

Hemel Hempstead in the 1920's & 30's was a very enjoyable town to live in, life was gentle - no mad rush - except for the hundreds of cyclists riding to get to work by 8am at John Dickinson's factory in Apsley. Fleets of buses also carried other workers there, the most popular being Charlie Knight's "Bream" coaches - workers preferring his private company as opposed to the London Transport ones. It was these small organisations, B&B and Jesse Dell's "Rover" that kept the fares down for many years, after they were swallowed up London Transport had the monopoly and local fares more than doubled.

I recall the canal bridge in Two Waters Road being demolished and rebuilt, that caused a lot of problems, going to the Central School at Two Waters, I used the railway line instead. Sometimes P C Copeland chased us on his bike, the only one I know of that had 2 cross bars, but by reversing our caps (these had a white ring round the top) our school was not blamed. A wooden foot bridge was built over the canal along side the road bridge but cyclists going and coming from J Dickinson's blocked it and it was impossible to go against the "tide". Vehicles had to divert along Lawn Lane and go over the bridges in Durrant's Hill to Apsley. The chaos went on for months.

We could not afford bus rides as children, we had to walk, being born in Marlowes in a 2 bed roomed terrace cottage a few doors from the Waggon & Horses Public House we were close to the shops. Although to get to the market meant a walk though the town and up the High Street. The Co-op was also quite a distance, opposite what is now Midland Road, but Mum shopped where prices were lowest. School was Bury Mill End, at the bottom of Astley Road, the grounds are still there today but the old buildings were demolished years ago. In those days each of the local schools taught children from aged 5 to 14 years old. Each area having at least 1 school - George Street, Cowper Road, Apsley (near Two Waters) and many more. Very few families had cars, not too many even had bicycles, walking was normal.

Most Sundays during the summer we walked to Bovington to visit my younger brother's God-mother (a Mrs Dean and her husband Moses) it took us most of the day as we went over the commons and moors, sometimes finding golf balls, my elder brother once found a camera which he took to the police station, it wasn't claimed, after 3 months he had it.

Our milk was delivered daily, by Mr Snoxall with his horse & cart and a 17 gallon churn of milk in the back. One of us boys or my sister would take a milk jug out to the cart and Mr Snoxall would ladle a pint into it. Not having a refrigerator, we didn't have gas or electricity, it was kept cool in the summer by standing the jug in a bowl of cold tap water and covering the top with a piece of muslin. Fresh meat and other perishables were stored in a "safe" - a wooden box with fine wire mesh at each side and in the door - kept outside.

There was a cold water tap in the scullery, over the coal fired copper, with a back door into the garden and outside toilet. (Shared with the next door neighbour). The front door opened onto the narrow pavement - no porch - no inner hallway - just step into the room. The only form of heating & cooking was a coal fired "range" in the living room, which heated an oven and boiled a kettle for hot water or saucepans for cooking.

When it rained hard the narrow pavement was only a few inches above the road and gutter, water flowed under the front door and into the room so dad had loosened the first two floor boards, this allowed water to go directly under the house and into the river Gade that flowed behind the cottages and at one time powered the Mill a few doors away. Lighting was by oil lamps and candles, we didn't have a radio as battery powered ones were expensive to run. Houses with electricity did have them but some used accumulators which needed charging in a specialist shop in Marlowes (Mr Beavens Cycle Shop) at 6d a time. I used to collect and deliver them and got paid a 1d a trip.

I do not remember, but was told, that when the Waggon & Horses was the end cottage in the row our toilets were buckets that were emptied nightly. The "new" Waggon was built and put onto main sewerage and at that time we were included. The old cottage that was the original Waggon was demolished to give the driveway in and out of the new pub. Late at night the "honey waggon" (iron wheeled tank) towed by a Council truck rumbled along Marlowes on its way back to the Corporation yard on the corner of Bridge Street and Cotterells after emptying toilets in numerous back yards around the Borough. I have a photograph of the original Waggon & Horses when it was a cottage in the row with a group of men outside including my father. On the wall behind is a poster that advertised a film being shown at the Electric Theatre called "The Mil??? Of The C???" the rest of the title being concealed behind a man's shoulder. It also stated Monday April 29th - research shows that was in 1929. The cinema was in Albion Hill off Marlowes. (Some houses in Bovington, backing onto the American Air Base, were still without mains sewerage in the early 1950's.)

