



THE BRICKMASTERS

1788 - 2008



And if you think of Brick,
for instance,

and you say to Brick,
“what do you want, Brick?”

And Brick says to you
“I like an Arch.”

And if you say to Brick:
“Look, arches are expensive,
and I can use a concrete
lintel over you.

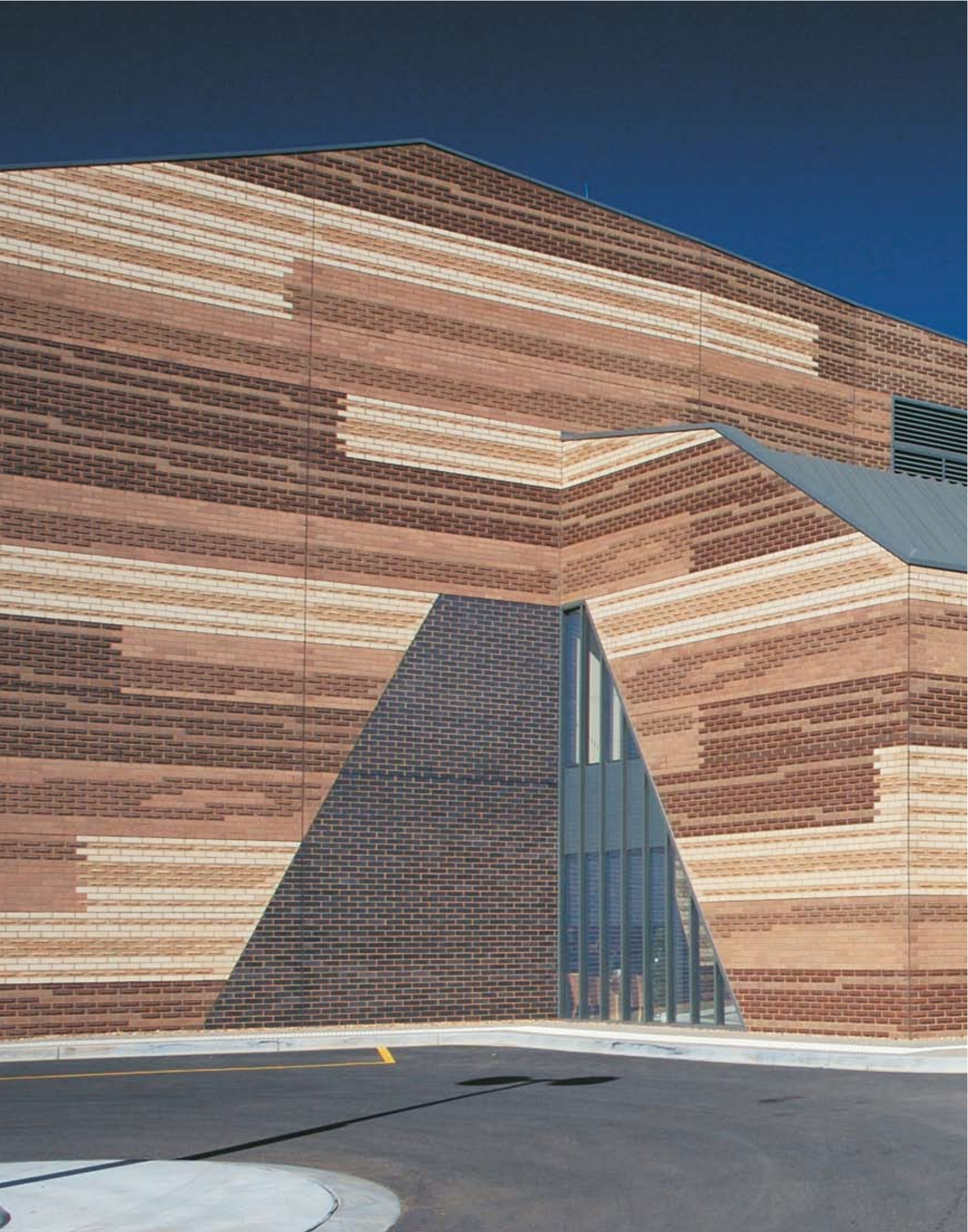
What do you think of that?”
“Brick?”

Brick says:
“... I like an Arch.”

Louis Kahn, architect, 1901–1974








RON RINGER

THE BRICKMASTERS

1788 - 2008





On the preceding pages:

Frontispiece:

Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney

Brick arch, Holy Name Chapel, St Ignatius College, Riverview,
Sydney*

Brick arch, residential house, Centennial Park, Sydney

Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney

Sydney Technical College, Sydney

Mornington Centre, Victoria, showing polychromatic brickwork in
contemporary style*

Following pages:

Pymble Ladies College, Sydney *

An engraved portrait of Arther Phillip Esq., Captain General and
Commander in Chief in and over the territory of New South Wales.

