

# Jabez Wedderburn

Born 1862. Scale maker.

Available online at [www.livesretold.co.uk](http://www.livesretold.co.uk)

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*This life story of Jabez Wedderburn was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Wedderburn company at [www.wedderburn.com.au](http://www.wedderburn.com.au), and from the Wedderburn Family pages on the Rootsweb website at [www.freepages.rootsweb.com](http://www.freepages.rootsweb.com).*

# 1. Ancestors



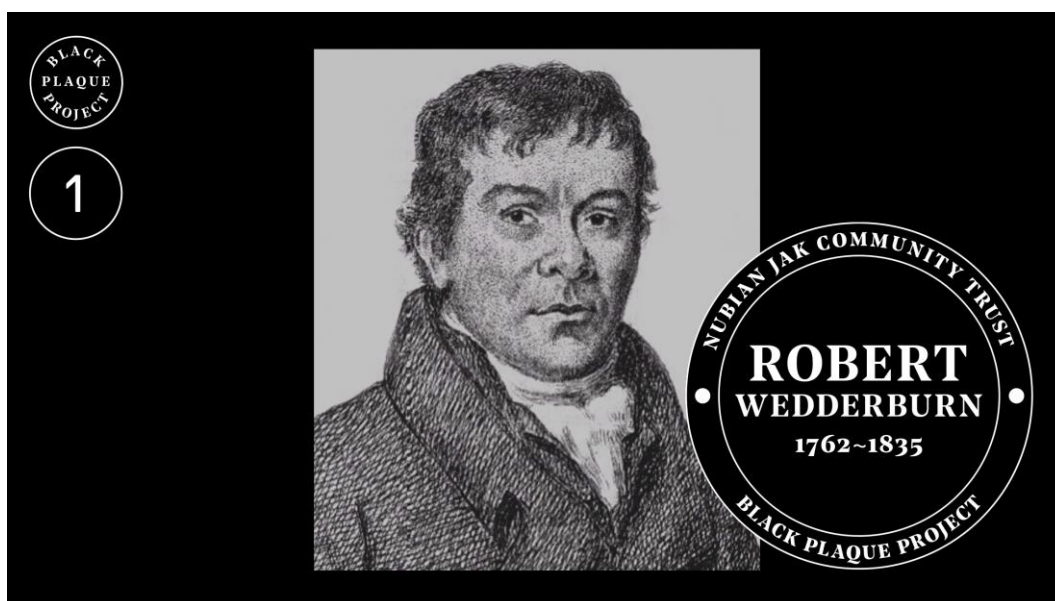
*This photograph of the staff of the London scalemaking business of Jabez Wedderburn shows the 24 persons attending the firm's outing on July 11th 1864 to the Kings Head in Chigwell, Essex, a pub made famous by its inclusion in Charles Dickens' 'Barnaby Rudge' as the Maypole Inn.*

The name of Wedderburn has been synonymous with weighing machines since the early 1800s. The first scalemaker of the family, Jabez born ca. 1797, was apprenticed to a blacksmith in 1811 for a period of 7 years. His son, another Jabez, born in 1827, established businesses in London and Yarmouth. On his death in 1882 his wife Harriet was to take control for just under two years, until the sons were able to take over the various parts of the business. One son was George Alexander, who was to set up in Southampton shortly after his father's death in 1882. Frederick William was to take over the London business. Jabez, the subject of this life story, emigrated to Australia and set up there. Others left for South Africa and New Zealand.

George Alexander was to acquire the scale making business of Henry Wood in Bridge Road (later to be known as Bernard Street) in Southampton. Wedderburns manufactured grocery brass beam scales and shop counter scales. These were submitted to the local Weights and Measures inspectors for verification. Wedderburns serviced the scales they sold, with engineers visiting their customers' premises on bicycles, or by pony and trap, up to four times a year. The 'restamping' of trade weights was carried out by a Weights and Measures inspector who would set up his test beam scale in the local village hall.

