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Brickies: Working life at the Thirroul Brickworks 1972-1983

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Brickies: Working life at the Thirroul Brickworks 1972-1983

Abstract
Michael Organ worked at the Thirroul Brickworks between 1972-1983. The following article is an account of his experiences there as a young boy fresh out of school.
“Brickies”
Working life at the Thirroul Brickworks
1972–1983

Michael Organ

The annals of Australian labour history are full of stories of mining disasters, the hardships of long drawn out strikes, union battles with government and bosses, and instances of extraordinary individual actions to defend hard won wages and conditions. However the more mundane trials, tribulations and misadventures of working life for those involved in seemingly non-hazardous industries are often left unrecorded. The brick, tile and pottery sector is one which does not figure prominently in accounts of working class struggle, though of course it played a part and continues to do so.

Between 1972–83 I worked at the Thirroul brickworks, located approximately 80km south of Sydney in Wollongong’s northern suburbs. Having opened as the Vulcan Fire Brick Company in 1919, on an area of flood-prone wetland between Bulli and Thirroul, it annually provided jobs for approximately 200 workers until finally closing in the early 1990s. Due to the existence of high quality clay-rich soils in the Bulli area, brick making had taken place there from the earliest years of European settlement. The local Aboriginal people made use of the clay for thousands of years in their cave painting, body art and utensil decoration, and Bulli soil is famous world-wide as a foundation for cricket pitches. Captain Robert Marsh Westmacott made bricks on the site in the 1830s and 1840s. During the twentieth century local factories included the nearby Bulli Brick Works, which opened in 1947 and continued operating through to 2002. Moreover, the ‘Farm’ or ‘Thornies’, now known as Cookson Plibrico, opened next door to the Thirroul brickworks in the 1960s and was still in operation in 2006, though there are plans for its imminent replacement by an Anglican Church retirement village development. The circumstances which led to my working for more than a decade at the Thirroul brickworks
are relatively straightforward, and in many ways typical for the time and place.

**Father to son**

I was born at Bulli Hospital in 1956 and grew up in the Sandon Point housing commission estate located a couple of hundred metres south of the Thirroul brickworks. During my youth it was known as Newbolds General Refractories, or Newbolds for short. Anyone looking out over the coastal plain from atop the escarpment at Bulli Lookout, or travelling down the steep Bulli Pass road, could see the chimney stacks of the kilns and the Newbolds name written large in red lettering on the side of the tallest building on site.

Newbolds had purchased the plant from Vulcan in 1933, and in turn sold it in 1974 to BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary Ltd.), operator of the Port Kembla steelworks and its biggest customer. Thereafter it was called Australian Industrial Refractories (AIR). My father, Keith Organ (1930–2002), worked at Newbolds and was able to facilitate my securing a position there. He had been employed as a postman for a number of years in Bulli.
and Austinmer before finding a job with his brother Kevin at the Bulli Brick Works. He then moved to Thirroul in the late 1950s. Keith was a burner for most of his time there, operating the kilns in which the bricks were fired. One of my earliest memories was of going to work with him late one night during the Christmas holidays, in the early 1960s when I was about eight and watching as he shovelled coal into the glowing red fires of the open-air brick kilns. It was hot and dirty work, and combined with his heavy drinking you could see by the lines on his craggy face that it was not an easy life. My mother recalls him coming home from work with hair singed from the extreme heat of the 300 degree furnaces. Boils and burn marks regularly appeared on his body as a result of standing close to the heat for long periods, while stoking the fires.

In those days the burners loaded the bricks into the kilns, set and manned the fires and assisted in removing the burnt bricks. They were also required to go into and under the slow-to-cool kilns and clean them out prior to refiring. On one occasion during a cleanout my father received a sliver of steel in his eye. The doctor recommended six months off work, but he was back on the job almost immediately. He could not afford to wait the many months it would take for the compo payment to come through as he had a wife and three young children to support. However the kiln heat was not always a negative. One time when it had been raining for weeks on end my father took a load of wet nappies into work for drying by the kiln. Unfortunately they got singed during the process and my mother never allowed it to be repeated.

