



The History

Metala was settled in the mid 1850s on the banks of the River Bremer in the Hundred of Freeling.

The first owner was Herman Daenke. Herman was born in Russia of Danish parents in 1830. At the age of five he went to live in Prussia and then, as a young man, spent two years in France and a year on the Amazon before coming to Australia. Herman established and named Metala, building the homestead as it stands today. He intended to be a gentleman with a grand two-storied house. Thankfully the money ran out before the second story could be built but the original square section of the house has walls 0.5 metre thick, ready to accommodate another level. He died in Milang in 1896 and is buried in the local cemetery. As the homestead has been restored short pencil messages and notes written by his daughter Isabella have been uncovered on the walls of most of the rooms in the house, many of them dated 1877. The restoration of the main homestead has been a slow process, but has recently been completed. Undertaken by Guy and his wife Liz, their intention to keep the house in as original condition as possible while making it comfortable and convenient to live in.

Daenke sold Metala in 1882 to William Harper Formby (1818-1892) who took possession in April 1883. Metala at that time was 1001 acres for which 5 pounds per acre were paid. He moved from Wayville in Adelaide with his wife (formerly Eleanor White) and eight children. William, a horse dealer and importer by profession, intended to set up a horse stud and spelling place for the animals he provided for the stage coaches running from Adelaide to Melbourne. The stables across the road from the homestead were complimented by a large yard and open shed where the machinery shed stands today. These housed feed and water troughs carved from large logs to feed all the stock.

Arthur Formby, second son of William (1869-1958) took over the management of Metala in 1890 and with his brother Fred purchased Metala from their father' estate in 1894. Their partnership was dissolved in 1902. Under Arthur Formby's ownership the property grew to its present size of 2,700 acres. Prices for the purchase of extra acres varied from 10 shillings to 11 pounds per acre, the most expensive being the Bremer River flats.

Arthur married Elsie Landseer (1874-1936) of Milang in 1899. The Landseer family were prominent in the riverboat trade, which at the time provided one of the most cost effective and convenient methods of goods handling to and from the area. Elsie was by all accounts a wonderful horsewoman, only ever riding side saddle. Her mounting block is still in the garden of the main homestead. The gardens at Metala under Elsie's care were beautiful. The entire front lawn area was a formal rose garden with brass taps. The story goes that the odd job man and maid were expected to polish the taps until they gleamed every Saturday morning.



In 1891 Arthur planted the first vines on Metala, having been encouraged to do so by his brother-in-law Ronald Martin of Stonyfell fame. Ronald had married Elsie's younger sister Hilda. The plantings consisted of 21 rows of Shiraz, 3.9 acres of which are still producing and 14 rows of Cabernet, 2.0 acres of which are still producing. The record floods of 1939 and 1992 heavily damaged both these blocks. 15 rows of currants were also planted which today have made way for further plantings of Cabernet. A further 5.4 acres of Shiraz was planted in 1894 and all are still producing premium fruit at 3.5 tonnes per acre. These old beauties, which are now known as the Old Blocks and the Cellar Block, are still hand picked and pruned.

From the late 1890s until 1910 Arthur Formby made his own wines in a cellar adjacent to these early plantings. Some of the old open fermenters are intact today although one row was pulled out to make room for storage at some stage in the past. These wines were carried by horse drawn wagon to Milang where they were then dispatched by rail to Adelaide or by River Murray steamer to other parts of Australia. Early records say that in the 1903 vintage Arthur Formby made 9,000 gallons of wine, which in the Langhorne Creek area was second only to Frank Potts of Bleasdale fame.

Arthur found winemaking and farming a rather formidable task and so in 1910 came to an agreement with his brother-in-law Ronald Martin that saw Stonyfell take over the winemaking tasks. They continued to make wine from the Metala fruit on the property until 1955. At this time, owing to the difficulties of finding suitable hands and also the emergence of motor transport, it became simpler to truck the grapes to Stonyfell for processing. The cellar on Metala was closed and many of the red gum vats were transported to Stonyfell. These old cellar sheds still stand today and are now used for the storage of machinery, much of which is used in the vineyard.