In the mid 1920's house numbers on our side of Marlowes were odd, my birth certificate lists 119 as my birthplace, later it was changed to 224 reflecting the extra properties. The new Waggon had a series of short wooden posts and metal chains painted green, along the front, I used to enjoy jumping over them until one day I slipped and a spike on a chain link dug into my knee, I didn't repeat the exercise - I think I was about 4 years old.

The street lamps were gas, a man called Lampy came along at dusk pushing a bicycle with a long pole and a ladder strapped to the cross bar. He used the pole, which had a hook on the end, to pull a small chain that ignited the lamp from its pilot light. If the gas mantle was broken then he had to use the ladder to fit a new one. In the late 1930's electric lamps were installed, only to remain switched off in 1939 until 1945.

At age 11 there was a slim chance of a Scholarship place in the Grammar School, priority was awarded to fee paying children, places left after that were given to the highest graded pupils with consideration being given to their parents ability to pay for uniforms, sports kit, books, school outings etc. This being decided at interviews before accepting the pupil. Other 11 year olds could also gain entry to The Central School, this did not have any fee paying students, entry was by ability only and the top 20 boys and 20 girls were admitted. All this changed in 1938, the Central School Headmaster, Richard T Barnard, was given the Headship of the new Secondary Modern School in Crabtree Lane and this meant the

closure of the Central School.

There weren't any roundabouts or traffic lights in the town, the first pedestrian crossing was installed at the start of Marlowes in 1936/7, the term "Belisha Beacon" being coined after Hoare-Belisha the Home Secretary who was in office when they were introduced.

Originally it crossed at right angles but bus drivers coming from the Heath Park direction complained that they could not see the nearside end by the Plough Public House until they were too close. It was then altered to be longer by stretching that end towards Mrs Sells sweet shop. As children we would stand by the crossing, sometimes for 20 minutes or more, waiting for a vehicle to approach so that we could step onto the crossing and stop the vehicle.

There were 5 roads meeting by the Plough Public House, arriving from Marlowes the first left was Wood Lane, next was Lawn Lane, then Two Waters Road then Station Road. All very much as now except Wood Lane ended at Wood Crescent, this is now a dual carriageway to the M1 (although a few original properties remain up to Basil Road), Lawn Lane, Two Waters Road and Station Road were all single carriageways. Leighton Buzzard Road didn't exist. Cotterells ended by the Heath Park Hotel and the end of Marlowes has been cut off. In foggy weather bus conductors lead their buses over the junction with torches, the water table was only inches below the surface of the road, flooding took place regularly and Mrs Sells sweet shop had slots in the door frame ready to accept the 2ft high boards to support the sand bags to hold back the flood water. The pavement/kerb height outside her shop was about 18" above the road.

We fished in the River Gade from the bridge in Station Road, mainly gudgeon and roach, when I was older (about 8) I took my younger brother fishing near Heath Park and the railway bridge that crossed the canal. Having caught a large roach I was ready to go home but my brother hadn't caught anything so I waited, he insisted on baiting his own hook - he was 4 so I humoured him but he got the hook caught in his finger. Naturally he cried, we went home - mum made me take him to the Hospital A & E (don't think it was called that then) the casualty officer couldn't understand why the hook wouldn't come out until I drew a sketch explaining about the barb! the only way was to cut off the line by the shank and push the hook through. A jab of something numbed his finger and the hook was out. I still got blamed for the accident but enjoyed the roach which I cleaned and cooked myself.

Wadkins Bakery - opened their back door on Sunday mornings to sell stale cakes and sweet crumbs (scraps of icing sugar etc). A bag of sweet crumbs cost ½ d, stale cakes known as wads were 2 or 3 pence for 12. My elder brother who was earning money from delivering newspapers had cakes almost every Sunday. Usually I got them for him because he played in the Salvation Army Junior Band and was wearing uniform, he paid me a ½ d so I got my sweet crumbs

The year I was 11 (1936), I moved to the Central School in the September, as did 3 other Bury Mill School boys - I left us after a couple of weeks as his parents paid for him to go to the Grammar School. By this time I got a job delivering newspapers before going to school. Mr. Viney's shop in Marlowes was at the junction of Albion Hill, led to Maynard Road and Paradise, his print shop in Albion Hill had been a Salvation Army Hall as well as a cinema, parts of these roads still exist. I also delivered the Gazettes on Fridays and collected money from clients on a Saturday morning. Earning 3/6d + extra 1/- Collecting.

