

a fine sunny afternoon, spotted a newly opened hotel and dropped in for a cup of tea. It was a seaside holiday hotel, not a pub.

She chatted with the new proprietors, John and Ada Mead, recently from Auckland, New Zealand, and they became good friends. Telling them that we used to run a b&b guesthouse, they one day asked her if she was interested in helping out in their tea rooms, saying that she could take Peter with her. I had some reservations about it, but eventually agreed.

She did very well there, in the summer months making more than I was at the docks. But best of all, she was extremely happy. The work suited her. She stayed with them until in 1957 they became homesick, decided to sell up and return to New Zealand. By that time, however, we had decided to migrate to Australia.

In the middle fifties, conditions in England were deteriorating. Wages were low and we were being plagued by strikes. Many heavy industries, shipbuilding yards in particular, were closing down. Overseas contracts were being cancelled because of strike action by militant unions. I quote the instance of the 'Screwy Strike' where ships being fitted out were using aluminium faced plywood panelling.

The shipwrights claimed it as their work, the metalworkers said it was theirs. So they all went out on strike. Thousands of shipyard workers all over the country were idle. We maintenance workers were not affected as we didn't use that material, but they tried hard to bring us into it. It went on for week after week, finally being agreed that the metalworkers would drill the holes and the shipwrights screw the panels in position. It was a totally unworkable solution. So it went on, strike after strike, meanwhile work that traditionally went to British industries began going overseas, first to Europe, and when they too started to have union trouble, to Asia.

I had the opportunity to do some relief work as chippy on the train ferries. An occasional trip only, but enough for me to get restless and want to get away from all this union trouble, and go to sea again. There was one drawback however, Rene often reminded me that the 'Next time you go to sea,' she said, 'I am going with you.'

Emigration

It was the time when we were being bombarded with advertisements. 'Migrate to Australia,' the ad's said, '£10 (\$20) a head, children free.' Surprise surprise, when I broached the subject, never thinking that Rene would agree, she was enthusiastic. We sent in our application, were interviewed at Australia

House in London and accepted. I quickly found a job in Townsville where I was to run tourist boats to the Barrier Reef and be responsible for their maintenance.

Accommodation was to be made available. Sounded great, but unfortunately, Rene's doctor who had been in Townsville during the war advised against it, saying that she would never stand the heat. So we then checked the weather reports for the whole of Australia, finally deciding on Tasmania. I wrote to the secretary of the Royal Hobart Yacht Club who quickly found me a job and agreed to sponsor me. All we had to do then was wait for a ship.

At that time, immigration was by sea, many ships being specially chartered for the purpose. We had a little over a year to wait, but put the time and my cheap rail tickets to good use by doing the rounds of all our relations saying 'farewell.' We also had one final holiday at a holiday camp in Sussex.

With mixed feelings, we sold up our home and furniture, packed our bags and finally boarded *TV Fairsky* at Southampton in June 1958. Settling into a comfortable four-berth cabin on B deck we had time to explore the ship before sailing that evening. *Fairsky* was a new liner, converted from a wartime aircraft carrier, still smelling of fresh paint. This was to be her maiden voyage as a passenger ship. To us, and most of our fellow passengers used to the austerity of wartime England, she was the height of luxury.

Sailing from Southampton on a fine, sunny summer evening, Rene and I stood on deck, seeing, perhaps for the last time, the familiar sights of Hampshire, of our former home town Gosport, the oh so familiar entrance to Portsmouth Harbour. To starboard, my favourite prewar playground, the Isle of Wight. It brought a lump to my throat. 'What have we let ourselves in for?' I said. No reply. I guess she felt as I did.

That feeling soon passed when we quickly made friends with those who shared our table at dinner that night and for the rest of the voyage. Later we entered the Bay of Biscay which was living up to its reputation, very rough. Rene was seasick and took to her bunk, where she stayed, right through Biscay and the Mediterranean until we docked at Port Said. The skills of our steward, even the ships doctor's attentions were to no avail.

Never having experienced sea sickness myself, caring for her, Bob who was also sick for a day or two, and looking after three-year-old Peter was no problem. I was enjoying myself. Two of our dining room companions, both male were seasick, their wives were not, so for the first few days I was companion to two ladies and their children.

One day, another passenger asked me, 'Just which one is your wife? I've seen you with three different ladies and a whole bunch of children.'

‘They’re all mine,’ I said, trying to keep a straight face. ‘My religion you know.’ Then I continued, ‘One is a good cook, one an excellent housekeeper, and I’m not going to tell you of the expertise of the other one.’ At that time Rene was on deck looking at the sights of the Suez Canal, so I could point her out to him. For some days after I was the recipient of many strange looks from fellow passengers until they twigged that it was all a leg-pull.

