

Ray Brookes

Clarrie Neal

Ray Brookes is an identity of Riverstone who during his life has been a model builder, a master craftsman on the restoration of historic homes, a restorer of vintage cars, a part time writer/photographer, and has been on five expeditions to Antarctica where he spent three years working.

He was born in 1933, one of seven children born to Bill and Lindia Brookes and spent all his childhood days in the family home at 16 Hunter Street Riverstone. He attended Riverstone Public School during the war years, 1939 to 1945 and remembers the air raid trenches being dug and our practice drills. He recalled the headmaster Joe Millerd using his map of the world to explain to the children the progress of the war. Ray used to run home every day to get his lunch and then would run all the way back to school to get there just before the bell rang.

He has vivid memories of the day as a five year old he was sent to neighbour Norm Brown to get some eggs. As he entered the yard he was attacked by their blue cattle dog that was normally kept on a chain anchored to a log. This day the anchor broke free and the dog savaged Ray with bites all over his body and limbs. Ray only escaped by crawling under the barbed wire fence and by hooking the anchor at the end of the chain around the barbed wire and eventually breaking free. Norm had the dog put down later that day.

Ray loved to experiment and one of his favourites was to get the dry ice from Mulford's school tuckshop and put it in the ink wells, watching the blue coloured bubbles and vapour it produced. These experiments led to his nickname of "professor", given to him by his mate Charlie Weaver.

He remembers the day he was walking home from Charlie's place when a Wirraway from the Schofields base crash landed in the meatworks' paddocks just behind the Egg Pulp, the pilot surviving. He also recalled the day (28 April 1939) the Avro Anson crashed at Eastern Creek near Grange Avenue killing all four crew.

Sometimes Ray would clean out the picture theatre for Charles Murrell. He remembered the day when Charles was locking up and he dropped the key between the step and the wall and it finished up under the floor. Charles had Ray crawl under the floor up to the step to retrieve the key and kept asking Ray had he found it. Although Ray had found it he said no, because also under that step were a lot of coins that other patrons had lost and Ray was busy filling his pockets first.

Ray remembers the first day Lettie Williams attended Riverstone School and she was placed at the same desk with him. He recalled telling his mother that a new sun-tanned girl from Broken Hill had started at school. Lettie recalled going home and telling her mother that she was sitting alongside a nice quiet blue eyed boy but he did not smile. Perhaps it was because he had a few teeth missing at the front.

Little did they realise that in 1955 they would eventually marry and raise their four daughters in Riverstone. Ray recalled that their wedding reception was held in the Masonic Hall, now the museum. Lettie recalled the first day she arrived in Riverstone, the Vineyard bush was on fire and with the smoke and flames she thought she was in hell. She was also amazed to find that none of the boys wore shoes to school. Ray's secondary schooling was two years at Richmond Rural School, he left when he was aged 15 and did not attempt the Intermediate Certificate.

As a young lad Ray often used to go rabbit trapping and camping with Charlie Weaver, Neville Stockwell and myself (Clarrie Neal). After loading up our pushbikes with the gear we would ride out to Rouse Hill and camp in the bush near Wally Brown's place. Ray decided there was too much gear for the pushbike so he used to walk out to Rouse Hill pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with traps etc.

His first job was in the tin-shop at the meatworks where he worked for 12 months. After being refused an apprenticeship in carpentry he left and commenced work as an Indentured Apprentice Carpenter with local builder Harold Boulton. Although he was an apprentice carpenter he was required to lay bricks, apply cement render, plumbing etc.

He attended Granville Technical College and in 1953 won their top apprentice award. In 1954 he was called up to do his Army National Service Training with school mate Norm Jennings, which was followed by two years part time service in the CMF. While in the Army, Ray was a member of the guard of honour at Government House when Queen Elizabeth was in Australia in 1954

He completed his apprenticeship in 1955 and got a job with local developer Bill McNamara, working on big projects such as shopping centres, Richmond aerodrome, Government Institutions, churches, etc. Ray commenced work with the Department of Public Works in 1980 working on the restoration of historic buildings. Initially he worked as a member of a team but in later years much of this specialist work he did alone.