I also had a Saturday job at Salmon & Sons, general stores with a shop on the corner of Alexandra Road opposite the old High Street. We delivered groceries and hardware including paraffin etc to outlying villages north of Hemel.. Very often taking a tea break at Fred's Café at Bourne End. One day a new driver joined the firm, looking back I'm sure he didn't have a licence, Gilly the proper driver stood on the running board next to the new driver while I stood on the passenger one while he drove along a track in Little Gaddesden. I do not remember anything else until I woke up in West Herts Hospital. I was told my head had hit a wooden electric cable pole. I missed a couple of weeks schooling, the new driver didn't get a job, I was paid my 2/6d a week by the firm and was soon back on my feet again.

A well known character around town was Tommy Cook and his wife, he was a "rag & bone man" collecting any scrap given by householders and loading it into the costermonger barrow that was pulled by his donkey. The donkey always looked very poorly, seemed his rib cage was always visible, a tin can with water swung under the back of the barrow. One day we saw the donkey and cart parked in Cotterells, outside my Aunties house near the bottom of Cemetery Hill, my older brother Bill found some cake in the barrow and gave it to the donkey. It was eating it when Tommy came out of a house - saw what we were doing and yelled out "clear off" or words that meant that. He carried a wooden stick, like a cudgel, very heavy but it acted as a walking stick for little Tommy. He ran across the road and as he chased us he threw the stick which luckily missed us but hit the corrugated iron fence around the council yard from Cotterells into Bridge Street. The dent remained in the fence until it was demolished when the area was cleared in the 1950's new town work.

I had a 2 wheeled box cart, dad had made it from a Tate & Lyle sugar box obtained from Johnson's Grocer's shop, fitted onto a pair of old pram wheels. I used it to collect horse manure, Fisher, Hammond & Duck Dairies in Wood Lane used a fleet of horse drawn carts to deliver milk around town, so Wood Lane became first stop to collect the "dung" and it didn't take long to fill the cart - delivered to a neighbour I got 6d a load. After cleaning out the box cart we also used it to collect coke from the Gas Works, whilst we all had open fires/cooking ranges, mixing coke with coal meant it was less expensive.

My oldest brother John was a bus driver and was turning into Alexandra Road (narrowed

then as Salmon's shop-since demolished- was on one corner) when a car was coming down, the car driver asked my brother to reverse - at which point he was told that my brother was paid to drive forward & take passengers to Harpenden, the passengers had paid fares to go there, would the car please reverse to enable him and the passengers to get on with their journey. At first the car driver wasn't prepared to move but when my brother switched off his engine and the passengers started shouting the car moved out of the way.

Whilst many left school aged 14 most of us ex-Central School types stayed on until 15. War started September 3rd 1939, that first day (Sunday) the sirens sounded for an air raid, I was then living at 219 Marlowes - opposite the Waggon - and after about ½ hour a group of "officials" had gathered outside the Waggon and were looking around the Stone Masons Yard next door to the Waggon. There were dozens of marble stones laying around, some already with names on waiting delivery to the cemetery, most were blank. I ventured towards them and they were talking about the how to cover the marble stones one suggested going over to the Princes Arms to Edney's (a tarpaulin maker) and getting sheets to cover them over. One of the men was an Air Raid Warden, who lived a few doors away from me, he tried to send me away but I spoke out and remarked that a German Bomber was more likely to aim for the railway or factory buildings than a graveyard. I dodged a clip aimed at my car but they soon moved away and I heard nothing more about it.

I became a firewatcher for Marlowes from Bridge Street to the Railway Arches with an evacuee Charlie and a neighbour Lennie, the rota meant I night a week approximately, nothing ever happened on our watch or on the street in general. We spent the nights on patrol if the warning had sounded or playing cards and brewing tea if not. We had the use of an empty house next door to Cossors the green grocers. The electricity supply was a bit erratic, the hot plate ring wasn't earthed properly, and if you didn't switch off before taking hold of the kettle or frying pan you got an electric shock. The organiser of the Lower Marlowes Fire Watchers was Mr Painter, the owner of the "DIY" shop (not known as DIY in those days) he sold timber, paint and paraffin so had a real vested interest in ensuring that no fires occurred near his shop located opposite the fire-watch house. The night sky was lit up by the fires burning in London, it was a terrifying sight, the noise of explosions could also be heard when the wind was from that direction. We were thankful that our town was spared those horrors.