As burning involved shift work, as a child I did not see much of my father for he was either at work, in bed asleep, out with his mates at Bulli pub, or having a roll-up at the Bulli Bowling Club. Working, sleeping or having a beer – that was dad’s life and there was not much time or money around for anything else. However, on occasion Newbolds was important to us kids because of the annual brickworks picnic, which we attended irregularly, and more especially the Christmas Tree. Usually held at the Thirroul Leagues Club or Bulli Police Boys Club in the first few weeks of December, it was an occasion for food, sweets, Santa, fun, and early Christmas presents. As an employee myself in the 1980s I was able to do what my father had done two decades before and sponsor my nieces and nephew’s attendance at the festivities.
First job

As the end of my fourth form high school year approached, I was asked by my father if I would like to work over the holiday break and earn some money. I said yes and my first experience of working life was therefore as a 16 year old doing the day shift (7am to 3pm) in the dusty loft at Newbolds. This took place over a six week period from mid December 1972 through to the end of January 1973. Upon entry to the plant I signed on as a member of the Brick, Tile and Pottery Union. Membership was a given, not questioned, and in hindsight a blessing in disguise. The bosses had their unions, such as the New South Wales Chamber of Manufacturers, and ample resources available to them in dealing with the workforce. As workers we were on our own, but we could rely on the union to take care of issues such as fighting for improved wages and conditions. ‘A fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay’ was the mantra instilled in me from an early age, though my parents were in no way politically active and I cannot recall ever engaging in a political discussion with them at the time. This work ethic was something we learnt at school, at church and at home, and everyone knew it. As a young, naive 16 year old I was thankful that the union was taking care of industrial matters, leaving me to concentrate on doing my job. The union delegate throughout this time was Les Buchanan, a strapping big bloke who worked on the setting bench stacking unburnt bricks on to flat top cars prior to their entry into the driers and kilns. Les was a good union delegate: intelligent, strong, committed to protecting workers and getting a fair deal for them, and approachable. He had the rather difficult task of dealing with management, which prior to 1974 comprised the Newbolds family company. A new management regime was introduced that year with the purchase of the plant by BHP.

Based on my experiences at Thirroul and Port Kembla over a ten year period I found the BHP management style of the 1970s and 1980s to be one of treating workers like children. They were the bosses and you were to do exactly as they said. They were arrogant and distant and did not necessarily have the relevant experience to command respect on the factory floor. Fortunately there were plenty of people around the Thirroul plant who did know what they were doing, and the transition from Newbolds to AIR went relatively smoothly. Whilst I had secured my Christmas job at Newbolds through my father and his contacts, any young kid growing up in Bulli in the 70s had a wide variety of job opportunities to choose from, especially in local industry. You could, for example, work in one of the many
Illawarra coal mines which dotted the nearby escarpment, such as Bulli or Bellambi coal mines, or in a brickworks like Newbolds at Thirroul, Bulli Brick at Bulli or Pendlebury’s at Woonona, or you could travel by train to the Port Kembla steelworks which was always looking for workers, especially during the Christmas holiday break. If you were female you could work in one of the local clothing factories, including Bulli Spinners, or, as my mother did, engage in domestic duties at Bulli Hospital.

General hand

When I started at the brickworks in the summer of 1972 I remember working in the loft. This was the tallest building on the site and contained large bins which held clay and silica sand for the brick making process. My job was to make sure the material continued to flow and did not clog up. It was an extremely dusty environment. After a couple of weeks I left and was placed with an old hand, Joe Barbaro, as his offsider in shunting cars of bricks around the plant.

During the course of five Christmas holiday breaks between 1972–77 I worked in a variety of relief positions, including as a brickies labourer repairing the cars that were used to transport the neat and tightly stacked bricks through the driers and kilns. I spent some time on the setting bench, though this was for a short period only as it was one of the most desirable jobs, with a good bonus rate. I was also put in the grinding shed, an especially difficult job because you had to spend all day with your head down and visor and gloves on grinding the edges of bricks to bring them into the desired tolerances. I never liked grinding as it was too noisy, too dusty and not a very sociable environment. The handling of often large and heavy bricks did not bother me much, though the monotony of grinding did.

