

Nimmo & Blair, seed merchants and growers of Dunedin

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Nimmo and Blair was one of New Zealand's preeminent agricultural and garden seed companies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during a period of significant growth for the nation in urbanisation, technology, and industry. They became renowned for promoting the use of quality, locally grown seeds and for introducing new agricultural and horticultural equipment for radical and practical changes in farming production.

The company was founded in 1876 when businessmen Robert Nimmo and John Blair (Fig. 1) took over the business of their former employer, G. F. Reid, a goods forwarding agent based in Dunedin. Because the advancement of railways meant that general goods could be transported without the requirement for a special agency to organise, Nimmo and Blair concentrated their efforts on one part of that business: the seed trade.



Fig. 1 Mr J. Blair. *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand*, "The New Zealand Electronic Text Collection" (CC BY-SA).

A flourishing era of business quickly ensued for the supply and distribution of seeds and agricultural equipment to customers around the country. Initially based at 13 Stafford Street, within two years that premises was outgrown and a new one was found at 181 Princes Street. Agricultural seeds (grass seed, root crops, etc.) were the primary commodity as were seed machinery and farming implements.

The quality of imported seed from Great Britain, particularly of grass and clover, had for a long time

been inferior. It was cheap, not first-rate, and reacted unfavourably to New Zealand's different soil conditions. This typically led to cases of poor pasture and crop growth as a result. Nimmo and Blair strived to find an improvement on the situation by supplying (in their words) the highest-quality products. The first major step in their endeavour was in 1879 with the importation and eventual supply of the Drummonds Seed Cleaning Machine (Fig. 2), the first of its kind in the country.

THE Undersigned have for Sale—

AGRICULTURAL SEEDS:

White Clover,
Red Clover,
Alsike,
Cow Grass,
Timothy, &c., &c.
Turnip Seed, imported and colonial grown,
Rape Seed, and Mangold.

We have, at considerable expense, imported a
SEED CLEANING MACHINE!
and farmers can have machine-cleaned grass
seed.

Don't use Dirty Seed!

SHEEP NETS, WOOLPACKS, AND CORNSACKS:

We can offer a bargain in this line, having secured some slightly damaged. They will be sold cheap.

400galls. Iron Tanks; Rock Salt, Blue Stone; Fencing Wires, No. 6 to 10, cheaper than ever; Cambridge Rollers; Fanners; Cahoon's Hand Broadcast Sowing Machines; Mitchell's Grain and Grass Sowing Machines, for sowing Turnip Seed Broadcast—it is acknowledged that an immense saving can be made by using them.

W. G. Murray and Co's Double Furrow Ploughs—cheap.

We are agents for Nicholson's Reapers and have some extras on hand.
We are Agents for N. Forsyth and Co.'s Rope. Supplies on hand.

NIMMO AND BLAIR,
CUSTOMS, FORWARDING, AND GENERAL
COMMISSION AGENTS,
Princes street south,
DUNEDIN.
to mch80

Fig. 2 Mount Ida Chronicle, Volume X, Issue 155, 29 May 1879, Page 4.

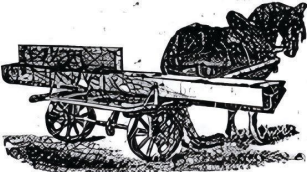
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This was a game changer for the industry, meaning seeds could be cleaned of impurities and separated from unwanted weeds in the mixture. For the company, it really was a turning point. They could now supply seed stock of unmatched quality as well as charge farmers for individual cleaning services. A letter written by them to a customer in 1886 states that they had received samples of grass seed from Hurst and Son, of London, and were intending to clean it through their machine before sending it on. Other machines for seed sowing and special ploughs and hoes were also sold (Fig. 3–4) that significantly reduced the amount of labour, time, and cost involved for the farmer.

R. MITCHELL & SONS'

BROADCAST
SEED-SOWING MACHINES

Are unequalled for sowing broadcast



ALL KINDS OF
GRAIN, GRASS SEED, RAPE,
OR
TURNIP SEED,

NIMMO AND BLAIR,
PRINCES STREET SOUTH, DUNEDIN,
ARE THE AGENTS.

The balance of a consignment of W. G. MURRAY & Co.'s (Banff)
DOUBLE-FURROW PLOUGHS will, to effect a speedy
clearance, be sold at £7 10s., NET PROMPT CASH, by

NIMMO AND BLAIR,
DUNEDIN.

