ILLAWARRA'S EARLY STEEL INDUSTRY

Based on June and July 1986 Bulletins.
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updated by John Herben.

[In July 1983 the speaker at the Society's monthly meeting was the late Miss Bessie Foskett, whose topic, based on her long association with the Port Kembla Steelworks, was "Early Days of Port Kembla Steelworks". Although no notes of the lecture were available for publication in the Bulletin, the Society has now happily received from Miss Foskett's Estate, following her death in February 1985, a copy of notes from which she spoke. These were compiled by Edgar Beale for the 1986 Bulletin. Now, some 23 years later, the notes of her talk with corrections and the addition of dates, obtained from the book "The Hoskins Saga", local and overseas Birth Death and Marriage records, are presented here for you to appreciate the origins and hardships of the Hoskins family.]

Miss Bettie Foskett began her talk with -

It was my fortune to spend 40 years, from 1927 to 1967, in the steel industry, always closely associated with management, and I can truthfully say that Port Kembla was a happy place. The going was tough, times were hard, but management regarded every employee as a person, and except in a few instances, the employees respected their employers and gave their best so far as effort was concerned, plus - above all - loyalty. You may find that hard to believe, but I assure you it was true. Without loyalty the industry could never have survived.

I plan to tell you something of the beginning of the iron and steel industry in Australia, and of necessity will involve quite a deal about the Hoskins family, the pioneers of the industry. Particularly I will deal with Charles Hoskins and his sons Cecil and Sid. The City of Wollongong developed and grew up largely because of the efforts of Cecil and Sid Hoskins - how sad it is that so few of our young people even know the name today.
The Hoskins pioneers were not born with a silver spoon in their mouths, they lacked money, education, and at times even food, which makes their life story all the more courageous and exciting. The family suffered many great tragedies.

Let us start from the beginning, with the migration to Australia from England of the parents of Charles Hoskins. John Hoskins (1819-1863) a gunsmith by trade married Wilmot Eliza Thompson (1820-1896) in Plymouth in 1839. Not being a strong man he came to Australia with his wife and family to see if a warmer climate would help him. They arrived in February 1853 at Williamstown, Victoria, at the time of the gold rush and it was not long that John was tempted to try his luck, but luck was not to be with him. John died in early 1863 aged 44 years, leaving his wife and six children practically penniless. The two eldest boys, George 15 and Charles 12, had to leave school to seek work to sustain the family. Both had various jobs in machine or moulding shops in Melbourne but none appealed to them. Early in 1864 the family moved to Ballarat. This is the point at which we first meet Charles Hoskins (1851-1926), the father of Guildford (1886-1916), Cecil (1889-1971) and Sid (1892-1959).

Employment opportunities were scarce and the two brothers, George and Charles, went from pillar to post. They even tried the gold diggings in 1869, but, like their father John, had no luck, but learned a lot about mechanical equipment which would be in good stead in years to come. Due to lack of money George walked 70 miles (110km), to Bendigo in search of work. He was taken on as an apprentice to become a fitter and turner. After some time the family came to Bendigo where Charles got a job in an ironmonger's shop. They managed to survive but thought opportunities were better in NSW as they wanted to start their own business. George went ahead to Sydney arriving in early 1875. He soon found a job working with locomotives, but the firm went broke after 3 months. No job, little money he embarked on contractual work. His first job was making a lathe for a plumber and bell hanger. Other contracts followed and in 1876 he asked the family to come over and for George to join him in a partnership.
George and Charles then sub-leased a strip of ground in Ultimo with a 40 ft frontage. Here they proudly built their first humble workshop and called it Hoskins Enterprise Ironworks. The building was 40 ft square, made of light timber, with a roof of bark and sides covered with palings. Their scant capital only permitted the purchase of a few tools. For motive power they purchased a second-hand wooden cartwheel and mounted it on a wooden frame. A belt was put around the wheel hub and then up to the pulley. The brothers took it in turn pulling the cartwheel round and round while the other one operated the turning job. They took in any jobs they could get and undertook to supply them at prices being paid for similar imported articles. They quoted too low for their work and many times were close to bankruptcy. For example - one Friday evening when Charles arrived home from work late as usual, his mother asked him the time. Putting his hand into his pocket he said "Oh, I have not my watch". Further questioning by his mother elicited the information that he had pawned his watch to pay their one and only employee.

Both men were ingenious - nothing stopped them from having a "go" - as was shown on the goldfields. A produce merchant asked them to design a hydraulic squeezing machine to press the bulk of two bales of hay into the size of one. It was such a success the Agricultural Society exhibited it at the Show.

Another device manufactured by the Hoskins Bros. was a Potato Thrower for which they charged 15 pounds. The wharf labourers were on strike and there were 2000 tons of bags of potatoes awaiting loading. The crew of the ship were willing to stack them if they could by-pass the wharf labourers. Hoskins Bros., with the aid of an air pump, designed to shoot the potatoes from a platform on the wharf into a spread sail on the ship.