I also worked in the classing area, a large open space at the back of the plant. This involved checking the quality of bricks after they had come out of the kilns, sorting and strapping, and seeing them despatched to various destinations. The best classer was a thin little man called Artie Samways. Barely showing evidence of any muscle on his body or sweat upon his brow, he could go all day handling thousands of bricks, leaving the rest of us classers behind. In most areas of the plant we had a set quota to do, such as grind or stack 20 pallets of bricks or bag 24 pallets of castable materials. Beyond this an extra couple of tons of output were usually allowed and resulted in a few extra dollars bonus each day, an important supplement to a never very substantial salary. Classing was an area where,
with time, increasing numbers of women were employed. Most were middle aged, married and of various ethnic backgrounds. They spent much of the day bent over moving bricks about, and many developed hernias as a result. Whilst they were able to achieve the necessary quota, they were not able to keep pace with some of the old hands such as Artie. Their male workmates were not always chivalrous or polite in their dealings with them. My father once recalled a conversation where one of the male classers was asked by a women for assistance in lifting a rather large brick. His response was along the lines of “You’re getting the same wage as me – you bloody well lift it yourself!” after which he stormed off.

Newbolds manufactured a wide variety of industrial bricks and refractory materials. The bricks were of all shapes and sizes: round, square, hexagonal, long, short, big, small, solid, perforated, brown, yellow and white, soft and hard. They were made to handle the extreme temperatures of steel making furnaces, and as a consequence almost useless as house bricks because of their friability. Most of the plant’s output ended up
lining the furnaces at the Port Kembla steelworks, though this was not the only destination and export jobs regularly came through the factory. Many of the off-cuts, or those bricks discarded because of cracks and other flaws, escaped the crusher and found their way into the foundations and building extensions of some of the local workers. A number of houses in the Bulli and Thirroul area now rest upon a clandestine collection of Vulcan, Newbolds or AIR bricks, or are protected by similarly constructed retaining walls.

**Occupational Health and Safety**

The work environment at Newbolds was a relatively safe one, with only the presses requiring extra care, and of course the kilns, although in general they were not seen by the workforce as dangerous. While some of my friends found employment in coal mines and over the years lost fingers or received damage to their limbs, accidents at the brickworks were rare, though not unknown. For example, two deaths had occurred in the 1920s and 1930s arising from falls in the crushers. Improvements in occupational health and safety laws since then had made the physical environment safer by the time of my arrival in 1972, though there were still some outstanding issues.

One thing the brickworks did share in common with the coal mines, although not to the same degree, was the presence of dust. Brick silica dust permeated the air at Thirroul and could, with long term exposure, lead to silicosis and ill health arising from lung disease. Asbestos was also present at the Thirroul brickworks, and most other brickworks in the region. The main area in which it was utilised was in wrapping pipes and as insulation against the heat associated with the brick kilns. Bags of asbestos were also put into the mix in the refractory bagging plant, known as the Specialties Plant, which was built on site in the early 1970s. By the time I worked there full-time at the end of 1978 the bags of asbestos had gone, though there was still talk of them and plenty of dust and powder floating around to cause concern.

I worked three Christmas breaks at Newbolds between 1972 and 1974, before commencing an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering at the University of Wollongong in 1975. At the end of that year I spent my holidays at the Port Kembla steelworks, working in the coke ovens area with a memorable little Portuguese man whose conversation invariably focused on “jigga jigga” (sexual intercourse) and the intimate exploits of his fellow work mates. Needless to say, I had little to add to the
conversation. In the end it was the extreme heat, sulphurous fumes, burns from sprays of coke and the long hours of travel between Bulli and Port Kembla which turned me off repeating the experience. I headed back to AIR in 1976.