NICHOLSON'S REAPERS AND EXTRAS AT REDUCED PRICES,
TO MEET THE TIMES, are still on sale by

NIMMO AND BLAIR,
DUNEDIN.

FENCING WIRES, WOOL-PACKS, SHEEP NETS, ROCK SALT,
BLUESTONE, &c., &c.

A SHIPMENT OF CALCUTTA CORN SACKS JUST TO HAND BY "KILMENT."

AGRICULTURAL SEEDS IN VARIETY,
IRON TANKS (400-gallons), WATER-BUTTS.

FARM PRODUCE RECEIVED AND SOLD ON COMMISSION.

AGENTS IN DUNEDIN FOR THE "CLUTHA LEADER"

NIMMO & BLAIR,
FORWARDING, CUSTOMS, AND GENERAL COMMISSION AGENTS,
Princes-Street South, Dunedin.

Fig. 3 *Clutha Leader*, Volume VI, Issue 334, 5 March 1880, Page 8.

The second step was in 1888 when the business started to grow their own seed. James Shiel, a seedsman of Rangiora, Canterbury, came on as a partner. Shiel was a big promoter of home-grown seed quality and found like-minded individuals in Nimmo and Blair. Impressed with the quality of the soil in Canterbury for growing locally produced seed, the business utilised land there for production. In one year's time, the business had land under cultivation for crops in several different areas of the district with varying conditions. Vegetables such as peas, beans, potatoes, turnips, and carrots were their choice

of crop. Imported selections were grown and many new seedlings were created and named by them, including the 'Maori Chief' potato, 'Sir Harry Atkinson' pea, and 'Shiel's Border Hero' bean.

WE HAVE FOR SALE—

400-gal. Iron Tanks and Empty Seed Casks
Rock Salt and Bluestone
Cornbags and Woolpacks—Calcuttas
Fencing Wires, No. 6 to 10, best brands
Sheep Nets—Tarred
Cambridge Rollers, plain and notched
Potato Digging Machine
Fanners
Cahoon's American Hand Broadcast Seed
Sowing Machines
Pirle's Double-furrow Plough Socks
Murray's Double-furrow Ploughs—cheap
Grain and Grass Seed Sowing Machines, 18
feet wide, Mitchell's. Specially adapted
and fitted for Sowing Turnip Seed
broadcast. A shipment expected by the
"Cape Clear."
THEY SAVE TIME, LABOUR, AND SEED.

Landing and to Arrive:

White Clover	Timothy
Red "	Lucerne
Alsike "	Rye-grass
Cow-grass Clover	Cocksfoot
Mangold	Sheep Parsley
Rape Seed, Sowing	Rib-grass
	Rye Grain, &c., &c.

Turnip Seeds, of varieties, Imported and
Colonial.

NIMMO & BLAIR have imported a
Grass Seed Cleaning Machine—the best pr
ourable—and trust the Farmers will appr e
ciate this endeavour to supply a felt want.
Never ruin your fields by using dirty seeds,
even if cheap. It is a "penny wise and
pound foolish policy."

We are agents for
Joseph Nicholson's Reapers and Extras
A. Forsyth and Co., Sydney Rope Works.

A supply of best Manilla, assorted sizes
always on hand.

NIMMO & BLAIR,
CUSTOMS, FORWARDING, & GENERAL
COMMISSION AGENTS,
No. 181, PRINCES STREET SOUTH, DUNEDIN.

Fig. 4 *Otago Witness*, Issue 1486, 8 May 1880, Page 5.

From 1885 the business operated out of larger premises in Lower High Street, between Rattray and Dowling Streets, Dunedin, and facing the statue of Dr Donald McNaughton Stuart in the area known as the Triangle (Fig. 5–6), later renamed Queens Gardens (Fig. 7; formed where High, Rattray, and Cumberland Streets intersected).

In addition to continuing to import many seed selections from Great Britain, including from Sutton's Seeds, re-exporting it after treatment to places like Great Britain and Australia, and selling it throughout New Zealand, their trade expanded from wholesale seeds to retail sales of flower seeds and bulbs, and other general nursery lines such as fruit trees, roses, and sweet peas.

Nimmo & Blair's "Standard" Seeds Triangle Dunedin

Fig. 5 Otago Daily Times, Issue 10601, 22 February 1896, Page 6.



Fig. 6 The Triangle, Dunedin, in 1886, photographed by Alfred Burton. The building on the far right is Nimmo and Blair's premises. Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 1982; 1982/49/22.

