

The Mayor - Cr Pat Reilly and the Councillors of Willoughby City  
invite you to attend the opening of

## ***Rags to Stitches***

**The Ralstan Story & Quilts by Lynnette Ferguson**

**Wednesday 15 June, 2005, 6.00pm - 8.00pm**

**Foyer Exhibition Space, Ground Floor, 31 Victor Street Chatswood**

**RSVP: Tuesday 14 June: 9777 7972**



**Exhibition Dates: 14 - 30 June 2005**



### **The story...**

In 1946, Ralph Staniland begins a family manufacturing business that specialises in making dressing gowns and leisure wear. The Ralstan brand became synonymous with luxury and quality in the domestic and overseas markets...

Esta Trott, a Ralstan employee from 1965 - 1984, begins as a machinist, moves to the finishing table and later becomes floor manager. Esta used factory fabric offcuts to make clothes for her family and support the local community...

*Lynnette Ferguson, Esta's daughter, makes quilts to commemorate the life of Esta and the Ralstan legacy...*



## The RALSTAN STORY

Ralph Staniland Pty Ltd was founded by Ralph Staniland and his father Frederick Staniland in 1946 with the head office located in Clarence Street, Sydney. They saw a market niche for Australian made women's dressing gowns and combining the names of Ralph with Staniland, the Ralstan brand began. Ralph had been involved in millinery before the war and had an eye for the latest styles in fabric and design.



### The rag trade...

Initially, Ralstan designed garments in Sydney and used a contract maker in Harden, NSW. Ralstan used machine embroidery for many years and were one of the first in NSW to use embroidery on garments. Princess Embroidery was the name of the company who manufactured these pieces for use in gowns and leisure wear.

Fabric was supplied locally and was mostly wool and mohair woven especially for Ralstan by Onkaparinga in Adelaide. Ralstans were one of their top customers for gowning material. Ralstan also bought fabric from local designers such as John Kaldor.





Annual fabric buying trips to New York, London and Paris ensured the company's designers stayed abreast of the latest fashions and Australian wool manufacturers acknowledged the international standard of the gowns.

Specialty summer fabrics included high quality printed cotton and jersey designed by Ralstan in Australia, often inspired by paintings purchased from Paris or other parts of Europe, then printed in Japan and shipped back to Australia for manufacture.

Luxury fabrics were sourced from various countries, mainly Europe, including Neidick Velvet (Germany), voiles from Switzerland and France, vyella from England and cashmere from Italy.



## **Business with the world...**

The Company's main customers were the major department stores such as David Jones and Grace Bros. Much of the company's advertising was done in partnership with these retailers. At the West Ryde factory, Ralstan manufactured dressing gowns and "leisure gowns" for David Jones including their own line. David Jones gift catalogues from the David Jones Archives show the range of designs and fabric.

Ralstan were perhaps best known for their wool dressing gowns and in the late 1970s sold Australian wool dressing gowns to high end department stores in New York (Bergdorf Goodman) and London (Harrods).

In the early 1950s, the company leased a factory in Eastwood and employed a small staff – around 20 or so. In the 1960s, they purchased and moved to larger premises in West Ryde where staff numbers increased to more than seventy. The house on Victoria Road, West Ryde, which was used as an office, is still there.







As demand grew the West Ryde factory could not produce enough so the company leased a small factory in Prentice Lane, off Willoughby Road, Willoughby in the mid 1960s.

There were about ten employed in Willoughby. Ralstan also employed a number of outworkers at that time – women who sewed at home on piece rates. They were paid fair rates based on garment costings. The Willoughby factory was closed in 1972 as it was becoming increasingly difficult to get skilled staff in the area.

Factories were also opened in Liverpool and Brookvale in the late 1960s. In Liverpool, two different factory sites were leased over the years, both a little larger than the Willoughby site with about 20 staff. The last was on Liverpool Road, on the edge of the CBD.



### **By the 1970s things were changing...**

Ralph Staniland's son Michael joined the business in 1969 after obtaining a Commerce Degree and working as a chartered accountant. He was initially appointed as Company Secretary but took on many other roles as the years went by. Michael was appointed joint Managing Director (with Ralph Staniland) in the late 1970s.

After Gough Whitlam came to power in 1972 and reduced tariffs on imported clothing by 25%, competition from imported garments became intense and Ralstans were forced to close factories in Liverpool and Brookvale.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ralstan moved up to 25% of production to China. Garments were designed in Australia and fabric was selected locally, then often printed in Japan and shipped to Hong Kong and China to be made up.

In 1988 David Jones went to China direct and Ralstan closed in 1989.





**The main Ralstan factory was in West Ryde from the 1960s to the late 1980s. The small cottage on Victoria Road, West Ryde was used as the factory office and is still on the site.**



**During the 1960s, a small ground-floor workshop was leased in Prentice Lane, Willoughby, employing about ten staff and several outworkers to keep up with demand.**

**Other factories were leased in Brookvale and Liverpool from the 1960s to 1980s until production ceased.**





## **A working life...**

During the 1960s and 1970s, ninety-five percent of the staff were female and highly skilled machinists from non-English speaking backgrounds. Their average working life with the company was about 30 years.

As skilled machinists became hard to find, the company offered flexible working hours to retain these skilled workers. Many of the workers were migrant women with young families. Ralstan allowed mothers of young children to work school hours only and to leave in time to pick them up. Mothers were able to take school holidays off without pay. Ralstan also allowed some workers to take work home if they had a machine. In some cases, they loaned machines to staff so they could work at home if a child was ill. In the main, Ralstan had a happy and contented workforce.

The annual company Christmas parties were organised by staff as were other social events and dinners.