In June 1940 we heard that my cousin, an observer on Blenheims was missing presumed killed. This was a shock he was the only child of my mum's younger sister. In August during the school holiday, I dressed in my long trousers (yes aged 14 we only wore short trousers at school) and took a bus to Watford, at the RAF Recruiting Office by the Pond I asked about volunteering for aircrew. The Sergeant was very kind, had a chat with me, then advised me to come back when I could shave. I accepted his words, returned home and didn't tell anyone about it, but decided that next time I would write to the Air Ministry direct - this I did in 1941 but that's another story.

By September 1940 I was helping my older brother and his workmates who were drivers

for P W Anderson who in addition to Coal & Coke Merchants had a contract to collect milk from Home Counties farmers and deliver it to dairies in Wembley. Plus they bought and sold wheat, corn etc some had to be collected from London Docks. The milk run was early morning, as a vital necessity the firm received extra fuel for the lorries. The farmers wives gave us generous hot milky drinks with fresh baked chunks of bread and butter.

They also managed to engage in a spot of household removals, a visit to the Kent countryside at the height of the Battle of Britain was very thrilling for me. Hundreds of aeroplanes flying around firing their guns gave me a front row seat whilst sitting on top of the lorry cab. It convinced me more than ever that my future was with the R.A.F.

The lorries also collected grain etc from the London Docks, usually about 7 tons at a time,

On one trip with my brother we had a burst front tyre - caused by an upturned pedestrian crossing spike caught in the tram lines - at the bottom of Highgate Hill. Luckily the high load didn't fall but we had to off load some 3 tons before using the jack. A policeman was helpful in forcing open a bombed out shop to let us store the off loaded sacks until we returned the next day to collect them.

During the early days of the war sirens would sound in daylight for no apparent reason, at school it was the signal for immediate retreat into the air raid shelters, on one occasion the warning lasted over 3 hours. Unfortunately whilst water was available no provision for food had been made, myself and another prefect left the shelter to go and obtain supplies of Horlicks tablets, and were returning with them when the all clear sounded.

There were many occasions when German aircraft flew over the area in daylight, sometimes the sirens hadn't sounded, I saw them a few times flying at about 5000/6000 feet in a straight line. The invention of radar was in it's infancy and not 100% in identifying friend or foe. The Observer Corps were the main information for aircraft identity- height - direction etc. telephone communication was also somewhat erratic so mistakes occurred.

Easter 1941 I started work at John Dickinsons, "Junior Foreman" in the Packing Supplies Department, rather a simple easy job but it paid a wage. Older men were getting called up for service, engineer apprentices were excused, by the end of the summer I decided it was time to contact the R A F so I wrote in October offering my services, a small alteration to my birth certificate from 1925 to 1923 meant I was nearly 18. My request was granted with a travel warrant for Euston on November 6th 1941, there I would be interviewed, have an aircrew medical then if accepted be attested, sworn in as an A.C.2 and placed on deferred service until receiving call up papers. I was 15 and 11 months old and had a service number 1398674.

I was advised to attend the local Air Training Corps meetings to obtain other basic information that would be useful when called up. I went to the local ATC meeting and

was greeted by my old Head Master, R T Barnard who was the F/Lt Commanding Officer of 1187 Squadron. His opening remark was "welcome Tommy, pleased that you are joining us" - I presented him with the form given to me at Euston, he looked at me and said "You're not old enough" to this I replied "Sir, you know that and I know that but they don't". He extended his hand and said "congratulations well done - all the best" and the matter was never mentioned again. I was called up to start aircrew training on April 13th 1942, age 16 and 4 months.