Work at the brickworks was always financially important for me. Mum and dad were pretty poor, and whilst university fees had recently been abolished by the Whitlam Labor government and I received about $40 a week student allowance during my first year at Wollongong university, the money I earned through the Christmas holidays helped in tiding me over for the rest of the year. It also took a little bit of pressure off my parents. In fact, the scrapping of course fees was the only reason my parents could afford to support my university studies. I therefore had to work during the break.

The other side of work

Life at Newbolds / AIR was much more than simply donning grey overalls and heavy steel-capped boots, clocking on, doing an eight hour shift, clocking off and picking up a pay packet at the end of the week. For a young lad barely out of high school it was also a hive of social activity. The workforce comprised a lot of young men, mostly in their late teens and early twenties. Their talk at work was of sport, music, the surf, women, getting stoned or drunk and having a good time. Drugs were everywhere. Of course the company had a strict policy against the use of recreational drugs or alcohol at work, but people often got around that. Many of the older men had serious alcohol addictions, although it did not seem to interfere with their ability to work to any great degree. Some of the hardest and best workers were also some of the biggest drinkers. We all drank. Many of the young guys would also get stoned before they came to work, during work, and of course after work. You could buy the stuff at work, mostly marijuana (pot, grass, dope) or little blocks of hash, and you could smoke it with bongs made out of refractory cast-offs and specially fired cones. Exotics and heavy drugs such as LSD, acid or heroin were only spoken of in hushed tones and not used at work, as far as I was aware, but some dealing took place. Their use at work was considered too dangerous and heightened the risk of getting caught and sacked.

Many of the lads would disappear at lunch time and either go out the back of the plant, in amongst the pallets and stacks of bricks, or off site to score, pull a few cones or smoke a reefer. They would return to work with a huge smile on their face and
production would continue. As many of the tasks were relatively simple and repetitive, I can only suggest that the effects of recreational drugs and alcohol did not impact on performance and production such as to cause the company undue concern at the time. It was a common event to work alongside someone who was still hung-over from a heavy night out, or stoned, and you really didn’t give it a second thought.

Outside of work, drugs and drink were a big part of the weekend, and there were plenty of places to imbibe. In the Bulli, Thirroul, Austinmer area alone there were three pubs and seven clubs, the latter including Austinmer, Thirroul and Bulli Bowling Clubs, Austinmer and Thirroul RSL, Thirroul Leagues Club, Bulli Worker’s Club, also known as the Shitcarters Arms, and Woonona-Bulli Social Club. As some of these facilities were located close to the Thirroul brickworks, on day and afternoon shift workers would head off for a quick ale during lunch or dinner breaks.

I remember many an afternoon shift between 7.30 and 8pm hopping into someone’s car parked at the back of the Specialties Plant and rushing off to the Thirroul Rex Hotel for a pie and beer, or to watch the pornos playing on the television behind the bar. Returning to work just after 8, we would spend the next two hours cleaning up, pumping out a few more pallets of bricks or bags of cement, before heading off to the showers and clocking off at five minutes to the hour. A large proportion of the older blokes would go straight from work to the pub or club for a beer or two or three, then home to their families where all manner of turmoil would often take place, spurred on by the lack of money, stress of life and the grog. There were plenty of stories of workers picking up their pay packet on Friday afternoon, heading off to the local pub and arriving home later that night with empty pockets, their wage having been drunk or punted away. In such an environment, work was often a sanctuary where one could forget about money and family worries for eight hours.

The other major drug of choice used at the brickworks was tobacco. Most workers smoked and any break in production would be an opportunity for a “smoko”. Even for those who did not smoke, breaks such as lunch or dinner would be referred to by that name. Work pants and overall pockets usually contained a pouch of tobacco and roll-your-own papers or a pack of “cigs”. My father used to smoke Drum with Tally-ho papers, or buy packets of Rothman’s Blue and Camel from one of his best mates, Kelvin Downie, who happened to have a Rothman’s franchise for the plant and would regularly bring in cartons
for sale. I recall one worker in particular, a big man who never spoke much but always had a smile on his face and a roly butt hanging off his upper lip. He could be setting bricks or working the presses and that little half-burnt roll of tobacco and paper never seemed to move.

