South Coast History Society Inc.

RecollectionS

Issue 32

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History is Her story too

The historic Murrah Hall c.1970 during the years when it lay abandoned. ('Murrah Archive', Robyn Levy) – see story page 8

Commercial Fishing on the NSW South Coast

Conditions along the NSW South Coast have enabled its waters to support an unusually rich variety of marine species.

Abundant food for fish and other aquatic life is provided by the Eastern Australian Current that sweeps enormous quantities of plankton, fish larvae, crustaceans and other nutrients into the area. And the many rivers and lakes along the coast provide habitat for fish and other marine animals, and also deposit nutrients onto the extensive off-shore continental shelf.

The commercial value of fishing the South Coast's waters was recognized in the early days with, for example, a shore-based whaling station being established in Twofold Bay by Thomas Raine in 1828.

Commercial fishing ultimately grew to become one of the South Coast's major industries – but also has been an industry that has been typified by periods of significant boom and bust.

Fantastic Reads

Its history is fascinating – but we warn, because 'fishing' embraces so many different forms of aquacultural activity, it is a story that cannot be adequately condensed to just a few pages. Our 'net', therefore, contains many holes!

The Breadth of South Coast Aquaculture

Those fishing, those harvesting seafood along the NSW coast have tended to be relatively small family-based enterprises that rely on high levels of local knowledge and skills learnt over many generations. There are now over 1,000 licensed operators in the state. Many were/are immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, from countries such as China, Italy, Greece and Britain.

The industry is highly regulated by the Australian and, particularly, the State governments. Different regulations, different quotas are largely based on the species of fish being targeted and the methods employed by those in the industry.

Broadly, NSW Fisheries divides the commercial fishing industry into a number of subgroups: Estuary Fishing (the most diverse of the commercial fishing sectors; around 600 fishing businesses have estuary fishing licences; most use mesh or hand nets), Estuary Prawn Trawling, Ocean Hauling (this includes both commercial fishing from beaches and within 3 nautical miles of the coast; pilchards, sea mullet and Australian salmon are the most commonly targeted species; commercial hauling and purse seine nets [see below] are utilized), Ocean Trap and Line Fishing (tuna fishing once dominated this sector, but now snapper, yellowtail kingfish, leatherjackets, bonito and silver trevally are the most commonly taken species; traps and a variety of lines with hooks are used), Ocean Trawl Fishing (including prawn trawling and fish trawling, with the principal fish caught being school whiting, tiger flathead, silver trevally, various species of sharks and rays, squid and octopus; otter trawl nets [conical shaped nets that are dragged through the water or along the sea floor] are often used), Lobster Fishing (around 100 operators are licenced and they use traps; South Coast lobster fishing developed from the 1960s, particularly around Ulladulla and Batemans Bay, after significant offshore lobster grounds were discovered off Sydney), Abalone Harvesting (from reefs close to the shore by divers using surface-supplied air or scuba tanks), and Oyster Growing.

The Development of the South Coast Fishing Industry

The availability of fish, the logistics of transporting catches to major markets (especially Sydney), and advances in mechanical technology (principally of motors and refrigeration) have largely determined how and when the South Coast fishing industry has developed.

The products produced from whaling – mainly whale oil and whale bone (baleen) – could be easily transported to markets in Sydney and other populated areas from the time that Thomas Raine pioneered the whaling industry in Twofold Bay. His success paved the way for the Imlay Brothers and Benjamin Boyd to follow shortly thereafter, and for the Davidson family to follow in the 1850s.

Other forms of fishing on the South Coast could not be as easily developed because there was no way of keeping catches cool until they reached the market (the Sydney Ice Company did not open until 1864) and there was no way of regularly, reliably transporting catches to major markets (the Illawarra Steam Navigation Company did not commence a weekly service to South Coast ports until around 1866). So, until these obstacles were overcome, the local fishing 'industry' serviced little more than the needs of locals.

At that time, the limited commercial fishing that was undertaken was in lakes, estuaries and from beaches. Hand lines and hand nets were used – with perhaps the largest hauls being gathered by 'stalling', or netting off entire tidal flats at high tide to trap everything in the net when the water flowed out.

A major turning point for local fishermen was in the 1860s when steam engine vessels began transporting ice from Sydney (packed in sawdust to minimize melting) and taking fish to be sold in Melbourne and Sydney. Ice factories were built locally from the early 1900s and, because fishing required enormous quantities of ice, they prospered until the advent of refrigeration.

Cleaning tables and cutting saws at the Narooma factory

There was no lack of demand for South Coast seafood because, from the mid-1800s, the waters immediately around Sydney were showing signs of being overfished. An 1880 Commission of Enquiry into NSW Fisheries noted that fish were being 'followed up every creek and cranny by their relentless human enemies', and were 'perpetually harassed and hunted'. 'Meshes (of the nets being used) decreased in width, so that nothing escaped, and bushels upon bushels of small fry — the young of the very best fishes — were left on the beaches,' because only larger, more popular fish such as bream, whiting and flathead were selected to be sent to market.

This Commission also resulted in government encouragement for the introduction of deep-sea fishing.

Deep-ocean fishing became possible, and commenced around 1925, once larger, more powerful engines became available. These enabled bigger boats to be built and for these to be equipped with power winches that could haul in larger nets. New species – such as tuna, salmon, blue-eye trevalla (blue-eye cod) and orange roughy (ocean perch) – were then able to be targeted.

New ways of fishing and new types of nets were developed. Set nets, such as gill nets and drift nets, and beam nets (nets that were towed behind a launch with a beam positioned to keep the mouth of the net open) were supplemented by seine nets (floating nets that were dropped around a school of fish, thereby encircling them; they were first used locally in 1936), which developed into purse seine nets (the bottom of a seine net was gathered together, trapping more fish because they could no longer swim away under the net [akin to a purse being zipped closed]).

Enormous numbers of salmon entered South Coast rivers to spawn during winter months, and fishermen from the 1930s to the late 1950s would net them in large quantities. At that time, salmon was considered a poor table fish, so the bulk were sold to canning factories. In Narooma, more fish were usually netted than the cannery could immediately process, so netted fish were towed behind a launch to a holding pen (one of these pens was McMillan's near the entrance to Wagonga Inlet. It was 240-metre long and between 40- and 80-metres wide and was situated on the inside break-wall of the main channel, utilising the break-wall as a barrier). When processing capacity became available, the fish were simply re-netted and towed to the cannery.

Effective techniques for attracting and then 'poling' schools of tuna were developed in the mid-1940s. Huge numbers of fish were caught this way (hundreds of tonnes of tuna per day might be caught by a fleet of up to 50 pole boats operating out of Bermagui alone – with light aircraft ultimately being utilized to spot the shoals of fish), before poling gave way to purse seine fishing of tuna in the 1970s which in turn, from the 1980s and spurred on by the successful airfreighting of fresh-chilled tuna to Japan, gave way to longline fishing (the tuna being caught on hundreds of baited hooks that are strung along a single drifting line that extends for several kilometres).