It was in 1980 that he first linked up with Rouse Hill House but for the last four years prior to his retirement in 1993 he was employed there by the Historic Houses Trust. He performed all types of restoration work and he often had to study a lot on the materials being used and the methods of preservation. Some of the work he did at Rouse Hill House included:

- the summer house was on the verge of collapsing and had to be pulled down and restored.
- the slaughter house had toppled over and had to be stood up and the roof replaced.
- the stables had to have flooring and roof replaced, doors renewed, and stable divisions restored.

Ray said it was quite an experience working on the stables because at lunch time a large blue tongue lizard would often appear from under the floor for a hand-out. The hand-out was usually an egg that Ray collected from the fowl shed. On hot days a large red-bellied black snake would also appear, though he was not fed.

At the Rouse Hill House opening day ceremony held in April 1999, Ray Brookes was publicly thanked by the President of the Historic Houses Trust and by Bob Carr, the Premier of NSW, for his efforts with the restoration of this property.

It was in 1971 that Ray first made out an application to work as a carpenter in Antarctica. He thought not having his Intermediate Certificate would hinder his chances but hoped that the Indentured Apprentice and his Trades Certificates would overcome this problem. He was also very aware that most other applicants would have their University Degrees.

He was interviewed in September and at this interview he realised this was going to be something special when he offered his credentials to the committee and they said "we already have all that information". Ray was amazed to find that they even had his records from Riverstone Public School.

A week later he received a letter advising he was on a short list and that he was required to undergo a series of tests and courses in relation to his health and physical fitness. He also had to do an Intensive Psychological Test of five hours alone in a room with no windows.

He was successful and advised that after initial training courses he would commence work with the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) at the Davis base at the end of 1971. The initial training courses included an explosives course at Bendigo, a survival course at Falls Creek, an intensive First Aid course, along with medical procedures required during emergencies.

Ray made five trips to Antarctica with ANARE -

1. In late 1971 to early 1973 at Davis (wintered over).
2. In late 1973 to early 1975 at Davis (wintered over).
3. In 1976 at Macquarie Island where he worked on the powerhouse during the summer.
4. and 5. Were made in the summer of 1977 -78 along with the French Expedition to Commonwealth Bay where he worked on the historical Mawson's Hut.

It was on his first trip working at Davis in 1972 that Ray had two interesting experiences. The first one was with a model glider, with a six ft wingspan, that he built from oregon off cuts and made the casing from surgical paper tissues, about the same thickness as toilet paper. There was much discussion at the base as to whether it would fly or not, and many were prepared to gamble their week's rations of beer on the result. It had to fly for one minute.

The big day was 3 June 1972. The glider was raised on a string, just as one would fly a kite, to a height of 150 feet and released. At its first attempt it flew for 2 minutes 10 seconds. Ray collected on all the bets but being a good teetotaler he returned the beer rations to some much wiser punters later that evening. The glider's best effort that summer was to fly for more than four minutes and travel over 1000 metres. The editor of their newsletter later wrote "Ray is a real craftsman, whatever he does, he does it well".

The second event is about a large Husky dog, known as Cactus, that sometimes Ray would take for a walk, and, at other times Cactus, would take Ray for a walk. An item in the Davis Newsletter for April 1972 read: "The month started on a sad note, our dog Cactus disappeared from the station and never returned, but we are ever hopeful."

The July Newsletter read "The appearance of the sun on the 8th July was much appreciated by all. Better than this was the interception of our deaf Husky dog 'Cactus' who had been missing for 60 days. Des called out "Ray, quick look". Quote Ray "a bloody dog-----Cactus". He was retrieved soon after, carried home by our dog lovers and cleaned up. While missing, constant attention had been given to searching for Cactus by all. Traces of the dog's survival had been noted about three miles southwest where old decrepit seal carcasses, which had been there for years, were chewed up into an assortment of little pieces."

This poem was written by Ray and appeared in the Davis Newsletter for 1972.

Cactus

Young Husky dog from Davis here,
He's been with us just over a year,
Come from Mawson, he wasn't sold,
So brave and strong, deaf I'm told.