There is no doubt in my mind that the widespread use of tobacco accounted for the early death from cancer and emphysema of many of the brick plant workers. Whilst there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of this, I am not aware of any definitive studies having ever taken place. When my own father passed away in 2002 there were signs of silicosis on his lungs. Nevertheless, the impact of a lifetime of smoking cigarettes and heavy drinking made it difficult to identify any single contributing cause of his death, or the precise effect of his many years working with brick dust and assorted chemicals.

**Brick burner**

My time at the Thirroul brickworks was divided into two periods, firstly as a part-time worker during the many Christmas / New Year breaks between 1972-77, and secondly as a full timer from December 1978 through to February 1983. For a number of the holiday breaks I was a burner, like my father, but I can’t recall ever working on the same shift as him. Burning involved 24 hour shift work, seven days a week, all year round. There were three burners per shift, each responsible for one of the large undercover oil-fired kilns. By the time I arrived at Newbolds in 1972 there was only one of the older, open-air kilns remaining, and I never had charge of it.

Burning was a good job, if you did not mind the shift work. You were largely left alone to do your work and not be subject to intense scrutiny by the many foremen and supervisors on the plant, especially during the day shift. Your work involved moving cars of bricks from the dryers into the firing kilns, maintaining a check on the temperature of the kilns, pulling cars of fired bricks out, and cleaning up any falls. While burning could be a nice warm job in winter, it was stinking hot in summer. The shift work also conflicted with one’s social life, especially doggies (nightshift), so the majority of burners were older or married men, although there were a few young people like myself to take up the holiday slack. Because of the hours and irregular rosters, burning was therefore not a job I ever thought of staying with, unlike my father, and I was always looking beyond. It was nevertheless a good way to earn money during the summer holidays and university breaks, and a refreshing change from
the intensity of the study process associated with my electrical engineering degree. That intensity eventually resulted in my dropping out of the course at the University of Wollongong in September 1978 and looking for a new direction in life. It was inevitable that in seeking short term employment I should end up back at the brickworks.

The author with his two nieces, wearing an AIR t-shirt at Bulli Showground, April 1981.

**Toddy’s crew**

On 11 December 1978, I began working with Paul Todd’s gang in the Specialties (Castables) Plant. This was a relatively new section of the factory, built around 1974. It was a modern production facility tasked with bagging dry refractory material into 25 kg bags, or producing 25–40kg boxes of wet mouldable refractories. The plant was supposed to be dust free, but of course the dust collection system never worked and instead we relied on the natural ventilation of the large corrugated iron shed opened at each end and the proximity of sea breezes to disperse the dust which filled the air when the plant was in
operation or stockpiles were being moved. Materials such as vermiculite and perlite were especially irritating on the nasal orifices, whilst other fines such as kyanite and white alumina power were common ingredients in the mix.

Initially I was part of the production crew, working on mixing materials, bagging, putting the bags on pallets, and shrink wrapping and securing them for transport. I also worked on the mouldables line, where the wet, plasticine-like refractory material would be extruded from a machine, cut into slabs, wrapped in plastic and boxed, to be shipped to the Port Kembla or Newcastle steel works where it would be plastered like tiles onto the walls of steel making vessels. As a member of the production crew I was right in amongst the dust and chemicals. The worst of it was when we had to clean out the pit underneath the mixing area, or get into the dust collectors, though you could never really escape it. After a year or two I became the crew's laboratory technician, monitoring production quality and testing materials. As such I spent more time in the lab and less time on the floor of the dusty production area.