The volumes of fish caught locally (especially Barracouta, Australian salmon and later Tuna) were potentially so great that a local fishing boatbuilding industry was established on the South Coast – initially at Moruya and later in Nowra, Batemans Bay and Bermagui. From 1938, local fish

processing facilities (primarily canning works) were also established (see below).

Meanwhile, roads between the South Coast and Sydney were improving and refrigeration was becoming available. So, from the 1930s, fresh fish from the area could be transported direct to the Sydney markets by truck.

World War II had a significant effect on the local commercial fishing industry. Local shipbuilding ceased and numerous local fishing vessels and their crews were drafted into the Small Ships fleet to assist the war effort (see story in Recollections 5 at www.bit.ly/Recollections5). Imports of canned fish were restricted (over 4,000-tonnes of Canadian pink salmon had been exported to Australia per year prior to the war – so a significant local market for canned salmon became immediately available), and the war created an enormous demand for local canned fish to feed the Allies' fighting forces and home markets.

From the 1940s, significant changes have occurred in the local fishing industry. For example, freezers were added to fishing boats to save landing fish into markets or processing facilities when gluts were being experienced. This, in turn led to on-board processing of fish, and eventually to the construction of huge factory ships, some of which act as mother ships to an attendant fleet of smaller fishing vessels. Simultaneously - perhaps to the detriment of local fishermen - fishing has become 'global', with more overseas fishing vessels and factory ships being attracted to southern Australian waters.

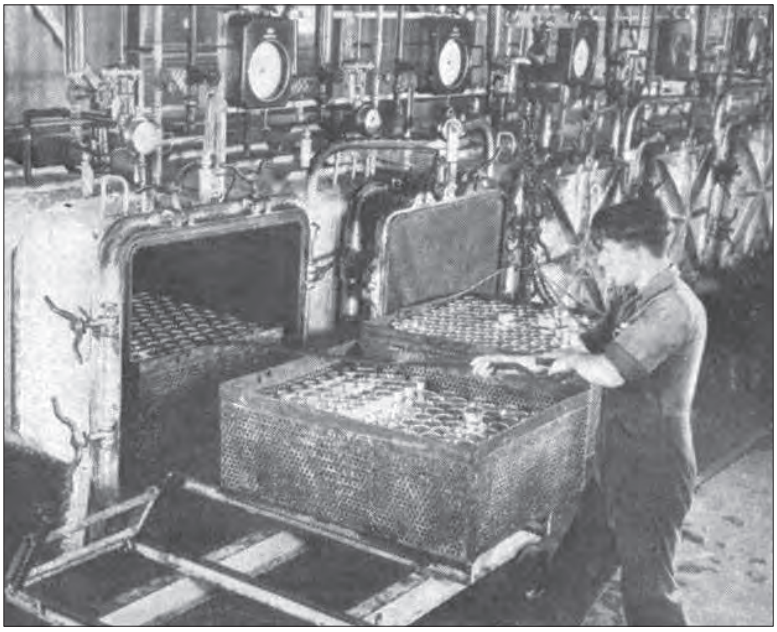
Processing

The first fish cannery on the South Coast was opened in Narooma in 1938. It has the capacity to produce eight million 12oz cans of fish per year from a single shift of workers. It also processed fish offal into fish meal.

Forty fishermen supplied the cannery – at various times with salmon, barracouta, tuna, mackerel, scad and pilchards. Its tinned fish was mainly marketed under the Greenseas and Nar-Roo-Ma brands.

The Narooma fish cannery operated until 1960.

Between 1940 to 1999 a fish cannery operated in Eden



The battery of cookers at the Narooma factory

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'Monday Movies' is another superb South Coast History Society initiative,
made possible with generous support from the Mumbulla Foundation.

(initially on the northern side of Lake Curalo, before a larger works was erected in 1948 on the shores of Cattle Bay – but only after legal restrictions were overcome that would have required the fish processed in Eden to first pass through a metropolitan fish market!) which employed about 150 locals. It was supplied at its peak by 40 tuna boats. It normally processed about 3,000 cans a day, but this rose to almost 15,000 cans at peak production.

Between the mid-1950s and 1960 a small tuna cannery operated on the Bermagui Steamer Wharf. Its product was marketed under a Cee-Dee Products brand. Any fish that this cannery could not handle were trucked to the larger cannery in Eden.

Sustainability

Throughout Australia's history, a fine line has been walked between commercial exploitation and sustainability of fisheries. As previously noted, concerns were expressed about overfishing near Sydney as early as the mid-19th century and these led to an interest in the possibility of opening up fishing areas on the South Coast.

The introduction of ocean trawling in the 1920s only exacerbated things. For example, 2.3 million tons of tiger flathead were taken from the Botany Grounds off Sydney in 1919 but this crashed after the introduction of ocean trawl fishing to just 0.2 million tons in 1937. In the 1970s and 1980s, the same boom-to-bust scenario played out with southern blue-fin tuna and orange roughy.

The governments' response has been to introduce stringent regulations, licences, bag limits and quotas to the industry. This has resulted in fewer commercial fishermen being able to operate in NSW, with the abalone industry (primarily a South Coast industry) providing a good example.

Commercial fishing for abalone began in the early

Salmon Harvest, Eden 1958. Image: National Library of Australia, nla. obj-136531816

Tuna Poling off Eden. Image: National Archives A1200:L49552

1960s with annual catch rates of between 200 and 400 tonnes, but peaking at 1,200 tonnes in 1971. Growing concerns about the state of the resource led to an inquiry in 1979 that recommended that the abalone and sea urchin industry become a restricted entry fishery. This took effect the following year when only 59 divers were granted access to the fishery - down from more than 100 divers the previous year. Since then the number of divers has been reduced further (by 2000 it had reduced to 37) and individual catch quotas were introduced in 1989 in a further attempt to maintain the viability of the industry.

In a further attempt to maintain fish stocks, six marine parks (no-go or restricted fishing areas) have been established in NSW since the 1980s. Two of these are on the NSW South Coast: the 202 square kilometre Jervis Marine Park, established in 1998, and the 850 square kilometre Batemans Marine Park which extends from Murramarang Beach to Murunna Pont just north of Bermagui, which was established in 2006. The establishment of these has not been without consequences – extensive and lucrative prawning grounds off Long Beach having, for example, been closed.

Cultural Fishing

Aboriginal peoples of the South Coast see fishing as an integral part of their culture. Fishing provided them with, and many believe should still provide them with, food and a commodity that can be traded.

As their traditional lands became privately owned and they thereby became excluded from areas where traditional hunting or gathering food occurred, and as they were forced onto missions, Aboriginals became increasingly reliant on

fishing. In fact, they were actively encouraged to depend on fishing, as both the Wallaga Lake and Wreck Bay Aboriginal communities on the South Coast were established as fishing-based communities, with boats and nets being provided to enable their residents to fish.

In the late nineteenth century, Aboriginal people on the South Coast collected and dried mutton fish (now called abalone) for export to China. And whole communities would also come together to haul schools of mullet off the beach, with everyone who helped taking a share of the catch. These activities additionally served to reinforce aspects of Aboriginal culture, and to pass on traditional knowledge and values to younger generations of Aboriginals.

