

# VicRoads Association

## Newsletter No. 239



Membership of the Association is available to all who have been members of VicRoads or forerunner organisations or the spouse of deceased members, and bestows on them all the rights of the Rules of Association. Cost of membership is a once only fee of \$50. Enquiries about membership or receipt of the Newsletter by e-mail should be directed to the Secretary, VicRoads Association, PO Box 80, Kew 3101 or by phone or e-mail as shown in the footer below. Visit our website at [vicroadsassociation.org](http://vicroadsassociation.org)

### Dear Members,

I am not sure when this newsletter comes out but it is likely that it will be the last before Christmas. I therefore want to wish all of you a very happy and festive time with your friends and families.

For me, Christmas is a time of reflection. It is as much about the memories that come out of a special time which I have consciously celebrated for nearly eighty years. I don't remember the first few! I'm sure that many of us cherish these memories and reflect on them as we approach Christmas for another year. We may remember time spent with people we see often, people we haven't seen in a while, or loved ones we've lost. Regardless, the good memories we have of them are everlasting.

However, Christmas memories don't always have to be about remembering people. Oftentimes, our senses and Christmas spirit play a huge role in what we remember: a certain smell may bring back memories of Grandma's kitchen, or a festive jingle creates a nostalgic feel. I will always remember the chatter and laughter of my aunts preparing the ducks or the turkey for cooking in Mum's wood stove. Perhaps seeing the excitement of our grandchildren opening their Christmas gifts invokes our own memories of childhood. One of my aunts gave me a cap pistol with about 50 caps, for three years in a row. Once I fired the caps I was no longer interested but all these years later, I still remember it.

I spent two Christmases in England where the snow wasn't fake but the friendship was genuine. The first (in 1964) was spent with Australian friends in a large house in Norwich. It snowed on Christmas Eve and it was the first time I had ever seen snow. We built a snowman in the front garden and tucked a can of Foster's beer in his arms. We have had a life-long friendship with those people ever since and have celebrated later Christmases with some of them.

A year later, we celebrated Christmas with our English neighbours in the tiny village of Pulverbatch in Shropshire. Our daughter, Sara, was only a fortnight old. Our neighbours, Peter and Cecile, owned the delightful 15th Century hotel next door – the White Horse Inn. We exchanged gifts and indulged in food and wine that only Peter and Cecile could conjure – pheasant and rich plum pudding with all the doings. All the while it was snowing. We keep in touch with Peter and Cecile – albeit spasmodically. We went across to England to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary and they have come out to Australia to see us. That Christmas was a catalyst for a life of friendship.



The White Horse Inn today.

As a child, we mostly celebrated Christmas at our place because we had a large back room (which Mum called the vestibule) where we could set up rows of trestle tables to accommodate about 30 adults and children. Drinks would be served in the good room at around 11.30 am. These drinks included beer, sherry or lemonade shandy for the adults and usually the most garish coloured soft drink for the kids. My family weren't big drinkers so there was a sense of naughtiness in the imbibing. We ate shortbread or a slice of hedgehog "but not too much as you'll be having dinner soon". In those days

## What's coming up

### Occasional Lunches at Shoppingtown Hotel 12 noon

Our next lunch will be held on Monday 6 February 2023. There is no longer a requirement to contact Kelvin York – just turn up.

### Annual Golf Day Friday 2 December 2022

We have decided to cancel the Golf Day this year. The course is still under repair following the heavy rains and the refurbishment program. We will schedule another one for late next year.

### Introduction continued

it was always 'dinner' at lunchtime. Sometimes Auntie Jean did her rendition of the one-armed fiddler which had us all in stitches. After lunch we sat in the coolness of the good room until 3.30 when all the men had to go off and milk the cows. They returned about 7 o'clock and it started all over again.

I remember it every year!

Every family has its traditions and I should have invited you to tell me about yours. I extend all best wishes to members and their families and sincerely hope that they enjoy their Christmas memories and create new ones.

David Jellie,  
Chairman and Editor

## New members

We welcome the following new members to the Association – John Clinch and Graeme Newman.



### Christmas Lunch at Waverley RSL Monday 12 December 2022, 12 noon

Our Christmas lunch will be held on the above date at the Waverley RSL Club which is located at the eastern end of Coleman Parade near the Glen Waverley Shopping Centre. For those wishing to travel by public transport, the RSL is opposite Glen Waverley Station which is the end of the line. There is ample off-street parking adjacent to the centre.

We are planning to start at 12 noon and we will sit down to lunch at around 12.30 pm. We have booked a separate room on the first floor with access via the lift. The cost of the lunch will be \$45 per head payable in advance. This cost covers a two course (main and dessert) with two options for each course with alternating serves. Drinks are available at the bar located in the room at bar prices. It is easier if you have photo ID for entry to the club. Your driver licence will do.

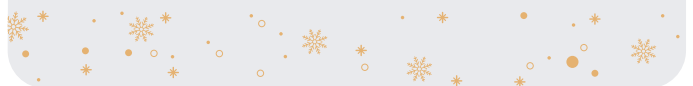
If you wish to attend, please contact Ken Vickery on 0409 561 618 or [kenvickery@tpg.com.au](mailto:kenvickery@tpg.com.au)

Payment should be made in advance via electronic transfer to the VicRoads Association account as follows:

BSB: 083323  
Account number: 170934017

Please make sure when paying that you include your name as the transaction reference so that the payment can be attributed to you.

This is an excellent venue and last year's lunch was the most successful ever. It would be wonderful to catch up with you to celebrate Christmas.



