



## Robbie Donkin

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*Born in Brighton, Melbourne, in 1927, Robbie has been a bricklayer all his working life. He is a remarkably fit-looking man. When he was young he was a professional boxer, and later he became an award-winning ballroom dancer - a pastime he still pursues actively. He has been married twice and has lived on the Central Coast of NSW for most of his adult life.*

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I was born in Brighton, a suburb of Melbourne in 1927. I can't remember much before I was about four - my mother and father moved around a bit. My father was in the building trade - he did anything, actually, but he was mainly in the building trade. He was a hard working man - he worked seven days a week.

We moved out to a little place called Bayswater about 1930-31. I can just remember the highlights. I can remember almost drowning in a waterhole when I was four. My mother was expecting another baby, and I was playing with my sister on the banks of this dam. We were throwing rocks in, and I didn't let mine go, and I went in. My sister yelled out, and my mother, who was having a bath in an old tin bath in the shed where we lived, came out with only a towel around her and jumped in and pulled me out. I was almost gone. I can still remember it, right to this day. I brought up a lot of water. But she couldn't get out of the hole because it was too steep and the lady from the next house brought over a box but she still couldn't get out, so they had to get her a ladder from another house further away. Anyway, they finally got her out. That night she had my brother John.

My father was on the dole in those days - on the "sustenance" from the government. You didn't get money - you only got coupons. You'd go up to the

grocer's shop with coupons and the butcher's shop with coupons. But in those days there were plenty of potatoes, plenty of rabbits, plenty of blackberries, mushrooms - and we always had an old cow. (I was one of thirteen children, incidentally. Only ten survived, and there's only about four or five of us now.) When the Depression was finishing and jobs started to get a bit easier to find my father got a few jobs round about 1937. But we had to do many a moonlight flit - you know what a moonlight flit is: it's when you couldn't pay the six shillings a week for your rent and during the night your father and mother would put you on the back of the horse and cart and you'd wake up three or four miles away in another town in another house.

I started school when I was about five and a half. We had no power. It was kerosene lamps and candles. As soon as it got dark you blew the candle out and went to bed. One of the houses we lived in had a dirt floor. Not many clothes - we always had hand-me-downs, and not much food. I can remember my mother crying because we had no food. She had long hair, and in sheer desperation she sold her hair to the barber - for two shillings. I couldn't recognise her when she came home. Anyway, after many moves, we moved to a place called Don Vale, where we had another old dump. I went to the public school there. Lots of the kids there came from underprivileged families too. My father had a job then - not much money, of course (I think it was about three pound ten a week) but we survived. We had plenty of rabbits and a couple of cows by then. And everybody had horses - that was our main form of transport. We always had dogs, and we had ferrets for rabbiting. An old chap over the gully taught me how to make rabbit nets from hand-woven twine - I can still do it. He also told me many yarns about the Kelly Gang - (he was about 75 when he was telling me these wonderful stories). He lived in the Beechworth area when he was a young man and Ned Kelly soon became my hero. I later visited Glen Rowan and probably walked close to where he fell. Part of the old inn was still standing. The rail line has shifted a little since then and the highway has changed the little town - so have the facts!

We used to go out and get bundles of rabbits in those days. We never ever went hungry but we ate a lot of rabbit. My mother always had stews, and we had rabbit stews, and baked rabbit and boiled rabbit, and fricassees. About twice a year, if we were lucky, we got a ride into the city on the train. It was an all day event, and sometimes in the summer time we'd go to St Kilda beach, which was an all day journey there and back with just a few hours on the beach. After we left Don Vale we shifted out to Healesville. They bought a run-down property out there. My father was always keen on having cattle. We always had a dozen cows there, and some calves - and we've *always* had chooks and ducks. So we had plenty of eggs and milk and rabbits and mushrooms and blackberries. We cooked on a fuel stove. Still no power. I never saw electricity in a house we lived in till I was ten or eleven. We had a chip heater in the bathroom, and if you had one of those you were wealthy. When I was younger we had an old tin bath in the laundry, which was probably fifty feet from the house. You had to light the copper, heat the water, then bucket it into the bath. With thirteen kids we'd use the same water a lot because we only had a couple of water tanks. In the dry weather we had to cart the water for the chooks and that up from the creek.