Reaching further back in the family tree, Jabez Wedderburn's grandfather (also Jabez), who was born in 1797, was the eldest son of Robert Wedderburn. Robert Wedderburn was a Jamaican-born Unitarian, ultra-radical leader, and anti-slavery advocate in early 19th-century London. He was born in Jamaica. His mother, Rosanna, had been born in Africa, and was enslaved.

Wedderburn's father, James Wedderburn, was born in Scotland. Wedderburn's grandfather, Sir John Wedderburn, 5th Baronet of Blackness, was executed for treason after the Battle of Culloden, resulting in his sons John and James fleeing Scotland. James Wedderburn settled in Kingston, making a living first, as a doctor, and then as a sugar plantation owner. While in Jamaica he had children by several different enslaved women. Politically influenced by Thomas Spence, Robert Wedderburn was an impassioned speaker and became de facto leader of the Spencean Society in 1817 after the nominal leaders were arrested on suspicion of high treason. Robert Wedderburn published fiery periodicals advocating republican revolution, using violence if necessary, to bring about redistribution of property in Britain and the West Indies. In 1824, he published an anti-slavery book entitled *Horrors of Slavery*.



*African and Caribbean support organisation Nubian Jak Community Trust and Havas London created in 2020 The Black Plaque Project, an initiative to commemorate the contributions of black people throughout history. Timed to launch at the end of Black History Month, the project is a twist on London's blue plaques – the signs hung around the capital to pay tribute to notable British figures of the past and the buildings in which they lived and worked. However, only 1.6% of those honoured in that scheme are of African or Caribbean descent. To address this imbalance, The Black Plaque Project will install specially designed black plaques on buildings across London to celebrate the lives of some of its most notable black residents who may have been overlooked.*

## 2. A New Life in Australia



*Jabez Wedderburn, born 1862.*

In 1896, just seven years after the Centennial Hall, (Sydney's Town hall) was opened, Jabez William Wedderburn opened his doors for business as Wedderburn Scales, just around the corner at 88 Liverpool Street. A son of the Wedderburn scalemakers in London, Jabez thought that his brothers would end up with the family business so he decided to try his luck in the colonies.





However, it was not as simple as jumping on a ship, coming out and hanging up the shingle.

Jabez had no help from London, and for quite a while, although he was a qualified scalemaker, he was forced to work as a coal miner in the Blue Mountains, a wharfie on the Sydney Docks, and also as a professional runner. However, by the turn of the century, he had five employees and a reputation around Sydney town not only as a proficient mechanical scale maker, but also had notoriety with city weights and measures officials.



*A vintage set of Wedderburn scales.*



Jabez would often challenge the local establishment to "press" the scale weights, and rumor has it he never lost a bet. His running prowess was also of some renown, being a regular winner in the George Street footraces. This was a period of growth in Australia.

The gold rush had almost run its course, the country was heading into Federation, and the formation of Prime Minister Edmund Barton's first administration.

In the ensuing years, the Wedderburns purchased property in Redfern, and set up a manufacturing plant in Chippendale. About the the same time the company

bought a building at 73 Liverpool Street for its shopfront and there the company remained until 1970.

Jabez, the founder, had two sons (Walter Ernest and Jabez August) and two daughters - all went into the family business. Walter (left), father of the present chairman Bill Wedderburn, subsequently bought out his brother Jabez.



*An Wedderburn egg weighing scale. Now a collector's item.*

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### 3. Decimal Currency

The big break for the company was the introduction of decimal currency in February 1966. As chairman, Bill Wedderburn reflects "all scales had to be changed over and we were in a position to take advantage of this, being on the spot." Bill's competitors were the big companies in England, Europe and the U.S. who had to go back to their boards to get approval to change machinery.

These companies had a lot of investment in mechanical equipment. As if this was not enough, the changeover to metric measures in the mid-70's put the seal on Wedderburn's growth. Now all scales had to change from pounds to kilograms - the Imperial age was at an end. It was also around this time that scales changed from mechanical to electronic.