# What's been happening

## Visit to the North East Link (NEL) Program – 17 October 2022

A group of 27 people attended the briefing at the Watsonia Information Hub, 17 Watsonia Road, Watsonia. Elizabeth Patena welcomed us and provided an overview of the project. Tony Frodsham talked about traffic issues, Alex Macaronas talked about the tunnel s package, Tallis Richmond described the North Packafe, Adrian Lim the South Package and Stuart Dangerfield spoke about safety management.

The project will provide a connection between the Metropolitan Ring Road at Greensborough to the Eastern Freeway in Bulleen as shown on the map below.

It is the largest investment in a road project in Victoria's history.

It will complete the missing link in Melbourne's orbital freeway between an upgraded Eastern Freeway and the M80 Ring Road.

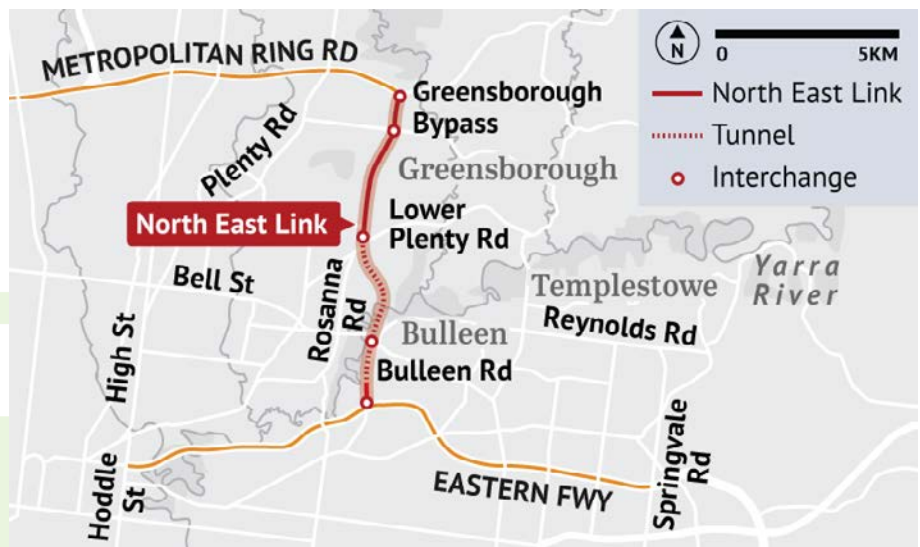
NEL will improve traffic flow, reduce travel times, remove non-local traffic from local roads and increase reliability for road users with up to 135,000 vehicles using the freeway daily. It is estimated that NEL will take up to 15,000 trucks off local roads resulting in reduced travel times for freight and associated industries. NEL is expected to reduce travel times by up to 35 minutes across the project corridor.

The \$11.1 billion Primary Package was procured and will be delivered as an 'availability-based' Public Private Partnership with an Incentivised Target Cost (ITC) regime that applies in respect of costs incurred during the design and construction phase of the project.

The contract for the Primary Package has been awarded to the Spark consortium. The Spark consortium comprises WeBuild, GS Engineering and Construction, CPB Contractors, China Construction Oceania, Ventia, Capella Capital, John Laing Investments, DIF and Pacific Partnerships.

The Primary Package scope includes:

- twin, three-lane tunnels 6.5 km long
- a split interchange at Lower Plenty Road and Manningham Road, and an upgrade on the existing interchange South of Bulleen Road to accommodate the tunnel on-ramp and a new interchange west of Thompsons Road to service the new Bulleen Park and Ride and accommodate the tunnel off- and on-ramps
- new and upgraded green land bridges, development of extensive shared user paths and walking and cycling infrastructure, to form a new North East Trail network



- high quality outcomes in open space, noise walls design and maximising tree canopy replacement.

The other remaining project elements of NEL will delivered under separate packages, including:

- upgrades to sections of the M80 Ring Road and Eastern Freeway, including interchange upgrades
- delivery of a new Bulleen Park and Ride, and upgrades to the existing Doncaster Park and Ride
- design, construction and maintenance of the NEL Tolling Collection Capability, including tolling services, systems, communications and structures.

The new link will be tolled, with the State retaining toll revenues initially, while the Eastern Freeway and the M80 Ring Road will remain toll free. A State-owned company (State Tolling Corporation) has been established to collect tolls for NEL with toll revenue going towards the cost of building and maintaining the project.

It is expected that all the contract packages will be staged to complete at around the same time for an opening in 2027-28.

After the briefing, we repaired to the Watsonia RSL for a very pleasant lunch.



I will provide more information about the project in later editions.

Howard Hughes and James (Jim) Trajcevski enjoying lunch together.

## Vale

We extend our sympathy to the family and friends of the following members who have died.

### Charles Spicer

(ex-Geelong Division). I have no details about Charles' death. A newsletter was returned to us noting his recent death.

### June O'Regan

Her husband, John, rang me to say that June had died on 14 October at Yarrawonga at the age of 90. They had shifted from Melbourne to Yarrawonga about seven years ago. I am not quite sure where June worked but I think she may have been on the Eastern Freeway.

### Peter Coxon

Jim McClusky rang me to say that Peter had died recently and provided me with the following tribute.

Peter passed away on 15 October 2022 after suffering from pulmonary fibrosis for several years. He was 74.

Peter joined the then CRB in the 1970s as a Licensed Surveyor and worked in a number of areas through its transition from the CRB through the Road Construction Authority and VicRoads to the Department of Transport. He undertook a number of roles within the land information and survey discipline including work on construction (notably the West Gate Freeway), in the Photogrammetry Section, and in Survey Operations. Peter took on these varied roles with enthusiasm.