When I tell my kids about how hard things were they think I'm joking. Even going to school, if you didn't have enough money to buy pencils and things, you always felt intimidated. We were poor until after the war when we became working class. Anyone who had a large family before the war were a poor family. I didn't think this meant that there was anything unfair about the way things were - it was just

how life was, you know. If you were in that bracket, then too bad. We never had any luxuries. Flock mattresses on the beds and a few old blankets. In the winter I used to let the dogs in to sleep on the bed to keep me warm. We used to put newspapers between the blankets. When you look at how people live today - the things they waste! In those days we didn't waste *anything*. You'd put it aside and keep it in case it came in handy - even if you never used it. I'm still that way. I've got things down there in the shed that my father had. But you did everything by hand, and time was no consideration. If you needed a handle for a shovel you made it yourself with a spokeshave. My father used to use a piece of spotted gum I think it was. You never bought anything if you could make it or find it. He might have spent three or four hours making a shovel handle, but at least it didn't cost him any money. Often he had nothing to do anyway if he couldn't find any work.

The schoolteachers were very hard, very strict on you. Many many days I got six of the best - I probably deserved them, but they were hard and vicious in those days. You usually got it on the hands, but I can remember that in First Class they made you bend down and spanked you on the bum. The girls had to bend down. Some of the women used to make them pull their pants down, but there were a few complaints about that and it soon stopped. But schooldays in those days you feared your teacher. If you saw your teacher coming towards you, you'd get frightened.

Then the war started and my father joined the army because he would be better off. He was one of the first from the area to join up - in 1939. If I remember rightly he was in the 2nd 24th Engineers in the Ninth Divvy, and they went everywhere. They went to Crete and Greece, and all those places. Anyway, after the war things started to get pretty good but there was still rationing - food, and petrol, and tobacco, which didn't worry us because we were a non-smoking, non-drinking family. It's not that we were a religious family - on the contrary. I suppose it was because we just couldn't afford it. Ladies in those days didn't smoke anyway - only the men smoked. It was definitely a man's world in those days. Then, just before the end of the war I joined the navy. I had three years and eight months in the navy. There's a lot of funny stories in the navy of course, just being a typical sailor.

I remember being slightly concerned - a bit scared, maybe! - by the size of the seas south of Tasmania. A few weeks later we lost two seamen over the side - we couldn't find them. But that's part of history I suppose.

Actually, before I went into the navy I took up bricklaying with an old chap who used to take me to work on a Saturday. He used to give me two shillings to work all day with him, carrying bricks and mixing mortar, and then I slowly got on the trowel. Then after I left school (I left school at fourteen) he gave me a job. It was five and a half days a week. And he was a miserable old bloke, too. You weren't allowed to talk. You had to call him Mr Stringer, and even his two sons (they were only in their early twenties) I had to call Mister. One day the old fellow wasn't on the job and Jack, one of his sons said to me, "When Dad's not around you don't have to call me Mister. Call me Jack." But it was very hard to call him Jack.

We weren't very well-educated people - we just went to public schools, then I did two years at tech. The thing was then: as soon as you're old enough, get out and get a job and support yourself and the family. So I got one pound a week. I paid ninepence tax - they gave you the tax stamps in your pay envelope and you had to have a book to put them in so you could send them in at the end of the year. I

gave my mother ten shillings, which left me with nine and threepence after I'd paid tax. I used to go to a dance and to the pictures once a week, and I'd buy a bag of chaff for my horse about every ten days. I used to ride my horse up to the station, take the bridle off it and let it go home.

I decided I'd do a bit of travelling around after I got out of the navy and went back to bricklaying, so I just bummed around from state to state laying bricks. (I was in my very early twenties at this stage.) But I should have mentioned that prior to this I'd realised that there was money in boxing. I was always considered a good fighter when I went to school because I had to fight to get everything, so at sixteen and a half they talked me into going in to the West Melbourne Stadium. I'd never had a proper boxing lesson in my life, only some old bloke who taught me a few things up the back of the old barber shop. Not surprisingly I got hell bashed out of me for three rounds, so I decided it was time to learn and I went to a proper feller and I did very well. I finished up having 27 professional fights, both before and after I was in the navy. During my naval service I was still keen on boxing and I won the Inter-Services Championship in 1947 in the Featherweight Division. Then I came out of the navy and had a few more fights in the West Melbourne Stadium. I think I won about 23 altogether. I was doing all right.