When the New South Wales Government began regulating access to fisheries with licences, quotas and bag limits, and when more non-indigenous fishers entered the industry, Aboriginal fishers were further impacted. This led to the formation of an Aboriginal fishing rights movement that has campaigned to have traditional Aboriginal fishing values recognised and respected. It also resulted in a South Coast native title claim covering the area from Bundeena, just south of Sydney, to the Victorian border and three nautical miles out to sea.

Cultural fishing has been legally recognised as distinct from commercial fishing since 2015: Aboriginal people in NSW do not need to apply for the normal licence or pay the normal fee as a cultural fisher (providing, however, they do so within the provisions of the Act and its Regulations) and Aboriginal fishers can take double the normal bag limit of fish and five times the daily limit of abalone.

South Coast Aboriginal cultural fishing is, however, still not fitting easily with modern, licenced, regulated Australian commercial fishing or with recreational fishing. Those now advocating for change most commonly argue that recreational fishing bag limits often aren't high enough for a single cultural fisher who may be aiming to feed 10, 20 or more people, and that it is unreasonable to now restrict the trade of a long-established, integral part of Aboriginal culture.

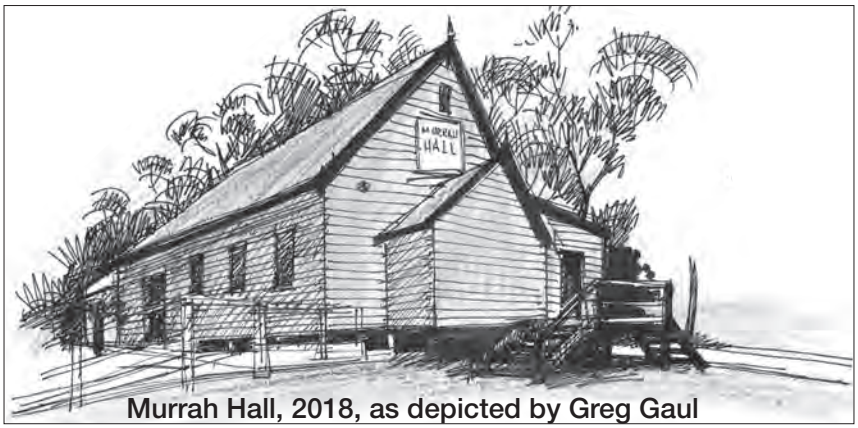
The question of access to culturally important fishing spots has become yet another issue. Indigenous people provided knowledge about their cultural fishing spots during the planning of the two South Coast marine parks, only to have them designated as protected zones where all fishing is prohibited. This left them with the feeling that the government and non-Indigenous people really don't care about what has happened to their communities and culture…communities with a culture that successfully managed their sea country and its resources for many thousands of years.

Sources: Fisheries Newsletter, July 1949; various NSW Fisheries websites; Material Evidence for Early Commercial Fishing Activities on the Far South Coast of New South Wales by Alister Bowen in Australasian Historical Archaeology, 22, 2004; Australia Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies; 'Plenty of fish in the sea? Not necessarily, as history shows' in The Conversation; 'Death of a Town' in sailworld.com 13.11.2012; Regional Profile East Marine Region, Australian Government Bureau of Rural Sciences, 2007; 'Narooma's Past' by Laurelle Pacey.

This is the third of three articles about the historic Murrah Hall by Canberra-based historian Dr Richard Reid. The earlier articles were included in Recollections 29 (available at www.bit.ly/Recollections 29) and Recollections 31 (www.bit.ly/Recollections31)

... from a state of dereliction:
the saving and restoration of Murrah Hall, 1972–2003

The building of the Murrah Hall in 1903 illustrated a strong sense of community, and community purpose, in the settler families of the Murrah. But the hall's doors closed c.1972 and the building was virtually abandoned owing, it is claimed, 'to a lack of interest and because social activities tended to be focused in larger centres'. How is it that today the hall, looking cared for, is so evidently there for anyone to see on a drive from Tathra to Bermagui? An answer to that is to be found in the surviving records of the Murrah Hall, the 'Murrah Archive', a collection of documents that testifies to the presence in the area of a new group dedicated to the hall's survival and its use as a cultural and community facility.



Murrah Hall, 2018, as depicted by Greg Gaul

In 1979, 47 people put their signatures, and addresses, to a public statement:

We, the undersigned, are prepared to act upon our concern for the Murrah Hall.

The concern was that the Mumbulla Shire Council (1982+, Bega Valley Shire Council) might allow the site to pass from public ownership and the hall might be demolished. A handful of signatories to the statement lived in the immediate Murrah area, one actually giving an address as Murrah School; a few, six, lived close by at Cuttagee and Barragga Bay; some others at Cobargo, Tilba, Narooma, Wallaga Lake; and two as far away as Cottles Bridge in Victoria. The majority, however, gave a Bermagui address. A letter to council in March 1980 spoke of a 'growth of population at Cuttagee, Barragga Bay and the Murrah' but the evidence suggests that most of those 'prepared to act upon our concern for the

Murrah' were from Bermagui and beyond. Robyn Levy, the Hall's historian, described these new arrivals:

Around this time [the 1970s] *new settlers with young families were arriving to escape the fast pace of the city and wanted a community meeting place.*

They found the vacant Murrah Hall.

Those who realised the potential of Murrah Hall were from a newly formed organisation in Bermagui called the 'Theatre Group', later known as 'The Workshop' or 'Bermagui Drama Group Workshop'. An undated document suggests that at some point in 1978, even before the public statement of 'concern', there had been discussions by the Group with Mumbulla Shire Councillors about using Murrah Hall for 'rehearsals', 'play readings' and 'general use'. One reason given for needing the hall was as a 'place to store equipment etc.' People were keen to organise a working bee to get the hall functioning again, the Group looking to obtain an agreement from Council to allow them to restore the hall and have use of it.

There were initial setbacks: after telling the Group in January 1979 they had been appointed as a 'management committee to control manage and maintain the building' it was learnt in March 1980, 'verbally and coincidentally', that Murrah Hall would be sold. This was even after working bees had been held, the hall cleaned and some essential maintenance carried out. The cry went up from the Group in a letter to Council of 18th March 1980:

We feel the Murrah Hall is essential to us and to the community we live in. ... We would appreciate an early assurance that our efforts – both past and planned – to restore and use Murrah Hall are not in vain.

Council quickly backtracked on any decision to sell and advised, in May 1980, that the Group's occupation of the building would be allowed providing 'the building is brought up to an acceptable standard within twelve months'. No public functions could be held in the hall 'until acceptable toilet facilities are provided' and a licence obtained under the Theatres and Public Halls Act.

A process had begun which, over the next twenty years, would see those striving to renovate and use Murrah Hall constantly confronted by the need to raise funds for essential building work and improvement to facilities, and to understand, and comply with, the requirements of local and state ordinances and regulations. In June 1980 a council inspection produced a lengthy list of matters to be attended to, for example 'doors-renew', 'roof-repair/replace', 'water-provide tanks', 'toilet accommodation-provide', and the far from comforting statement:

... the Council will look forward to your reply which shall elaborate on the specifications, method, and type of rectification/improvement which shall be undertaken, and when, to each item.