After taking early retirement in 2007 Peter re-joined VicRoads in the maintenance area at Burwood East. He finally retired due to ill health early this year.

Peter was always a cheerful presence at work, willing to embrace new technologies and to improve workplace practices. He was a positive contributor at team and management meetings. Not only was he a valued colleague, but was a friend and mentor to many. The work that he did has made a positive contribution to the Victorian road network.

Peter married Dianne in 1975 and they have two daughters, Catherine and Anne. Peter took a keen interest in both of their careers, and in recent years he was blessed with the arrival of grandson William.

A private service was held on 25 October to celebrate Peter's life where he was remembered by family and friends.

### Colonel Geoffrey Robert Hunt RFD ED

Geoff died on 8th November 2022 aged 91 years. In addition to his career with the CRB and its successor, he had a distinguished career in the Army as the Commanding Officer (CO) of 22nd Construction Regiment of the Royal Australian Engineers.

Geoff started in Bridge Branch and was transferred to Bairnsdale Division to supervise bridge construction and maintenance in East Gippsland. When Peter Lowe transferred to Bairnsdale a few years later, Peter took over bridge duties and Geoff transferred to road construction and maintenance. He later transferred to Horsham Division in Western Victoria as Assistant Divisional Engineer. In the 1970s he became Project Engineer on the Wallan-Broadford Section of the Hume Freeway. This was the first section of the Hume Highway to be converted to freeway standards. He then transferred to Head Office as Specifications and Contracts Engineer.

Geoff joined the Citizens Military Service (CMF) on 31 August 1955 as a Lieutenant and was posted to 22nd Construction Regiment. He enlisted into the military under the Supplementary Reserve (SR) scheme and was part of 22nd Construction Regiment just after its establishment and in its formative years.

He quickly adapted to the military environment rising through the ranks to obtain the rank of Colonel. During his service he held appointments as the Officer in Charge 107 Plant Squadron, (1966), CO 22 Construction Regiment (1975) and as Commander 6 Construction Group (1980–1983) (later known as 6 Engineer Group). He retired from the military on 31st December 1983. He also served for a period with Logistics Command where he was involved in planning of exercises. He attended Field Forces Engineer exercises conducted at Darwin and Katherine and attended a Field Force Command Logistics Staff Course on campus at Sydney University's St Andrew's College in 1978.

In January 1963 Geoff took part in the very successful exercise conducted at Wewak in Papua New Guinea which involved construction of bridges and roads in extremely difficult conditions. 22nd Construction Regiment deployed with a very substantial contingent who relieved 21 Construction Squadron in place.

In 1971 Geoff undertook active service in Vietnam as part of the Officer Training Scheme and detailed his experiences in his diary. It is a detailed daily record of his experiences and a great insight to his experience.

In 1980, as Commander 6 Engineer Group, Geoff brought together the five main SR units for a series of exercises which saw the individual squadrons take on tasks in the field which really tested their capabilities. The exercise proved to be an outstanding success and reinforced the value of the SR terms of service.

Although Geoff's time in the military finished a long time ago there is no doubt that this forward-thinking sapper helped shape and develop the Royal Australian Engineers in Victoria as we know it today.

Geoff is survived by his children Ian and Kate and three grandchildren – his wife Betty pre-deceased him in 2019.



Lt Colonel Geoff Hunt (seated centre) with officers of 22 Construction Regiment. Captain Peter McCulloch is seated on his right and Captain Noel Osborne on his left.

## News from members

### Bill Brake

Bill wrote to me in response to my requests for information about people in the last few newsletters. This is what he wrote.

*'Dear David,*

*Having read the last issue of the newsletter I thought I had some information that would answer your questions. Please excuse the writing as I have no alternative. I am 99 and living in a unit in a retirement village.*

*In 1945 I joined the Army (VX96311) and at the war's end I was in the final stages of my training building a bridge over the Murrumbidgee River at Wagga Wagga. Frank Jackson did return to Bairnsdale after the war where he was a draftsman and general rouseabout. I think it would have been in 1950 when he moved to Melbourne as deputy to Roy V. Quick in the Pipe Testing Section of the Bridge Sub-branch.*

*Leo Russell replaced me when I moved to Benalla in June 1953 and he lived in the house that we vacated. When I moved to Dandenong in November 1955, Jack Ryan was a clerk doing general clerical duties under the then Divisional Engineer's clerk, Bob Boucher. I think Jack lived east of Box Hill.*

*Frank Docking moved to Dandenong as Divisional Engineer and when Bob Boucher retired, the other Jack Ryan moved from Divisional Engineer's clerk at Traralgon to Divisional Engineer's clerk at Dandenong.*

*You do a great job with the newsletters and they are always interesting reading. All the best and I hope you have been able to read the scrawl.*

*Bill Brake.'*

I was very pleased to receive this letter from Bill. He was a member of the Board when I was working on the South Melbourne Section of the West Gate Freeway and he was always supportive of our work. He was also on the committee of the VicRoads Association when I became President in 2003. I was amazed at his wide-ranging knowledge of the organisation and, between he and Tom Russell, I always had reliable sources of information about people and events. From his letter, you can see that he still has this ability.

I rang Bill and arranged to call down to see him at his home in Dingley. Peter Lowe joined us and we had a couple of hours talking and mainly laughing about our reminiscences. Bill is 99 years young with a mind as sharp as a tack. He looks after himself – does his own shopping and cooking – and his only problem in life is his poor hearing, which he has suffered for a long time. Bill was also able to put me straight on his entry in Roads to War. He loves reading the news about everyone in the newsletter and extends his best wishes to everyone. He is quite a remarkable man but with typical humility, he would deny it!