From the early days until just after the war there was a cellar man cum winemaker at Metala every vintage called Paul Freemale. For 3 or 4 months of the year he lived in rooms at the back of the stone cottage, which are now Metala's offices, and was fed by the dairyman's wife. Quite a character, he often made his own drop from a sugar bag of prunes from Mr. Percy Dodd's orchard. The result was brew with a kick like a mule. Paul also never missed the Easter races at Oakbank, walking the 21 miles from Strathalbyn and then walking the 21 miles back to Metala after the races.

Arthur and Elsie had two children. Myles (1901-1994) graduated from the University of Adelaide as a Rhodes Scholar in 1924 and, after studying at Oxford, he practiced all his life as an E.N.T. specialist in England. He had two children also. Roger recently retired from his practice as a Lawyer in London. Patty settled in South Africa.

Mavis (1905-1990) lived all her life at Metala. She married Denys Butler in 1932 and in 1948 he took over the management of Metala. Denys took responsibility for all areas of the management of the property and was very much a hands on person. The only time he would have found for himself was to indulge his passion for Polo, which he played very well. Under his guidance the vineyards continued to grow until illness and his untimely death in 1972, led to some years of Metala being in the wilderness under various managers. In 1934 Mavis and Denys had a daughter, Helen, who lived and worked on Metala until her marriage in 1961 to Stuart Adams. Helen is still actively engaged with the business side of running Metala.

Their son Guy Adams now manages Metala and has done so since 1983, exactly 100 years since his great grandfather William took possession. Metala today has 300 Hectares under vineyard, comprising of Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon with a small percentage of Chardonnay. A great part of the success of this vineyard can be attributed to the determination of Guy to be at the leading edge of viticultural practice over the past 25 years. Metala has always embraced new technology and sought to improve performance while maintaining the high quality of fruit for which it is renowned. Guy is the 5th generation to manage the business and is passionate about ensuring the sustainability and viability of the property by implementing a constant program of improvement.

Over the past decade Guy and his wife Liz have carefully restored the original Metala Homestead, bringing it back to the iconic building of yesteryear. Recently the gardens have also been rejuvenated. Guy & Liz live in the Homestead with their 2 young children, Myles and Emily who are the 6th generation to live on the property.



The Label

It has been well documented over many years how Bryan Dolan conceived the idea of Metala becoming an estate wine and in 1959 sketched out the Metala label. He handed it to label designer Wyatt Morrow for fine-tuning. Bryan won the inaugural Jimmy Watson trophy in 1962 with the 1961 Metala Shiraz Cabernet. In the early 1950s Jack Kilgour and Bryan made the Private Bin Langhorne Creek claret from Metala fruit and the same fruit made Stonyfell's renowned 1945 Vintage Port which won so many trophies and medals over the years and we believe was made from Cabernet Sauvignon.

For a few years under Dalgety Wine Estates ownership, fruit from other districts was added to the Metala wine with mediocre results but thankfully in 1986 it reverted back to 100% estate grown fruit and the tradition continues today. At Saltram the family tradition also continued. Nigel Dolan, second son of Bryan and Peg, became winemaker at Saltram 30 years after his father made the Jimmy Watson winner.

Until the end of 2007 Nigel continued to make the Metala White and Black label wines at the new Bilyara Wolf Blass facility, with continued success for the parent company Fosters Wine Estates, but still the original label survives with its individually numbered bottles updated to include the Saltram name and Nigel Dolan's signature.

This long-standing wine label celebrated its 40th Anniversary in 1999.

The Property

The Metala property was quite diversified in its activities during the early days.

Cereal growing for hay and grain was a major part of each year's program with 700 – 800 acres being farmed for this purpose each season. 2 full teams of Clydesdales numbering between 24 and 30 were used for seeding, ploughing and harrowing as well as pulling the wagons full of seed and super.

A short horn dairy of 30 cows was run on Metala for about 30 years between 1930-1960. The dairyman and his family lived in the cottage that is now our offices. During the mid 1950's the dairying was phased out and, with the purchase of a Shorthorn bull, the focus came to be on breeding milk vealers.

In 1954 the first bore was sunk on the property and by 1965 over 100 acres of high quality lucerne was being produced for the racehorse and fodder store markets. This continued until 1995 when our concerns about the high water usage and the effect it had on the underground water basin, coupled with high labour inputs made this an unattractive activity to pursue.