I enjoyed seeing the canal again and being able to point out familiar landmarks. Our run ashore in Aden was a pleasant interlude, in spite of the intense heat. We were met at the gangway by a friend and his wife. He was doing a spell of duty at the RAF base just outside Aden. ‘What would you like to do,’ they asked, ‘see the sights or come home for a cup of tea?’

Having spent the last couple of weeks on an Italian ship where only coffee was served, we decided on the tea option. It was delicious. After a few hours ashore we continued through the Red Sea. Once into the Indian Ocean, again we struck bad weather, once more, Rene taking to her bunk. There she stayed until we reached Fremantle.

I digress a while here to explain that as far as seasickness goes, Rene was incurable. I have known her to be violently ill even on a cruise from Hobart up-river to New Norfolk. We took the local train from Fremantle and spent a few hours seeing the sights of Perth. Then off again across the Great Australian Bight to Melbourne where we landed. A quick flight across Bass Strait brought us to Hobart on a cold, wet winter evening on 26 July 1958, exactly one month after leaving England.



Part 2

Chapter 4

A New Life: 1958 – 1990

For the unprepared, the first look at life in Australia could be a shock to the system. Once the novelty of living in a strange land had worn off, some began making comparisons. But they were in a new country, a new environment, in some aspects a totally new experience. Hopeful migrants arrived with stars in their eyes, fully expecting to be welcomed with open arms and good jobs waiting.

The welcome was there, but one had to prove oneself by being willing to start at the bottom, so to speak. Some made the mistake of voicing their comparisons openly only to succeed in offending the locals. Then came the often well deserved derisive comments – ‘Pommie bastards, 10 quid wonders, whinging Poms, if you don’t like it why don’t you go back to where you came from?’

My own reaction to those comments was amusement, I found that there was no malice intended except to those who deserved it. Fortunately, the whingers were in the minority. We who had done our homework looked to the future. Here there were better prospects for getting a new start in this new land and we were prepared for a few setbacks and disappointments.

On the ship coming out, long before we reached our destination, it was easy to spot those who would never make a go of it. They were forever finding fault and quarreling. They were not pioneering types, would never be able to settle in the next town, let alone a country on the other side of the world.

Rene and I liked Tasmania right from the start. We quickly found a comfortable flat at Fern Tree, on the lower slopes of Mount Wellington. Soon after we settled in, there was a knock on the door. There stood a man who,

with a broad Yorkshire accent, introduced his wife saying ‘We’ve coom to welcome our new neighbours.’ They soon introduced us to their friends, most of them were like us – ‘New Chums’ – newly arrived British migrants. We spent a few happy months there, quickly adapting to a new way of life.

I loved Fern Tree with its quiet rural environment, even though it was only a 20-minute ride from the city centre. Our flat was one of five in a large colonial-style house. The only buildings nearby, other than a few houses, were the Fern Tree Hotel, a delightful little Swiss style church and a general store. One had only to go out the back door and there was the bush.

On Saturdays I would enjoy taking the boys out there to cut the week’s supply of firewood. With our neighbours, we would spend all day in the bush cutting up fallen trees and exploring the many trails in the area. At lunchtime, the ladies would join us, bringing flasks of tea and sandwiches.

There were a few leeches and the occasional snake but we soon learned to cope with them. One day little Peter, he was only three at the time, got a leech on his leg. Without a word, he ran home, took the salt cellar and poured a liberal dose of salt onto the leech, that being the time-honoured method of removing the pest. Poor Rene nearly had hysterics. Being a Londoner she wasn’t accustomed to a rural existence. An incident like that was enough for her to want to move into Hobart where she could be surrounded by houses and shops. After only a few months she had her wish.

We were frequent visitors to social events run by the Good Neighbour Council, an organisation to assist newly arrived migrants in settling into their new environment. Volunteer workers, mostly former migrants who had succeeded in the settling-in process, visited new arrivals and gave valuable assistance in contacting the various organisations and government departments committed to the immigration programme.

The most important was finding suitable housing. In that respect, we struck lucky. One of the volunteers, an elderly gentleman wanting a live-in housekeeping family, no objection to children, offered us a home in Lenah Valley, a Hobart suburb, rent free, in return for Rene’s housekeeping duties, caring for him and my assistance with general maintenance and in the garden. We stayed with him for about 18 months until we were able to move into a home of our own.

In the short time we lived at Fern Tree and Lenah Valley, I joined the British Ex-Service Legion and the Royal Automobile Club of Tasmania social club. At their various social functions we made many friends, most of them in our own age group and British migrants, all facing the same settling-in

problems. Those friendships lasted for many years and to this day I am still in touch with some of them although sadly, most have now passed on.

The legion was at that time very active in looking to the needs of British ex-servicemen, until some years later when the Returned and Services League (RSL) took on that task. The Legion then ceased to exist. At the RACT, I joined the cribbage team and for many years played in inter-club competitions.

Within a few days of our arrival, I started work with Jock Muir, one of Australia's best known boatbuilders. I had applied for the job before leaving UK and was led to believe that I was going to work in an up-to-date, well-established yard. What a disappointment! The yard was small, with only five employees, yet it had a reputation for turning out first-class yachts and fishing boats.

