



CHAPTER 3

The History of Cotton



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WORLD COTTON HISTORY

A BRIEF SUMMARY

COTTON HAS A VERY LONG AND INTERESTING HISTORY IN THE WORLD AND IS ONE OF THE OLDEST KNOWN FIBRES. THE WORD COTTON COMES FROM AN ARABIC WORD 'QUTUN' OR 'KUTUN' USED TO DESCRIBE ANY FINE TEXTILE AND SOME OF THE EARLIEST FABRIC RELICS FOUND IN EXCAVATIONS OF ANCIENT CIVILISATIONS WERE COTTON.

Archaeologists found cotton fabric 5,000 years old at Mohenjo Daro, an ancient town in the Indus River Valley of West Pakistan, and similarly aged examples have been found in Egypt and Mexico.

Although the cotton plant is thought to have initially grown wild in East Africa, it was first cultivated in the country now known as Pakistan where its early uses were as a textile for clothing, bindings for sandals and harnesses for elephants. The Greek historian, Herodotus (484 – 425 BC) wrote about a tree in Asia that bore cotton 'exceeding in goodness and beauty the wool of any sheep.' Cotton was widely used in the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Indian sub continent. Early Mediterranean traders, the Ionians and Phoenicians introduced cotton materials to Europe.

Over the next 2,000 years, cotton, wool and silk became the preferred fibres for fine fabrics across the developed world. In less developed and warmer countries where cotton farming, home spinning and village industry were interlocked – cotton was dominant, and still is, 2,000 years later.

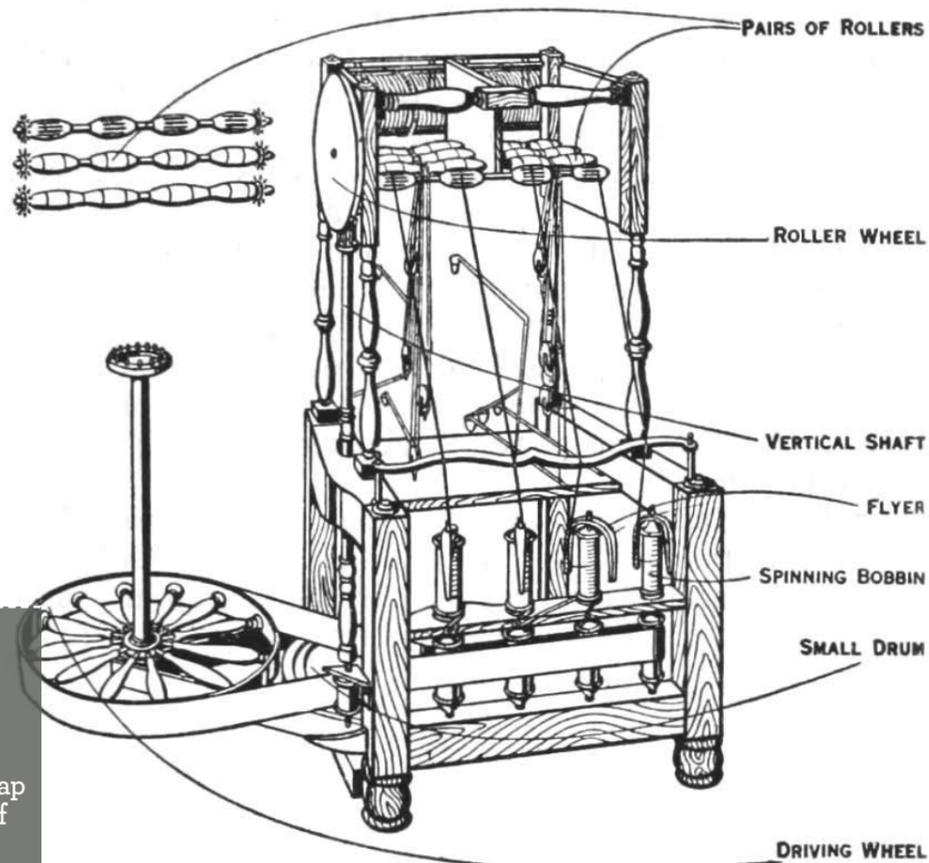
In more developed countries the surge in cotton consumption was triggered by the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th Century. Spinning mills sprang up in places like Manchester which led to ports like Liverpool becoming major cotton shipping centres. With access to slave labour and new Upland types of cotton, the American colonies, soon to