## Lunch with the three Peters

I recently had lunch down at Hastings with Peter Lowe, Peter McCullough and Peter Hosking. I had made an earlier visit to see Peter McCullough and it was then that we hatched the plot to catch up with Peters Lowe and Hosking.



Peter Hosking, Peter Lowe, David Jellie and Peter McCullough.

Peter McCullough has recently written a brief history of the Country Roads Board which includes some of his own recollections about people and events. It is a great source of information for me and with Peter's consent I will be able to publish some of them in future newsletters. Peter has a deep knowledge of the CRB and all its machinations. In 1978 Peter interviewed many people who had worked with the CRB and the RCA and gathered their stories on tape from which they were transcribed. It is due to Peter's recognition of the value of these stories that the publication of *Reminiscences of Life in the Country Roads Board* came about. It was a remarkable achievement – a wonderful oral history more readable than an academic history because of the colourful characters involved.

Peter and I share one passion which has caused us great sadness for some time. We both support the Essendon Bombers. Peter took me to the John Coleman statue in Hastings – where we both stood – heads bowed praying for his resurrection. It was a very precious moment. We also ignored the fact that although Coleman played for Hastings he was born in Port Fairy.



Peter also provided me with a dozen of his delicious home-grown eggs.

The great man with John Coleman. No! Peter McCullough with the Great Man.

## Jim Winnett



Jim Winnett – November 2022.

When I was a craven engineer in Bridge Design Division, there were two people who had a reputation for being able design a bridge on the back of a cigarette packet. They were Phil Read and Jim Winnett.

Phil was a big man – jovial and English. He had an immaculate, copperplate writing style and his engineering sketches were works of art. They were so clear and exact, it was hardly worth handing them over to the drafting section to be redrawn.

Even Jim would admit he didn't have Phil's hand, but he was able to produce a bridge design with minimal detail. At one of our recent lunches at Doncaster, Jim produced the following scrap of paper out of his bag.

In January 1971 the Snowy River experienced its worst ever flood. The river at Orbost was a mile wide with a maximum discharge of 7,790 cubic metres per second – the highest discharge ever recorded of a river in Australia. The water blasted out of the steep gorge at Bete Bolong and then dispersed across the flats slowing in velocity. However, the sheer quantity and force of water scoured straight through the huge sand dunes at Marlo – where it enters Bass Strait – and all the livestock on the river flats were swept many miles out to sea or were snagged in trees. It also scoured out the abutment at the Melbourne end thus severing the Princes Highway.

The bridge crossing at Orbost was – and still is – the only connection between eastern Victoria and southern NSW. The only other bridge crossing the Snowy River is McKillops Bridge between Wulgulmerang and Tubbut. This road is completely inaccessible to commercial traffic and is located in the most difficult terrain in Victoria. So, it became vital to repair the damaged crossing at Orbost as quickly as possible.

Jim was sent down to Orbost immediately after the flood and, standing on the bank of the river, he produced the drawing shown on the next page for a temporary bridge to span the gap using Bailey trusses. It contains all the details required and after about a half an hour he handed it the CRB Bridge Gang so that work could commence immediately.

It took three weeks to complete the work of opening up the Princes Highway to traffic – a truly remarkable achievement.



# LEST WE FORGET



The serviceman in this month's newsletter has a very special place in my memory as you will soon see. He is Alec Kennedy and he joined the RAAF and served in Bomber Command flying over Europe in the Second World War.

## Warrant Officer Alexander (Alec) Edward Kennedy 430454



Alec Kennedy's paybook photograph – January 1943.

Alec was born in Geelong in September 1924 and enlisted in the RAAF in January 1943. Alec has a special place in this narrative as he was one of my lecturers at the Gordon Institute of Technology when I was studying civil engineering. I held him in the highest possible regard, as did my fellow students, and at the time, I knew nothing about his war experience.

Alec attended Chilwell School No. 2061 in Geelong and I happened to

come across the photograph below showing him in Grade V in 1933. It seems such a long way for him to be flying across Europe in a bomber, a little more than 10 years later. There are 67 children in his class.



Grade V Chilwell School 1933. Alec is in the front row, fifth from the left.

For the three years before enlisting, he was employed as an apprentice carpenter with the Victorian Railways. He was 18 when he enlisted. Like other aircrew members mentioned here he undertook training in Wireless Air Gunnery and Radio School in far-flung places such as Parkes, Port Pirie, Ascot Vale, and Bradfield Park and he was awarded his Wireless Badge in September 1943 and his Air Gunner's Badge a month later. Through this period he was regularly promoted from Aircraftsman, Sergeant, Flight Sergeant and later, to Warrant Officer.

He embarked from Australia on 4 November 1943 and arrived in England on 10 December. He did further training in Scotland and England in Wellington and Halifax planes totalling 180 flying hours. He also undertook special training in Lancasters at Warboys in Cambridgeshire totalling 52 hours. Alec was then attached to two RAF squadrons – No. 158 and No. 635.

No. 158 was a Bomber Squadron of Halifax aircraft based at Lisset in Yorkshire. Although the majority of No. 158 Squadron crew were British, there were men from many other nations who served with the squadron. Canadian and Australian crewmen were by far the most numerous of non-British personnel in the squadron numbering 384 and 163 men respectively. Others came from New Zealand and there were also men from the U.S.A, Rhodesia, South Africa, Ceylon, the West Indies, Jamaica and Poland in the squadron.

I have found the names of Alec's crew in Squadron No. 158. The pilot, Peter Fewell, was an RAF officer and all the others – apart from Alec – were Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve members.



No 158 Squadron Halifax Bomber and crew.