It wasn't just for trophies. I got paid. If you got to the top you might get up to two hundred pounds a bout, but if you were only in the preliminary bouts you only got a pound for a four-rounder. It goes up with the number of rounds. I fought a ten rounder and I got twelve pound ten. It's a lot of hard work and a lot of pain and suffering, but still, it was all right and I enjoyed it. I had a few cut eyes and things, but I was a boxer, not a fighter. I believed in hitting and letting them miss. You don't just go in there, because any mug can get in there and trade punches. The crowd might like it, but my philosophy was "hit and not be hit".

But you didn't get many fights in those days. You'd be lucky to get five fights a year. You could get plenty of minor fights, if you wanted to travel up in the country. As a matter of fact I went away with Harry Johns. He had a boxing troupe, like Sharman's, and we went up to Swan Hill. I was a G - that's the guy that's planted in the crowd, and they had a bloke there about my size and I had to fight him. They were going to pay me about five pounds a week or something. You'd get into the tent and there'd be sawdust on the floor. Sometimes they'd have a bit of a rope and sometimes the people just got around in a ring. Anyway, I only stayed there one and a half days. You were only fed on stew and... ah, I caught the train back - I wasn't going to be in that. You had to fight twice a day, and although he promised me five pound I got nothing. I never even got my fare back. So that was no good.

Then I decided that I'd go up to my sister who lived at Coonabarabran on a farm, and help them with the wheat. I was playing football at the time, Australian Rules, which is a great game. And I was always a keen ballroom dancer too - I used to love to go to the dances, and when I left Coonabarabran, on the way back down here I stopped at Terrigal and thought it was a wonderful place, so I dug my boots in here and have never really shifted in 43 years.

I used to go to Sydney for lessons in ballroom dancing. I'm still dancing. I run a dance at the League's Club once a month and I teach on a Wednesday night. I do a lot of dancing and I enjoy life. I don't smoke or drink. I love fishing, I love surfing - I've got two grown up boys who are still keen surfers. I have four children (I remarried) and eight grandchildren. My second wife is my dancing partner and we go out and do exhibitions for Senior Citizens Clubs.

But getting back to my father and the horse and sulky days - we used to pick blackberries. There was an abundance of blackberries in those days. We'd sit on the side of the road and try to sell them. I think it was tuppence a billycan. You'd have a kerosene tin full of them and you'd dip them out. People who had a bit of money would go past and some would buy them. And my father used to go into the city to Balaclava and around that way once a week. He'd leave in the dark and get home in the dark on a horse and jinker. He used to sell a few clothes props. He used to get ninepence each for them. He'd sell a few of those, and take some blackberries in too and a few pairs of rabbits and we'd be right for another week. I can remember those days vividly, and it was a much harder life then.

My father was a hard taskmaster - he wouldn't let you have any spare time. If you stood still he'd slap a coat of paint on you. When I was a schoolkid my father managed to get hold of a bit of land. My auntie had a bit of money and she staked us - she financed mum and dad to buy this five or so acres, and we had to fence it. Every afternoon after school I had to dig a posthole, and by god if that post hole wasn't dug I was in trouble. But I was smart. I used to half dig the hole, then go down to the creek and get a bucket of water and tip it into the hole to soften it up for the next day. That's how I got through it. And if it was in a bit of a hollow I'd bank the dirt up so I didn't have to dig as deep.

I was the oldest son, and there was four years difference between me and the next brother so I copped it all. I'd rate my father as being a cruel, hard man. There was no love there. He'd never dream of putting his arm around any of his kids and telling them he loved them - though not many fathers did then. You were just a kid - a mouth to feed - and the sooner you could get a job to help support yourself and the family the better. There wasn't much birth control about then, I suppose. Six in a family was more or less usual, and Catholic people often had thirteen or fourteen.

