



Working life in Port Melbourne: John Kitchen and Sons, 1859–2013

Over its long history the company used a number of titles, but to the residents of Port Melbourne it was never anything but “Kitchens”.

John Kitchen and his sons began using sheep tallow to make soap and candles in Bridport Street Emerald Hill in 1854. It was a very smelly process to which the neighbours took exception, causing the family to move to a site near the river in Sandridge.

The eldest of the three sons, John Ambrose Kitchen was an innovative and astute business man. Under his leadership the business expanded into various other areas of chemical manufacturing. After his death in 1922 the business continued to thrive, becoming Lever and Kitchens then Unilever.

In a 1928 publication for employees, *Advance*, the philosophy of Kitchens was stated: The whole structure of business is based upon doing useful things for others – this is service. One important element of their success was building up a skilled and loyal work force. Many employees served the company all their working lives.

Candle making was an essential industry before the use of gas or electricity for lighting. The best candles were made from beeswax but were too expensive for most people. Cheaper candles made from sheep tallow, made an unpleasant smell when they burned. The advantage Kitchen’s had over its competitors was their use of the newly discovered process to make stearin candles by separating that out of the tallow and thus removing the unpleasant smell

From the 1860s to the early 21st century the Port Melbourne factory was one of the largest employers of labour in the district. True to the tradition set by John Kitchen senior and his son John Ambrose, employee welfare was a high priority. Employees were treated well and in turn remained loyal to the company.

In 1962 the company fully merged with Levers forming Lever and Kitchen’s Pty Ltd before becoming simply Unilever. The factory in Ingles Street, Port Melbourne closed in 2013. The site has since been developed as a housing estate of which the restored Administration Building is part.

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Where

Emerald Hill Library
195 Bank Street, South Melbourne

When

November 25th to March 24th

No ticket required



Come and see our latest exhibit on one of Port Melbourne's most iconic factories, John Kitchen and Sons!

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Visit the Port Phillip Heritage Centre to learn more about factory life, employee welfare, innovation and industry at J Kitchen and Sons.

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