No.635 Squadron was formed as part of the pathfinder force of Bomber Command and carried out that role from its formation in March 1944 until the end of the Second World War. Its first day of business was at RAF Downham Market in Norfolk on 20 March 1944 where it was to remain until it was disbanded. Initially, the squadron was equipped with Lancaster Mk. I bombers, but it re-equipped with Lancaster Mk. III, then Lancaster Mk.VI bombers soon after. The squadron took part in 189 raids, flying 2,225 sorties at a cost of 34 aircraft, a comparatively low 1.5% loss rate. After the end of the fighting the squadron performed transport duties for a few months before being disbanded at Downham Market on 1 September 1945. 19 Australians lost their lives while members of this squadron.

The last operations of 635 Squadron were daylight raids on 25 April, 1945 when four Lancasters attacked the gun batteries on the island of Wangerooge (off the German





coast near Bremerhaven), and 14 Lancasters attacked Hitler's nest at Berchtesgaden, Bavaria.

After war's end, 635 Squadron took part in operation Manna, ferrying prisoners of war home to England, and British troops from Italy. They began training for Tiger force, designed for operation in the Far East against Japan. These were long flights, anticipating much over-water flying. But when the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought about Japan's immediate surrender in August, the war was truly over. The Canadians, New Zealanders, Australians, with some South Africans and Poles also, were sent to their countries' holding depots to await transport home. It was reported that out of the 20 to 27



Assembling the Bailey bridge. Alec is in the white shirt, third from the left.



Assembling the Bailey bridge. Alec is standing in the foreground in the sleeveless sweater. Note the presence of Army personnel. I suspect the bridge panels belonged to the Army.



Launching the Bailey bridge.



The finished Bailey bridge.

## LEST WE FORGET



crews which had been operational in Squadron 635 during the war, only two complete crews could be mustered after all these had left.

Alec flew a total of 65 operational hours on raids in Europe – mainly in Belgium, France and Germany.

Alec was discharged in December 1945 and returned home to Australia.

On his return, Alec obtained a Diploma of Civil Engineering from the Gordon Institute of Technology and, after graduation, he joined the Geelong Division of the CRB. Among other things, Alec was the supervising engineer for the realignment of the Great Ocean Road at Urquhart Bluff (between Anglesea and Airey's Inlet) and was the engineer in charge of flood relief works at Hutt Gully west of Anglesea. The bridge at Hutt Gully was washed out in the floods of 1953 and Alec supervised the construction of the temporary Bailey bridge and the restoration of the road. The Bailey bridge was assembled on the Anglesea abutment and progressively launched towards Lorne.

Not long after his work at Hutt Gully, Alec left the CRB to become a lecturer in civil engineering at the Gordon. One of my fellow students, Gary White, recalls Alec explaining in a Civil 1 lecture how important it was to bench off, roll and compact the toe of the fill of an embankment –

'like they did at the CRB'. Gary said that this advice stayed with him when it was his turn to manage the Great Ocean Road. Gary spent all of his career at the CRB – most of which was in charge of the Great Ocean Road.

Alec's lectures were always full of the practical aspects of engineering – how to do things and what to look out for – and this practical approach stood me in good stead during my engineering career.

The other lecturer in the photograph – seated second from the right – is Arthur Kenneally. He and Alec became great friends at the Gordon and as students we always lumped them together like Bluey and Curley or Wally and the Major – except they were Alec and Arthur. They were a similar age and they enlisted only months apart, but Arthur enlisted in the Army. He served in the 14th Australian Field Company which fought in New Guinea, Morotai and Labuan.

We were lucky to have them as lecturers and role models.

In the class photograph below, the following people worked for the CRB – Alan Mackinlay, John Coles and Gordon MacIntosh (the first three standing at the back), myself (in the middle at the back), Gary White (extreme right), Michael Finlay (standing behind Alec Kennedy) and Sew Mee Wong (sitting on the extreme right).



Final year civil engineering class at the Gordon Institute of Technology – December 1960. Alec is seated second from the left, Gary White is on the extreme right and I am in the centre at the back.



## And now for something beautiful

In the last newsletter I told you of my experience in Lucca after an operation for a detached retina in my right eye. I was not allowed to fly back to Australia until the air that was placed in my eye during the operation had subsided. As a consequence, I had an enforced stay in Lucca for about a month. Although I was homesick, this was no great hardship because I have developed a great affection for Lucca – that is why I have included it as something beautiful. The story below was written in 2001 after I eventually returned home.

'Bishop Frediano founded the first church in Lucca in the sixth century and a number of structures have occupied the site of the Basilica of San Frediano since. The building we now see was built between 1112 and 1147. San Frediano's remains are in the crypt – probably the best place for them.

Externally it is quite a plain structure save for the huge mosaic on a golden background that sits on the façade above the modest main door, depicting the ascension of Christ. This was attached during the 13th and 14th centuries. However I was unable to see it then as the whole façade was under restoration and draped in plastic sheets. It set me thinking about the huge cost of maintaining the fabric of history in Italy, but on the other hand, that fabric attracts an enormous number of visitors each year creating a huge flow of income to Italy.

I entered the church through a small door at the side. It is a Romanesque church with an elegantly plain interior – although the later addition of side chapels was done in the usual florid styles of their times. There is very little stained glass so that the light reveals the natural colour of the masonry.

The artistic masterpiece in San Frediano is the baptismal font to the right of the main door. It comprises a vertical sided, marble tank about two metres diameter with a large inner bowl supported on a single column. This bowl has a lid over it supported by a number of small columns. I estimated that the whole construction is about three metres high. Three maestri contributed to the decoration of the font. It is easy to distinguish the work of each. It is as if they have each stamped their own personality on it. The tank was worked on by two of them while the third created the inner bowl and its cupola.