become the USA, provided much of the raw cotton. With lower production costs, cotton became more affordable and its popularity soared. During this period, specialty cotton including Egyptian, Sea Island (Caribbean and South East USA) and Tanguis (Peru) became highly prized for use in very soft and fine fabrics.

However, the American Civil War changed things: European nations were forced to look for other sources of supply and the British looked to their then colonies, including Australia.



Fact Sheet: World Cotton History



Arkwright's Spinning Frame, invented in about 1767 enabling cheap production of cotton cloth

A contrast in spinning technology



And the modern day version – Australian Cotton being spun in Dongying Hongyuan Textile mill (China)
photo by John Hamparsum

AUSTRALIAN COTTON HISTORY A BRIEF SUMMARY

By Cotton Industry Legend, Ralph Schulzé

Cotton has a relatively long history in Australia – native varieties have grown here for many thousands of years. However, although cotton was introduced to Australia with the First Fleet, it did not establish itself even as a minor commercial crop until the 1850's. Then the American Civil War started.

Gins were built, and relatively large areas of cotton were grown around centres such as Beaudesert, Caboolture, Ipswich and Central Queensland.

But when international trade returned to normal, Australian cotton production declined, falling to a total of 15 acres in 1886. In the early 1900's it reappeared and production gradually rose to 50,000 acres in 1924, and after a temporary decline, to 60,000 acres in 1936. In this pre-war period there were cotton gins at Rockhampton, Wowan, Gladstone, Gayndah, Dalby and Brisbane.

Following World War II production again fell to around 2,500 acres. But with the availability of better mechanical cotton pickers, and an increased Commonwealth bounty, production again rose

to reach 20,000 acres in 1960. Up until this period, cotton was regarded as a low input dryland crop or as a pioneering crop for recently cleared land. Irrigation was rare, yields marginal, and fibre quality poor and variable – then things changed!

The modern era of Australian cotton began.

Despite some opinion to the contrary, the modern era did not have a singular origin. Cotton farmers in various areas of Southern and Central Queensland concurrently began addressing cotton as a higher input, better managed, irrigated crop. At the same time what is now the Australian Cotton Research Institute was established near Narrabri following the completion of Keepit Dam.

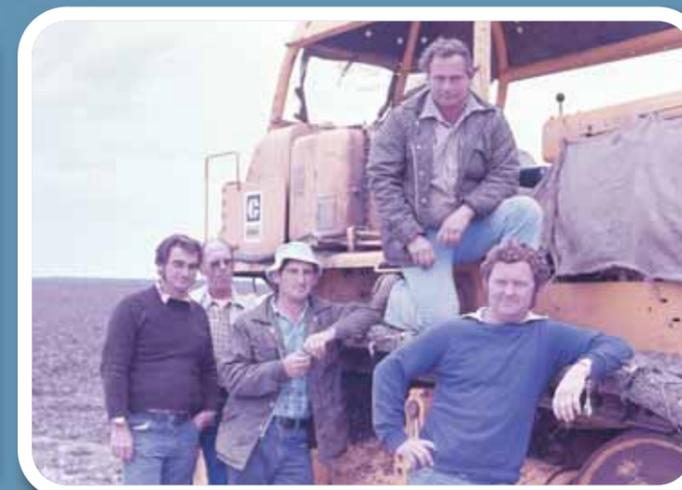
Research quickly focused on cotton as an exciting possibility. In these critical first three years, and before his transfer to wheat research, a Hungarian plant breeder, Nick Derera, provided the foresight to develop those possibilities. In this pioneering effort he was assisted by the farm manager Tom Lawler, and a young agronomist, Ralph Schulzé. News of these promising early results was

picked up by the media as far away as California. Two cotton farmers from near Merced, California, Paul Kahl and Frank Hadley, were so impressed that in early 1961 they came to Australia to see for themselves!

