

Wheels in Malaya

*The Wearne Brothers
and
Their Company*

CHRISTOPHER FYFE

LP

Story 6 The STORY TELLER

Christopher Fyfe first came into the Wearne family when he married Charlie Wearne's granddaughter Shirley, 11 years after Charlie's death. Despite this, by the time he finished writing *Wheels in Malaya – The Wearne Brothers and Their Company*, he felt he knew the man pretty well.

"I'd read letters that he'd written and all the anecdotes I'd heard about him emphasised one sterling quality. He had great loyalty to family and friends in Fremantle and Mandurah and was very considerate to his staff," says Fyfe, 76, at his home in Claremont, Western Australia.

The story of Charlie and Theo is told against a backdrop of people, places and the history of the company. Fyfe says the brothers were direct opposites but complemented each other. "People say Theo was a mean old skinflint and didn't do anything with his money while Charlie gave it away like it was going out of fashion. But if you look closely at what they did, on balance, there was little to choose between them. Charlie did things in an impromptu way, whereas Theo thought about it, then made a substantial donation."

The book was his late wife's idea. "She knew her grandfather as a child and teenager, but in the early 1980s she became interested in learning more about him. She interviewed relatives and former employees, many of whom were living in

Western Australia and became convinced that there was enough there for a book," says Fyfe.

In 1984, she and Fyfe started serious research. They went to Cornwall in England, where the Wearne family hailed from and looked at tombstones in church graveyards. They got microfilm copies from Singapore's daily newspaper, *The Straits Times* and scanned every page. They looked at shipping lists, deck lists, passenger lists and whatever else they could get their hands on, hoping for a breakthrough somewhere.

"Then one day she came to me with a big smile on her face and said 'I found something'. It was a substantial newspaper article about Charlie's exhibition of cars at an agricultural show in Singapore in 1906."

Later research took them to Singapore, Malaysia, various parts of Australia, the United States, London and St Martens Island in the West Indies. Fyfe says there was a heap of material to sift through. "If you left Aunt Ella (who died as a toddler) out of the family tree, you'd be known as the fellow who left Aunt Ella out." When Shirley died in 1996, Fyfe completed the research and the book was launched in 2002 at a ceremony attended by 22 relatives, including some of Charlie's great-great grandchildren.

Fyfe remembers his first meeting with his prospective father-in-law, Walter Wearne (Charlie's son). "He was around the place when I called

to see Shirley once. He was very good to me but I was eyeing him, aware of the fact that he was also eyeing me." He only met him three times, but saw more of Charlie's younger son, Foster, at family gatherings, after Foster retired to Australia and describes Charlie's daughter, Connie, as "a very gracious lady."

He says the two brothers were also opposites, just as Charlie and Theo were. Walter was energetic, the get up-and-go type. "He'd go upstairs two steps at a time, which is what I still do." Foster was quieter. He was the Company Secretary for many years, was involved in the sports club and enjoyed rowing.

Fyfe, who has three children and is a grandfather, has written several other books including *Gentlemen's Agreements* (on Australian wartime wool appraisal schemes) and *Heritage for the Future* (on a Western Australian tree planting society). He has also edited the memoirs of a Western Australian Surveyor-General and *Early Days*, the journal of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society. Before turning to writing, Fyfe was a wool valuer, wool auctioneer and accountant.

He ended the book on the Wearne brothers in 1956. "It's not always easy to know when to stop. But by this time Charlie had died and Theo had gone to live in South Africa. It seemed the sensible time to cut the story off."