

TURNER BROS.

Our History





Turner Bros. *celebrates over 100 years "in the business"*

Humble beginnings

The Turner Bros. story began in Norfolk, England, when young Walter Turner commenced his apprenticeship as a draper in the late 1800s. In usual fashion for the time, the young lad lived with the owner above the store to gain experience and a feel for the retail trade.

Walter was an adventurous type and migrated to Australia with his wife, Emily (nee Hodgens). They settled in Paddington before looking to buy a store in Bowral. They finally settled on Charlie Barsby's store in Railway Parade Kogarah, that had been operating since 1886.



The store originally had a dirt floor and was renowned for selling addles.

Walter opened for business in 1906. He and his wife, affectionately known as Lemie, moved into a home in Montgomery Street Kogarah (where the St George Technical College now stands) with their sons, Percy, Reg, Norman and daughter Eileen.

Their store in Railways Parade occupied the triangular shaped block of land, so well known in succeeding years as Turner Bros. It was the first substantial shop erected in the immediate vicinity of Kogarah Railway Station and to create a welcoming entrance, Walter spent over 600 pounds on a new shop frontage.

*Pictured: The Turner Family in 1906.
From left: Sons, Percy, Reg, & Norman. Walter, daughter,
Eileen and Emily.*



Practical clothes for practical times

Walter's opening items were very practical for the times. They included millinery, dress materials, bed linen, haberdashery, groceries and hardware. The last two items were slow movers and were quickly replaced with men's wear, one of the staples over the next seventy years. The shop assistants dressed in regulation black: the woman wore long skirts, the fronts of their blouses were full of pins and a tape measure neatly hung around the neck, ready for use.

Cash transactions were the normal procedure. Dockets, cash and change travelled from the shop assistant to the cashier's cubical, high above the counters, and returned by the overhead cash railway. A most ingenious device used before the introduction of the American cash register.

In February 1908, Headmaster Wilson from Kogarah School adjudicated on the W. Turner Competition. First prize went to Mrs. Rowd who won drapery and clothes to the value of one pound. The winning line was - *"I'll buy everything here to a nail"*.

Second prize was ten shillings for Mrs. Hilda Balke for *"Your prices would stagger a whale"* and third prize was five shillings for Miss Ethel for *"Go elsewhere than Turners and fail"*.

A world in crisis

Walter guided the business through World War I and Lemie was the driving force with her flashing blue eyes and lively wit. Following WWI, Walter's two sons, Percy and Reginald entered the business and the store became known as Turner Bros. Reg bought out Percy and ambitiously renovated to add another storey and refurbishment. During this period Reg moved the store to another site that was later owned by the old Commercial Bank of Australia.

The depression hit in 1929 and many businesses closed. Reg battled on with a combination of hard work, determination and strong support from his wife, Dorothy. In an effort to keep trading, he sensibly sold the freehold to the local dentist. The capital injection enabled the business to keep operating and slowly return to profitable times.

A family affair

Reg and Dorothy (nee Twilby) lived in Green Gables on the corner of Queen and Ocean Streets Kogarah (the house was demolished in the 1960's for a three-storey block of units). Here they raised their four children, Liliias, the twins Max and Robert and Roger. The family maintained close links with the Kogarah Presbyterian Church.

Dorothy's family showed the same civic spirit as the Turners. The grandfather, Mr. P. Hermann, Mayor of Kogarah in 1907, was responsible for calling a public meeting to form a fire brigade in Kogarah. It happened like clockwork with officers elected and members enrolled. Reg's son Max was an Alderman on Kogarah Council for several terms and held positions on Rotary.



Roger Turner

Reg remained the motivating force for many years with the solid support of Dorothy. He treated his staff like an extended family and took a personal interest in the customers. He was known for his firm handshake and friendly enquiry about the family. He was just a natural salesman and knew how to convince a customer that a particular item was just what they wanted.

On the move

Customers in the early days arrived at the Kogarah store by horseback or horse drawn vehicles from the outlying areas of the Kogarah district, Sans Souci, Sandringham and Dolls Point. The Kogarah steam tram The Puffing Billy then provided a more comfortable journey. This was replaced in 1937 by silent, trackless Trolley Buses. The diesel bus was next and from the '50's the motorcar began to be seen in ever increasing numbers, bringing customers from further afield.

Deliveries were an integral part of the Kogarah store at the time when fewer residents had motor vehicles. Walter started the service with a horse drawn vehicle. Reg continued with a VW Combi van and often had his six grandchildren help out during school holidays. In the sixties, Max made the difficult decision to stop home deliveries due to rising costs.

The post WWI building boom generally improved overall profits. This was enhanced after the opening of the Cronulla and East Hills railway lines that deposited train commuters right at their door.

Crisis again

The first major death in the family came in 1935 with the death of Emily, followed by Walter in 1938.

History repeated itself when Reg was responsible for guiding the business through yet another war - World War II - through days of shortages, rationing and coupons. Following cessation of hostilities, Reg was joined by his own family members in the business of buying and selling.

Sales

From the earliest days, half-yearly sales were a feature of the store. Walter first introduced the summer and winter sales and Reg and Max continued the tradition. The large crowds waiting outside the store, long before opening time, was evidence of their geniuses and popularity.

Interest free accounts were introduced early on by Reg - a personal recommendation was all that was required to open an account. A ceiling of 10 pounds was set for the total account and as recently as the 50s, that provided good purchasing power. All that was asked was that weekly amounts in shillings be paid equivalent to the total in pounds. This system ensured regular payments and protected the customer from over-committal. It was only in later years that economic pressures forced Turners to charge interest on accounts - a decision not made lightly.