I gazed, with an engineer's eye, upon this exquisite achievement of human endeavour and wondered how they did it. The tank was constructed in a number of sections with no effort taken to hide the iron dowels connecting them together. Were these sections worked on in the same studio or were they done in separate locations and then brought together later? Was there one artistic director who created the concept and then ordered the work from the sculptors? Did they have meetings between the three creators to



Basilica San Frediano, (1112 – 1147).



The renovated façade of San Frediano.

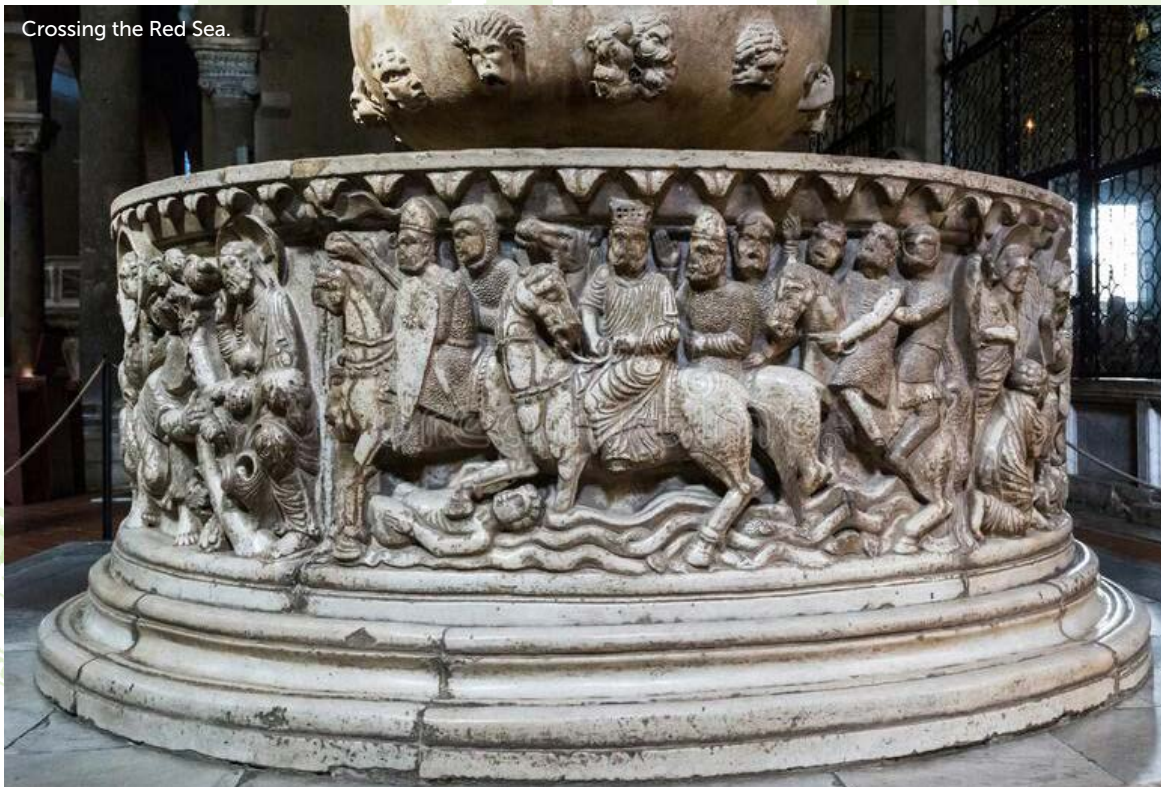
discuss design and progress or did each do his own thing? How did they ensure that it all came together as a whole?

The first maestro, from Lombardy, carved the relief around two thirds of the tank depicting scenes from the life of Moses. The scenes run into each other without breaks but the most arresting is the depiction of the crossing of the Red Sea by Pharaoh's soldiers. The panel is crowded by medieval soldiers on horseback prancing across the floor of the ocean. The horses are lolling through shallows

*And now for something beautiful continued*



Crossing the Red Sea.



of sinuous waves in which a few fish frolic. One rider has already fallen and is trampled underfoot. The horse ridden by the main figure has turned its head in panic – and for the very best of reasons if you recall what happened in the film. I can still see Charlton Heston's Moses, in the long flowing robe that concealed his knock knees, calling on the Red Sea to close over the hapless Egyptians pursuers.

It is also a bit of a coincidence that Frediano – after whom the church is named - was canonised for another famous water movement, a miraculous deviation of the Serchio River in the sixth century. I find all these miracles pretty exhausting.

The second artist decided to leave his autograph as it were. He carved on the top edge of his work *"Me fecit Robertus magister in arte peritus"*. I am no student of Latin but my interpretation would be that this says something along the lines of "My name is Roberto and I created this wonderful masterpiece so please think of me as you gaze upon it". His work is perhaps the most formal of the lot depicting the Good Shepherd, complete with a sheep draped over his shoulders and the six prophets. They are highly stylized each surrounded by a small arch ascribed by the experts to be inspired by Roman sarcophagi.

The third maestro, unknown by name but known to have been a local Tuscan, carved the inner bowl and its domed lid. I would love to have met this man so that I could fully appreciate his wit and intelligence. A medieval Michael Leunig with classical overtones! The Apostles cover the lid and around the bowl are the twelve symbols of the month. I especially loved the depiction of Gemini. It is a frontal portrait with a profile emerging from the right cheek. There are holes in four of the symbols through which water would cascade in graceful arcs into the tank below. The single column supporting the bowl is a writhing, sinuous stream of water out of which a naked child and a marine monster are emerging. What is the symbolism of this? Perhaps only the maestro knows – and that is the way it should be.