Japan was emerging as a major electronic scale maker on the world scene. "We were the pioneers in accepting the technological change, we trained people, got in the supplies," Bill's son Philip said. The days of mechanical weighing being an art and a science were at an end. However, the changes were not being accepted too gracefully. Bill recalls a scales convention he attending in the U.S. at the time. "Several of the attendees were walking around with Presidential-style buttons which said "Levers Forever" - levers being mechanical scales", he said.

It was also a time for Wedderburn to consolidate. The big UK and US companies were on the takeover trail and Wedderburn decided it was time to batten down the hatches and move its Redfern and Chippendale factories and premises to the one building at Summer Hill.

It also decided to expand its market penetration and in 1977 it opened its first interstate office in Melbourne with other states following quickly.

Today the company is enjoying a privileged position in the Aus\$ 600 billion trade measurement industry. It has offices in all states and in 1990 opened in several cities in New Zealand. Its competitors appear to be contracting rather than expanding, and the market is splitting into "niche" companies.

There are three brothers, Philip, Stuart, Bruce and a sister Tracy, all working in the family business.

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## 4. A New Century



*A modern digital Wedderburn scale*

In 1996, Wedderburn celebrated its 100th anniversary, a remarkable achievement for any business and one we could not have achieved without the ongoing support of our customers, staff and suppliers.

### **2000's – Diversification and New Head Office**

Wedderburn Scales, becomes simply “Wedderburn”, as we continue to expand our product range. Growing into much more than a scale business. In 2002 Wedderburn introduces Printers to the range, in 2005 POS Systems and in 2008 Food Equipment.

In 2010, Wedderburn relocates its head office and four branch offices to a larger establishment in Ingleburn NSW. All head office, Sales, Service and Labels staff are now under the one roof, enabling better integration of departments and improving customer service.

### **2013 – Growth and a Rebrand**

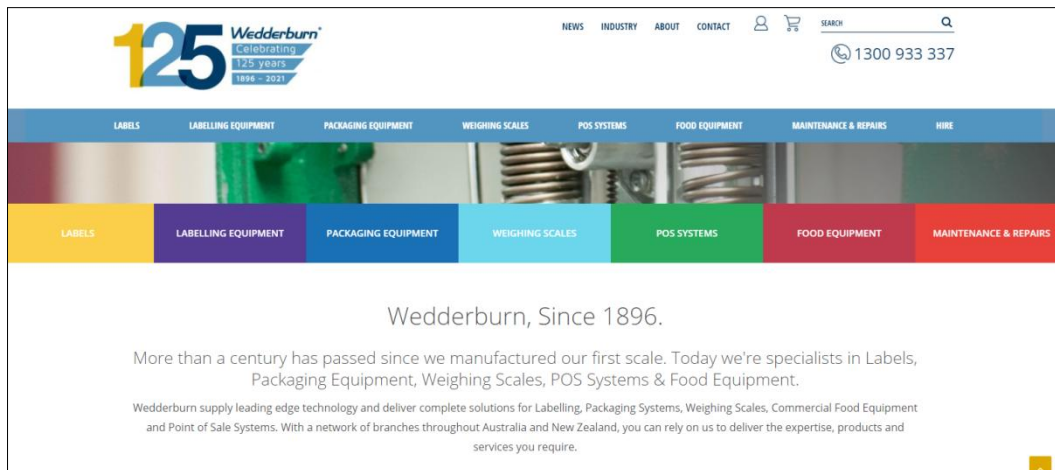
Wedderburn launches a fresh new brand and logo to better reflect the current business. The Label division continues to grow and the Ingleburn office is expanded by an additional 3500sqm to make room for innovative equipment. We can deliver unique packaging and advanced labelling product applications.





In 2019 Wedderburn embraces its history and experience, reverting to its original tagline, “Since 1896”. We’re incredibly proud to have over 123 years of industry experience to share with our customers.

Phil Wedderburn (above), great grandson of the founder Jabez Wedderburn, is now (2021) managing director of the company.



*The front page of the Wedderburn website in 2021.*