People say big families are happy, but big families are not happy, there are always arguments and fighting amongst the kiddies. There were five girls and five boys, and I was number four. Three others didn't survive. Infant mortality was much higher in those days. If you got whooping cough it was history. If you got appendicitis it was touch and go, and if you got pneumonia... And they used to use things like those mustard plasters that burnt your skin. But that was the way of living in those days.

I see my remaining brothers and sisters these days maybe once a year. We're not what you'd call close. The ones born before me are all dead now, and my mother had another two children after I left home at seventeen to join the navy. I've only really got to know them a bit in recent years. I never saw them for the first nine years of their lives because I never went back home during that time. I was glad to get out of home and go to work. Everything was such a struggle at home, but once I started work I could buy myself a few clothes and things like that.

Things were very tough on women then. Today women have got more freedom. I don't believe in suppressing a woman, but I think they were suppressed in those days. They were married and that's it. They had to put up with whatever the husband dealt out. Divorces were very rare. If a woman was divorced people in the district would avoid her. It was socially disapproved. And if a woman smoked, she'd do it behind closed doors. And blokes would think nothing of giving their

wife a backhander if she answered him back. In those times women were really just slaves, and they had to put up with it.

We used to do jobs as kids. My brother did a paper round, and we used to help pick fruit in the orchards on the weekends when we got a bit older. I think we got two bob a day. My sisters always did housework and went and helped other women in their houses - the more wealthy people in the town. We lived a fair way out of town. The money we earned we kept. When we got older we might use it to buy a shirt or something, but when we were younger, well a shilling wasn't very much, really. You could buy a ferret for two and six. I went to work for a day and a half to buy a ferret. I used to help a bloke on a horse and cart pick the fruit and pick up the fruit cases and take them up to the cold store.

I was laying bricks for seven pound a week when I was an adult. Then it went up to ten. You had to be in a union, especially when you were working for the big companies though I never saw a union guy in my life, but then if you left the district you didn't bother to resign the way you're supposed to - you started paying your dues again when you went onto the next job. The dues weren't much - not like today.

But things were hard. You'd go onto a job as a bricklayer and you weren't allowed to talk unless it was short and related to the job. You just laid bricks. There was no rolling of smokes - you had to roll them before you started work. There was no getting down off the scaffold for smoko like they do today. You'd sit on a pile of bricks and along would come the billy boy and you'd have a cup of tea and as soon as you were finished, (only about three or four minutes) you'd start again. And I tell you what, I put in some hard days. Often my hands would be bleeding from the wet bricks and the cold. In those days your work was the most important thing in your life. If you didn't have a job you didn't function, whereas today it's the other way around.

I enjoy growing vegetables, too. In my childhood everyone had a veggie garden. Today nobody grows vegetables. Very few people would know how to grow a bunch of spinach. They've got more money now and it's nothing to them. They'll go in and buy a CD and that's \$25. You couldn't do that before. If you had a gramophone or a wireless or a fridge when I was a kid, then you were well-off. We used to have a Coolgardie Safe instead of a fridge. If the blowflies got in and blew the meat you just washed it off with a bit of vinegar and away you went. They were just hard times for everybody - unless you were in the upper crust with the white collar workers. If you had a job you were right, but if your father was one of the more unfortunate ones during the Depression that didn't have a job... They say the Depression was over by 1932, but it took longer than that for things to really pick up. Your job was your main thing. Many people were in debt and had to start off from scratch. Then the war came and things got a little bit better.

During the Depression a lot of the guys used to work on the roads and you'd see hundreds of men all with picks and shovels digging trenches or whatever - at least half a mile of men. Whereas today you'd see two back-hoes and about fourteen men standing there watching it. Well - they cleared Australia by hand, didn't they? We never bought any wood because there was always plenty of wood around, but it was all cut by crosscut saw. When my father was away my mother and I used to cut it that way. We had an old handcart and we'd gather the wood on that. We always had about six months wood ahead of us. It was the same for everyone in the area where I lived. They all had fuel stoves, but they had gas in the cities and I can always remember going to my grandmother's and

being amazed to see her turn this thing on, light a match, and fire would come up. I could never understand it. But I was only about six then. But my grandparents were only working class people too. He was a plumber.