He wasn't bad to handle when he was just a pup,
But now this Husky dogs' so big he tangles me all up,
I tried to get him off the chain,
With wind so short I felt the strain.

The chains undone with no remorse,
The dog was swift, I felt the force,
On ice and snow I plundered forth,
Southeast by East, I ended North.

Oh God this dog's a giant, he dragged me down the hill,
With battered skin and swollen hands, he made me feel quite ill,
My strides were long, this dog's so strong he sent me almost soaring,
My trousers split, I yelled "Shit", so now I am a'roaring.

Gillespie stood with hands on side, with grin from ear to ear,
This bloke Brookes is sure underpaid for work he's done this year,
I'll send a note to the Director, to see what can be done,
On second thoughts I'd better not, they might just send a gun.

Ray Brookes

Ray recalled this incident at Davis. A decision was made to build huts out on the ice fields, to allow better access for the research workers to their sites. Ray built the first of these huts at Long Fjord, some 15 km out from Davis, and it has been named appropriately enough "Brookes' Hut".

Ray modified a jeep that was used to tow the materials on a sled from the base to the site, and as a safety measure attached 8 metre beams of oregon under the chassis. He also cut an escape hatch in the roof just in case the jeep did go through the ice. The jeep was a success and was able to get all the materials to the site, this allowing Ray to ride his skidoo out to the site each day.

One day when Ray and his partner were building the hut they received an urgent message to return to base immediately as the ice was melting. They made good time on their skidoos until a kilometre from the base where they paused and saw just how serious the situation was. They had no choice other than to make a run for it across the ice. They checked their skidoos then gunned them flat out across the ice cheered on by their mates on shore waving and shouting encouragement. Ray said they were lucky as they knew the field ice was breaking up behind them. It was a happy and relieved group of expeditioners at the base that evening.

It was on these trips that Ray has been able to write articles on some of his experiences and take excellent photos that have appeared in magazines and books. The articles on Brookes Hut and Mawson's Hut have featured in detail in Tim Bowden's book on Antarctica "The Silence is Calling".

Mawson's Hut.

This hut was built in 1912 at Commonwealth Bay by Mawson and his Australian Antarctica Expedition. Since the 1970s there has been much debate as to whether the hut should be restored and left on site or dismantled and returned to Australia and re-erected as a museum.

Ray was one of four members of a group that were chosen by ANARE to visit the hut and report on the options available. He was required to build a hut where the team was to stay while doing their assessment and restoration work. He named the hut "Granhholm Hut" after the Captain of the supply ship *Thala Dan* and a plaque was carved with the name and year 1978 on it.

They arrived in January 1978 to find the hatch on the roof of the hut had long disappeared and that some of the rooms had become solid blocks of ice. The wind had eroded the outer surfaces of timber and left the nails exposed, and that particles of snow had penetrated the tongue and groove boards and left gaps.

Much of the larger equipment was missing, however there were many items remaining on the shelves. As they cleared the ice out of the rooms they were surprised to find some of the rooms had little ice in them.

Ray said whenever the weather permitted he was up on the roof trying to restore it in the best possible manner. Ray believed the best option to preserve the hut was to support a false timber roof over the existing structure. Ray would have liked to return and finish the job but this was not to be.

Ray has always spent a lot of his spare time with his other two loves, model making and restoring vintage cars. He has built numerous model planes and also built, from scrap timber, a canoe that can be converted to a trimaran with a sail. Over the years he has had four vintage cars, including a vintage racing car that he built/restored and competed in Hill Climbs and Rallies at Amaroo Park. He has had two Vauxhalls, one being a Luton Vauxhall that was totally restored, the fourth car was a baby Austin 7.

Ray has always been a firm believer in physical fitness and when possible still rides his bike 40 kilometres every morning. In the 1980s he joined the Blacktown Cycle Club for veteran riders and participated in their races. However injuries sustained in a bad race fall one day ended his racing days. The bike he currently rides now has 54,000 km on the speedo.



Ray Brookes and assistant, Mawson's Hut, 1978.

Photo: Courtesy of Ray Brookes.

Compiled by Clarrie Neal from an interview with Ray Brookes in January 2000.