

OUR QUEENSLAND CELEBRATING 150 YEARS

Cultures flavour cannery

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FROM a premier to the mum of Queensland's most successful businesswoman, the Golden Circle cannery at Northgate has spawned its fair share of success stories.

Most of them began as immigrants starting a new life far from a troubled or impoverished homeland, like businesswoman Sarina Russo's mother, although former premier Peter Beattie "migrated" from far north Queensland to cannery row.

The factory has been an employment lifeline for generations of "new Australians" since a farmer's co-operative decided to open a pineapple processing plant after World War II.

At any one time since then more than 20 languages could be heard on the lightning-fast canning line.

Initially many of the workers were "10 pound Poms" and less than one in 10 employees were from overseas.

But as it became more difficult to attract British workers, the factory was kept running by people from

India, Papua New Guinea, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Nigeria, South Africa, the Philippines and a veritable United Nations of other countries.

For a long time, foremen had to resort to sign language to communicate with their workers, although more recently the company encouraged staff to take TAFE English language classes.

Some workers have not necessarily been legal – a well-publicised police raid on rail fare dodgers in 1990 inadvertently netted a dozen illegal Chinese immigrant workers.

But, mostly, the 1500 to 2000 employees have been hard workers who found the cannery one of the few options to improve their lot.

The surrounding area has a long history of food production stretching back to the first German families to settle there in the mid-1800s.

They were attracted by the good soil in higher parts and the area soon became known for its market gardens, mango trees, valencia oranges, pineapples and grapes.

It was soon a huge, amazingly self-

contained operation, with the sprawling plant able to churn out its own cardboard cartons, cans and plastic bottles at a dizzying rate.

But by the 1980s, as tariff barriers dropped and stiff competition emerged from Thailand and other low-cost producers, Golden Circle found itself squeezed harder than the sticky tropical fruit on its juicing line.

It hit back with two major upgrades, a baby food range and a failed stockmarket listing, before the iconic Aussie brand was gobbled up by multinational food processor Heinz.

Fast forward to 1997, the year the Golden Circle brand was launched. That first year the co-operative turned over more than \$1 million.

These days that is closer to \$200 million and the golden pines have been joined by cans of beetroot, tinned beans, carrots, corn, cucumber and peas, not to mention processed apples, mangoes, apricots, bananas, citrus, pawpaws, strawberries, peaches, pears and plums. That doesn't even include its fruit juice lines.



Tomorrow

THIS man was Queensland's "Mr Wildlife", a pioneering naturalist who did more than just about anyone else in the state to raise awareness about nature, mostly through his columns and a popular nature reserve.