We knew there were people who weren't poor like us, and I envied them for all the things they had that we didn't, but I wouldn't say I resented them. There were so many people in the same boat as us we just accepted our poorness as a way of life. When my father was out of work and "on relief" he might go away for a week working on the roads, then be home for a week, and occasionally he'd get an odd job here and there. In those days they made work for people to do in return for the dole, which is what I think they should do today, because today people get it too easy - they seem to think that the system owes them a living, and that's wrong. I've never bludged on the country in my life. I've always been willing to work.

Politics wasn't discussed at home as we grew up. There was no wireless, no television - all you got was out of the papers, and we never bought papers. You'd know if there was an election on because you'd see the newspaper headlines or read signs on shed walls and that sort of thing. The Communist Party was quite strong in the construction industry, but they weren't like the Russian Communists. Here they were just blokes who wanted the working man to have a better go, and they wanted the great big multi-nationals to share some of their wealth, which is not a bad idea, really. You read about these people who can spend half a million on their daughter's wedding - I reckon to get that much money you must be over the top somewhere, and you've got to be pretty ruthless.

After the Depression began to lift, the only thing that got the average person back on his feet were the war years. Things flourished then - there was plenty of work, plenty of overtime. My father joined up in 1939 because he had a lot of kids, and he was going to be a lot better off in the army. Once he'd joined up, my mother was getting as much paid to her for the children as he used to make in a week. We got all the benefits then - we got our school stuff given to us for nothing. Just before the Depression ended they used to send an old truck full of old boots and shoes to the school, and anyone whose father was on the dole or the relief got a pair. And if they didn't fit you, well too bad. That was at Bayswater. I can still see the big pile of boots. During the 30s, if you had a pair of sandshoes you were lucky.

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I've been a bricklayer all my life. I suppose I've laid bricks for over fifty years of my life. As a job, not all that much about it has changed over the years, though there've been some changes in the equipment that you use. Now they've got hoists, of course, and better wheelbarrows, (we used to have steel wheeled ones to start with, before the rubber tyred ones came in). Before we had hoists you could either throw the bricks up, or lift them up on a ginny-wheel (like a block and tackle) where you pulled your mortar up in buckets. Or else they had hod-carriers, but they were just on the way out when I started. They were still carrying bricks in the hod - I think they carried ten in a hod, and they had to go up three flights on ladders - they were very fit, very strong men, the hod-carriers. They used to have competitions to see who could carry the most bricks. I saw a bloke carry sixteen in a hod once, and that's the most you can put in them. And they were solid, heavy bricks, not like the bricks of today with holes through them.

If you were late getting to the job, for whatever reason - you'd get the sack. There

was always someone to take your job. But after the war things boomed and you could go from one job to the other without any trouble. People had plenty of money - and by the late forties people were even able to buy cars! (My parents never had a car until about 1952, when they got a Morris Oxford.)

On an average day I'd get out of bed at half past five, quarter to six, and you'd be on the job ready to start at seven. In the summertime you might start at six thirty, but in the winter when it was cold and it gets light later you'd start at seven o'clock. You'd knock off for ten minutes' smoko about nine, then you'd work till twelve. Lunch was half an hour or forty minutes - you'd just eat your lunch and then get straight back to work. Then you'd knock off around four o'clock - the exact time depended on how much mortar you had left. If I were working on my own sometimes I might work till six o'clock, if I wanted to get more done that day.

In my time as a bricklayer, many's the time I've laid a thousand bricks in a day, but it's got to be straight-run kind of work. Today it's all windows and openings and you can't lay fast when the work's like that. But you can do it on rough work, on big walls. If you're on a long straight wall and you're pushing it, you'll get to a thousand a day. On big factories, once you got up in the air you could just rattle them in. They had to be right, but you could rattle them in. You were paid by wages, so if you had a good day it'd be good for the boss and if you had a bad day he'd whinge. You had to keep working, because if you didn't they got rid of you.