Frontispiece to: *The Voyage of Governor Arthur Phillip to Botany
Bay: With an Account of the Establishment of the Colonies of Port
Jackson and Norfolk Island (1789)*. National Library of Australia

*** dry press face bricks, produced at Bowning Bricks, NSW**

Endpapers:

Front – Letterhead of Austral Brick Company Pty Ltd, circa 1933

Back – Letterhead of Bedford Brick Works, 1929

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced in any
form without the written permission of the Copyright holder.

First published in Australia by Dry Press Publishing Pty Ltd,
Brickworks Limited,
Wallgrove Road, Horsley Park, NSW 2164, Australia

+61 2 9830 7700

© 2008 Dry Press Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 978-0-646-48825-7

Book design:
Kathy Meharry

Research and text:
Ron Ringer, email: ron@syntaxwriting.com.au

Printed by:
Green Giant Press, Pte Ltd, Singapore

Contents

Acknowledgements	x
Preface	Mighty Brick.....	xi
Chapter 1	Beginnings.....	1
Chapter 2	Early manufacture.....	13
Chapter 3	Fuel to feed the fire.....	25
Chapter 4	An industry transformed.....	41
Chapter 5	The Brickmasters.....	61
Chapter 6	A place to live.....	81
Chapter 7	Austral Bricks.....	103
Chapter 8	War and peace.....	127
Chapter 9	On the edge.....	151
Chapter 10	Recovery.....	173
Chapter 11	Brickworks Limited.....	183
Chapter 12	Frontline.....	211
Chapter 13	Austerity.....	225
Chapter 14	The art and craft of dry press brickmaking... ..	247
Chapter 15	Great leap forward.....	265
Chapter 16	Texture takes off.....	285
Chapter 17	It's time.....	299
Chapter 18	Inside a tunnel kiln plant.....	325
Chapter 19	Fightback.....	341
Chapter 20	East meets west.....	363
Appendices	383
Bibliography	408
Glossary	416



Acknowledgements

Lindsay Partridge, managing director of Austral Bricks, stood by this project from its inception, and for this I am truly grateful. To write a company history is one thing, but to set it within the context of Sydney, and Australia's unfolding story, is a more difficult task. Without his support, enthusiasm and patience nothing would have come of the endeavour.

As a record of the past I have kept to the known facts. As a chronicle of the development of Austral Bricks and its parent, Brickworks Ltd, no embellishment is needed to convey the story of change and continuity. At all times I have let the story speak for itself in a way that dignifies the life and times of the key players.

Along the way scores of people offered their advice and assistance. Technical advice and feedback on early drafts was freely given by a chorus of brickmasters, engineers, kiln builders, brick carters, industry spokespeople, trade unionists, members of the Dawes family, Austral management and staff and many more. Among their number were: Ross Bell, Alan Bentley, Brian Binskin, Pat and Norman Binskin, Rod Clark, Bill Dennis, Bob Edwards, Bill Emmett, Patrick Filmer-Sankey, David Fitzharris, Michael Flack, Richard Gentle, Ron Hagstrom, Vince Higgins, Tim Hirshman, Graham Holland, Adrian Howie, Cathy Inglis, Maralyn Keelty, Bill Larfield, Miles Lewis, Jim Liepins, Peter Mahony, Trevor Melksham, Jean Millner, Eddie Monson, Geoff Noble, Alex Payne, Jamie Pearson, Sandy Pearson, Jack Peterson, Bill Prest, Bob Rushton, Alex Sawtschuk, Peter Scott, John Shergold, Arthur Sherman, Rosemary Szente, Iain Thompson, John Tindall, Geoff Travis, Steve Wall, Frank Wallbank, Ric West and Doug Wilmot. Also Arthur Easton at the Mitchell Library for his kind assistance. The passing of three fine men among this number, Albert Burgis, Jim Millner and Bill Wheatley, was a sad loss. They were a mine of information and a pleasure to work with.

Another small band of friends and collaborators deserves special mention. Ray Dawes, the only surviving son of William King Dawes, and a former director of Brickworks Ltd, provided insight into critical events. Warwick Gemmell, the author of an earlier book that excited popular interest in brick pointed me in the right direction during the first few chapters. Peter Graham, a former student and long-time friend brought a critical eye and editorial skills to bear on the entire manuscript. Kathy Meharry, the designer, has produced an outstanding piece of work based on a concept by John Tuffin. Thanks to Josh Hill, photographer, and David Dickson, illustrator, who brought so much to life.

Last, but by no means least, I am grateful to my wonderful wife and friend, Robyn, and our children, Ben and Maddy for their patience at having to live with the brick story for so long, and who kept the home fires burning. Robyn, who read the manuscript and corrected errors of syntax and grammar, held me to my contract with you, the reader.

Every effort has made to trace the ownership of copyright material. Information that will enable the publisher to rectify any error or omission in subsequent reprints will be welcome.


