

## **Onion & Shallot growing on the Bellarine**

It was claimed that Jonas Levien and James Walker were the first to grow onions at Drysdale, Levien having taken up land there in 1865.

In the 1870s Samuel Hibbert & Frederick Willey pioneered the onion growing industry on the Bellarine Peninsula. In order to test the suitability of the soil they imported a small quantity of Brown Spanish seed direct from Spain. It was the first acre of commercially grown onions and was situated on the corner of Church & Portarlington Roads. Their drays would take the produce over the paddocks to the Portarlington Pier. The return trip would carry loads of shell grit, a slow release fertiliser for the onions. Shell grit can still be found in the paddocks today.<sup>1</sup>

From Peel's *Rural Industry in the Port Phillip Region 1835-1880*:

*With the harmonious combination of soils, climate, plants, animals, men and market the Bellarine division became the onion supplier for all of Victoria, producing 83 per cent of the onions grown in the colony of Victoria in 1878-9 and 91 per cent in 1879-80, from 66 and 86 per cent respectively of the land sown to this crop. In 1879 a total of 1025 tons of onions valued at £7433 were exported from Victoria – mainly to New South Wales, South Australia and New Zealand.*

1866: Grand National Exhibition, Geelong: Mr J L Levien, Drysdale 1<sup>st</sup> prize.

Nov 1870: Ballarat National Grain Show : George Sutherland won 1<sup>st</sup> prize of £2 with his onion display.

1871: Geelong & Western District Agricultural Show: 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> prizes taken out by John Hamilton, Bellarine.

6 Jan 1875: Now that more districts have started growing onions with some success, there is no doubt that there will be a large supply. Our farmers will need to rely more on their grain crops for it is doubted whether onions will ever realise the high prices of past years.

19 Jan 1875: Mr Brennan has sold onions at a rate of 12 tons per acre. Mr Levien's looks like being 11 tons per acre.

3 Jul 1875: James MacFarlane accused of stealing Alex Hood's onion crop; he was arrested at Sandridge.

9 Aug 1875: Onion weeding has begun at Portarlington in spite of the wet and on land that is not safe to walk on. Children of different ages and sexes are employed in this inhumane work, and can be seen from early morning until dark, working away. This employment cannot be anything but injurious to body and mind and unless it is reduced to a very great extent, onions, instead of being a blessing to the district, will be a curse. Mr Curlewis, while a member of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Willey, Drysdale family descendant, 2010

Bellarine Shire Council, brought this matter before the public, but, unfortunately before he had time to show how far he would benefit the rising generation of this district, he resigned. Perhaps some public benefactor about will move in this matter, and teach some of our parents and onion-growers a little humanity.

26 Oct 1877: James Grieve's hand drill for sowing onion seed described in detail and highly complimented. James Grieve came from Drysdale and his drill was extensively used in the Bellarine Shire.

22 Jan 1883: Portarlinton – The onion season is now in full swing. Onion pulling. Prices are somewhat depressed as a consequence of a large crop. The only drawback is the want of labour.

3 March 1883: John Ray – onion dealer, Drysdale

4 Sept 1883: Portarlinton – Late damp weather is being replaced by sunny days which the onion growers will appreciate. Acres and acres of early onions have been ploughed in and the ground re-sown, owing to damp state of the ground and the rapid growth of weeds. The Bellarine does not now enjoy a sole monopoly as an onion growing district in Victoria is becoming more evident. Large quantities of seed of the best quality are being sent on application to all parts of the colony and the result will be that the supply is and will continue to grow, hence lower prices.

### **Other District Onion Growers**

13/10/1883	Richard Marchant
29/1/1887	Frank Martin's onion growing land at Drysdale for auction
16/3/1888	A. Burns' onion growing property, part of the Scarborough Estate for auction
25/1/1890	A. Burns, onion grower retiring; auction
13/11/1891	Thomas Lowther – onion growing, leaving district
20/5/1893	Death of George Priddle, early settler of Drysdale and one of the first to grow onions