

**GIVING BACK** Pharmacist, grocer, vigneron and investor a philanthropist at heart

# Businessman enjoyed a varied life

## **OBITUARY: Richard James Owens AM**

John Lewis

RICHARD James Owens AM was a pharmacist, the chief of a 45-store \$250-million-a-year supermarket company, a Hunter vigneron and in 1988 appeared on the Sydney Opera house stage in 14 performances of the opera *La Boheme*.

It was a sidelight in the life of this most enterprising, versatile and public-spirited Hunter Region citizen, who died at the age of 86 on January 19.

Mr Owens was an opera enthusiast and provided a \$150,000 underwriting for a Newcastle Australian Opera season of *La Boheme* and with characteristic verve in 1988 won his supernumerary or "spear-carrier" stage role with a \$6200 bid in an AG fund-raising auction.

His death is a sad milestone in his family's 78-year history in the grocery business. He was the grandson of the original Richard Owens who in 1910 set up a small grocery store at Wollombi which developed into a string of Newcastle-Hunter Valley over-the-counter service general stores. After the patriarch's death in 1929 the operation passed to his sons George, William and Arthur and, led from 1956 by Richard Owens's father George, the stores became the Savemore's self-service chain.

After schooling at Newcastle Boys High, Richard James Owens became a 1959 Sydney University pharmacy graduate - meeting his fellow pharmacist wife Mary at uni and later joining her in running chemist shops at Belmont and Broadmeadow. Pharmacy gave way to grocery in 1962, when Mr

Owens joined the family firm and in 1967 he and Mary sold their pharmacies and Richard became Savemore's general manager.

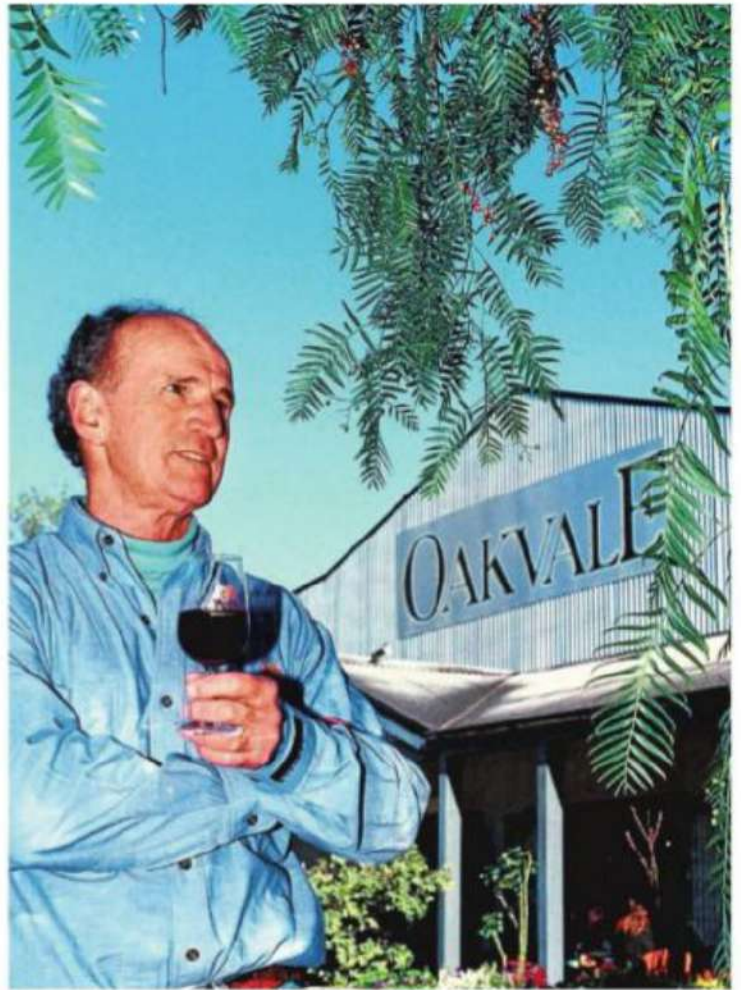
In 1975 George, Arthur and William Owens retired and in 1977 ownership of Savemore's was split between the three family groups. Soon afterwards Richard Owens became impressed by the success of giant food barns in the US and began the radical steps of turning his third of Savemore's into the Shoeys chain - a name inspired by a valued staffer Bill Shoesmith.

Mr Owens presided over the growth of Shoeys into a 45-site giant employing more than 2000 people in Newcastle, the Hunter Valley and northern NSW. In 1988 he and his family yielded to the sale for undisclosed prices of 40 Shoeys stores to Coles and five to David's Holdings.

Out of the grocery business, Richard and Mary Owens in 1994 took the wraps off a \$5 million wine investment when they established an impressive new country home and a state-of-the-art 34.5-hectare vineyard on what had been a 57-hectare dairy farm at the foot of the Brokenback Range in Milbrodale Rd, Broke. In 1999 they increased their wine investment by paying about \$2.5 million for the former Elliott family Oakvale vineyard and winery in Broke Rd, Pokolbin.

In 2010 the Owens quit the wine industry to concentrate on their family ROI Pty Ltd group which now focuses on property investment and development and the Ice Box Liquor retail chain.

Richard subscribed to the tenet that "philanthropy



Richard Owens the Hunter vigneron at the Oakvale Wines Pokolbin cellar door in 2000.

is two-pronged, if you give money, you also have to give time" which saw him serving as chairman of the Hunter Valley Research Foundation in the 1970s. He was a director of the Hunter Valley Medical Research Institute (HMRI) from 2000 to 2009 and chairman from 2003 to 2007 - playing a pivotal part in getting government funding for construction of the HMRI building on the John Hunter Hospital campus.

From the 1990s he

took a leading role in the International Institute for Management Development in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1991 serving as executive in residence at the institute's Swiss headquarters and lecturing in the faculty of family business.

He chaired the Australian Family Business Association from 2010 to 2012 and was a board member of Opera Australia and the Institute of Deaf and Blind Children for 20 years, was an honorary

professor at Bond University in Queensland and taught at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and the Harvard Business School.

He was made a Member of the Order of Australia for service to the community in the Hunter Region in the 2013 Queen's Birthday honours. He is survived by his wife Mary, his four children and their partners, 14 grand children and four great-grand children