They were soon to be followed by others and as a result a cohort of American cotton families emigrated to the Wee Waa district and other areas. It was the unique blend of American "know how" and practical Australian innovation that made these early efforts so successful.

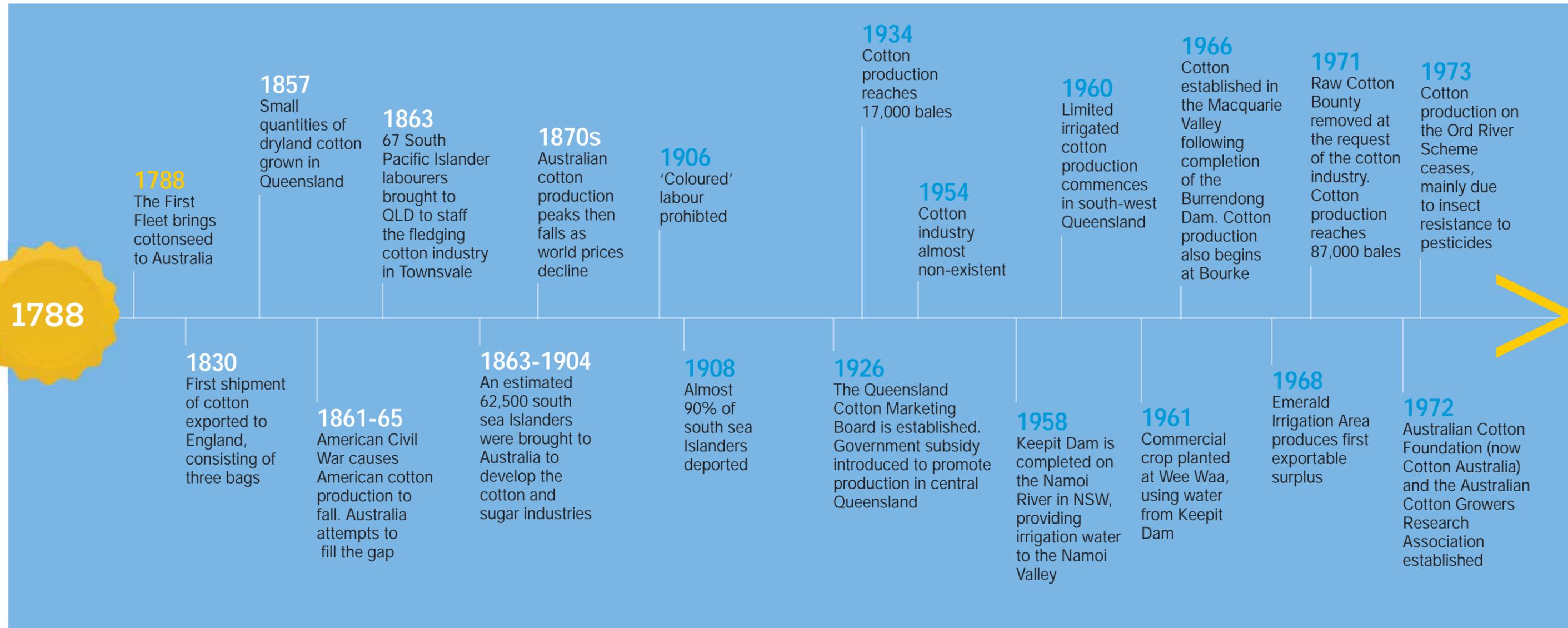
Meanwhile, in Queensland, progressive farmers in the Lockyer, Callide-Dawson and Condamine valleys were successfully developing irrigation and sound crop management. New irrigation areas at St. George and Emerald were also providing opportunities for successful cotton trials and expansion.