The Group must have wondered what they had let themselves in for. They were not deterred. A sub-committee was formed to draw up a timetable of necessary improvements, investigate sources of funding, and to promote the project. A meeting in Bermagui, called to inform the community what was happening and asking for volunteers, agreed they should work to make the hall 'reusable'. Most importantly, a quote was sought for what it might all cost to meet Council demands. By October 1980 they knew: a local builder provided an 'estimated cost' not

far short of $20,000. The 'volunteer' aspect of it all is well illustrated by the fact that the builder was offered, and presumably accepted, 'half a dozen cans as payment' for his work on putting together the quote.

Between 1980 and 1984 progress was slow, but the commitment remained despite failures to obtain significant funding. A submission for a large capital grant, perhaps for a sizable portion of the local builder's 'estimated cost', to the NSW Premier's Department, Division of Cultural Activities, showed the Drama Group Workshop had large ambitions for the hall:

It is intended that the hall would offer:-

- *a place for artists and craftspeople to work, hold exhibitions and conduct workshops;*
- *a place for musicians, dance groups and theatre groups to rehearse and perform;*
- *a venue for the screening of films;*
- *a venue for community arts performances and theatre groups from outside the area;*
- *a place where markets can be held for the sale of locally produced arts and crafts.*

An image of Murrah Hall devised by local artist Robert Fitzclarance. The Association used it in advertising. ('Murrah Archive', Robyn Levy)

Such ambitions show something of the nature of the social and cultural change developing in this region of the NSW south coast at the time.

The funding submission was unsuccessful, but the Group forged ahead. Between 1981 and 1984 over $2000 was raised from various functions and as much work carried out as possible, with volunteer labour, to meet Council demands. In 1983 Council employees even defended the Group when fears were expressed by state authorities that no progress was being made:

When the hall was visited it was locked which did not permit internal inspection but at least demonstrated that security has been improved. Externally the structure has been painted giving it a much better appearance ... I will again write to you [the Land Board] *before November this year with an update of the present position, and confidently predict that improvements and projected improvements shall be such that your Officer's fears of non-progress shall be invalidated.*

In mid-1985 there was a significant development, the emergence of 'The Murrah Hall Restoration and Preservation Association'. The first surviving minutes of the Association date from 2nd May 1985 and, while it's not clear from documents in the 'Murrah Archive' how all this came about, they saw themselves as emerging from the sub-committee of the Theatre Workshop. What is clear is that, under Association President John McVeity, the new body set about moving things forward as fast as possible to achieve a public entertainment licence, as indicated in a letter to Council in June 1985:

The aim of the group is to bring the hall up to public hall standard as required by the Theatre and Public Halls Act. With this goal achieved we believe that Murrah Hall will be a valuable and extremely practical centre which will be used by a wide cross-section of the community.

An Association constitution was written and the Association sought and, in 1987, achieved incorporation, a process which would protect individual committee members 'from financial responsibility in administering the Association'. This letter also outlined the considerable amount of work that had been undertaken between March 1984 and March 1985 – for example, installation of a new 5,000-gallon water tank, new guttering, a fenced children's play area, underground power lines to an amenities block, repairs to stumps, footings and flooring. Council was reminded that 'all labour is voluntary', 'funds limited and, while 'slow', progress was 'sure". When applying for a Council grant in late 1985 the Association, with much justification, claimed:

As you are possibly aware, the Murrah Hall has, since 1979, been gradually raised from a state of dereliction to its present state which is fast approaching a public hall standard, as set out in the Theatre and Public Halls Act.

McVeity was President of the Association until March 1995, a momentous period for Murrah Hall. Glimpses of that story emerge from his annual reports:

1985/86 – progress on a 'laid down plan of works' which included restumping (a huge job) of 75 per cent of the hall, considerable inside work on the kitchen, rewiring of whole hall, completion of water system as well as fund raising play nights by the Bermagui Theatre Group in Bermagui;

1986/1987 – 'little material progress' but not a cause for concern after previous years big effort, working solidly towards incorporation through their Public Officer in Sydney;

1987/1988 – successful year, much new work especially on approaches to the hall such as front entrance, stairs, handrails, landings, 'the Hall has been painted, all making

a great difference to the appearance, as well as making the entrance completely functional', Association now incorporated, 'we are now on our downhill run towards our goal of licencing ... we should soon be able to invite representatives from the Theatres and Public Halls Section to inspect the Hall'.

It is worth breaking off the McVeity narrative for a moment here to realise that all this was being accomplished by a volunteer committee, all of whom presumably had busy and energy-draining daily lives elsewhere. The surviving minutes of committee meetings for this period, often running to three typewritten foolscap pages, are full of the grind and challenge of simply getting things done. Take, for example, the meeting of 15th October 1987:

Correspondence to deal with, from Bega Men of Trees offering tree planting, from Bega Valley Shire Council requesting report on spending of grant funds, from Theatre and Public Hall's Section (Department of Local Government) enquiring what action had been taken to answer their letter of 21 October 1986 outlining requirements to be met for grant of a temporary licence (this was a complex matter needing comment from the Association on cesspit toilets, a sliding rather than hung side door between the stage and the kitchen, and queries as to whether 'the electric stove constituted a major cooking appliance');

Discussions on finance .... there was just $30 in the account;

Electricity – were they being overcharged?;

Pest control – need for discussions with contractor over how much spraying was needed and letter written accordingly;

Incorporation – a moment of joy as the certificate displayed, the President 'poured champagne and proposed a toast to Andrea Powells (our absent Public Officer) for all her hard work in organising the paper work required by the Public Affairs Commission';

Meeting times – proposal debated as to new meeting times;

Insurance – cover had to be reduced because of lack of funds, queries re cover needed and two committee members delegated to investigate;

Trust Deed – Bega Valley Shire Council 'are the Hall's Trustees' but have produced no actual Deed Certificate, much paperwork about this lost at changeover from Mumbulla Shire Council, need to follow this up with Lands Department as a deed will likely be needed before any granting of entertainment licence;

Work Project – two-week project to begin on 24 October with the President 'donating his annual leave to lead the work', President has been 'talking' to lots of possible helpers and many are expected to turn up, committee members to measure facias for ordering timber and paint for spraying roof;

Electrical – need to install 'an earthed leakage protection circuit breaker for the stage power points', a requirement for the licence, a volunteer developing a 'full electrical blueprint' and will install required switchboard;

Fireplace – to be renovated by a volunteer at no charge, donations of 'solid bricks will be sought;

Newsletter – to be produced to inform community of 'gradual renovation and restoration, with emphasis on recent

improvements' and goal of licencing, more donations in cash and kind sought as well as 'need of more helpers', there will be a mail drop of the Newsletter (presumably by committee members or volunteers) between Bermagui and Tanja;

Party 5 December 1987 – to be held as a fund raiser, 'hopefully with a couple of bands', will need a 'lot of organisation and work';

Post Office Box – to be retained at Bermagui despite shortage of funds;

Public telephone – approach to be made to Telecom 'pointing out there is no phone box between Bermagui and Tanja';

Drama Group – Bermagui Drama group to be asked to move its stored sets and props from entrance to super room as soon as possible, as it constitutes a fire hazard;

Table Tennis – a table tennis table is being donated 'but will have to be attached to the roof when not in use'.