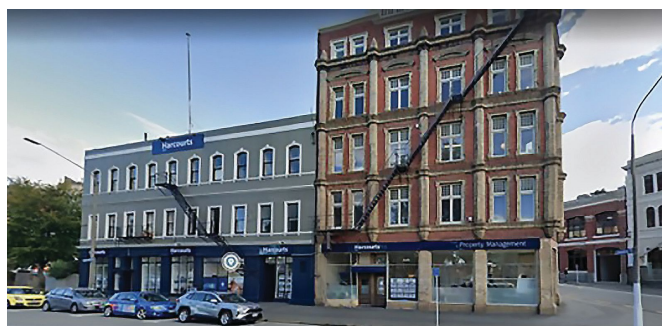


Fig. 7 The Lower High Street premises is now Harcourts at Queens Gardens. Image via Google Maps.

Products such as insecticides and manures also became a big component of the business. Stock was also sourced from local Dunedin gardeners, such as pelargoniums from Harry Clarke (gardener to entrepreneur Robert Glendining), and from nurseries (such as Charles Sonntag's Brockville Nursery). The first commercial sale in New Zealand of the Chinese sacred lily, or Joss flower (*Narcissus tazetta* subsp. *chinensis*), is attributed to Nimmo and Blair in 1891, but they cannot take the credit for its introduction into New Zealand (it was likely grown and exhibited earlier by local Chinese, such as market gardener Wong Koo²). They are, however, considered to have introduced Japanese plums into Otago, bringing them from Auckland for exhibition and eventual sale in 1896. Nimmo and Blair's 1907 catalogue (Fig. 8A–B) included gaillardias imported from Kelway and Son, of Great Britain, with others from South Africa. The catalogue also listed many new varieties of vegetables produced by the firm, including those mentioned above, as well as twelve new roses "never yet offered in New Zealand."

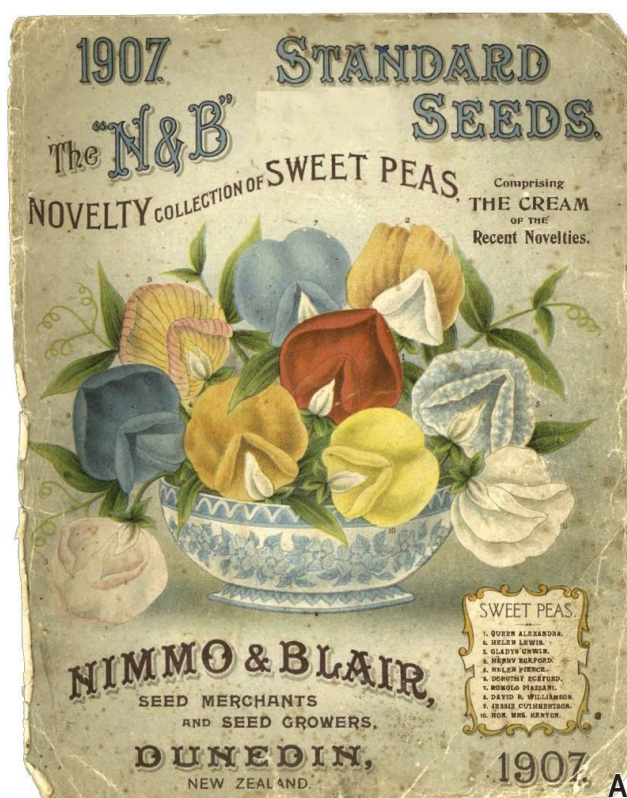


Fig. 8 Nimmo and Blair's 1907 seed catalogue. A, cover. B, example page.

Robert Nimmo died in 1891 and John Blair retired in 1895, going on to raise his own narcissi seedlings (before he died in 1913). James H. Nimmo (son of Robert) and George W. Gibson joined James Shiel (Fig. 9) as new partners in the business and the three of them carried it through into the twentieth century.

² Editor's note: See James Beattie's 2023 Banks Memorial Lecture, *New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2023, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 12–13.



Fig. 9 Mr J. Shiel, Mr G. W. Gibson, and Mr J. H. Nimmo. *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand*, "The New Zealand Electronic Text Collection" (CC BY-SA).

Their sales of vegetable and flower "Standard Seeds" in packet form, increased substantially, going from 6000 packets sold in the 1879 season to a reported increase to 300,000 in 1897, and an estimated 400,000 for the 1898 season. Consistent wins at horticultural and agricultural shows for their produce and products also supported their claims of providing goods of outstanding quality.