Hemel became a dormitory for many Londoners trying to escape the blitz, whilst our town escaped severe damage there were a few instances of bombs hitting some local houses with loss of life but nothing on the scale of the cities. News black-out prevented these being reported at the time. Many bombs were dropped on open countryside, one however destroyed a house in Astley Road and others were destroyed in Belswains Lane. I heard of one story involving evacuees living with my parents, the man had lost an eye in a London air raid and was recovering with his 8 year old son in Hemel, my mum - them and neighbours were in the air raid shelter near the Waggon when the wife of the air raid warden entered. Her first words to all inside was "I heard the siren so I got up and dressed myself." when the evacuee spoke out "Oh - well I guess you are old enough" As the lady in question was in her 70's it eased the tension - mum said it was quite funny at the time - everybody except the old dear was amused.

Generally speaking the local children welcomed the evacuee children, many lasting friendships were made, it was however difficult to understand their accents at first. They went to their own schools, it would have been better if more mixing had taken place as even better co-operation and understanding would have been achieved. One of the girls billeted with my parents remained a friend for the rest of her life.

The destruction of Hemel by making it a "New Town" caused a lot of distress to many families. Initially the objections were very strong, the Labour Government silenced most of it by stating that if Hemel wasn't to be the site then Redbourn would become the centre Hemel Hempstead "Fathers" recognised the futility of continued objection because if Redbourn became the centre then Hemel would virtually disappear.

Unfortunately in planning many errors were made, not apparent until they were built and then it was too late to correct, Marlowes being the biggest mistake by building the shops each side so far apart with a dual carriage way, whilst being perfect for motor cars at the time is not suitable now Marlowes has become a pedestrian precinct. The market move is a good one but traders do have problems unloading/loading and whilst they can be under cover shoppers are not.

Other Towns, many much smaller than Hemel Hempstead, have superior Bus Stations that enable all routes to arrive and depart from a central position. This makes changing from one route to another very simple. Rest rooms and a restaurant are provided. The original Market wasn't covered for many years, now the area should be cleared and the bus station enlarged to make it suitable for all buses and coaches to terminate there. The present widespread bus stops are not suitable for our town, that has so many routes in

and around it, plus the longer distance journeys and airport coaches. Currently airport coaches stop in the narrow road and passenger's cases clog up the footpath. They get loaded by the driver, sometimes on the off side, which puts him in danger of being struck by passing vehicles. It is difficult for cars to stop and drop off passengers and luggage too

Shop Mobility was an excellent idea, but difficulty of access through a car park, makes it harder for disabled people to use properly. More often than not the disabled parking floor is full and nearby spaces are also filled so one cannot stop near to the office anyway.

Having it on the first floor also causes many problems, the lift very often is so heavily used that scooter riders have to wait ages for an empty one to arrive. With so many empty properties surely the owners of the Shopping Precinct could make a ground floor shop available at ZERO rent/rates for Shop Mobility to operate from.

I await with interest to see how the new road lay out by Debenham's and Riverside will be done. With the hydraulic rams built into the road already I can imagine the problems when the road is re-opened into the Leighton Buzzard Road. The road sign in Leighton Buzzard pointing to Kodak's Car Park is very misleading and should have been taken down when the road was closed.

There is nothing positive to say about the loss of our Hospital, other than its demise is purely and simply a Political move by a Government that has lost its way, intent on trying to hang onto power by boosting their chances of holding onto a seat in Watford.

The misleading data provided to claim West Herts was improving by beating pre-set targets for waiting times is another act of "spin". I have had 3 routine operations during the past 8 years, ALL were performed in PRIVATE Hospitals but paid for by the NHS, because allegedly the NHS could not deal with me in the "target time" the Government created. One operation, to correct a problem after surgery in a Private Hospital, was done in an NHS Hospital by the same surgeon!!!

The last operation, due to be done at St. Alban's Hospital, was changed by offering me a chance to get it done immediately in a private Hospital at Sawbridgeworth some 30 miles away. Having already had pre-operation tests including blood tests done at St. Alban's I was surprised when all were repeated at Sawbridgeworth. Some 2 weeks after having the operation I received a telephone call from St. Alban's Hospital offering me a bed, still well within the 18 weeks "target", set by this incompetent Government.

I have tried to find out how much money has been paid to the Private Sector, by our local NHS Authority, to carry out routine operations that should have been done within the NHS but nobody will give me an answer. Hopefully with a change of Government this information will be released so that everybody will know the wastage that has occurred.

