

Brookes' Shoe Store

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In 1999 Faye and Eric Brookes held a closing down sale at their shoe store in Garfield Road. On 6 and 27 August I spent the afternoon in the store while the Brookes and Gail Putra (Faye's sister) served people, selling everything from slippers through to gum boots.

The front room of the shop has hundreds of shoes on display. There is a large display in the front window, row upon row of shoes along the side walls and a circular display in the centre. The next section has two bench style seats along the walls where people sit to try on shoes. The seats also double as storage areas and a comfortable place to sit and have a chat. One wall is covered with certificates of appreciation from community groups they have supported.

Storage shelves are suspended from the ceiling in the front room and hold boxes of shoes that people have on hold. I watched with amazement as Mrs Brooks or Gail stood unsupported on the top of a small timber ladder to lift down packages as people came to collect them.

As well as the shoes, they sell belts and handbags and the smell of the leather throughout the shop is a very pleasant one.

Mr Brookes has his work area set up at the rear of the shop. His equipment includes a Singer Boot Patcher (an industrial sewing machine), a Boot Last and a motorised Finishing Machine which has a series of wheels with different surfaces used to provide a variety of finishes to shoes.

After donning a well worn leather apron Mr Brookes cleaned and polished a pair of shoes a customer had used the wrong colour polish on. The solvent he used to remove the incorrect colour had a very strong smell and Mrs Brookes in passing commented that after years of using such products Mr Brookes no longer has a sense of smell.

Originally there was a flat upstairs consisting of a lounge room, kitchen and a bedroom. Entry to the flat was via a set of stairs on the outside. During extensions the Brookes had an internal staircase built. The front rooms are now packed from floor to ceiling with shoes. The back section is a modern self contained flat. Surprisingly this area contains only a few boxes of shoes!

In the quiet moments between customers Mr and Mrs Brookes talked about the history of Brookes' Shoe Shop and life in Riverstone.

Mr Brookes

When I left school I got into the shoe manufacturing trade, working in a shoe factory at Earlwood. Around 1948-49 there were a lot of blackouts as they couldn't produce enough electricity to supply everyone. They used to take it in turns to supply areas with electricity, four hours on, four hours off. The factory where I was working couldn't work with that so the Boss decided to put us off.

Luckily I was only off for a day, then I received a telegram to report back for work as they'd managed to get a generator to supply electricity.

When I was working in the shoe factory at Earlwood I was travelling four hours a day. I decided that I would rather be working that extra 20 hours a week than travelling and became determined to do something else.

In those days you could get started in something and find your way and you could do it on a little amount of money. I didn't care what I had a go at, I just wanted to try something, so while I was still working in the factory I saved up a few bob to get me going.

I started doing a few boot repairs in the shed at home. People were very supportive, collecting and delivering shoes for me for free and sending me work to do such as shoes to repair. I did try making shoes at one stage, but it is a tedious job and the shoes were being imported at prices cheaper than I could make them.

I suppose that I took on a lot of jobs that I shouldn't, things that took so long that you never got enough money for to pay for your time. I remember one of the worst that I took on was mending medicine balls for someone from Marsden Park.

Many of the old people around the town would give you support when you were young. When Faye and I were building our house in Riverstone Road we moved in before it was complete and Carl Stanford down the road used to let us run an electric lead from his place and Faye would cook tea in a Fry Pan.

Rosenthalls shop on the corner of Garfield Road, had a sign on the fence that said 'Rosenthalls for Everything'. We bought a stove from Mr Rosenthal and he let us take it and pay it off.

Even into the 1950s when we were building the house it was hard to get building materials. When I needed some bricks for the house I went up to the aerodrome at Richmond with another fellow and got some bricks off a job that McNamara's had finished working on.

Fibro was in very short supply. I wanted to build a garage and had to wait a long while for the fibro and it hadn't been dried so it was still 'green'. My brother Ray helped me build the garage and when we had a storm and it got wet, the fibro sheets cracked top to bottom in the middle. Greenaways gave us covers to put over the cracks.

As the business built up I rented a shop from my uncles, on the corner of Market Street and Riverstone Parade. At the time Billy Hughes was still in town with his boot repairs. We were in that shop for about 11 years when we bought this shop from Jack Arnold in 1965 for £5000 which we borrowed from the bank.

Jack had advertised it in the *Herald* and couldn't sell it at the time as the government had a policy which protected people who were renting. The government relaxed the restriction to exclude commercial properties, which meant that it would have been more likely to sell, but he honoured his agreement to sell it to me. At the time Peter Walsh rented the space upstairs and Norm Foley the hairdresser rented the shop.

We moved into this shop in 1965 and have been here for 34 years. At the time Alan Pfoeffler was in his shoe shop up the road and had been there for about 10 years. This building is well over 100 years old. I believe it was built by Mr Binks (though Mrs Brookes thought that it might have been Noble Hanna). It was owned for many years by Aird the tailor.

The building suffered from damp due to poor drainage. The building doesn't have any piers and as the floor sits on the ground, the moisture used to climb up the walls. You could see the beads of water on the walls, it just looked like perspiration. When Foley the Barber was here he couldn't leave a razor out overnight or it would rust.

I did a lot of work on the place and when I first pulled up the floors I found big balls of fungus and I thought to myself what have I done? We have done a lot of work on the building and alleviated the problems with the damp.