These days most people do piecework. They do so much a thousand. I think it's round about \$500 a thousand, now. But once they brought piecework in the standard of workmanship fell. They didn't worry if they didn't lay to the line, as long as they got the numbers in. Years ago I got a job here in Gosford and I was pieceworking. At the League's Club. There were six hundred thousand bricks in the part I had to do, which was the brickwork on the second part of it. I gave them a price to lay those bricks and I had to employ men. I had to make sure that the price I quoted would cover their wages and a bit extra, and a bit more again to allow for days lost to rain and whatever. So you had to put in a price to cover all that, and if you're too high you don't get the job. If you're too low you either go broke or make nothing out of it, and you might as well sit at home.

In my day, if it rained and you couldn't lay bricks you didn't get paid. But today, if you're working for a boss, you're on the award wage and he has to cover that. A smart man would always keep a bit of inside work to one side so there'd be something to do when it rained. In Melbourne I often worked in drizzle. If it didn't get too bad you'd be all right, but you'd always have wet boots. These days most of them don't even get out of bed if it's raining. They still won't get paid. If you work for the government, say on the railways as a brickie or for the county council or something you get paid if it rains, but not the building sites. If it's too wet to work you don't work and that's it, and if you don't like it, well too bad. Most brickies today just work for themselves. Very few of them work for wages. Every second utility has a mixer in the back - they're all doing piecework. Sometimes someone'll get into a really big job and need a dozen bricklayers and you'd go and work for him till it's finished. Of course these days you have to have a File Number before you can get a job but there was no such thing in those days. You could work in this town under the name of Joe Black and work in the next town as John Sullivan and just get the money in the hand.

I can remember when I was working on a factory in Richmond right near the tramline and a fellow got off the tram with an old overcoat on and a cap. He

looked like an alcoholic. He asked for a job, and when the boss asked him where his tools were, he had them in his pocket! And he turned out to be one of the fastest bricklayers! He'd get his sub at the end of the day and probably go and drink it, then go to another job. Unfortunately, bricklayers have got a bad reputation for drinking. Shocking. People used to look at me if I said I wasn't a drinker. I've got nothing against drink - I'll have a glass of wine if I go out. My father always told me it was a waste of money - though I had a few beers when I was in the navy. But I was never a drinker.

But bricklaying hasn't changed all that much. It's still one of the hardest jobs in the building trade, along with concreting. These days it's easier to get the bricks up, and you've got a mixer to mix the mortar. Roof tilers use a hoist now, and elevators, but a bricklayer's still got to bend his back.

Mortar's entirely different today, though. In those days we used mostly lime - lime on the inside and just a touch of cement on the outside. You could mix up a big batch of lime mortar and leave it, and when you wanted it you'd just pull off what you wanted into a barrow. If you wanted it for outside you might put half a shovel of cement to a barrow of mortar and mix it in with a larry, (which is like a hoe with holes in it), to case-harden it a little bit. A lot of the old houses still standing in the city today have only got lime mortar. It's quite OK as long as you don't get high winds and driving rain to fret it away and erode it. On the other hand when you add cement to it to guard against this, if you put in too much cement it cracks the bricks because the mortar's stronger than the bricks. With the lime mortar it's more flexible and moves with the bricks a bit.

But construction techniques have changed over the years. There's not as many big walls as they used to have - today it's all windows and openings. There's more reinforced concrete used and they just brick in the panels. See that's why that club in Newcastle collapsed during the earthquake - it was all brickwork and it just fell apart. These days ceilings have become lower, and they don't put the timber into the jobs - it's all about saving a dollar everywhere you can along the line, and if they can cut corners they'll do it. On cottage work, the workmanship's not there any more because of the importance of time in everything.

As for the bricks themselves, they've changed. There's much more variety and they're not as heavy because they've got holes in them. Before, they were solid with just a frog in them. They must save something like a third of the weight by putting the holes in them. The average brick used to weight seven to nine pound, but today they're about five pound. They must save a lot on material. Bricks were never exactly the same size anyway - there's always variation. It's because of the firing. You'd get one kiln and they'd be good and the next kiln they might be varying sizes, maybe not baked as hard. But generally bricks are not bad, though there are a lot of crook bricks on the market. They get away with it. Often they're not square. At one time you had to pick out bricks for the corners - the nice colours and the ones with nice ends, but today no-one seems to care. Also, today they go for a rough look that wasn't in fashion years ago. With solid bricks, you knew it in your back when you laid them, because they were a lot heavier. I don't know how I laid them because I was never a big guy, but you'd see these blokes pick them up and think nothing of it.