THE EARLY YEARS OF COTTON PRODUCTION IN AUSTRALIA



TIMELINE

HISTORY OF COTTON GROWING IN AUSTRALIA



FIRST SHIPMENT OF COTTON EXPORTED TO ENGLAND, WAS IN 1830, CONSISTING OF THREE BAGS

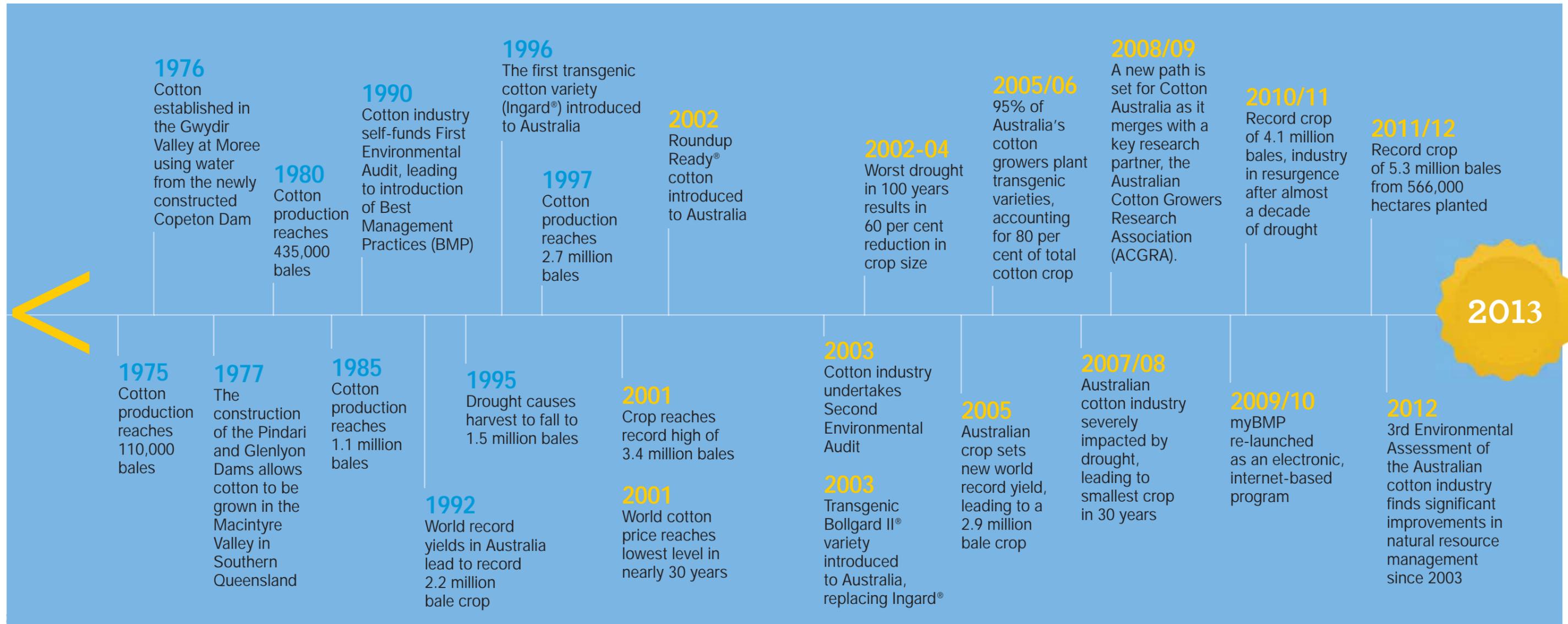


An interactive timeline chronicling the history of Australia's cotton industry and some of its leading organisations including Cotton Australia



TIMELINE

HISTORY OF COTTON GROWING IN AUSTRALIA



A RECORD CROP IN 2011/12 OF 5.3 MILLION BALES, ESTABLISHES INDUSTRY RECOVERY AFTER ALMOST A DECADE OF DROUGHT



CONTACT COTTON AUSTRALIA FOR A COPY OF THE DOCUMENTARY 'A LIFE IN COTTON'