For the reader, longing for exciting moments in the Murrah Hall story, all this may seem mundane, to be quickly passed over, but it is important to get a sense, such as these minutes provide, of the daily, weekly, monthly hard slog and attention to detail required of volunteers in a project such as this. The regulatory demands of local and state authorities simply had to be met and, if the hall was to have a future as a place of entertainment, significant commitment was needed from committee members and other volunteer workers. To return to McVeity's annual reports:

Program for the 100th Anniversary celebrations for Murrah Hall, 12/14 September 2003. ('Murrah Archive', Robyn Levy)

1988/1989 – low point recorded on Easter 1988 when an unknown band hired, need for more publicity as well as entertainment, highlight Hall's 85th birthday, a day/night party, 'a great time being had by all and a financial success', both bands donated their services, in early December 1988 'received 'our Hall Licence' but with proviso that if public entertainment held a toilet block would need to be provided within a year;

1989/1990 – a 'quiet' year, a 'downturn in member energy caused by other commitments and need to concentrate on building toilet block but President felt 'the future of the Hall is extremely promising';

1990/1991 – interest in the Hall indicated by members present who had been coming over 11 years and 'even those living overseas retain an interest', interest in the hall did once fade quickly threatening demolition but 'a few people ensured that the Hall was not bull-dozed', inconceivable that something like that could happen today, 'our dances now a focus' but need to get Hall hired for other functions to meet ongoing expenses;

1991/1992 – successful year, progress on toilet block with mudbricks laid in a big working bee just before Christmas, entertainment of a high standard over the year ranging from rock concerts to the Variety Night and Old Time Dance, hall hire from private parties increased markedly, there have been weddings, singing workshops and regular table tennis, possibility of a new play group forming. The Hall is known throughout the district and elsewhere, both to patrons and musicians, as a special place, and we have many requests from bands to play at the Hall;

1992/1993 – congratulations to all committee members for a 'splendid effort in 1993', also financially a successful year, not a lot of building work done, need to move toilet block closer to completion, could be opened officially in September when the Hall celebrates its 90th birthday, problems of success are people sneaking in to live entertainment without paying, need for greater security fencing and lighting, some bringing BYO drinks which cuts bar profits, Tai Chi, playgroup and table tennis groups using Hall every week;

1993/1994 – well done the committee for their 'support and dedication', Hall's 90th birthday celebration a huge success (of which more below), toilet block completed and perimeter fenced 'which has paid for itself in ensuring that people pay to come in', financial situation a problem as only $42 in account as of 2 March 1994, need to get community to use hall more, a bank loan on top of a generous interest free loan from a benefactor will be needed to pay all outstanding accounts, but 'we are up and running and 'things can only get bigger and better in 94'.

John McVeity resigned the Presidency at the Annual

The birthday cake,100th Anniversary celebrations for Murrah Hall, 12/14 September 2003. ('Murrah Archive', Robyn Levy)

General Meeting in March 1995. The Hall, he believed' 'was in good shape', the all-important toilet block had been completed and dozens of memorable functions held. As expected, McVeity thanked a whole range of people for what they had given to the project but perhaps his personal summary of the long road they had all travelled spoke for them all:

I was inspired by the heritage and the atmosphere of the place as I think most people were, and are. It was enough to inspire all of us to make it happen. We identified the tasks, liaised with the necessary government bodies, fundraising started and the work took place as required. It is very easy to make plans but nothing ever happens if you don't put in the time to see them through. Most plans come to fruition, some are still waiting – perhaps for the new committee.

By 1995 Murrah Hall was not only 'in good shape' but was a place known far and wide as a top venue for live music. Hall Historian Robyn Levy concluded – 'To say that this Hall was rebuilt and restored on rock and roll would not be altogether untrue'. Some of the bands that played there, drawing big attendances at their 'gigs', were remembered, among many others, by Levy – Bondi Cigars, Mighty Reapers, Warumpi Band, Backsliders, Drowning on Dry Land. Then there was the band name that sums up what was happening in this era at the Hall itself – Happenin' Thang.

The annual financial reports leading up to 1995, and for a few years beyond, show the clear rise to dominance of 'gig' income in Hall finances. Most of these returns, however, went straight out to pay the costs of keeping the whole show on the road. The Association also received some of its essential income towards maintenance and site development, starting in the mid-1980s, from Bega Valley Shire Council grants 'for Historical Societies and Public Hall Committees'.

After McVeity's departure things gradually changed. 'Gig' income, a barometer of the Associations willingness to continue running such events, showed a gradual decline towards 1999. According to a report in 1998, from the committee member responsible for administering the Liquor Licence, the average costs of functions suggested that the Association faced a significant financial risk of accumulating losses from function to function unless bar sales were high enough to cover all costs. Questions were raised – 'have we covered the cost of obtaining a licence', 'is someone prepared to take on the responsibility of licensee', 'are we happy with the focus of the hall being on widely advertised rock culture events', and, most tellingly of all, 'is

it all worth it'? There would no doubt have been long and involved discussion among committee members about all this, but the outcome was clear in the President's 1999 annual report:

The direction of the Hall as far as a licensed premises is concerned is over. The cost alone of a licence, security, garbage collection etc. is not economically viable.

The Hall, as President Merrin Cosgrove suggested, was increasingly being used for private functions and could now 'take on a new lease of life in a much broader community feel'. It would seem that the heyday of lots of 'big gigs' was over, although they didn't vanish completely from the Hall's entertainment offerings. The 2002/2003 financial statement, as at 30 June 2003, showed this changed emphasis on other cultural activities, with the most significant income now coming from Hall hire (presumably for private functions but maybe also one or two bands), an art exhibition and sale of artists work, and a grant from Bega Valley Shire Council. At the end of the financial year there was a healthy balance at the bank after all expenses were paid. Could this success and survival of the Hall, now almost 100 years old, without too many 'gig' occasions be accounted for by the visit in 2000 of the Tibetan Gyotu Monks? They 'blessed the hall, and left a plaque and a scarf to commemorate their visit and workshop'.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2003

Bega District News

Bega Bemboka Bermagui Candelo Cobargo Quaama Tathra Wolumla $1.30 including GST

Yuin history in Murrah Hall mural

Schools close as teachers strike

SEVERAL public schools in the Bega district will be closed tomorrow (Wednesday) due to a State-wide strike by teachers over a pay dispute.

Bega, Bega West, Cobargo, Quaama, Tanja and Bermagui Public Schools will be closed.

Bega High School and Bemboka and Candelo Public Schools will be open but with only minimal supervision of pupils.

Tathra Public School declined to provide any details of its arrangements for the day.

AS PART of the Murrah Hall 100th anniversary celebrations over the weekend, a mural by Garry Campbell depicting the history of the Yuin tribe was unveiled on Saturday afternoon.

The central figure in the mural is King Merriman, flanked on the left hand side by Mumbulla Mountain and on the right by Gulaga.

Mr Campbell said Mumbulla Mountain was the men's mountain where boys were initiated and men met.