Think of a big heap of sand on a building job. If someone asked you to move that heap only using a trowel you tell them to go to blazes, but that's exactly what a bricklayer does. I did one house by myself where I lived before. It had thirty four thousand bricks in it and I laid every brick, and I picked up all that pile of sand by hand and the rest by trowel - and toted all the bricks. I'd hate to think how many

bricks I've laid over the years. I couldn't even guess.

It's a repetitive job, but I got satisfaction from not working in the same area all the time. You were always on the move. I was always creative - I liked to look at what I'd done and think it didn't look a bad job. You could see something for your work. I like to see what I've done. I couldn't sit in an office and just sign a bit of paper that goes to someone else. I've always liked to build things. I'm very creative like that. I did just about everything by myself in this house I'm in now barring the plumbing - but you've got to get a licensed plumber anyway. Years ago you didn't have to have licensed people like today, (though you always had to have a licensed electrician) and there was a lot of unlicensed work done. That's why there's been so much trouble with some old houses. Plumbing's changed. It's all copper pipe today whereas in those days it was gal which would rust out and corrode. Electricity used to run in conduits down the wall - and the brass switches. But today of course it's all hidden and you just see the power points.

I learnt bricklaying on the job for a while, and then I went to tech. Before you could become a bricklayer you had to go to tech and do the theory. When I came out of the navy I did a two year rehab course. The government paid the boss sixty percent or something - anyway, it was a good scheme for the bosses, so they kept you on as long as they could. It was a special scheme they'd worked out for people who lived in the country and couldn't get to a tech. The theory was all about how to build arches and this and that. We were usually in the brickyards. There'd be a lean-to up the back and we'd have to build, say, a copper. We'd learn about bonding, and how to lay bricks, but most of the learning was done on the job.

I've heard people make out that building a copper was a difficult thing, but I don't think it is, (though you wouldn't find two blokes in the district who could build one now). I haven't built a copper for twenty years or more, but I could still do it. It's not hard - it's just that you've got to know how to construct them. It's like anything - if you know how to do it you'll do it. When arches first came back into fashion about twenty five years ago, none of the bricklayers knew exactly how to start an arch. They didn't know how to set them out. They'd never heard of a skew-back (that's where you cut the first brick and the crown brick), but they got wise. And they've got different equipment now - they've got brick saws, for instance. In those days you had to cut by hand and scutch them into shape. Today they just cut it with a saw. As long as it's near enough it'll do.

I don't know if it's still there but there used to be a big fireplace in the Wyong pub opposite the railway station built by someone called Popplewell. There was a plaque on it saying so. But that kind of work's finished now. No one does that type of work any more because it would have taken them hours to do that fireplace. The fancy fireplaces used to come in a box. You'd turn it upside down and take the back off and it'd be all numbered - all the Flemish bonds and the arches and all the courses. You still had to do them but they just had it marked out for you.

There's a bit of a knack to building a fireplace, but I don't think it's as mysterious as some people make out. If you know what you're doing you shouldn't have any trouble, but there's things you should look out for. If you build the chimney with a tree over it you'll get a backdraught, for instance. But the thing is you've got to give it plenty of height - you take it higher than the ridge of a house, and you've got to give it enough lay-back - you've got to drop the bar enough so that you have enough depth. If you haven't got enough depth and enough lay-back, then

you get smoke. Any fireplace - it doesn't matter who built it - there'll always be a certain amount of smoke till you get it going, till the heat rises. The best thing, when you light a fire, is to hold a sheet of something in front of it till it gets going.

When I was young every house had a copper and two fireplaces - one for the fuel stove and one to heat the house. There's no big deal about building a fireplace as long as you broke the daylight so the rain wouldn't come down. You could make a template as a guide if you wanted to, but after a while I just used to do it by eye. You'd only make a template if it was a real fancy thing that had to be done to the exact measurements. The more intricate the work the better I liked it. If there were any arches, or any fireplaces, or any fancy herringbone work or anything like that - I used to love to get on that. There's some examples of good brick work still around that was done by the Scotchmen and the English in the early days. They were craftsmen - good bricklayers.