Preface

Brick has shaped the built environment more than any other building material used throughout recorded history. Wood is ephemeral and subject to rapid decay if left exposed to the elements. Stone is monumental, solid and part of the natural environment, and as a material whose use stretches back to antiquity it is the only possible rival to brick. Moreover, prior to the Industrial Revolution that swept Europe and North America during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, buildings in steel and glass were unknown. The case for brick is difficult to fault. With its relative ease of manufacture and installation, cheapness and versatility as both a supporting structure or façade, brick is robust, practical and can be strikingly beautiful.

For our purposes the story begins with the discovery in 1788 of workable clays at Cockle Creek on what is now Darling Harbour in Sydney. Brickmaking in Australia not only enjoys a reputation for being the first extractive industry, but also the first manufacturing enterprise to take root in the fledgling convict colony. This work explores the development of brickmaking during early colonial times, noting the industrial transformations that carried the trade forward into the machine age of mass production. Dry press bricks, whether face or commons, used in thousands of engineering projects and countless homes, became the staple of building and construction until late into the twentieth century. From the outset a host of factors drove – and continue to drive – the industry including fashion, immigration, commerce and the business cycle, war, depression, government policy and, of course, quantum leaps in technology and its application to brickmaking. Like streams that coalesce into something broader and deeper, the development of the industry forms a river on which the history of both Sydney and European settlement in Australia is carried along.

Into this narrative The Austral Brick Company Limited made its entry in 1908 founded by a group of investors and builders led by Edwin Spackman, and establishing itself as a major player by the outbreak of war in 1914. Riding the boom of the 1920s and steering a path through the Depression years, the name Austral came to be associated with the remarkable figure of William King Dawes whose hold over Austral Bricks and Brickworks Limited extended for over a half a century. Without Dawes Austral Bricks may not have survived the devastating economic collapse. Certainly, the history of Brickworks Limited, established in 1934 by Dawes and other private brick manufacturers would have followed a different course altogether. Moreover, without the foresight of Jim Millner, the chairman of Washington H. Soul Pattinson (Soul Patts), who was the joint architect in 1969 with Dawes of the cross-holding with Brickworks, both companies may have succumbed to hostile takeover. Notwithstanding the contributions of these men, the achievements of an organisation cannot rest on two people alone. Dawes' three successors, Albert Burgis, Alan Bentley and Lindsay Partridge, the current managing director, took Brickworks and its flagbearer, Austral Bricks, to new heights. Under Partridge the company has





Preface

been transformed from a state-based operation to a national organisation that has no peer.

Outside the scope of this book lies the story of brickmaking's historic origins in the Fertile Crescent of modern day Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Jordan, which has been well documented by those who have gone before. Suffice to say, the earliest bricks can be traced back to Neolithic times (c.8300–7600BC) to Jericho where sun-dried mud bricks were laid in courses held together by more mud to make thick walls. Bricks fired in kilns only made their appearance in the third millennium BC, borrowing from the art and craft of potters whose handiwork clearly demonstrated the effect of high temperatures on clay. Fired bricks, however, remained a luxury article for thousands of years and were available only to those who commanded a supply of scarce and expensive fuels such as charcoal. As history demonstrates, without the permanent cultivation of grain crops and the construction of mud-brick dwellings human society would have remained nomadic and relatively primitive. Indeed, brick can explain a great deal about the past and the here and now as much as it can point to the future.

In recent times face brick in particular has undergone a renaissance among designers and architects. Dry-press bricks, when offset against stone, slate, steel and glass, confirm brick as quintessentially modern. Whether glazed, tinted, solid black, ebony, zinc, red earth – brick's enduring visual qualities borrow from an earlier age. Consider Berlin's Pergamon Museum and the original glazed ceramic bricks used to reconstruct the Gates of Ishtar, a remnant of the walls of Babylon. An echo of this grandeur can be seen in the work of the eighteenth century English architect, Sir Christopher Wren, whose brick buildings are still admired for their elegance and functionality. 'If you seek my monument, look around you', reads the inscription on his tombstone in St Paul's Cathedral, London. The legacy and continuing impact of brick is profound.

This book is a history that can be read on a number of levels and from different perspectives, any of which explore the achievements, the disappointments and the aspirations of a company that has provided, quite literally, the building blocks of inner city and suburban Sydney as we know it today. At another level the book will appeal to present and former brickmakers and those with an interest in the story of brickmaking in Australia. It can be also read as an alternative history of this great city. For business analysts and investors there is a wealth of detail to explore and appreciate.

Whatever the disposition of the reader *The Brickmasters, 1788–2008* is dedicated to an industry that will continue to influence the way we live and work.

Ron Ringer, Sydney, March 2008





Arthur Phillip Esq.
Captain General & Commander in Chief, in & over
the Territory of New South Wales.

Published May 1. 1789 by J. Stockdale Piccadilly