

Robison Bros & Co. Pty. Ltd. Melbourne

by Des Williams

They are the most sought-after Australian-made diving helmet. Here Des Williams delves into the history of the Australian company, about which we know very little.

The discovery of gold in 1851 had a profound effect on Melbourne's fledgling engineering industry. Initially shortages of skilled workers and escalating costs made business difficult, but by 1854 the introduction of deep lead alluvial mining and quartz-mining was creating a demand for heavy mining machinery. The city's rapid growth also created a demand for new products, with ornamental cast-iron lace and columns being turned out amid stamp batteries and pumps for the mines.

Robison Bros & Co. P/L was founded by James McFarlane Robison and his brothers in 1854, initially as plumbers and coppersmiths, the firm expanded into general engineering, boiler-making and brass, iron and steel foundries and became Melbourne's most important engineering firm. They constructed railway bridges, gold mining equipment, railway rolling stock and locomotives, pumping stations, brewing vessels, abattoir machinery, amongst much else and including the first turnstiles at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. By



the early 1860's, Melbourne boasted over a dozen engineering works and firms extended onto the low-lying ground south of the Yarra River, marking the beginnings of a major concentration of engineering in South Melbourne. These were the boom years.

At this time, the Colony of Victoria's largest manufacturers, merchants and traders were producing currency tokens, as a form of advertising and to help alleviate the shortage of small currency coins in circulation. Merchant's Tokens were produced by Stokes Ltd in Melbourne, at the expense of the



In 1935, Robison Bros. (in liquidation) was purchased by Valentine Henderson of Henderson's Federal Spring Works and operated as Robison Bros. and Co. (1935) Pty Ltd until it finally closed on 4 April, 1973.

During World War II, Defence work brought experience in making precision tooling, gauges and jigs and mass production as well as introducing new technologies such as magnesium casting. It was during this period that Robison Bros manufactured deep sea diver helmets under two contracts for the Dept. of Defence, during 1943 and again in 1945. The helmets were manufactured in very small quantities. There are very few of the 1943

merchants, in return for their advertising embossed on one side. In 1862, Robison Bros engaged in this form of advertising, with their penny token.

The telephone helped shape everyday life in Melbourne, at least as much as roads, shipping and railways. Australia's first commercial telephone service connected the Flinders Street offices and South Melbourne foundry of Robison Brothers in 1879. Their telephone number was Melb 1.

In the 1880's, Robison Bros & Co. P/L crashed with the collapse of the land boom and was reconstructed in 1888-94 on a reduced scale. Alfred Deakin (later, Australia's second Prime Minister) was Chairman of Directors during this period.

The greatest contributor to public expenditure was the Victorian Railways, which in the

peak year of 1889 let £300,000 worth of contracts to Melbourne firms for everything from dog spikes and platelayers' trolleys, to goods wagons and bridge girders. Among the several foundries in operation, Robison Bros won a contract to build 25 locomotives for Melbourne suburban lines, breaking the virtual stranglehold that the Phoenix Foundry at Ballarat had held on Victorian locomotive contracts since 1871. The company also cast several of the bronze monuments around the city of Melbourne, the most notable being that erected to the ill-fated Burke and Wills Expedition. It now stands in Swanston Street.



production run about these days, but some fine examples of the 1945 contract output still exist in the hands of collectors. These robust, utilitarian helmets were obviously the product of a company used to manufacturing heavy machinery and steam locomotives, as they are much heavier than most helmets manufactured overseas. The Robison helmet today, is the 'jewel in the crown' of any serious helmet collection. It is thought that because the 1945 contract was let so close to the end of the war, more of this batch survived, some in excellent condition. Of course we do not



over the years, so you can imagine my astonishment when I came across a retired abalone diver, here in Melbourne, who produced during my visit, a mint condition Robison helmet he has had for 40 years. They are such a rare helmet and I'd challenge anyone to show me a better example. The helmet (stamped No: 22) has never been in the water and has not a mark on it! Certainly an exciting day for this reporter, to see

References: University of Melbourne Archives, Matthew S. Churchward, Burnell, J.G., 'One hundred years of engineering in Victoria: Part II Industrial development', *Journal of Institution of Engineers Australia*, vol. 6, October, 1934, pp. 407-12. Linge, G.J.R., *Industrial awakening: A geography of Australian manufacturing, 1788 to 1890*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979.

On the previous pages we show the Robison which has never been in the water, a steam locomotive built by the company and the Robison Merchant token. On this page are the statue of Burke and Wills, along with Des Willams trying the Robison for size.

know how many were destroyed by the Dept. of Defence after the war either. This helmet is rare and it is believed there may have been only 50 produced in the 1945 contract. The Robison helmet in the Langley Helmet Collection at the MTQ in Townsville is numbered #47, but I am unaware of a higher surviving number, at the time of writing this offering.

Melbourne born WW2 salvage diver, Harry Chadwick, served his boiler-maker's apprenticeship at Robison Bros. during the late 1930's. Harry told me some years ago, that the Robison helmets were not popular with divers, because of their extra weight, so maybe this also has something to do with low number of surviving helmets.

At HDS SEAP, we have seen some lovely Robison helmets in the hands of a few very proud Australian collectors

such a fine helmet ... and yes, it IS for sale for the right price!