But things have changed. The trowels have changed. They're shorter and broader now. But it doesn't matter as long as you can handle it. I used to like a longer trowel, and not so wide, but now you can't buy them. They don't roll the mud off the board, they just scoop it off now. It doesn't matter, as long as you get the same finish.

I've worked on a couple of towers - church towers, but I never had anything to do with those big brick smokestacks because I think they'd stopped doing them by the time I was working. Heights never worried me, though. Never have. I'll still climb a tree to lop it. When I was in the navy I'd be up in the crow's nest and it didn't worry me a bit, but some blokes can't even get up on the roof - the bloke next door can't even get up there to clean his gutters out, and he's only in his late thirties. I think in my day you *had* to do it. (I'm not frightened of water like some people either. I still go snorkelling - I still ride a surf ski, and I still ride a bike. I love my bike.)

I've got no claim to fame for anything in particular. I opened up a boxing gym here at the Gosford Youth Club. I ran that for seven years. I used to train the young blokes there. After that I concentrated on the ballroom dancing. I came second in the South Pacific, and I got a third and a fourth as well. So I'm very happy with that. I still enjoy my dancing with my lovely wife. I adore her.

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I can remember when I was at school in about 1934, and this double-winged aeroplane flew across making this awful row. I'd never seen an aeroplane. All the classes from school ran outside to look at it. Today you wouldn't even look up. Everyone had horses and carts and suddenly here were aeroplanes and motor cars. Things were changing fast but I wasn't particularly aware of it. I didn't give it any thought. But it's changing fast now - the computer age. Oh gee, I'm lost. I don't even try and get mixed up in it. I haven't got a clue how it all works and I'm not interested because I don't need it and I'm content to lead my simple life. I don't need them so I don't want to get involved in them. But of course the young people will have to.

I think what I'd do if I had my time over again, I'd still do bricklaying but I'd also go to Tech more and develop myself more in the overall building trade. But if I'd been taller, my main ambition when I was younger would have been to get into the mounted police. I would have loved that, but I wasn't tall enough - you had to

be five foot ten then. Later they dropped it to five foot nine, and now it doesn't matter how big you are. I had a thing about uniforms, and I was around horses as a kid, and I would have loved it. But I wouldn't have wanted to be in the ordinary police. With the mounted police you'd go to all the important things, the parades, the big football matches, and it'd be great to have your own horse and look after it.

There are three things that my father imprinted on my mind: the first is that if you don't work you don't eat, and if you don't eat you die; the second was that Bernborough was the greatest ever Australian racehorse; and the third was that there'll never be another Les Darcy!

Looking back on my life, I have no regrets. I'd do the same thing, I suppose. If I could have channeled my life a bit differently - but you don't know. I was told I had to be a bricklayer, because my father was a bricklayer - that was what you did, you followed your father. One of my brothers was a plasterer, one is a mechanic (though he's twenty years younger than me and grew up in easier times) and my other brothers were in the building trade, too. Actually three of my brothers have done very well, but they got a boost from the families they married into - one of them married a girl whose father owned half the town, and another married into a very well-off family as well, which gave them a big kick along. They're millionaires on paper, but they're no happier than I am, I don't think.

Overall, things have definitely got better over the years. There's no doubt about that. Today we've got television, all the audio systems, every house has electricity, every house has heat, they're nice homes and the floors are covered, motor cars - most families have got two cars - the choice of food is better. Living standards have improved five hundred percent. But the only thing is, wages haven't kept pace to cover these things, and people still want things in life that they can't afford to pay for, so if you are a worker, then it's still a struggle - even if you have both husband and wife bringing in money. These days though, people will go out and pay \$150 for a picture on the wall, whereas in my day you never had pictures on the walls - you only ever had the bare essentials. But I think the Depression made people who lived through it too cautious. If I hadn't lived through it I wouldn't have been so cautious and I could've probably been better off, but overall I'm quite happy and I've got no regrets.

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*(Recorded May 30, and June 12, 1995.)*