

The History of Hercynia Vineyard

Vines were first planted in Axe Creek in 1860 by three German migrants, William Greiffenhagen and his cousins Carl and August Heine. They had arrived in Melbourne from Central Germany in 1854. They initially lived and worked in Melbourne, but were soon attracted to the Bendigo Goldfields, and made quite a lot of money from a mining lease at Ironbark.

The three miners purchased adjoining land in Axe Creek, and planted 2 experimental acres of vines on Carl's land. They formed a partnership and by 1864 had increased the vineyard to 10 acres. The partnership continued to purchase land at Axe Creek, and by 1868 owned some 300 acres. The vineyard was also increased to 25 acres, with about 13 acres bearing fruit.

Varieties planted included Hermitage, Burgundy, Cabernet Sauvignon, Verdelho, Riesling, Chasselas, and Mataro.

In 1868, the vineyard was formally given the title of "Hercynia Vineyard". Hercynia was the name of the region in the Hartz mountains of Germany where William Greiffenhagen had been born.

In 1869, they commissioned an architectural firm to design a substantial homestead and cellar complex on the crest of a small hill on the property. The cellar was built from sandstone and red brick, with all of these materials being derived from their land. The three-storey cellar measures 31 metres by 7 ½ metres, and is still standing today. Two of the three storeys are built into the hill below the surface, to maintain a constant temperature for the fermentation of the Hercynia wines and the storage of barrels. The cellar maintained a constant temperature between 15.5 C and 16.5 C, and had a capacity of 25,000 gallons. This made the cellar by far the largest in the district, and it became the source of a great deal of curiosity and admiration. It was promoted as one of the Bendigo district's main attractions.

The cost of construction of the cellar, reputed to be at least £2,000, brought an end to the original partnership. In 1870, William Greiffenhagen bought out August Heine's share. August Heine had previously purchased land and had established a hotel in Mandurang. The remaining partners increased the area under vine to 27 acres, and introduced some additional trial varieties (White Hermitage, Malbec, and Gowairs). "Hercynia" was now the largest single vineyard in the Bendigo region.

From the start, the partners were determined to produce quality wines at an affordable price. Their efforts were recognised throughout the district, with a local Bendigo Advertiser correspondent praising both their red and white wines. They experimented with different varieties of grapes and varying methods of pruning and cultivation, to determine the effects on growth and yield of the vines.

They also tried various planting techniques, including trenching and drill planting. They recognised that Red Hermitage grapes were best suited to the area, and found that the best quality grapes were produced from aggressive pruning techniques. They experimented with trellising of their vines, but found that the cost was prohibitive. Instead they used the "diamond principle" of trellising, with the vines being propped up on poles which were three feet apart.

They monitored the development of different grape varieties in various locations on the property, to determine what effect the various soil types had on the each variety. Anything that would improve their output and the quality of their wine was thoroughly investigated. They were true pioneers of the local wine industry.

In 1873 William purchased Carl's share of the vineyard for £3,000, and became the sole proprietor of the estate. Carl Heine returned to Germany, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Under William's management the vineyard continued to prosper and expand, and by 1875 there were 30 acres under vine with more being planted from rootstock cultivated on the property from mature vines.

The 1874-75 season was an excellent one for Hercynia Vineyard, with the wines winning just about all of the major classes at the local Agricultural Show. However, William's success did not end there. Through the 1870's and 1880's Hercynia wines were entered in a number of prestigious wine shows around the world (such as London, Paris, Philadelphia, Venice, Sydney and the International Exhibition in Melbourne), and drew acclaim from critics worldwide. His wines received a number of Gold medals (including one from the Vienna show), and a magnificent Champions Cup.

Throughout this period William Greiffenhagen was consistently producing 120 hogsheads (each of 500 gallons) per year, which he had no trouble in selling. Although he produced very good quality wine, William maintained a very reasonable price for his wines. A case of Hercynia's prize winning Burgundy and Riesling was selling for only 12 shillings per dozen. Despite this, William was earning in excess of £1,200 per season for his wines.

With his continuing success, William began to receive orders for his wine from overseas. He developed a wine export program with an extensive international clientele, particularly from Germany where his wines were highly prized.

By 1891, the vineyard had grown to 40 acres. William had expressed a desire to increase his winegrowing area to 150 acres, based on an assessment of suitable soil conditions, but that did not eventuate. He had, however, branched out into distilling brandy for use in fortified wines, and had started making cider from apples grown at his orchards.

Phylloxera Vastatrix struck the Bendigo region in 1893. Although William's vineyard was never actually infected by the dreaded insect, Government regulations forced all vineyards within a two mile radius of an affected vineyard to be grubbed out and destroyed and all of William's vines had to be pulled out.

After phylloxera William Greiffenhagen never replanted his vineyard, instead concentrating on his substantial orchard which had not been affected by the wine louse.

William Greiffenhagen died on the 24th of August 1916. He had lived in Australia for 61 years, and in that time had become an eminently successful man in both his professional and public life. He was a founding member of the Agricultural Society, and a local Shire Councillor for a number of years. William had married a local girl, and had two surviving children. On William's death his eldest son, James, continued to tend the estate and the orchard until he sold the property in 1928.