



Arthur Ellis was born in Farsley, near Leeds, and emigrated to New Zealand when he was five with his parents Ephraim and Christina Ellis. Their ship Surat was wrecked near Pounawea in 1874 and the family were left with seven shillings and the clothes they stood up in. The Surat ran aground on New Year's Day 1874 with 271 passengers and crew on board. There was no loss of life, however "the unfortunate immigrants had lost all they had, but the people of Dunedin were very good to them, and treated them most kindly." [White Wings Vol I. Fifty Years Of Sail In The New Zealand Trade, 1850 TO 1900]

Ephraim and Christina both got work in a Kaikorai Valley woollen mill until 1877 when Ephraim and his brother-in-law William Nicholson sent to England for a flock-making machine, and set up their own small mill in Kaikorai Valley to produce flock for local upholsterers.

Young Arthur Ellis attended Lindon (now Kaikorai) School until aged 13 he began working for his father, cutting up rags for the flock machine. He received no wages, but was kept in food and clothing. At 17 he was given one shilling a week, and at age 20, five shillings a week, plus food and clothing.

In 1889, the flock trade was depressed, so Arthur went flax-milling at Otautau until 1891. He then returned to his father's business where he took growing responsibility. After his marriage in 1894 to

Agnes Mellor (a sister of Joseph Mellor) Ephraim allowed him a third of the profits, although at this time the factory barely gave them a living.

In the mid-1890s, Arthur made his first purchase of kapok at a local auction. Realising that teasing kapok would be more profitable than flock-making, he began importing direct from Java. His next innovation was to begin manufacturing mattresses. At first they were filled by hand, but after Ephraim's death in 1912, Arthur bought machines which gave the firm a dominant position in the local bedding trade.

In 1913, Arthur formed a limited liability company, Arthur Ellis & Co Ltd, and by the early 1920s was employing over a dozen people making modest but steady profits.

At this time Arthur, although only in his 50s, began handing over management to his sons and in 1930 retired completely. He was anxious, unlike his father, to give the young men a chance to 'show their mettle.' He played bowls at the Kaikorai Bowling Club of which he was a founding and later life member, and was also a keen reader and chess player.

After the death of his wife Agnes in 1933 he married Mrs Rose Finch in 1938. He died on 27 February 1945, survived by his second wife and four sons and two daughters from his first marriage. His ashes were buried in the family plot in Dunedin's Andersons Bay Cemetery.

Alfred Roland Mellor Ellis became the new 'chief' of the firm in the mid-1920s, working closely with his brothers Norman and later Maurice who joined in 1936. Under Roland's direction the firm developed nationally and internationally. By the late 1930s the firm employed over 100 women and producing 40,000 Fairydown quilts a year. By then the firm had also begun producing the first innerspring mattresses in New Zealand, branded 'Sleepwell.' Fairydown sleeping bags were to become world-famous in the successful Mt Everest expedition and the 1958 expedition to the south pole.

In 1957 a new factory was opened in Hornby, Christchurch to meet demand for Fairydown products.

Roland retired in 1959, and died in 1965. The family remained in family ownership until 1973 when it went public. In 1987 the family sold all their shares to Northern Feather Works, Copenhagen, their major supplier, and they became the owners. In 1991 Donaghy's Industries bought the Northern Feather interest, and the Dunedin plant was closed, and the New Zealand operation centralised on Christchurch.

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