It was in some ways a strange dynamic working in the Specialties Plant with four or five regulars. Paul Todd, the foreman, was in his early forties and the oldest of the crew. A good storyteller, he focussed on the production output and apart from that was fine to get on with and relatively relaxed about the job. The rest of the crew were mostly young, in their early twenties, married or single, working to support themselves or their families and to have a good time – cars, drink, dope, music, surf and women were on their mind. Typical in some ways, though atypical in others, was one of the young fork lift drivers on the specialty plant crew. He drove a red Toyota Celica – the nearest thing to a sports car going around at the time, and was a bit of a ladies man, smartly dressed and the essence of mid 1970s Aussie ‘cool’. He stood out from the majority of young working lads, myself included, who were of the jeans and t-shirt variety, and more often than not long-haired and scruffy. The Specialties Plant and laboratory crews were a strange mix. We had, for example, a bass playing, hyperactive heavy rock musician and an aged surfer who spent his holidays sitting in an ashram in India. It was inevitable that these two should come into conflict, but the job at hand tended to diffuse most personal situations.

The wages at the brickworks were relatively standard for such work, yet they paled in comparison with the earnings of those in the local coal mines who were able to secure large bonuses. While most of the coal miners could afford their
own homes, a lot of the brick plant workers lived in rented accommodation or in nearby housing commission estates and never really had enough extra money available on a single wage to make such a purchase. I know my father couldn’t, even though my mother was also working. During a typical week in December 1977 I took home $119 in the pay packet I picked up Friday afternoon around 3pm. Money was tight for everyone, and I cannot recall during my time at Thirroul there ever being much talk about buying a house. Bringing home such a basic wage meant that owning a house was not always achievable, so some employees just concentrated on work and having a good time. Short-sighted, yes, but realistic.

Dusted and bored

Work conditions in the plant generally were good, though the Specialty Plant was a problem due to the dust, of which there was a lot. Dust masks were available but were rarely used in the hot, sticky environment, and most workers thought they were useless anyway. All manner of chemicals and dusts were inhaled, but we were told they were largely inert and we never asked too many questions. It could be said that a lot of workers did not care to know. We also knew that management would not necessarily provide the answers we wanted, and certainly not with any degree of detail. We all knew that if we did not like it we could leave, but this was not an option for most as it would have meant travelling to Port Kembla or further afield and losing the many advantages of working close to home.

My diary entry for 11 December 1978, the first day at the Specialties Plant after dropping out of university, noted rather ominously the words “dusty and boring.” The intellectual highlight of the day for most workers was reading the local newspaper, the Illawarra Mercury, or browsing through the Australasian Post, with its semi-naked women. While I was no prude, this was a decided difference from the environment I was used to at the University of Wollongong, and somewhat stifling. At the time I also found many of the conversations in the tea room and on the plant floor conservative, racist and homophobic.

It has been said that the social and cultural revolution which swept America and Europe in the 1960s did not reach Australia until the 1970s. My experiences at the Thirroul brickworks tended to reflect this. The environment of change I was experiencing during my senior years at high school and early years at Wollongong University from 1975, in the form of
discussion of issues such as sexual freedom, the use of drugs, the coming out of gays, mistreatment of the Aborigines, and an anti-war feeling were largely absent from the brickworks tea room discussions. This was due in part to the age and relative conservatism of the bosses, foreman, supervisors and many of my workmates, and the fact that it was not worth the trouble to engage in vigorous debate and stir up people who you were required to work closely with in a production crew on a daily basis. As such, tongues were held.

However, when it came to industrial matters there was plenty of freedom of expression, even though the brick plant was a relatively tame industrial environment. Strikes were few and far between, and only ever ran for a day or two. My second day as a member of Paul Todd’s crew was a strike day, and while I cannot recall the exact reason for the stoppage it was probably in support of a wage claim or the sacking of a colleague for some misdemeanour. Les Buchanan and the local Brick, Tile and Pottery Union officials, supported by the South Coast Labour Council, were relatively efficient in dealing with matters such as occupational health and safety, wages and conditions. The Illawarra was very much an industrial region with a strong union presence during the 1970s and early 1980s, and as such the bosses did not try to make unnecessary trouble. I was lucky to be working during this time, for it showed me the important role unions play in protecting workers. There was no way that I, as a young 16 year old school kid, could deal with the many industrial, OH&S and employment issues connected with working in such an environment.