True, both my boss Jock and his brother were fine craftsmen with a wealth of experience, but the working conditions were deplorable. No washing facilities, just a tap in the yard, and the toilet was a primitive structure at the end of the jetty, open to all the elements. Payday was Friday if we were lucky. Then sometimes it was by cheque, sometimes part cash with the balance by cheque. That was inconvenient with the banks closing at 3 p.m. No late night shopping in those days, only a few corner shops open till late and at weekends.

I had to risk being labelled a 'Whinging Pom' but I was not prepared to tolerate those conditions. I stuck it for a few months and then looked around for something better. It wasn't easy. Being 12,000 miles (19,300km) away from our families and friends led to periods of homesickness, but we soon overcame that. Rene found part-time work as a doctor's receptionist that gave her an added interest and helped us financially.

Bobby was well settled in Hobart High School and Peter played happily at home or at the doctor's waiting room. I had bought a small car, a 1939 Hillman Minx, so we were able to go out and about at weekends, exploring the countryside.

On The Waterfront

In the background of the picture opposite is the old floating bridge linking Hobart to the eastern shore suburbs. This was constructed in the 1940s of interlocking pontoons with a lift span on the western end for ships proceeding upriver to the wharves at Risdon. This bridge connected with the roads leading to the east coast and the Port Arthur peninsula. There is another bridge about 10 miles upstream at Bridgewater also with a lift span and had a road and rail link to the Midland Highway to Launceston and the north.

The 1959 fruit season was about to start, the port beginning to fill with ships loading apples for the British and European markets. Those ships, mostly British, had unloaded their cargos at various mainland ports before coming to Hobart. I got a job as shipwright with the firm holding the dunnage contract for these ships. Dunnaging a ship consists of preparing the holds for the safe stowage of a cargo.

With a fragile cargo such as fruit, it is a complex operation, very labour intensive and requiring large quantities of timber. When the season was in full swing, we had 90 shipwrights working, many of them transferees from mainland ports, in addition to the hundreds of wharfies (stevedores or longshoremen) loading the ships.

To be employed there I had to join the union. Would you believe it!, after the union hassles back in England, I found that all the officials of the Hobart branch were former workers of the Clydeside shipyards in Scotland where a lot of the industrial disputes and strikes originated. But that's another story.

Back to dunnaging. For us shipwrights, there was a 'pickup office' located between Victoria and Constitution Docks, where Mure's fish restaurant stands



The port of Hobart, 1960

today. Here we gathered each day, sometimes morning, sometimes at night, to be assigned to a ship. Our first job was to ‘floor’ a hold, that is cover the entire deck with 3” x 3” timber bearers and 6” x 1” planks. With four or five holds in each ship, we were kept busy. So that the wharfies could get an early start at loading, all flooring work was done at night.

For a fast job, we were awarded piece-work, a system in which a price is paid for a specific task instead of an hourly rate of pay, the price being ‘negotiated’ with the contractor by one of our Scottish union men. This was an incentive for a fast job within the allotted time and usually ensured us a generous pay packet.

With flooring completed, we were then assigned to the wharfie gangs, two chippies to a gang. For a fast load, large holds needed four gangs. Our job was to ensure that each layer of cases of apples was level and had battens laid in between so that cold air could be circulated all the time the ship was at sea.

This was necessary to ensure that the apples arrived at the markets in good condition. To maintain an even stow of cargo, we had to construct shelving to conform with the changing shape of the ship’s side as the level of stowage got higher. It was very hard work, especially at the start of loading when we had to climb a 60-foot vertical ladder to get to the bottom of a hold.

Working hours were long, 8 a.m., sometimes earlier, to 11 p.m., Monday to Friday, half-day Saturday and all day Sunday, mostly of course at the agreed overtime rates. In addition, if assigned to an outport, e.g. Port Huon, a small four-berth port about 30 miles (48km) south of Hobart, there was a ‘living away’ allowance plus accommodation and meals.

With a fruit season lasting about 12 weeks, one could earn a lot of money. Making friends with local orchardists, I got to know a lot about apples. There were far more varieties then than there are today, some being ready for picking early in the season, others at later stages. We all had our favourites and so indulged ourselves. A bushel case, about 40 lbs (18kg) of good quality fruit would cost us five shillings (50 cents).

Towards the end of that season, the Marine Board of Hobart had advertised for a Shipwright Surveyor. I sent in my application. Fortunate in being the only one of a large number of applicants with previous survey experience, mine was successful.

This Board, the largest of the four Marine Boards, was responsible to the Government for all maritime matters relating to the coast of Tasmania. The other Marine Boards were Launceston, Devonport and Burnie. Their responsibilities covered the administration and operation of ports, harbours, estuaries, pilotage, marker-buoys and beacons.