On the mountain he has painted portraits of his father, George Campbell, Frank Mumbulla and Gubboo Ted Thomas.

Gulaga was a women's mountain, where they went for women's business and often to give birth.

On Gulaga Garry has painted his aunts, Aggie, Pam and Harriet.

Around the mural is a line with circles representing the various campsites and near those circles are depicted the animals and seafood eaten at those sites.

Various Bermagui Public School and Narooma High School students helped Garry with the animals and seafood representations.

They were Alauna Harris, Sian Wong, Hana Matsuoka-Renton, Ada Campbell and Elouise Sherwin-Russell.

Pauleen Harris and Penny Jones also helped Garry with the mural.

Funding came from Regional Arts NSW and Country Area Support Program grants.

A full report on the Murrah Hall centenary celebrations will appear in our Friday edition.

Garry Campbell identifies the people in his mural which was unveiled as part of the Murrah Hall 100th anniversary.

The unveiling of the Murrah Hall mural, depicting the story of the Yuin people, at the 100th Anniversary celebrations for Murrah Hall. It was front page news. ('Murrah Archive', Robyn Levy)

Whatever its effect, the monks presence at the Murrah would have astonished all those ministers of religion who held Christian services in the Hall back in the 1920s and 1930s. It would also have astonished the energetic country and western dancers of the 1940s and 1950s.

What would have amazed them even more was what turned out to be the Hall's biggest event and earner in the 2000/2001 financial year – a sell-out performance on 19th August 2000 by Wollongong's Gay and Lesbian Solidarity Choir accompanied by local choirs Lotus, Bega Koori Women and an act calling itself Medieval Madness. Billed as 'riveting choral talent', The Gay and Lesbian Choir had established a big reputation in Sydney and southern NSW. Pauline Harris' President's report caught the mood of the night:

Whether it was the spiritual fervour of the Bega Koori Women, freedom songs of Lotus Women's Choir, a gyrating pregnant conductor, the delights of Medieval Madness or the consciousness-raising of the Wollongong Gay and Lesbian Choir, this concert packed in the value.

Cultural diversity and change had definitely come to Murrah Hall.

Between 1978 and 2003 a battalion of dedicated volunteer fetchers and carriers, cleaners, minute keepers, tradesmen, dance promoters, cooks, door attendants, ticket sellers, newsletter editors and committee persons rescued a deserted, and potentially derelict, small rural community building, the Murrah Hall, from potential destruction. This singular achievement was celebrated in two of the biggest events ever held at the Murrah, events which would have been recalled and remembered for many years by all who participated and attended – the marking of the Hall's 90th and 100th anniversaries in 1993 and 2003.

The 1993 celebrations were noteworthy for another reason, for a century had passed since the Murrah settlers had, in the early 1890s, began that process of community action and pressure which led to the erection of their public school, river bridge and finally, in 1903, their public hall.

It would require a whole article in itself to cover adequately the range of the programs put together by the Association for these two anniversaries. In 1993 Robyn Levy took a long, long paragraph to summarise what would be on offer to 'capture the historic importance of the 90th birthday' - 'a huge weekend of NON-STOP entertainment' on Saturday 11 and Sunday 12 September, the exact 90th anniversary of the Hall's opening. There were fireworks, all-day market stalls with local pottery, leatherwork, cast iron, 'stunning hand-made Koori artefacts from Wallaga Lake', and a seemingly endless array of home-baked foodstuffs with an international flavour of fare from Indonesia and Mexico. Children were kept involved by a roving 'Spruiker' with games. Recalling the good old days at the Hall there was a Euchre tournament and local children performing 'a statue-like presentation of the many stages of the Hall history as told by local historians'. At the core of proceedings were the bands playing throughout the day – to name but a handful, Violet Femmes, The Spinners, The Wilts, the Murray Douch Orchestra, and legendary Australian jazz singer Pat Thompson who was then living in Bermagui.

Most importantly, the Association was aware of the depth and wealth of local memory at the Murrah represented by older surviving residents of the area a number of whom

attended the weekend. Some were interviewed and recorded by Robyn Levy and these tapes are now a vital part of the 'Murrah Archive'. And, what must have delighted all those volunteers who put in hours of free labour, was the opening by local Bega Valley Shire Councillor Jack Miller of the finally completed toilets.

Ten years later they did it all again, only differently.

For the more significant 100th birthday there was a series of warm-up events – an art exhibition, a health and healing day, a classical music prom and picnic afternoon and, recalling the days of country music at the Hall, a 'Country Music Day' with Murray Douch, a man from the Murrah if ever there was one, and his 'marvellous accordion'. By August 2003 a new 'Murrah Hall Cookbook' was in view spanning 'those hundred years with classic recipes handed down from local "old timers" to the more contemporary dishes'.

Over the weekend itself – Friday 12th to Sunday 14th September – while bands provided the expected entertainment there was more emphasis this time on the Hall's history, and indeed on a history stretching back many thousands of years before the arrival of European settlers at the Murrah.

The events kicked off on the Friday with an 'Old Time Ball ... just like they had 100 years ago' featuring Murray Douch and his Orchestra, while throughout the weekend on display was the Murrah Hall archive collection featuring images and historical documents, some stretching back into Murrah settler history of the last third of the 19th century. History was again the focus on the weekend's final big gathering billed as a Family Day with games for kids which recalled the festivities at the Hall's opening in 1903 – a ladies nail-driving competition, a barefoot race and a tug of war.

Looking back on it all now, however, there was one event of great significance over that weekend remembering, honouring and celebrating Murrah's past as represented by the building and survival of the Murrah Hall. On Saturday 13th September 2003, local Koori artist and elder Gary Campbell unveiled his mural depicting the story of the local Yuin people, a story taking his audience back into a time far beyond settler history into 'The Dreaming'. Campbell was assisted in his storytelling by students from Bermagui Primary School who enacted a 'Retelling of Local Aboriginal Creation'. Three years after 300,000 people had walked over Sydney Harbour Bridge to show their support for the ongoing process of Aboriginal reconciliation, that process had found its way, almost naturally, into the century-old story of Murrah Hall.

The 'Murrah Archive'

The three articles about Murrah Hall in recent issues of *Recollections* have all drawn heavily on the 'Murrah Archive'. This is a series of items collected and collated by Robyn Levy of Bermagui who, in the 1980s held the position of Secretary to the Murrah Hall Restoration and Preservation Association. Robyn subsequently became the Hall's 'Historian'. The material was assembled in the main for two significant commemorative occasions held at the Hall – the 90th (1993) and 100th (2003) anniversary of the opening of Murrah Hall.