The entire construction is a harmonious blend of art and imagination with every picture telling a story. Of course, this was the intention of the masters in those days because few people could read so their stories and myths were retold through representational art such as this. It is generally recognized that it is the finest baptismal font in Italy – which is high praise.

This church is also the resting place of Santa Zita who died in 1278. Apparently, she was a maid of some local landlords called the Fatinellis. She was caught by one of her masters stealing some bread that, if done in another country at another time, could have seen her become an Australian citizen. When she was caught, she was asked what she was carrying under her skirts and she replied that it was flowers. When they asked to look, she indeed pulled out a bunch of flowers. For this miracle she was canonised as the patron saint of maids and ladies-in-waiting.

I have a theory. It is that she had probably snaffled the flowers earlier that morning and when challenged, pulled them out instead of the bread. Goodness knows what else she had stuffed in there. Her uncorrupted (i.e. not embalmed) remains lie in state in the chapel named after her. Now I don't know about you, but if I were dead for over 700 years, I wouldn't want every Tom, Dick or Harry (or more correctly, every Tomaso, Ricardo or Harroldo) gaping at me wondering what colour my eyes were. She is displayed in a brightly lit glass coffin. To be honest she doesn't look a well person. She is a very swarthy colour, her naked feet poked out from beneath her long gown and a couple of rather prominent teeth protruded awkwardly from her brown lips. I don't think she was a raving beauty even in her good times.

But the Lucchesi are very fond of her, and each year on the 26th April, they bring her out of her coffin to caress her and bless the daffodils. I am not kidding! Please don't ask me about the connection with the daffodils. I don't know and no-one was able to give me a satisfactory answer.

Santa Zita – died 1278.



Mind you, during my travels over the years, I've seen quite a few preserved people or parts thereof. I can recall San Sebastian in the cathedral in Seville, the ancient Egyptian mummies in Cairo, and a variety of heads – including the head of Sir Oliver Plunkett in St Peter's Church in Drogheda, Ireland, and countless heads in Sarawak in Borneo. And you can see so many finger bones of prominent ex-Christians in little glass

### *And now for something beautiful continued*

jars throughout Europe, you start to wonder if they weren't more like the multi-armed gods depicted in Hindu religious culture. But I've never felt close to them.

I decided to go to the football. Lucca plays in the Serie C league (or third division) and they were to play Trestina that day. I bought my ticket at the box office at the stadium. It was the equivalent of about forty five Australian dollars for a grandstand seat. For some reason that I could not fathom, all the odd numbers were on one half of the grandstand and the even numbers were on the other side. I happened to go to the wrong side but the spectators said it didn't matter so I just sat down.

As luck would have it, the young man next to me spoke good English and was a referee in a district league. He was a discerning student of the game. His elderly father accompanied him. He estimated that the players in this division would have salaries in the order of 120 million lire (120,000 Australian dollars). After pondering on this for some time, he further stressed that that was a before tax figure. This gave me the impression that football players in Italy were very compliant in tax matters.

Lucca certainly looked the part. Their strip is red and black vertical stripes – a most becoming colour combination – and they were all so handsome they reminded me of a team of Mark Mercuris with longer hair.

There were about 2,000 people at the game and 1,950 of them walked to the stadium. The crowd was surprisingly demure with very little of the chanting and singing that I usually associate with soccer. Calls of *"bella balla"* and *"granda balla"* acknowledged clever delivery of the ball. At first I thought Lucca was going to carry the day. They were in constant attack but after half an hour the opposition broke free and their smallest player sneaked in behind the defence and scored an opportunistic goal. It was greeted with more silence than an opposition goal at an AFL match in Adelaide.

It seemed to knock the stuffing out of Lucca. They started to take theatrical dives – five rolls, a pike and a double twist was the standard – trying to get a free kick, only to see the opposition score again. It remained that way to the end but no one seemed to mind too much. It was such a pleasant Sunday afternoon.

There was a good news story of soccer in Italy at that time. In the Serie A League - the premier league – the leading team was a small, industrial suburban team from Verona called Chievo. They were affectionately called the Flying

Donkeys. They were ahead by five points after about eight rounds. They had fought their way up from a very lowly division – Serie D – but joining the big time did not seem to faze them. Their match that weekend drew 16,000 fans which was about four times the population of their suburb. The combined salary of the team was less than the salary of the most lowly paid player on the Inter Milan list. There is no salary cap in Italy. All of Italy has taken them to heart and since returning home, I scan the soccer results willing Chievo to keep winning. Alas, they drifted to finish fifth in 2001 thus qualifying them to play in the UEFA Cup. (Note: This was written in 2001. Chievo remained in Serie A until 2006-2007 when they were relegated to Serie B but bounced back to Serie A a year later. They remained there until 2019 but they were not allowed to register, as they had outstanding tax payments. Their sole income was from television broadcasting rights. To put this in some sort of context it would be the equivalent of Collingwood compared to say, Benalla Rovers. They have to start all over again from Serie D.)

I also attended the opera. Lucca was the birthplace of Giacomo Puccini and as a boy he was a chorister at San Michele. Perhaps he was inspired by that wonderful façade. However the opera I attended was by the other great Italian master Giuseppe Verdi. I bought a 45,000 lire ticket in advance at the Teatro del Giglio. The opera was presented by the Provincial Administration of Lucca. From September through to December they staged *La Fanciulla del West* (Puccini), *Don Pasquale* (Donizetti), *Don Carlos* (Verdi), *Il Cappello di Paglia di Firenze* (Rota) and *Nabucco* (Verdi).