The Hoskins Bros. became known as craftsmen and business men of integrity, their customers increased and they took on extra employees. They could not afford to waste manpower turning the lathe by hand, so they designed and built their own steam engine. This worked well, and business continued to improve, but both men were always looking for new challenges and new fields of endeavour.
They turned next to pipe making. At the time all pipes were imported into the country. How did they become involved in pipe making? In 1888 the Water Board had let a contract to an overseas firm to lay 5 miles (8km) of 6ft (1.8m) imported riveted pipe which was connected with steel collars and sealed with lead joints. The pipeline was to carry the main water supply for the city of Sydney. The contractors failed because they couldn't get the molten lead to run completely around the joints. Charles Hoskins used to sit on the bank and watch them try and try again without success. As the pipes had a circumference of about 19ft (5.8m) around which the lead had to run, their difficulty was to prevent the lead setting before it completed the circuit. Charles went to the Water Board and said his firm could undertake the work and guarantee success. They got the contract. Their method consisted of getting thicknesses of rope, soaking them in kerosene, and winding them around the joint, then lighting them and getting the joint as hot as possible. While the heat was still contained in the joint, the molten lead was run around and the joint was sealed successfully.

The success of this job lead to much more work for the Water Board and it became necessary for Hoskins Enterprise Ironworks to expand. Nevertheless their progress had its ups and downs. For instance they undertook an order for a private company to make a long main of steel riveted pipes for an irrigation scheme at Mulgoa. However, the private company went bankrupt and could not pay for the pipes and the Hoskins Bros. made a loss of £28,000 on this contract alone.

In 1898 came the great financial break for the Hoskins Bros. They won a contract to manufacture and lay 330 miles (530 kms) of pipe to bring water from near Perth to Kalgoorlie. This contract was won against tenders from England and America and was the greatest lift the Hoskins Bros. had ever received. Without it they could never have taken over the iron and steel industry in Australia.

Even before and since the Fitz Roy Iron Mining Co was formed in 1851 at Mittagong many attempts had been made to produce iron and steel in Australia. The next person to try was James Rutherford at
Eskbank Ironworks at Lithgow in 1874. The quality of iron produced was reasonably good, but the venture failed financially and Rutherford loaded two drays of blasting powder into the base of the furnace, detonated it and demolished the foundations.

The next man on the scene was William Sandford who acquired the whole undertaking at Lithgow in 1892. He became the first man to make steel in Australia from a 4½ ton furnace. However he was in constant financial difficulties. In 1907 he completed a new blast furnace at a cost of £100,000 which was £30,000 more than estimated. The finance was obtained by bank overdraft, which unfortunately Sandford could not meet, and the bank foreclosed within three months of the commissioning of the furnace.

The NSW Government approached G & C Hoskins to see whether they would be interested in carrying on the infant iron and steel industry. Following negotiations with the Bank, G & C Hoskins did take on the Lithgow Iron & Steel Works for a total outlay of £202,000. In addition they made a handsome gift to Wm Sandford in recognition of the work he had done in pioneering the industry at Lithgow. Of the two Hoskins Bros. it was Charles who, from 1908, undertook the development of the iron and steel industry while brother George and his sons involved themselves in the lucrative business of pipe making in Sydney. Charles' sons Cecil, 18 years old, and Guildford, 21 years, joined their father in the business with Sid, 16 years, to follow soon after.

Industrial relations were very strained as previously the men were engaged on contract and considered themselves their own bosses. There were political problems also as this period saw the advent of the Labour Party. The work site was not fenced. There were no washing or showering facilities, no septic system, no provision of transport to the plant, many men had to walk four miles each way, no shelter for outside workers, no issue of overalls or protective equipment, no change rooms or lunch rooms, and smoking was not permitted during working hours. Within a short time this latter rule was revised to the extent that men were permitted to smoke provided they rolled their cigarettes before
coming to work. There was not one single electrical unit or one fixed light. During afternoon and night shifts, light was reflected from the furnaces, and where more intense light was necessary, this was provided by slush lamps - great wads of cotton waste burning from the spout of a billy-can filled with mutton or whale oil.

In 1908 crane drivers were the highest paid employees at six shillings per day for 10 hours work, and there was a downward grading of daily wage until the labourers were reached. There were no extra payments for shift work, there was no sick leave or annual leave, and very few public holidays.

Over the next twenty years the Hoskins has much to learn in every sense, and above all they had to improve and extend all facilities and conditions at Lithgow as well as extend and improve their pipe making operations in Sydney to meet increasing demand and generate greater cash flow for advances at Lithgow and for development of raw materials such as coal, iron ore, limestone, etc. and for overseas research.

We will omit the technical details of these developing years, but as time went on Charles Hoskins became convinced that if they were to supply the Commonwealth and not only NSW, it would be necessary to relocate the works to a sea port.

After long deliberation, Port Kembla was selected as the new location and in 1924 Charles, Cecil and Sid Hoskins purchased 400 acres from Mr W C Wentworth which became the site for the first section of the Port Kembla Steel Works.