While some of the material in the 'Archive' has been referred to in the *Recollections* articles, it is worth listing the main items:

- A series of taped interviews conducted by Robyn Levy with elderly residents, and ex-residents, of the Murrah in 1993 for the 90th anniversary celebrations;
- Minutes both photocopied and original of 1902/1912 Murrah Progress Association; 1955/1970 no official name cited but created by committee of Murrah residents running events at the Hall; 1979/1985 Bermagui Theatre Workshop Sub-Committee responsible for Murrah Hall; 1985 to c.2011 Murrah Hall Restoration and Preservation Association;
- Administrative records, very largely but not exclusively, of the Murrah Hall Restoration and Preservation Association for the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s;
- Copies of original documents relating to Murrah history researched and copied by Robyn Levy for the 100th anniversary. These were put on display at the Hall for the anniversary weekend;
- Photographs, and scans of photographs, of events at Murrah Hall and of general life at the Murrah, including images of many local residents between c.1910 and 1950;
- Colour photographs of events at Murrah Hall in the 1980s and 1990s;
- A collection of material relating to the events leading up to and including the 100th anniversary celebrations at Murrah Hall;
- Individual pieces about the history of Murrah Hall written by Robyn Levy and used to promote the story of the Hall.

Robyn is custodian of the Archive and very conscious of its value as a local resource. While, at one level, it is an essential record of the administration of the Hall, the contents are also a significant record of life at the Murrah and would be invaluable in writing the social history of the area. As has been shown in the three articles about the Hall, the material in the 'Murrah Archive' links with a wealth of family and local sources, especially perhaps the essential complementary and explanatory information to be found in Bega district newspapers. It is a reasonable assumption that the records of the Bega Valley Shire Council, and whatever survives of its predecessor, Mumbulla Shire Council, would also contain significant records about Murrah Hall but also the links between the Hall and many aspects of community and farm life at the Murrah.

The very existence of the 'Murrah Archive' raises the question as to what has survived of similar material relating to the other local public halls and institutes throughout the Bega Valley Shire Council area. Currently the Shire, on its website, lists 23 public 'venues for hire 18 of which (Murrah among them) are described as a 'Hall'. These are almost certainly buildings that, like the Murrah Hall, were erected by local communities and each would have its own particular community story to tell. The richness of that story is suggested by what has emerged from the 'Murrah Archive' allowing this writer to attempt something of the Hall's story, and its connection with the wider Murrah and Bermagui community over a whole century.

The writer is very grateful to Robyn Levy for allowing him unfettered access to these records. Robyn is determined to ensure the survival of the 'Murrah Archive' and we can be confident that this unique source, so suggestive of the experiences of those who were associated with Murrah Hall from 1903 to 2003, will be around for others to consult for the foreseeable future.

(A feature film was also produced by Hiromi Matsuoka and David Arvind Condon about the Murrah Hall's 90th anniversary celebrations in 1993. South Coast History Society is hoping to screen this on a future occasion.)

William Rixon – the District's Leading Businessman

When William Rixon died in late 1916, his funeral procession extended for more a mile and included over 100 motor cars, plus horsemen and pedestrians. '*Friends had come from Bombala, Nimetybelle, Bimbooka, Cobargo, Pambula, Moruya, and other distant centres, to testify to the respect in which the deceased was held.*' As the South Coast's leading businessman and a noted sportsman, he was well-known and highly-respected throughout the area south from Milton to the Victorian border...and even well beyond:

The Lachlander and Condobolin and Western Districts Recorder noted his death by observing (on 3.1.1917) '*He was a man of iron will, yet with a heart of the kindest nature. His portly personage has gone for ever, but his memory will live on green in the hearts of his many, many friends.*'

William Rixon's Grave in Bega Cemetery

William Rixon was born in 1844 at Taylors Flat (now Cathcart) before he and his parents moved to Eden where he grew up. At age 15 he was 'swinging a pick and shovel' on the Nerrigundah goldfields. He then established a horse-drawn coach service linking Bega, Tathra and Merimbula, before establishing himself as a Bega-based auctioneer. From 1872 to 1895 his business operated as a partnership with Charles Macleod (Rixon was the salesman, Macleod looked after the office), and thereafter as William Rixon Pty Ltd.

In the late 1870s Rixon and Macleod erected cattle years on the corner of Carp and Gipps Sts in Bega where they auctioned livestock and started to sell land.

Later, his office was relocated to 162 Carp Street – right in the centre of Bega – and it (or, more accurately, its verandah) became the gathering place for locals (or, more accurately, local men) to share news and gossip. These men collectively became known as the Bags Mob – the bags of produce on the verandah providing them with convenient seats. During World War I, for example, soldiers fighting on the Western Front would send letters that were simply addressed to 'The Bags Mob, Carp St, Bega' and these would be read out to those in attendance.

Many land subdivisions in Bega, Cobargo, Bemboka, Candelo, Quaama, Eden, Wolumla and Pambula were marketed through Rixon and Macleod or William Rixon Pty Ltd.

Rixon himself developed a reputation for straight dealing, uprightness and strict integrity. But he was also generous – providing financial assistance to many struggling settlers, to the extent that it was often said of him that 'he carried the district on his back.'

He was also renowned for his punctuality. If he made an appointment, no matter the time or place, he was there to the minute; and he held any man who failed to be similarly punctual as worthless.

He was a stalwart of St. John's Church of England in Bega

The Bags Mob – William Rixon standing next to post in centre

(he made a point of always being back in Bega so he could attend Sunday services) and gave generously to the Church.

Rixon, though, was just as well known for his love of horse racing. He was widely known as a breeder and trainer (one of his mares won the first Federal City Cup – now presumably the Canberra Cup), and for his skill in handling horses.

Although he was a racing man, William Rixon was not a betting man. Ironically, though, it was a bet that probably made him more widely-known than did any other act in his life:

One evening in 1882 he was praising his two buggy horses — Jack and Donovan — for some journey they had recently undertaken when Ben Lipscombe, a well-known Monaro solicitor, scoffed at his story and, in the presence of many witnesses, bet Rixon £50 to drive the horses from Bega to Bombala in under five hours. Rixon duly accepted the challenge.

William Rixon. Photo courtesy Bega Pioneers' Museum

Rixon carefully prepared for the event with the horses being driven up Tanja Mountain (Dr George Mountain) daily for some weeks. The Bega-Bombala route was actually 52 miles in length, including a rise of 1,700ft in 3 miles up Tantawanglo Mountain, then a drop of 1,200ft, followed by another rise to 2,300ft over the next five miles.

Rixon stationed men at various points with along the route with buckets of water to splash over the horses as they passed. And, it was reported, Rixon never removed his whip from its socket from the start to the finish of the journey because he would sooner lose the bet than flog his horses.

The police at Bombala evidently got wind of his drive, and '*rode out nearly as far as the mountain top to meet him, expecting to encounter a man beating a pair of jaded beasts in a cruel effort to accomplish the impossible. About six miles out they met a gentleman sitting easily in his Abbott and keeping a tight rein on a pair of dark bays, who were swinging along at spanking pace, quite fresh apparently. Never dreaming it was Rixon, they shouted as he passed — 'Have you seen a man galloping a pair of horses up the mountain?' "Yes," he yelled; "keep on as you are going and you may meet him." They kept on for some miles and met Rixon – but that was after they returned to Bombala the same evening having ridden about 20 miles altogether in an attempt to get evidence for a prosecution on a charge of cruelty to animals.*'

Rixon completed the journey in 4½ hours, easily winning the bet…then drove the horses home the next day.

Rixon married when he was 24 years old. His wife, Agnes, was 17 (she was the step-daughter of John Malcolm, one of Bega's most renowned builders). They were to have 14 children, two of whom died when just one year old.

