KEEPING THINGS COOL FOR 100 YEARS

By Nicholas Rider.

This month marks a century for ice manufacturer and distributor Bells Pure Ice. *Convenience World* spoke to the company ahead of the milestone.

The history of Bells Pure Ice dates back to June 1926 when Ithaca Ice Works was founded by Jim Mee to supply ice to local communities in Brisbane.

At a time when refrigeration was still developing, ice production played an essential role in everyday life, supporting households, businesses, and local industries.

From these beginnings, the business steadily evolved over the decades. As production methods advanced and demand grew, the company expanded its operations, eventually evolving into the nationally recognised brand known today as Bells Pure Ice.

Convenience World spoke to Tony Mee, the brand's outgoing National Manager Customer Liasison (and Jim's grandson) ahead of his retirement.

Discussing the company's early days, Mr Mee says his grandfather's business was established to produce block ice.

"There was no such thing as crushed or party ice back then," he said.

"Ice was predominantly sold to the ice vendors, who were like the milkman. They'd buy a truck load of ice and then go selling it door-to-door to households.

"A household got delivered a block of ice [maybe three or four days a week] to put in their ice chest – that kept their milk, butter and all their perishables cool."

When refrigerators became affordable in the 1950s, Mr Mee says many ice manufacturers were "wiped out".

His grandfather's business, however, survived this period, which he puts down to where the company was based at the time.

"Our factory was located near the Roma Street rail yard [in central Brisbane]," he said. "All produce that went out to the country was sent by rail. There were no refrigerated trucks or semi-trailers of any great note back then.

"Refrigerated goods were transported in iced-down rail wagons, and we tendered for that business. We were successful in winning the contract because we were very close to the railway yard, so our transportation costs weren't high, and my father, in particular, worked day and night to get that job done with a team of people."

Party ice was becoming popular in the 1960s and 1970s, Mr Mee says, the product Bells Pure Ice is best known for today.

"Back then, it was called 'crushed ice' because they'd crush the blocks into smaller pieces," he said.

In 2014, Ithaca Ice Works merged with Bells Pure Ice, and several other partnerships and acquisitions were generated in the following years.

Scale

To ensure a constant national supply, Bells Pure Ice has 10 company-owned manufacturing plants capable of producing more than 1500 tonnes of ice daily.

Each of these plants has on-site cold storage facilities, and together with standalone cold storage warehouses, the company is able to store more than 20,000 pallets of ice at any one time.

This large-scale production and storage capacity allows Bells Pure Ice to provide national distribution coverage for P&C retailers, including independents and major chains 7-Eleven, Ampol, bp, Viva Energy, OTR, Caltex, EG Group, Freedom Fuels, and United Petroleum. Beyond P&C, the company also supplies Coles, Woolworths, Metcash, BWS, Dan Murphy's, Liquorland and others.

This distribution is entirely managed by Bells Pure Ice.

"The distribution side of things is a major part of our business, and that's what really sets us apart from our competitors," Mr Mee said.

Staying well-equipped

Also contributing to the company's success is its use of technology.

Mr Mee says Bells Pure Ice has always tried to be at the "cutting edge" of technology with its manufacturing plants and equipment, citing robotic systems on the production floor as an example.

"We've got the best ice making equipment that's available," he claimed.

"We've [also] introduced a voice recognition ordering system that's being implemented and tweaked all the time."

Demand amid challenging times

From Covid to cost-of-living pressures, recent years haven't been easy for most.

According to Mr Mee, Covid was "terrible for us", with parties and gatherings off the agenda.

"We survived, like a lot of businesses, just by working as hard as we could," he said. "We were lucky that we had assistance from the government."

Cost-of-living pressures in recent years, though, have had a somewhat positive impact on business for Bells Pure Ice.

"There's a school of thought that when the cost of living is high, people then entertain more at home – [for example], a backyard barbecue or having friends over for drinks – which requires a bag of ice in their esky," Mr Mee said.

He also suggests that consumers are more likely to take "low budget" holidays such as camping or boating trips, and other experiences that may require a bag of ice.

"We almost think we're recession-proof to a degree," he concluded.

The impacts of recent high fuel prices have been a mixed bag for the company.

On one hand, Mr Mee says Australians may have travelled less over the Easter break due to fuel being too expensive. On the other hand, he says gatherings at home may have called for ice supplies. Where the significant impacts have been felt, though, is on the distribution side of the business.

Weather driven demand

Weather is the major driver of how busy the company is, Mr Mee says, with summer the high point.

"From a percentage point of view, we're doing around about 20 per cent of our turnover in the four or five weeks over Christmas and new year [typically, up to Australia Day]," he said.

However, with cooler weather in some parts of the country around Christmas 2025, demand was affected.

"Most people buy a bag of ice or multiple bags of ice to celebrate Christmas," he said.

"But as we experienced in Adelaide and Melbourne [last year], we had sub-20° days, and rainy and overcast weather. People will still entertain and have a beverage, but because it's 20° and not 30°, they only need one bag of ice instead of two or three."

In the cooler months, July and August, business will "drop about somewhere between five and seven per cent of our turnover".

"The further south you go in the country, the [greater] those variances in turnover are," Mr Mee said. "Queensland, [for instance], doesn't have the fluctuations as much as say Victoria and South Australia."

Milestone celebrations

To mark this month's anniversary, Bells Pure Ice will host celebrations at all its plants across the country.

"We'll be acknowledging this milestone, having a sausage sizzle, and thanking everyone," Mr Mee said.

Looking ahead

People often tell Mr Mee they believe a business manufacturing and distributing ice must be great to run, with fairly predictable demand and no fear of AI or such developments having a negative effect. He says the Bells Pure Ice team isn't naïve in thinking like this, with much to consider as it looks to the future.

"We're keeping our eye on all sorts of different options and trends," he said, "and again, like our technology and manufacturing processes, we just want to be at the cutting edge of that. We want to be leaders, not followers."

Since speaking to Convenience World for this article, Mr Mee has retired after 40 years dedicated service.