In 1895 it was reported that 120 staff were employed in the seed-producing department of the business, with an additional 20 staff in the offices and warehouse. By 1903 such was the extent of their business operations that they again moved into a newly built larger warehouse further along High Street facing the railway station and looking out over Queen's Gardens (Fig. 10–13). At this time they were said to be exporting at least 350 tons of seed worldwide, including to Australia, Argentina, France, Germany, India, Italy, South Africa, and the USA, with around 1000 acres of land under crops in Canterbury, Marlborough, Nelson, and even in Victoria, Australia.



Fig. 10 Nimmo and Blair's High Street Seed Warehouse and Offices as built in 1902. The building is no longer standing. *Otago Witness*, Issue 2555, 4 March 1903, Page 42.



Fig. 11 Early Dunedin map of the central city. The blue arrow denotes approximate location of original Lower High Street premises. After 1903 their premises moved to somewhere along the orange arrow. Scoular, James C. (1948). *Century: Dunedin after the first hundred years 1848–1948*. P. 52.

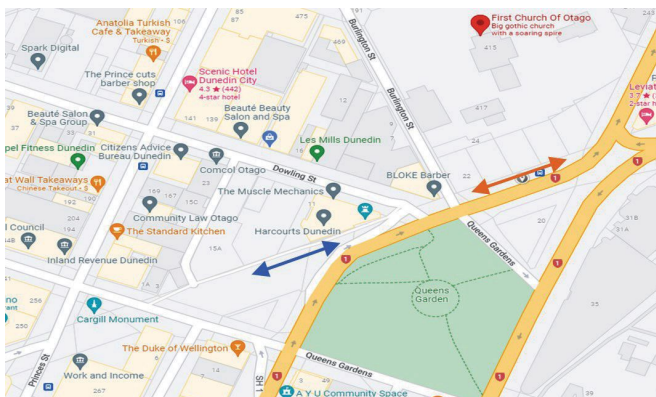


Fig. 12 The location where both premises would be today. Image via Google Maps.



Fig. 13 1906 letter, picturing the High Street Seed Warehouse and Offices. Nimmo and Blair (Firm), "Nimmo and Blair letterhead," <https://ourheritage.ac.nz>.

James Shiel left the firm in 1908 and in 1919 the retail side of the business in seeds and plants was sold to former employees of the firm, Malcolm Matheson and Arthur Roberts, who established their own nursery business which is still operating under the same name of Matheson & Roberts today. Nimmo and Blair retained a warehouse and seed-cleaning establishment in Willis Street “adjacent to the wharves and railway goods sheds” and an office at 49 Vogel Street, in a building “immediately adjoining the Union S.S. Co.”

From 1918 it appears the business was run still by James Nimmo in partnership with his brother Robert (Fig. 14). Local advertisements from 1942–1944 place the business at 38 Water Street, this time above the premises of the Union S.S. Co., while in 1948 they are still advertising from Vogel Street and then in 1949 seem to be based at the NZ Express Co. building in Bond Street.

High-Grade Seeds and Manures.

NIMMO AND BLAIR'S, LTD.

Seeds and Manures.

Our reputation for nearly half a century is behind everything we sell, and our business is now controlled by Messrs J. H. and R. D. Nimmo, sons of the founder of Nimmo and Blair. The same care and attention to the supplying of High-grade SEEDS and FERTILISERS is therefore assured to our Clients.

We particularly desire to make it clearly known that we are still dealing in MANURES and FERTILISERS, and find it necessary to state this owing to statements having been made that we were out of the Manure Business. Clients will therefore kindly note this, and we hope to be favoured with Orders as usual.

Turnip Seeds	Agricultural and Garden	Rape and Grass Manure
Rape Seeds	Seeds of all sorts,	Potato Manure
Mangold Seeds	Turnip Manure	Mangold Manure
Grass Seeds	Rape Manure	Superphosphates
Clover Seeds		Etc., Etc.

NIMMO & BLAIR, LTD.,

SEED AND MANURE MERCHANTS, DUNEDIN

Fig. 14 *Mt Benger Mail*, 7 August 1918, Page 4.

Any further reference to the company in available sources runs dry with the 1940s. It was possibly absorbed into the A. S. Paterson export business group, but that conclusion is based only on loose leads.

Acknowledgements

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