I went to *Don Carlos*. Because of the afternoon siesta, the performance did not start until 9 o'clock and it finished at quarter to one the following morning. The Teatro del Giglio was built in 1817 and at that time it was one of the major opera houses of Italy. In 1831, the first performance of Rossini's *William Tell* was given there. Although I was on the highest of the four levels, I was quite close to the stage. The intimacy of the theatre enabled the singers' voices to stand out rather than being drowned by the music as I sometimes find in larger venues.

The production and the performances were first class. However the length of the opera meant that I had to walk home alone in a strange city in the early hours of the morning. But this conveys the wrong impression. You can walk around Lucca in any place and at any time, and feel perfectly safe.

To be continued ...

# Trivia and didactic whimsies

## Questions that haunt

Why do we press harder on a remote control when we know the batteries are getting dead?

Why do banks charge a fee on 'insufficient funds' when they know there is not enough money?

Why does someone believe you when you say there are four billion stars, but check when you say the paint is wet?

Why do they use sterilized needles for death by lethal injection?

Why doesn't Tarzan have a beard?

Why does Superman stop bullets with his chest, but ducks when you throw a revolver at him?

Why do Kamikaze pilots wear helmets?

How do those dead bugs get into those enclosed light fixtures?

Why is it that whenever you attempt to catch something that's falling off the table you always manage to knock something else over?

In winter, why do we try to keep the house as warm as it was in summer when we complained about the heat?

## Wisdom of silence

Sally was driving home from one of her business trips to Mildura when she saw an elderly woman walking on the side of the road. As the trip was a long and quiet one, she stopped the car and asked the woman if she would like a ride. With a silent nod of thanks, the woman got into the car.

Resuming the journey, Sally tried in vain to make a bit of small talk with the woman. The old woman just sat silently, looking intently at everything she saw, studying every little detail, until she noticed a brown bag on the seat next to Sally.

'What in bag?' asked the old woman. Sally looked down at the brown bag and said, 'It's a bottle of wine. I got it for my husband.'

The woman was silent for another moment or two. Then speaking with the quiet wisdom of an elder, she said,

'Good trade.'

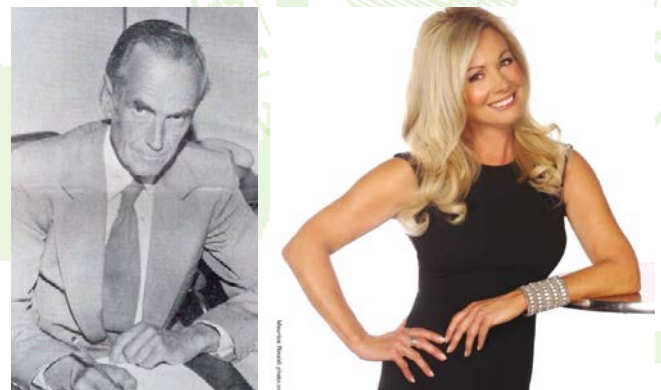
## Introducing a bit of glamour to our newsletter

I introduce you to Mikaela Jade Schreuder – the girlfriend of Mason Wood, the St Kilda footy player.



Mikaela and Mason at the Trevor Barker Award night.

Mikaela is the daughter of Celeste Billing whose father, Bob, was the Principal Training Officer at the CRB. I reckon Bob would have been photographed more times than anyone else in the CRB because he was in every photograph taken of every training group. Celeste was a TV star in the 1980s and 1990s. She was the hostess on The Price is Right with Ian Turpie and went on to work on the Sale of the Century hosted by Tony Barber and Alyce Platt.



Bob Billing and his daughter Celeste.

*Trivia and didactic whimsies continued*

## **A good buy (or bye)**

A sixteen-year-old boy came home with a Porsche, and his parents began to yell and scream, *"Where did you get that car?"*

He calmly told them, *"I bought it today."*

*"With what money!?"* demanded his parents. *"We know what a Porsche costs."*

*"Well,"* said the boy, *"this one cost me fifteen dollars."*

The parents began to yell even louder. *"Who would sell a car like that for \$15.00?"* they asked.

*"It was the lady up the street,"* said the boy. *"Don't know her name – they just moved in. She saw me ride past on my bike and asked me if I wanted to buy a Porsche for \$15.00."*

So, the boy's father walked up the street to the house where the lady lived and found her out in the yard calmly tending to the flowers. He introduced himself as the father of the boy to whom she had sold a Porsche for fifteen dollars and demanded to know why she did it.

*"Well,"* she said, *"this morning I got a phone call from my husband. I thought he was on a business trip, but I learned from a friend he has run off to Hawaii with his secretary. Then apparently, she stole all his money and stranded him there! Well, he called me, without a dollar to his name, and asked me to sell his Porsche and send him the money. So that's exactly what I did."*

## **Inflation**

I started my new job yesterday. My new boss handed me a fiver and said,

*"First things first David. I need you to go down to Bunnings and buy a glass hammer, a tin of striped paint and a bubble for a spirit level."*

I laughed and said, *"Do you really think I'm that stupid?"*

*"What do you mean David?"* he sniggered.

I said, *"That lot is going to cost more than a fiver."*

## **Blessings**

My cousin invited some people to dinner. At the table, she turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, *"Would you like to say the blessing?"*

*'I wouldn't know what to say,'* her daughter replied.

*'Just say what you hear me say,'* the mother answered.

The daughter bowed her head and said,

*'Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?'*

**David Jellie**

Editor

[pdjellie@hotmail.com](mailto:pdjellie@hotmail.com)