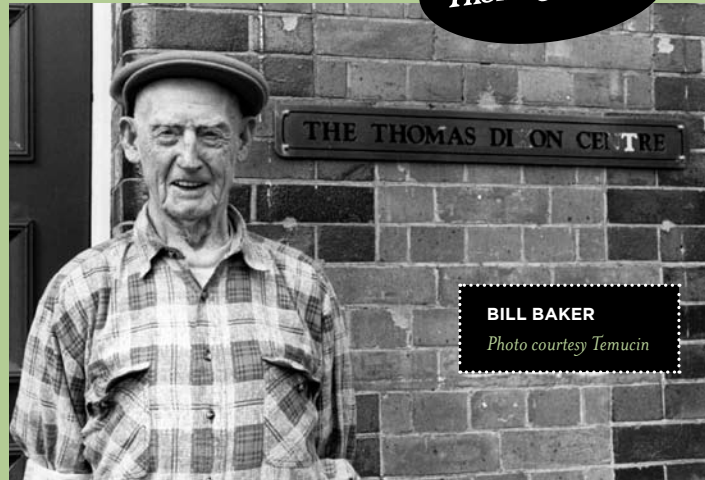
³ Queensland Heritage Register, File No. 601024

⁴ Reminiscences - Percy Hanlon

⁵ Information on Thomas Coar Dixon's activities in Maleny supplied by Mr. H. Bryce, Maleny Historical Society.

REMINISCENCES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

The late William Joseph Baker (affectionately known as Bill) was born on December 22, 1908 at West End in Brisbane. In 1922, at the age of 14, he went to work at Dixon's Boot Factory where he remained for 51 years, retiring at the age of 65. Even during the Depression years, when others were losing their jobs, his place at Dixon's remained secure. As a young man, Bill played first grade Rugby League for Souths but he also loved dancing. He was at a local dance when he met his future wife, Kathleen Mary McPhee. They had three children and when the children were older the whole family would join in the square dancing activities held at Orleigh Park.



Thomas Dixon

BILL BAKER

Photo courtesy Temucin



CLAUDE STANBURY WITH MR E.T.A. DIXON, RECOGNISING HIS 50 YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE COMPANY.

Photo c.1977, courtesy Ray Stanbury.

Ray Stanbury was only 14 when he began working for Dixon's in 1953. He left the company around 1977 after the move to Wacol. When he first started at the factory he was living at Paddington so would ride his bicycle over the bridge to West End every day. Ray's father Claude had been a long-time employee at the factory and Ray himself worked as a 'clicker', cutting out leather patterns for the shoes. These patterns were cut out by hand and would then be cut out in bulk by the machines. It was not easy, as the leather was full of flaws and any faulty leather had to be discarded. The factory mostly used kid leather, but for special orders they sometimes used kangaroo, crocodile, or calf skin – sometimes even snake skin. When Ray first went to work at the factory, the clicking room was upstairs in the

main building, later it was shifted to an outside building near the entrance to the property. This has now gone. The nearby cafeteria which was outside the main building has also gone. The finished shoes were kept on the top level at the front of the building, and next to the stock room was a room called the socking room, where shoes were examined before final boxing. Ray remembers the big steel doors leading into the socking room (presumably a fire door). The clicking room was in the centre of the top floor and the final stitching was done in a nearby room called the closing room. Downstairs on the ground floor was the making room and the finishing room where the leather was made up. It was quite noisy when the machines

were working, as they were all attached to long shafts and belts connected to the ceiling. Fortunately the noise did not carry to Ray and others working upstairs.



George Woolard was also a clicker at Dixon's. His daughter Anne remembers that he worked for the Dixons for many years, only retiring when the company moved to Wacol. She also remembers **Rod Waldock** who was apprenticed to her father when Dixon's were at West End.

Matthew Byrne lived at West End during the 1960s and 1970s and he remembers the Dixon factory well. "I was born at the Mater Hospital in December 1963 and grew up at 35 Ganges Street, Hill End. I remember the Thomas Dixon Boot factory area as fairly grim visually; it was in the industrial precinct of Montague Road. West End became very industrialised after World War II and in the 1960s and early 1970s there were many working class families living there. I remember there being a number of factories nearby and few trees other than at Orleigh Park down on the

CREDITS

Research by Marilyn England, BA MA, Toowong History Group with input from Kerry Viksne and Jocelyn Dixon, great granddaughters of Thomas Coar Dixon.
Booklet designed by JSA Design.

banks of the Brisbane River. I recall walking past the Dixon factory but never had much idea of what went on inside it. To me it was just another part of the large industrial precinct along Montague Road. In the late 1960s I remember the knock-off whistle at Dixon's blowing at approximately 5pm. People would pour out of the factory to go home and a stream of cars would come up Ganges Street. I can still recall the strong petrol smell as the cars of departing workers went past our house. Dixon's factory seemed to employ hundreds of people."

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