Some of the bricks are like iron and others so soft that they crumble in your hand. We have done a number of renovations and extensions over the years. Building the first extension which became a storeroom was a cow of a job, as the side wall had to be built over what was a big twelve foot well. My brother Ray helped with that job.

I tried buying second hand equipment, but it was hard to find and not always the best. The main things I have left are a Boot Patcher, a Landis sole stitcher, a bench, a Last and a Finishing Machine. I've always kept the shoe repairs as part of the business. You never get the money for the time you put in, but it is a service for your customers. The sad thing is the rubbish that people buy elsewhere that wears out so quickly and they bring in to me to repair, but it costs nearly as much to repair as a new pair.

You used to be able to buy leather in whatever size or quantity you wanted, the tanners like Johnsons and Farleys stocked it and would sell you just what you wanted. Now they aren't interested in supporting small operations. The tanners want minimum orders of \$1000 and won't produce until they have the actual order from you.

We used to buy our shoes from the sales reps who came around. They'd take our orders which would then be delivered by Courier. Things are changing, the suppliers like Dunlop don't seem to want sales reps on the road, they want you to select what you want from looking at a computer! You might see the reps once a year at the start of summer or winter, they don't seem to want to service small business.

The big businesses are also changing their warehouses. I had to wait for 2½ months for shoes to come out of the warehouse from a company which was changing things over to computers. I thought I'd do the right thing by a customer and go down to the warehouse to pick them up and it took me half a day to do that and they were only over at Bankstown.

Nowadays they want to sell shoes in a supermarket style setup. The problem is there is no service to the customer if the shoes don't quite fit or aren't quite what they want.

With footwear you never get out of the shop as it is hard to get someone in for a short time to fill in. Faye's sister, Gail Putra, has worked for us for 11 years and our children have worked here at times. Our son Stephen worked here for around ten years before branching out into computers.

To be successful in the shoe business you have to have an understanding of the business and be able to estimate what size shoe people take and also to guess what they are after. To be in a place like Riverstone you have to cater for the area.

We have a lot of shoes in stock. I have never been a man for bookwork, if you are working 'hands on' you know what is selling and in what sizes and when to order more stock in. Some lines always sell well and you can carry them all year round. Others are seasonal, so you order a batch in and hope that they sell and you don't get left with them on the shelf.

As for paying for what they have bought people around here are pretty good, we've only been caught a couple of times in allowing people to take shoes on the promise of paying later and they haven't. You learn to size people up and know who will pay and who won't. We have customers who live as far away as the Blue Mountains who come down to buy shoes from us.

Word of mouth advertising is the best, you really can't beat it. Since we have started the sale people have been coming from everywhere. For example people get talking at bowls at Richmond and then next day we have people from Richmond in to have a look.

The business has been good to us, but it is time for us to take some time and get out of the shop and do other things. The industry has changed and the introduction of the GST will mean more work as there is no tax on shoes at present. We decided that we would have a closing down sale and dispose of the stock that we have built up. By having a sale we can thank the loyal customers who have supported us over the years and give them the opportunity to get a bargain. It is a funny thing about having a sale though, the shoes that didn't fit before, when I reduce them they suddenly fit!

There have been many stories that I could tell you from over the years. I remember sitting here on the seats chatting to a fellow who used to go fox hunting. A huge rat came running through the door, raced past us, skidded around in a U turn, raced out the door, across the road and up the drain pipe at the bank. The fellow I was talking to sat up straight and said "If only I'd had my gun". If he'd had his gun he would have blown a hole in my floor!

It wasn't just the old days that the stories come from, only the other evening we had a fellow wandered in drunk, sat down on one of the seats, then lay down and went to sleep. I woke him up but he went to sleep again. Finally we got him out when Faye told him that there was a drink waiting for him outside and helped him down the road to a seat.

Mrs Brookes

I worked on and off in the old shop as I had the children to look after. When we moved into this shop I was only going to work for seven years, but then we decided to build a storeroom, so I stayed another seven while we paid that off. Then we built another storeroom so I stayed on another seven years and well I'm still here!

We are fairly well organised, I used to live my life by sayings at one time, "Never put it down, put it away, A place for everything and everything in its place". We once had the shoes set out according to colour, one aisle for black, one for white, one for bone and it worked really well, things were easy to find.

This is our first and only sale that we've ever had. We have always tried to keep the price of our shoes down so that people would come back.

We always opened 5½ days a week, but for about 3 or 4 years we were open 7 days a week to try and give Stephen a hand. It was only recently that we stopped the Sunday trading.

The Meatworks were a source of income for us here in the shop. They would bring the freezer suits up to me to replace the zippers on when they wore out, as I could replace them using Eric's sewing machine. The Meatworks also used to purchase their boots from us over the years, gum boots, work boots, all sorts. We also got a lot of trade from the people who worked there who would come in and buy things before they caught the train.

While Eric has looked after the boot repairs I have always done the hand painting of the shoes and my hands show the effects of the use of the strong stripping chemicals. We were very busy with the repairs and alterations when Alan Pfoeffler closed his shoe shop in Riverstone and had his closing down sale. People were buying shoes that weren't the right colour and bringing them to us to dye them as well as buying shoes that weren't the right size and having Eric stretch them.

We will miss the shop and especially the people, but there are a lot of things that we'd like to do, travel, work in the garden and around the house and it is time to make the change.