The end of era

Reg retired in the mid 50's and built a home at Wentworth Falls, called "Rest and Be Thankful", aptly named by his wife Dorothy. Both continued to maintain a keen interest in the store and never lost touch with their Kogarah friends. Unfortunately their time on this planet was all too short with Dorothy's death in 1972 and then Reg in 1974.



The end of the Kogarah Stores

The early seventies saw the long awaited opening of the pedestrian subway linking Kogarah and West Kogarah. This saved many now ageing customers the effort of climbing the railway steps.

Another development was the opening of the Captain Cook Bridge in the sixties, which linked Sans Souci and

Taren Point by road. At first this brought customers to Kogarah but the opening of Roselands in the 1950's and Miranda Fair in 1964 spelt formidable competition. The huge buying power of Grace Bros and Myer meant the old style family store could compete no longer. In addition, discount stores were springing up.

Max made some sound decisions by opening a smaller menswear shop in the Kogarah Town Centre in 1975. The haberdashery and Wool Baa shop moved to smaller premises along railway parade, formerly occupied by the linen and towel shop.

The inevitable decision to close was faced in April 1975. Gradually the other smaller Turner Bros. stores in Kogarah also closed their doors. Some of the staff, such as Jack Gannon, had been employed with Turner Bros. for as long as forty years. The staying power of the staff is indicative of the satisfaction and conditions of employment with the family store. The firm's motto on receipts was -

Turner Bros. Kogarah
For civility and service

At the time of closing of the Kogarah store, 11 staff had a combined service of over 300 years. Liliias (Barrack) was not ready to retire and went to Nock & Kirby's as ticket writer until they also closed their doors.

The Kogarah store was sold to a developer and then to Peter O'Reilly who moved his pharmacy business from further along Railway Parade after the store received yet another facelift. Peter was the son of the test cricketer, Bill O'Reilly and has since sold to another pharmacist.

The move to furnishings and curtains

In the early 1930s, Reg saw a market for curtain making so he started a curtain making business. He needed a seamstress so he hired a widowed lady, Mrs. Nethercote of Bellevue Street, Kogarah. He arranged for an extra room to be built onto the back of her house where she continued sewing for many years. From this humble beginning, the curtain making progressed to a small factory at Scarborough Street and eventually to the Curtain Shop at Rockdale in 1966. The post-war boom of building added greatly to the success of this particular venture, especially through the opening of the Cronulla and East Hills railway lines.

1956 saw the firm made into a private company, still trading under the now well-known name - Turner Bros. Max Turner took over the leadership of the store, assisted by Roger and Liliias. Robert moved into the partnership with Robert Allan, specialising in furnishing and furniture. The business grew as a result of entering the commercial window furnishings market and so

a workroom was established under the name of Yardslick Curtain Co at 45 Princes Highway Kogarah in the late 1960s. Business was brisk and by 1969 had added soft furnishings. Fully trained decorators completed large contracts (including the soft furnishings for the new Parliament House in Canberra) both here and overseas. By this time loyal staff were gathering in all sections and assisted in the general success of the business.

Going commercial



The commercial curtain industry fully established in the 1960s and 1970s as high rise buildings were being built across the CBD. Major buildings furnished by Yardslick included:

- ☞ National Mutual Building, corner York and Market Streets
- ☞ A.N.Z Building, corner Pitt and Hunter Streets
- ☞ AMP Building at the Circular Quay
- ☞ NAB head office at Collins St Melbourne, plus many others.

Woollen curtains were the trend of the day and were manufactured from 100% Australian made materials. Projects required thousands of meters of product, keeping Living Fabrics at Silverwater busy with production. Turner Bros. vacated Yardslick in 1979 and moved to a purpose built factory at 441 Princes Highway Rockdale where curtain making continued for a number of years.

Vertical blinds

The 1980's were the era of the vertical blind. This product became popular with office applications, so Turner Bros. established a relationship with Australian Curtain Industries who amongst other things manufactured "Suntrack" vertical blinds. With this product many major contracts were completed, including:

- ☞ NAB House - The Sydney head office for NAB
- ☞ CML Building - corner Pitt and Martin Place
- ☞ CML Building - Brisbane
- ☞ AMP Building - Brisbane.

Again Turner Bros. outgrew the Princes Highway premises so a larger curtain marketing company was also established in Rockdale called "Sydney Drapes". Sydney Drapes employed approximately 30 staff and produced work for all the Mansours' stores as well as Turner Bros.

This arrangement continued for a number of years until the untimely death of Bradaim Ghattas, the owner of Australian Curtain Industries.

As a result Turner Bros. took over the plant and some staff to form the new company Contract Curtain and Bedspreads.

At the same time, Turner Bros. relocated sales and administration to West Street Hurstville. This lasted a few years until the mid 1990s when Turner Bros. purchased the Marrickville property and relocated administration, sales and Contract Curtain and Bedspreads, now known as CCB.

Turner Bros. today

Today, Turner Bros. is still in the business of soft furnishings, window furnishings, and internal and external shading systems. It employs over 45 staff, trades with companies all over the world, and is regarded as an industry leader. It is known for reliability, quality and efficient project management. Quite a change from Mrs. Nethercote's 1930's sewing room!

CCB is now an independently run company separate from Turner Bros., attracting their own clients and employing their own staff.

Roger attempted to retire in 2005 at the age of 72, however, he is still working part time between overseas adventures. Recently the fifth generation of Turners commenced working in the business.