Sources: "*A Family Began with 'Love'* by Margaret Cooper; *Southern Star*, 26.12.1916, *The Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, 19.1.1917.

HISTORIES

Argyle: The Impossible Story of Australian Diamonds

by Stuart Kells

In its 37-year life, the Argyle Diamond Mine in the Kimberley region of Western Australia (the mine closed in November 2020) yielded 865 million carats (173 tonnes) of rough diamonds. It became the fourth largest diamond-producing mine in the world by volume.

It's a miracle that this exceptionally rich diamond deposit was ever discovered, and an even greater miracle that the mine was ever opened. There were just so many incredibly complex hoops that those looking for diamonds and then those working to open a mine had to jump through.

'*Argyle: The Impossible Story of Australian Diamonds*' chronicles the seemingly-endless line of challenges that were faced, and it details how each of them was overcome. The result is some absolutely fascinating reading.

Towards the end of the book there is a summary of the Argyle project's firsts and innovations:

'*The discovery of diamonds in the Kimberleys was the result of a ten-year search that touched every drainage system in the region. The field crews made 35,000 helicopter take-offs and landings. One find led to another…the methodical approach over a vast area is why AK1* [the deposit that became the Argyle Mine] *was discovered and the difference in results between Ashton* [the exploration company] *and De Beers is telling.*

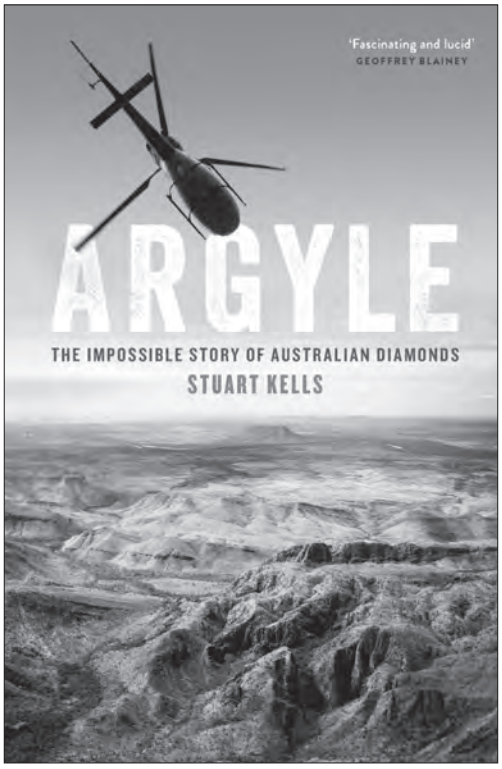
Notwithstanding hundreds of millions of dollars spent exploring, De Beers failed to find a commercial deposit in the southern continent…[Ashton] *was the first venture to explore systematically and with geologists. De Beers instead used helicopter pilots and field assistants to collect samples. This probably accounted for much of their failure in the Kimberley. Having geologists in the field teams made a big difference…*

At the beginning of mine operation, Argyle was slated to yield 20 to 25 million carats a year, making it the world's biggest producer, singlehandedly eclipsing De Beers' South African mines. To get a sense of the scale of the output: in just four days in 1989, Argyle produced more diamonds than the Copeton and Bingara fields [in NSW] *produced in their best forty years. The initial estimates of Argyle's grades and yields were exceptionally accurate. Through a series of investments, output was increased until, in the 1990s, Argyle produced up to 40 million carats per year. That's around 8 tonnes of diamonds or 40 per cent of world production…*

The Argyle profit royalty delivered more than $1 billion to the state of Western Australia. At the height of mine production and sales, gross returns were between 30 and 40 per cent. The Ashton name, haphazardly selected from a

mining map, became famous in Australian business history.

Argyle was more than just a mine. It brought a new industry to Australia and changed the world diamond market. Hundreds of Australians were trained as diamond sorters. Thousands of people worked in the development and operation of the mine. Millions of carats of Australian diamonds were sold through Antwerp and processed in India. The venture established global sales channels for champagne and cognac diamonds. Regular tenders for Argyle pinks fed demand for Argyle's signature stone, and established a powerful Australian brand.



The history of Argyle is a collage of firsts and biggests and bests: the first Kimberley diamond search report, the unprecedented sampling program, the biggest diamond laboratory in Australia, the first large-scale helicopter sampling with geologists, the first time diamonds were found in lamproite, the first time chromite was used as an indicator mineral for diamonds, Australia's first mineable diamond pipe, the first external financing of a diamond mine, the first Australian diamond mine, the first Australian member of [De Beers'] *Central Selling Organization, the world's leading producer of rare and valuable pinks.*

The Argyle project was built on a collection of innovations – in searching, sample analysis, deposit assessment and mineral extraction. And then in sales and distribution…the partners broke new ground in mine logistics and workforce management, including Fly-In Fly-Out commuting, now a pillar of Australian mining. Other innovations were made in mining law and regulation. Argyle is a case study in how matters of business and commerce are inextricably intertwined with matters of politics and government. The Argyle story is a series of challenges and negotiations, with breakthroughs and lessons at every stage.'

But it is the improbable stories relating to each of these firsts and innovations that makes this book so riveting. These include multiple examples of sheer good luck (two mining leases held by others expired just at the right time, enabling the venture to immediately peg the areas they needed to exploit their [until then, totally secret] diamond finds; an unfriendly Australian government and an unsupportive State government were, fortuitously, swept from power and succeeded by more favourably-disposed governments at critical times for the venture), to the downright scandalous (the Western Australian Brian Burke-led government extorted $50-million from the company simply because there was no need for the company to build a township near the mine – and what it then did with this windfall is absolutely astonishing [a clue: Alan Bond's bank balance increased at that same time by more than $40 million!]), to the totally bizarre (in 1982 the venture was experiencing severe difficulties raising finance to build the mine and a Bill Mulligan of Chase Manhattan bank was championing the venture's cause. At one stage he asked Sir Leslie Froggatt, chair of Ashton Mining, *'If we get this deal done, can you get me a knighthood?' 'Yes' Froggatt replied. 'If you do this deal, you will be a knight'*. Fast forward to a dinner hosted by Ashton Mining in 1984 in Perth, celebrating having secured the necessary finance for the mine: '*Sir Leslie Froggatt took the podium. 'Will Bill Mulligan please come up?' he said. Mulligan came up. 'Kneel before me,' Froggatt said. Then he brought out a sword and touched Milligan's shoulders with it. Remembering his promise to Mulligan, he'd bought a knighthood, along with a sash and a crest and other regalia from the breakaway Hutt River Province. 'Arise' he said. 'Sir William of the Hutt River Province*.').

So, is '*Argyle: The Impossible Story of Australian Diamonds*' worth reading? ABSOLUTELY. And, as a result of reading the book, would I rush out and buy any 'valuable, rare' Argyle champagne and cognac diamonds? ABSOLUTELY NOT, having discovered that the vast quantities of them are really of so little value that they are now also embedded in Argyle's '*diamondiferous runway and in the diamond-studded highway*' leading to the Argyle mine!

Review by Peter Lacey

'*Argyle: The Impossible Story of Australian Diamonds*' is available in paperback from around $24.50.

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