

DICKIE TOUGHER AND THE FIRST BRICK

BIRTH OF A STEELWORKS

On June 25th, 1969, a local free paper called *The Express*, presumably an ancestor of today's *Advertiser*, printed an interesting article relating to the very beginning of the Hoskins steelworks at Port Kembla. In relation to the overall saga of the steelworks, this story is equivalent to the first chapter of Genesis.

The story was headed by a photograph of Dickie Tougher holding up a brick in his hand, against a background of Port Kembla Harbour with the blast furnaces in the distant background. Although we have not attempted to reproduce the photograph, here is the text in full:-

"It might still be out there, amongst the millions of others, or it might long since have been crushed to dust. I don't know. The powder magazine isn't there now. It was knocked over many years ago."

Dickie Tougher looked wistfully towards Port Kembla and its jagged, gigantic skyline etched in mass steel, towards the billowing smoke and smog, the red dust, the roaring noise, the ships and the oil-covered water of the inner harbour.

His eyes, still vital, still alert, after 67 years of a not always easy life, surveyed the coal heaps and the cranes, the trucks and trains, and he was still incredulous.

"I'd like to find that brick – it was a special one."

It was indeed a special brick. There has been none like it since and there's not likely to be another.

But if the brick was special, so too was Dickie Tougher. He recalled this week:-

"It was a sunny Monday morning, early in 1925, when I was a fourth year apprentice. I was 23 years of age and I sat in the middle of a paddock with the then manager of the Lithgow Steelworks, Mr. Douglas. It was all Mister, in those days, son. I can't remember his first name because I probably didn't know it, but he was a Scotsman in his 70's.

"He opened up this plan and he said: 'Dick, you'll be able to tell your children and grandchildren that you laid the first brick in one of Australia's

largest projects.' And as he said it, he surveyed the rolling paddocks, bare of everything but a few trees and cattle---and Fitzgerald's farm house. And I said to him 'bull....' But he was right and I was wrong."

Mr Douglas was an industrial visionary able to see, where Dickie Tougher, a 23-year-old apprentice couldn't, that the rolling hills and valleys below would one day, 44 years later, serve as the site for the sixth largest steelworks in the world and the largest in Australia.

On the Tuesday, or it may have been the Wednesday, after that Monday morning, a horse and dray brought bricks and mortar to Dick Tougher.

He had already sunk the first pick and shovel into the site. Then he trowelled a layer of mortar, selected one brick and nudged it gently to the string line. By doing so, Dickie Tougher and that brick unwittingly claimed a unique place in Australia's industrial history.

They started what is now [1969] Australian Iron and Steel, Port Kembla, the gigantic steel-making wing of BHP, one of the world's great heavy industries.

That first brick was one of a couple of thousand used to build a powder magazine, to house the dynamite and detonators, the lines and plungers, later used to blast out the foundations, not just of the Port Kembla Steelworks, but of an industrial revolution, an enterprise which in large measure has carried Australia to nationhood.

The brick and Dick Tougher were the very first. There were none before them.

Looked at in historical context, that first common [brick] and Dick Tougher's flashing trowel might romantically be regarded as the metaphorical foundation of Australia's heavy industrialisation.

Lithgow had been before them, but it was from that brick at Port Kembla, laid that day in 1925, that steel sinews began to grow through Australia's economy, strengthening a nation. Few of us ever enjoy the privilege of being at the base source of an industrial giant. Dick Tougher was and it's something he still wonders about today.

"Mr. Douglas drove me down from Lithgow in a T-model Ford to do the job. I stopped in a boarding house in Railway Parade and he stopped in a hotel while the job was being done."

Dick Tougher worked at the Port Kembla Steelworks for 35 years, as a brickie. The powder magazine was situated where Cringila now is, near the

spun pipe section which has long since disappeared.

Retired now, he still lives in Corrimal Street, Wollongong, and spends his days talking over old times at the Harp Hotel, and wondering how he could have been so wrong, and Mr. Douglas so right.