Metala has over recent years made a commitment to improving the water quality and levels of our underground basin. When ever possible we recharge the basin with good quality floodwater and have been monitoring and managing our water usage for many seasons. Guy is actively involved in a number of local committees who are focussed on providing leadership, policy and advice to landholders on best practice management strategies for the local water resources.

The policy of diversification continues today on the property. Along with the vineyards a further 200 acres is leased to Fosters Wine Estates for vineyards that are completely under their management.

Metala also runs a substantial flock of Merino sheep for wool and meat production using Dalveen rams, a tradition which has continued since 1952. Until recently we had large herd of beef cattle but they were regrettably sold due to lack of sound pasture after 3 poor seasons in a row.

The annual rainfall at Metala is around 350mm with the majority falling in winter. The summers are generally dry and warm to hot, however we are blessed with a cooling breeze from Lake Alexandrina each evening allowing the fruit to ripen evenly. The soils range from deep and alluvial on the floodplain to deep sandy loams on the floodplain fringe areas. The limestone ridges are where we undertake the broad acre cropping and grazing. Trees range from huge red gums along the river and in the swampy areas to Sheoak scrub and finally out to stands of pink gum along the limestone ridges. We currently have approximately 8% of the property under natural vegetation. Our aim over the next few years is to bring this to at least 10%, building useful corridors of vegetation for wildlife and birds.

Irrigation is used on the vines during the late growing season when our moisture monitoring data indicates a need. Water is sourced from Lake Alexandrina through a private 5km long pipeline we constructed in 1994. In 1999 an 80-megalitre dam was built on the property to improve our management of the water and reduce pressure losses.

Around the beginning of 1900 a series of floodgates, weirs and banks were installed on the Bremer allowing us to take advantage of good quality water when it comes down the river. The river is in essence just a winter creek and when high rainfall is experienced further up the catchment the shallow watercourse cannot contain the volumes that come down. In most instances we are able to pick and choose when to inundate the vineyards and for how long we hold the water in each block, however there are always natural floods, which are beyond our control. We then endeavour to move the water through as quickly and carefully as possible to the next landholders on the creek. Flood times can be very special and social times as all the locals are out and about keeping an eye on things and love to take the opportunity to have a quick chat on the side of the road.

The work program for the property is fairly intense due to the variety of production we undertake.

Autumn sees vineyard maintenance begin with repairs to posts and irrigation systems post harvest. We also strip down the grape harvesters before they are shedded for the off season. Cover crops for mid row are sown and, depending on the opening rains, the broad acre cropping preparation and seeding begins. We crop between 800 – 1000 acres of cereal each year. Lambing will finish early in autumn and later we tail them.

Winter sees the prepruning by machine and hand pruning commence. Pruning continues without a break until mid September, usually finishing with the chardonnay just before budburst. We shear in mid July and at any time may be on flood management duties, which involves monitoring the levels both here and upstream and using the gates and boards in all the banks to control water levels and flows. We will also take the opportunity to do general machinery maintenance when time permits and will spray the crops for weeds late winter.

By spring the pruning should be complete and our spray regime will commence. We have recently employed a new Viticulturalist, Sarah Wing, who is responsible for the planning and implementation of the vineyard management in consultation with Guy. If we were developing new vineyard, planting would happen during early spring, preceded by the necessary ground preparation and irrigation installation. Late spring will see the sheep being dipped for lice control. We roll our cover crops in the vineyard and then spray them to create a thick mat mid row. Our aim in doing this is to retain as much moisture as possible by mulching, suppress weed germination and to improve the soil as the organic matter finally rots away. We begin moisture monitoring in the vineyard late October. This allows us to build a clear picture of the soil moisture levels at differing depths in the vineyard.

Our spray regime will continue throughout the summer and irrigation will be started according to the needs of individual blocks. The reaping of cereal crops starts late November and is hopefully complete by Christmas. Young vines will be trained over the summer and Vintage will begin with the chardonnay in late January. We crutch the sheep in February and then pick grapes until mid to late April.

Then it all begins again.

We are proud of our heritage and are committed to maintaining a property, which has a unique place in Australian winemaking history.