

A History of the Winery Engineering Association (WEA)

By Geoffrey Leighton, Inaugural President

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Chapter 1 – The Origins of the WEA

The origins of the WEA began many years before we were formally incorporated. At that time, Max Finlay was the Managing Director of Programmed Maintenance Services (PMS). He established a small annual dinner for PMS customers in the wine industry. The first one I attended in 1988 had approximately ten people from various wine-producing regions.

Over the next two years, these dinners grew in size until they were attracting close to 40 wine industry customers. During a conversation at one of those dinners Max suggested that this growing network of wine industry engineers could benefit from being formalised into an association. He was already involved with a similar organisation representing hospital engineers, and PMS had been very supportive of that association. He believed a similar model could work for winery engineers.

As a result, I, with industry contacts established the first winery engineering conference at Lindeman's Karadoc Winery in 1991, which was attended by around 40 people from across the region. The next conference was held at the Orlando Rowland Flat Winery, followed by one at Orlando Wyndam Estate. We continued to hold these conferences at winery locations around Australia, and over the years many more were organised, with attendance steadily increasing at each event.

The success of these events encouraged like-minded support from across the industry to gradually form a committee with office bearers, and we were up and running. The initial Executive of President, Geoffrey Leighton, Secretary, Kevin Smallercomb and Treasurer, Peter Stone was established and all remained in those roles for many years.

As the conferences were becoming a significant annual event, we thought it was time to establish a more formal entity by incorporating the Association, providing protection for those of us organising conferences and establishing a formal identity for the organisation.

Throughout this period, PMS was extremely supportive of our efforts. They provided valuable assistance with publicity, printing, advice on organising and formatting our conferences, and secretarial services whenever they were needed. As we moved towards incorporation, PMS also provided guidance and support with the legal processes involved in establishing the Association. Just as importantly, the PMS personnel were personally enthusiastic and supportive of what we were trying to achieve for the winery engineering profession across the Australian wine industry.

Chapter 2 – Growth of the Conferences

After the first conference at Karadoc, I remained actively involved in each of the conferences that followed for some time.

In most cases, we collaborated with the local winery engineer, as we chose to hold our conferences at winery locations, Ian Jeffrey at Gramps Orlando Rowland Flat and Wyndam Estate, Ken Johnson at Penfolds in the Barossa, David Clark at Seppelts Great Western all played important roles in helping to organise conferences at their respective wineries. In each case, the local engineers worked closely with myself and PMS staff, assisting with the planning of the event, catering, venue arrangements and the many other details required to make each conference successful.

For the first few years, these were purely technical conferences. Over time, however, we began to attract support from suppliers to the wine industry. Many recognised that there was no better opportunity to present their products and services to a gathering of winery engineers representing most of the major wineries, particularly in South Australia, but also from Victoria and New South Wales.

The support of these trade suppliers became fundamental to the growth of both the Association and its conferences. Their sponsorship enabled each conference to become increasingly professional and comprehensive. It also provided an opportunity for suppliers not only to present technical papers but also to exhibit their products through organised trade displays. This combination of technical presentations and supplier exhibitions proved to be an excellent model and became one of the foundations on which the Association continued to grow.

The partnership between the winery engineering profession and its industry suppliers has remained one of the strengths of the Association, encouraging both trade participation and strong attendance from winery personnel across Australia's wine industry.

Chapter 3 – Conference Locations

For many years, our policy was to hold WEA conferences at winery locations. This gave delegates the opportunity not only to attend technical presentations but also to experience the host winery and its operations firsthand. As the conferences grew in attendance and the trade exhibition became a significant component of each event, we were eventually required to broaden our approach and make greater use of larger conference venues.

Over the years, conferences were held in a wide variety of wine-producing regions, including Mildura, Griffith, Bendigo, Great Western, Morphettville Racecourse Adelaide, the Clare Valley, and numerous locations throughout the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale. Each venue offered delegates the opportunity to experience different wineries, regional winemaking practices and local hospitality.

The WEA also expanded its conference program to New Zealand, holding conferences in both the North and South Islands. These conferences were conducted on a biennial basis and continued successfully for approximately fourteen years. While they were commercially successful and well attended, they did not achieve the level of ongoing interaction and collaboration between the Australian and New Zealand wine industries that we had originally hoped for. Consequently, the New Zealand conference program was eventually discontinued.

Chapter 4 – Personal Reflections

From a personal perspective, after the first conference at Karadoc I remained engaged through the years of growth that followed, serving as President through the incorporation process and beyond until 2012 eventually resigning from the committee in 2026.

