

*The Brickmasters 1788-2008*, RON RINGER.

Horsley Park: Dry Press Publishing, 2008; xii + 433 pp; photographs, maps, plans, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$75.00.

This history of brickmaking resembles a brick. It is a deep brown colour. It is thick and heavy. It would make an excellent door stop. But it is too good to be relegated to such a task.

Ron Ringer was commissioned to write a history of Brickworks Ltd and its precursor, the Austral Brick Co Ltd. He has used the opportunity to write a history of brickmaking in Sydney from 1788 onwards. Commencing with the making of bricks under James Bloodsworth in the 1790s, he details the making of bricks, the lives of brickmakers and associated workers such as brick carters and brick yard employees. He meshes this into an overview the growth of building in Sydney, and to a lesser extent, building across the state. As well as delineating the role of brickyard owners until well into the twentieth century, he includes much detail about the working lives of their employees and the sheer hard grind of what was a very physically demanding job.

The initial chapters of the book are marred by an infirm grasp of historical change in Sydney and a number of curious errors of fact. The Rum Hospital contractors, for example, were not paid in rum (p30) but were given the right to import a large quantity of that liquor. And typographical errors mar the text at times. The book, however, has many strengths.

The pictures are excellent, many not seen before. The 1951 *Women's Weekly* cover on page 224 eloquently encapsulates the woes of home building in the 1950s. Most importantly, we now have a detailed and extensive overview of the history of brickmaking in Sydney, which will be of particular use to practitioners in the heritage industry working on Sydney's built environment. The work's careful explanation of technical matters is clear and comprehensive. Changes in brick manufacturing techniques are not only tied to technical innovation but also to the nature of the clays brick-making firms in different localities were obliged to use. A key point that emerges from this work is that Sydney clays were different from those of Melbourne, so works about brickmaking in Melbourne should be used with caution when discussing the Sydney situation. The different types and shapes of bricks turned out over the years across Sydney are not only explained but illustrated.

A major strand that runs through this work is the relationship between the different brick and clay working companies and the bewildering array of sales groups, cartels, consortia and 'joint marketing arrangements', coupled with complex cross directorships of various brick companies. I have long been trying to get a grip on these matters. Ringer has clarified all of this which is indeed a major achievement.

Unlike many historians writing histories of a company or business, Ringer delves deep into the personal lives of directors, brick pit owners and their workers. A great deal of oral history research has gone into this work much more than is superficially apparent at first. A strong concentration on the Dawes family who were involved with the Austral Brick Co for decades forms the core of the book, but does not overwhelm it. Issues of personality and family are brought to life in ways that are rare in company history.

The work is never dull. Though it may be technical at times, explanations are clear and accurate. Anecdotes and insights also enliven what could have been a very dry subject. This work will sit on my book shelves next to other key brickmaking texts such as Nora Peek and Chris Pratten's *Working the Clays: The Brickmakers of the Ashfield District* and Warwick Gemmell's *And So We Graft From Six to Six: The Brick Makers of New South Wales*. And it will be referred to just as often as key text on brickmaking in Sydney for a long time to come.

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