In 1925 Charles Hoskins relinquished the position of Chairman of Directors of Hoskins Iron & Steel Co Ltd to his son Cecil, and Cecil and his brother Sid became joint Managing Directors. Charles and his wife Emily went on a long overdue holiday on an extended overseas trip. Unfortunately Charles died shortly after his return on 14 February 1926 aged 74 years. However, both Cecil and Sid lived the life of iron and steel since school days and it was in their blood to continue the pattern set by their father for the development of a successful modern iron and
and steel works at Port Kembla. This they did. Charles died content in the assurance that his plans would be consummated.

Before closing I would like to give you an insight into the lives and characters of Cecil and Sid Hoskins. Two most wonderful men, but so little known or understood except for their families. To most people they were just business men. They were two of nature's gentlemen, and if the two of them could have been rolled into one, we would have had the perfect man. They were absolutely complementary to each other. What characteristics one lacked the other had, and vice versa. They each knew this, and they knew also their own shortcomings, and they worked in perfect harmony using the best of each. They had the utmost respect and affection for each other. In fact, I have never known any two brothers more closely knit. At the same time they were as different as chalk and cheese.

They both placed women on a pinnacle and woe betide anyone who belittled womanhood. They worshipped their mother, who incidentally was a Quaker, and adored their wives and daughters. I can honestly say that in 40 years I never heard either of them use bad language, or anything approaching bad language. They were keen business men - some perhaps would say hard business men - but they had hearts of gold and were extremely kind towards their fellow men, including their employees.

They loved Australia, and were extremely generous and philanthropic, but almost always gave anonymously. Cecil Hoskins was knighted in 1960 in recognition of over fifty years of service to Australia.

As you no doubt would guess, I could go on for a long time talking about the Hoskins brothers, but I will take a short cut and tell you a few little anecdotes which will help you to believe that the Steelworks for at least 40 years had a heart.

So ends Miss Foskett's notes with corrections and updated information. Then she recounted stories of the Hoskins family and their contribution to local life, culture and well being.
The Apprentice: this was a story to the effect that a young man, well into his apprenticeship, wished to break it so he could earn better money, if only temporarily, as an unskilled man, in order to marry. The plan was of course short-sighted; but Mr Sid dissuaded the young man, lending him money so that he could continue to qualify in the trade and ultimately earn real tradesman's wages, whilst marrying in the meantime. After his indenture and married for some time he went to Mr Sid's office with 10/- to commence repaying the loan. For being so honourable and a good tradesman Mr Sid discharged the rest of the loan. As usual, this act of generosity was done in strict privacy.

Scout Camp at Mt Keira: The local Boy Scout Association, deciding to acquire some land of its own, duly choose a site. It was not much of a place, to be sure, but it was the best they could afford. Then, to their surprise and slight annoyance, the executive found their president, Mr Sid, being dilatory and not responding with his usual promptness to requests made of him. He was strangely unco-operative. Later the reason emerged; he had a plan of his own. All along he had been quietly conducting delicate negotiations for an extended lease of steelworks land in a much better location. His long-sightedness and vision won the day; the intended purchase was abandoned, and the local Scouts thus acquired, virtually free, the present Mt Keira Scout Camp, a site unsurpassed in beauty and suitability by that of any other scouting group in the world, if it has its equal.

Gleniffer-Brae: the home of Mr Sid and his family was built prior to World War II. It was occupied in 1939, its lands embracing the whole of what are now the Wollongong Botanic Gardens. Becoming too large for family needs, Mr Sid offered it, with a substantial sum of money, to the King's School to enable it to re-locate from its small site at Parramatta, but after initial promise the scheme fell through. Then the Housing Commission built a large subdivision of expedient but unimaginable cottages adjoining the Hoskins land on the east. Moreover, that body had then the propensity towards resuming land to expand into sites such as these gracious parklands, so that Gleniffer-Brae was potentially under attack. So there was a touch of defensiveness in Mr Sid's reaction, though the citizens of Wollongong have every
reason for gratitude; he gave the eastern section to Wollongong City Council for the purpose of establishing Botanic Gardens. Then the house was acquired by Sydney Church of England Girls' Grammar School, and, to acquire an adequate area for its purpose, at Mr Sid's request some of the land was sold to the School (full market price being extracted by the Council for what it obtained for nothing). Eventually the entire property was acquired by the Council, to be consolidated in the present Botanic Gardens. But it is certain that only for the original generosity of Mr Sid and his wife, who was the actual owner, Wollongong would never have had this attractive civic amenity now the home of Wollongong Conservatorium of Music.

Incidentally, Miss Foskett saw Gleniffer-Brae rise from the turf, because every morning at 9 am she went with Mr Sid to note progress and matters of attention. The building of the house was a real labour of love. All this, and much more Miss Foskett told us. The Society must be grateful to have the notes of the substantive part of a memorable talk.

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