ADDENDUM TO PRE-WAR HEMEL HEMPSTEAD - MEMORIES OF TOM PAYNE

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I do not remember, but was told, that when the Waggon & Horses was the end cottage(s) in the row our toilets were buckets that were emptied nightly. We shared 1 toilet between 2 cottages, in the back yard, up the garden no electricity or gas only a candle, we used paraffin lamps indoors. When the "new" Waggon was built and put onto main sewerage we were included. The old cottage(s)? that was the original Waggon was demolished to give a driveway in and out of the new pub. Late at night the "honey wagon" (iron wheeled tank) towed by a council truck rumbled along Marlowes on its way to the Corporation yard on the corner of Bridge Street and Cotterells after emptying toilets in numerous back yards around the Borough and taking the contents to the Sewer Farm located on the site that is now the Ski Slope.

I have a photograph of the original Waggon & Horses when it was a cottage in the row where I lived, a group of men outside, most standing but 3 seated with my father sat on the extreme right when looking at the picture. On the wall behind is a poster advertising a film being shown at the Electric Theatre called "THE MIL?? OF THE C???" the rest of the title concealed behind the shoulder of a man standing in front of it. It stated Monday April 29th and research shows that to be either 1924 or 1929. (I believe 1924) The landlord's name is Herbert Essam, Licensed to sell Beer by retail to be consumed on the premises & Dealer in Tobacco - no mention of spirits.

The Electric Theatre (cinema) was located in Albion Hill, a turning off Marlowes opposite Davis & Bailey's Iron foundry and the Half Way House Public House. Later, after the Princess Cinema was built, it became the Salvation Army Citadel and later still it was used by Mr Viney (Newsagent in Marlowes) as his print Works.

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During the period I worked at J Salmon & Sons Hemel had a Royal visitor, I believe it was the Princess Royal, coming to lay a foundation stone or open a new Wing at the Hospital. Marlowes was lined with crowds of people holding Union Jack Flags and there were hundreds of people as well as children so I guess schools were closed for the event.

I was working as a help mate for the driver and we went to Watford taking our new van back for a service and to collect a relief van. This turned out to be a very old pre-war green coloured vehicle, no side windows in the driver or passenger doors, these had a curved profile along the top and the top half was open. There was also a wide running board along each side and the windscreen was flat with the top half opening and a small wiper blade about 6" long in front of the driver. On arriving at "The Plough" from Two Waters we were stopped by a policeman, I believe it was P.C. Copeland, (his bicycle had 2 cross bars). He wanted us to wait until the Royal procession that was due to arrive from Boxmoor Station had passed before we could drive up Marlowes. Gillie Thomas, my driver, argued that it was essential we got through quickly and as there

wasn't any alternative route (Wood Lane was a cul-de-sac and Cotterells was out because the Royal Party was coming from Boxmoor Station).he let us through on the promise that we got past Hillfield Road (known as Hospital Lane) quickly without stopping. Salmon's shop was on the corner of Alexandra Road and what is now known as Queensway so we drove into Marlowes with everybody lining each side waving flags and cheering us on.

Gillie & I entered into the spirit of the occasion by waving back, Gillie giving the typical "Royal" wave of the hand motion which increased the cheering. people further along the road, assumed the "Royal party" was coming got over their initial shock and added to the hilarity when our old van reached them. When we reached Hillfield Road we found our way ahead was blocked by people standing across the road, by blowing the hand operated brass horn (operated by squeezing a large rubber ball which blew air into the horn) this increased the laughter but they moved out of the way, and we reached the shop to tell our story to the manager and staff.

In the 1980's during a visit with my wife to Australia to see her sister I was recalling the story when her husband, Philip Thomas originally from Boxmoor, remarked he remembered the event. He was a Boy Scout at the time and was one of several Scouts, Guides and Cubs, lining the pavement to try and keep the people from getting into the road. He confirmed the cheering and flag waving as an old green van "chugged" (as he put it) up Marlowes - only about 200 yards in front of the Royal Procession.

Pity that no photographs have materialised over the years of this event. We had to use the old van for several weeks and it caused a lot of interest wherever we went. I am unable to recall the year but I'm sure it will surface in the Gazette Heritage Page one day. He didn't know me at that time, it was in the 50's he courted and married my wife's youngest sister, but it made a very interesting talking point among his Aussie friends.