Throughout that time, we progressively aimed for a structured approach, with a board and committee designed to encourage wider participation with redundancy planning, also we were all volunteers, so managing the workload was important. This eventually led to the appointment of Trevor Leighton as Executive Officer to manage the ongoing development of the WEA, together with the statutory roles of President, Secretary and Treasurer. I continued as President until retiring from the role in 2012.

Chapter 5 – The People Behind the WEA

Over the years, many individuals have applied their skills, experience and resources to the development of the WEA. It is difficult to single out particular people, as the Association has always depended upon the willingness of members to contribute their time and expertise. Nevertheless, there are several individuals whose contributions had a particularly significant impact on the growth and success of the organisation.

Kevin Smallercomb was the inaugural Secretary who was involved in the original WEA activities and contributed to the organisation prior to and during the incorporation then continued on until he retired from the Wine Industry and resigned from the WEA.

Following the resignation of Kevin Smallercomb. Ray Pender took on the role as Secretary and became the central point of contact for the Association's meetings, records and administration. His attention to detail, accuracy and organisation ensured that the WEA maintained strong records and effective communication during an important period of its development. His efforts over 22 years were a major contribution to the continued growth and stability of the Association.

Ray also introduced the Royal Flying Doctor Service RFDS to the WEA as our major fund-raising charity. Ray has a deep understanding of the service provided by the RFDS through a personal experience and has been the driving influence on our annual fund-raising event resulting in substantial donations to the RFDS over the years.

Trevor Leighton, as Executive Officer, brought valuable experience in conference organisation and event management to the WEA. His professional approach significantly enhanced the organisation, communication and presentation of our annual conferences and trade exhibitions. Trevor was also instrumental in establishing the WEA's activities in New Zealand and in developing ongoing support from New Zealand-based industry suppliers. His contribution helped broaden the Association's reach and reputation.

Ken Johnson served as the WEA's first Program Director and successfully established many of the conference planning and presentation formats that continue to influence the Association today. Ken was also responsible for developing the early speaker programs for the New Zealand conferences, helping to establish those events as respected forums for the exchange of technical knowledge and industry experience.

Following Ken's retirement as a Director, David Clark assumed the role of Program Director. David continued to develop and refine the conference program, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and professionalism among speakers and the conference organisation. He continued in the role coordinating both the Australian and New Zealand

conferences for 16 years while maintaining high standards in both content and presentation. David also continued the development of the newsletter, providing a valuable means of communication and helping to keep the WEA active and connected between conferences.

Peter Stone as Treasurer was the gate keeper of the WEA finances and managed our excesses by staying constantly involved with expenditure and the voice of reason, if we listened. We were always aware of the financial situation. Peter was the inaugural treasurer and remained in the role until 2022. His contribution of the bottomless bottle of Pot Still Brandy at our annual dinners is well remembered.

While these individuals deserve special recognition, they represent only a small number of the many members, volunteers, suppliers and supporters whose efforts have contributed to the success of the WEA over the years. The Association's achievements have always been the result of a collective commitment to advancing the winery engineering profession and supporting the Australian wine industry.

Chapter 6 – Life Members and Their Contributions

The WEA has been fortunate to benefit from the dedication and commitment of many individuals who have contributed significantly to the development of the Association over many years. In recognition of their service, a number of members have been awarded Life Membership.

The following individuals have been recognised as Life Members of the WEA:

- **Geoff Patrilli** – Life Member, member of the Alumni, former Director, Vice President.
- **Brian Kleeman** – Life Member, member of the Alumni, former Committee Member
- **Ken Johnson** – Life Member, member of the Alumni, former Director, Conference Programme.
- **David Clark** – Life Member, member of the Alumni, former Director, Conference Programme and Newsletter
- **Peter Graue** – Life Member, member of the Alumni, former Director, Historian.
- **Peter Stone** – Life Member, member of the Alumni, former Director, inaugural Treasurer.
- **Ray Pender** – Life Member, member of the Alumni, former Director, Secretary.
- **Geoffrey Leighton** – Life Member, member of the Alumni, former Director, inaugural President.
- **Kevin Smallercomb (deceased)** – former Director and inaugural Secretary whose contribution to the Association's development is remembered with appreciation.

Each of these individuals made a unique contribution to the growth and success of the WEA. Through their leadership, technical expertise, administrative support and commitment to the Association's objectives, they helped establish the foundations upon which the WEA continues to operate today.

The Association remains indebted to all those who have generously contributed their time and expertise in support of the Winery Engineering Association and the Australian wine industry.

Geoff Leighton