



# The Marchant General Store

## hub of the community and history of a pioneer family

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Situated on the banks of the Torrens River, it was a fertile and picturesque setting for market gardeners with the undulating foothills at the base of the Adelaide Hills as a backdrop to protect the gardens from the summer heat of desert winds and frosts in winter. From Athelstone the Gorge Road cuts its way through the rocky hillsides on its convoluted way to the Barossa in the northeast and Hahndorf to the southeast.

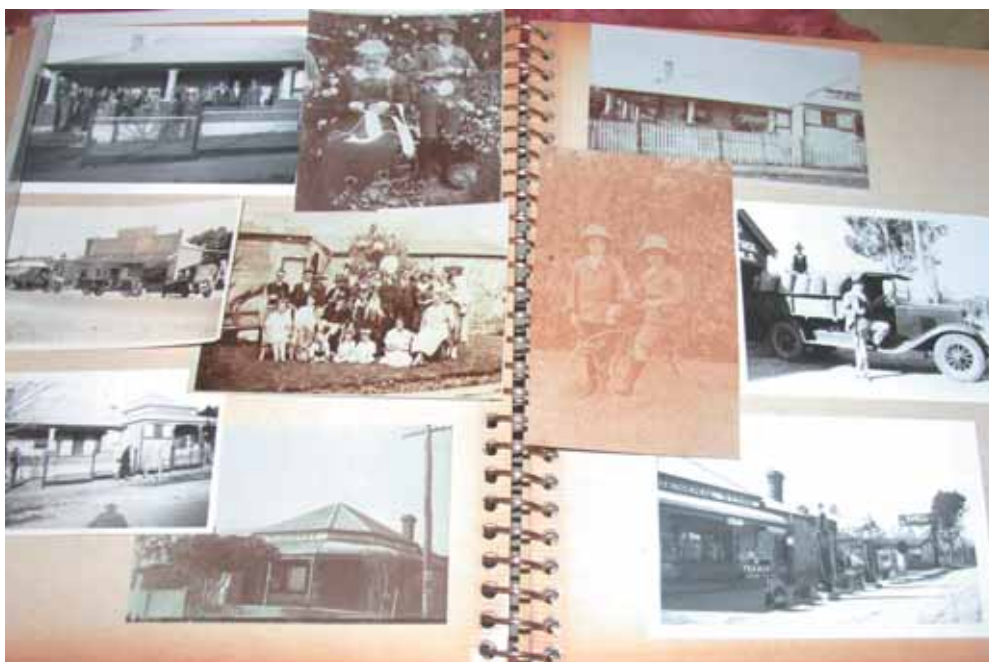
The Marchant family laid the foundations for the general store in 1854 and continuously ran it for 102 years until 1956. The General Store began with the journey to South Australia by Abraham Russell of Brigstock, Northamptonshire with his wife Hepzabah and their children. James Marchant of Exeter, Devon was on the same ship and later married young Elizabeth Abraham in South Australia.

James Marchant built his bakery oven in Athelstone using ballast bricks from the same ship on which they travelled, and supplied bread for the village and region. Above his house was a corner store.

'In 1850 a general store sold most

Photos from over 100 Christmases past illustrate the lives across the generations connected to the General Store in Athelstone, South Australia. Ten kilometres east of Adelaide's centre it was a village beyond the suburban belt until a generation ago, located at the major cross section of Russell Road and the Gorge Road that winds up the Adelaide Hills.

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- 1 A busy General Store with petrol bowsers and agencies
- 2 Old time packaging
- 3 The corner stone of Athelstone, J Marchant's General Store
- 4 Barbara Howie's painting of *Marchant's Store* 1953
- 5 J Marchant General Storekeeper letterhead and other mementoes
- 6 Early Athelstone family
- 7 Storekeepers' tools: post office scales, mini adding machine, inkwell and advertising piggy banks and sign
- 8 Album of Athelstone daily life and the General Store

of its goods straight from the packing cases, vats, chests and barrels and then transferred them to the customers' baskets, bags, containers and billies.<sup>1</sup>

After his early death, Elizabeth ran the store for a short time until their son, John Marchant and his wife Isabella took charge. Customers came from all directions to this crossroad village, stopping for supplies or refreshments on their way to Adelaide or for their final supplies when travelling farther inland. An Adelaide family on a Sunday trip would stop at the Marchant store to rest, shop, buy the children treats and hear local news.

Every general store is more than a business and the Marchant store was the epicentre of life in a community of about 300. Whether dispatching the daily news, the local gossip, news from interstate and abroad and anything else important, 'If the Marchants didn't know about it in Athelstone, it simply didn't happen.'

The Marchant General Store was the first post office apart from the Adelaide GPO in approximately 1854. In 1926, it had the first licensed petrol bowser outside the Adelaide metropolitan area. Hazel

Marchant remembers motorists waking her parents in the late evening when desperate for petrol or other food supplies.

By the 1940s postal, bank and insurance agencies and petrol bowsers ensured an increasing array of goods and services to avoid a trip to the city. A butcher several kilometres away would deliver meat to the store for re-sale and seasonal produce from the local market gardens and hill orchards were on the shelves. During World War II American soldiers were billeted in the area, adding an international influence on Athelstone society.

John died in 1941, outliving Isabella by over 20 years, and their son Aubrey and his sister Gwendoline were the third generation owners until selling in 1956. Aubrey maintained the tradition of giving back to the community by volunteer roles including Chief of the Country Fire Fighting Service, elected a local Alderman and curator of the local cemetery. No wonder that a distant cousin referred to him as the 'King of Athelstone.'

Sadly, the Athelstone General Store was modified beyond recognition in the late 1970s. The cellar remains, appearing as a time capsule complete with the original oven and various Marchant family relics.

The bonds of relatives and the relationships between Athelstone families who all shopped, posted letters, had documents signed or just caught up on gossip still exist today, more than 150 years after the first diggings for a bakery in 1854.

#### Note

1. Mimmo Cozzolino, *Symbols of Australia* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1980).



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