Management

The two plant managers during my time at Thirroul were ‘Old Mr. Scroope’ and ‘Big Red’. Jack Scroope, part of the Newbolds management team, was an Alfred Hitchcock like figure, stern of face, always dressed in a suit and topped by a gleaming white hard hat. The old school Scroope was eventually replaced by the younger, thinner ‘Big Red’ (his nickname derived from that of the American actor Red Buttons), brought on board following the purchase of the plant by BHP in 1974.

Our encounters with senior management were few and far between, and more like a royal visit then a chat with a colleague. I remember when word would come around that Jack Scroope or ‘Big Red’ were going to conduct a plant inspection, usually late on a Friday afternoon. We would all have to stand by our machines, in readiness at the drop of a hat to start up the
presses when informed of their approach. This took place even if we had finished our production quota for the day, and was in reality quite farcical. Old Mr. Scroope and ‘Big Red’ may have been the grim face of management, but Doug Wakenshaw was the heart of the plant. Doug, one of the senior plant supervisors, was a lovely man; experienced, knowledgeable, compassionate, easy to talk to and free of airs. He kept the Thirroul plant ticking over, especially the kilns. Respected by all, he would be at work at all hours if a problem arose, and get stuck in when there was a fall in the kiln or some other issue needing urgent attention.

The workforce at the time was mostly second and later generation Australians of British stock, reflecting the local demographics. There were a few Italian and Eastern European men and women, the result of post-war migration to the Illawarra, but the majority of those immigrants ended up working in the steel works or closer to the Port Kembla – Wollongong industrial centre. I do not recall any Aboriginal or Asian workmates. I will never forget the time when a delegation of Japanese brick plant operators toured the site during the late 1970s. A couple of our workmates had served in World War II and been held in Japanese prisoner of war camps, where they were subject to torture and deprivations. As such they were deeply scarred by the experience. One of the old hands was so traumatised he had to hide out the back of the plant amongst the stacks of bricks during the tour, as he could not stand to face the visiting delegation and revisit the horrors of the war.

From bricks to rocks

Over the years I became increasingly disenchanted with the dust and monotony of AIR. However my work there had one positive spin off in that it tweaked an interest in geology, the study of rocks. As a result, after three years on Toddy’s crew, in 1982 I enrolled part time in a science degree majoring in that discipline at the University of Wollongong, thereby making use of the credit points I had earned prior to dropping out in 1978. Throughout 1982 I continued working, however the following February I took a redundancy package then on offer from AIR and left to pursue my university studies in earnest. I was also able to do this with the support of the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) which in 1983 had on offer retraining packages, provided to help deal with the downturn in employment at the Port Kembla steelworks and the large number of people in the region affected by this. With my payout from AIR and $70 a week from the CES I was able to focus on finishing my undergraduate degree,
which I did in 1984. I never returned to the brickworks, apart from the occasion of a reunion held there sometime in the late 80s or early 90s.

AIR continued to operate through to 1992, but from about 1988 it had been relocated in stages to a site adjacent to the Port Kembla steelworks. The plant was then razed during the mid 1990s, despite protests from members of the local community who called for the preservation of elements of the industrial heritage of the site. The old clay quarries were filled in with bricks and other refuse, the chimneys were demolished and the buildings of wood, brick, steel and tin were removed.

The site sits idly by today (November 2006) awaiting transformation into a high density residential development. The only artefacts of more than 70 years of brick making on the site are scatterings of bricks and the memories of surviving workers and management. Many employees have passed on, the victims of lung disease, cancer and other undiagnosed illnesses arising from the numerous hazards associated with working in a manufacturing plant last century. The pictures in my mind of working life at Thirroul are clear, even if the records are no
longer extant: the hundreds of thousands of pale yellow bricks, stacked high and deep, the heat and haze of orange red kiln fires, afternoon sunbeams shining through the white alumina dust and silica floating in the air, the stoned glazed eyes of my workmates and their smiling faces, the steaming hot showers at the end of a shift and the acrid fumes of diesel and acid mixed with the sweet smell of grass on a summer’s evening as we looked forward to the weekend ahead. Good times...

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