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# THE PRINTING OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRST DISTINCTIVE BANKNOTE-REVISITED

Alan Flint

In early 2000, Australia's first distinctive bank note sold for a record price for an Australian note, it brought one million dollars and considerable publicity at the time. It had been held in the same family since it was printed in 1913 and much of the publicity surrounded the family and the little girl, who was the original recipient.

From sketchy details known of the early banknote production stages, it was assumed that only one printer was involved at the last process. However a series of events led me to discover that in fact a three man team was in charge and I had the good fortune of meeting up with one of those note printers who were there when the first distinctive Australian note was complete.

This article records my discoveries and subsequent events encompassing the first banknote while at Note Printing Australia Ltd, my then employer.

Australia's first distinctive note was of ten shillings denomination and had a scene of the original Goulburn Weir, Victoria as its back design. (Fig 1.)

I visited the Weir at Nagambie, 90km north of Melbourne when it was re-opened after extensive repairs and donated a large visual of both sides of the first note for inclusion in their visitor centre. The note was first printed in 1913 at the Old King's (Customs) Warehouse which is still standing today and situated behind the Spencer Street Railway Station in Blyth St. West Melbourne.

Australian and State postage stamps were being printed there at the time under the supervision of the Australian Stamp Printer,

J.B. Cooke. The choice of the King's Warehouse was seen as ideal in having all of the country's security printing housed in the same building. By being situated near the docks, materials emanating from overseas could be quickly secured on delivery. Thomas Samuel Harrison, an Englishman with extensive knowledge and experience in the field of security printing was appointed Australia's first note printer.

By including the new banknote printings, the existing stamps strongroom was further fortified with a thick layer of bluestone aggregate together with hardened steel railway lines stacked vertically on top of each other. This was done, of course, to add a formidable barrier to guard against attack. Following Cooke's retirement in 1918, the Stamp Printing Branch was abolished and Harrison became the Australian Note and Stamp Printer.

## **Bill Comerford, one of the three printers.**

In December 1981, a Mr. Bill Comerford, a local Bendigo resident, wrote to Note Printing Australia Ltd., formerly the Reserve Bank of Australia, Note Printing Branch, outlining an article he had recently read in the "*Bendigo Advertiser*".

A lady had written to the "*Advertiser*" enclosing a ten shilling note seeking information about its circulation. As a consequence, a couple of responses were received from correspondents giving some details of its origin.

This story was of particular interest to Mr Comerford as he considered he probably

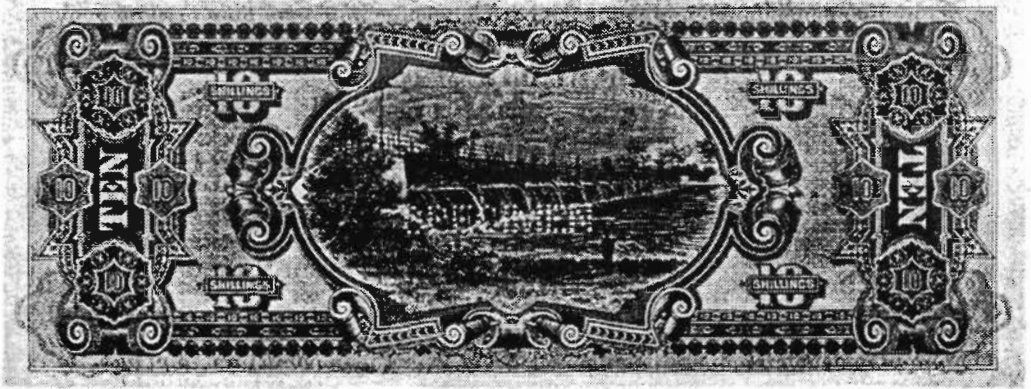


Fig 1. The back & front of Australia's first distinctive note

printed the note when the Australian Note Branch was first established in the Old King's Warehouse.

In his letter, it appeared that Bill's father had seen an advertisement in the "*Melbourne Herald*" seeking staff for the new government department. Bill disliked school and was keen to try his luck in the big world.

Gordon McCracken, a future general manager of the note printing works and Bill - both 14 year olds - were appointed to the staff in March 1913.

Bill recalled that "T.S. Harrison" had just been brought out from England to set up printing operations and to become the new Australian Note Printer, together with his son Ronald as the engraver and a Jack Knight as foreman printer. The only machine assembled at the time was a small hand press and Harrison embarked on acquiring the machinery required to set up Australia's own banknote printing establishment.

Following Bill's contribution to the subject, he was asked by the "*Bendigo Advertiser*" to record some of the early history of

the Australian Notes Branch for the archives of the “*Bendigo Library*”.

Bill’s letter went on to request dates of the later relocation of the original works to the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy (1924) and later 50km north to Craigieburn (1981). He also indicated he would be grateful for any other information considered of interest, in particular, concerning the gradual development of the works which would bring up-to-date, the story of the early history of the Australian Note Printing Branch.

Bill said he was not a historian, but just recorded some of his early experiences at the branch - 68 years previously.

As a postscript to his letter, Bill added that his association with the note works was terminated in April 1922 - together with all other male members of the staff with the exception of his friend - Gordon McCracken. This came about due to an electioneering promise by the then Prime Minister William Morris (Billy) Hughes. Hughes had said, “if re-elected, I will replace all supernumeraries in government departments - with ex-soldiers”.

Apparently, Gordon McCracken was seen as future executive material and was retained on that basis. The Notes Branch was originally a department of the Federal Treasury, but being a new and small department and owing to the intervening war years, the staff was never officially gazetted as permanent. So, it came as a shock when Billy Hughes implemented his promise and all male members of staff were gradually discharged, irrespective of age and even included some who had been rejected for war service.

Thus it was in April 1922 that Bill was the last to have his employment terminated after 9 years, having served as an apprentice machinist, storeman, & checking officer.

On the other hand, McCracken eventually rose to general manager status and held that position for 23 years until his retirement in 1963.

Bill became an insurance agent working in this field until he retired in Bendigo.

In January 1982, I replied to Mr. Comerford thanking him for his interesting letter which would assist when the future *Note Printing Museum* at Craigieburn was developed. Bill was provided with several booklets and staff magazines that were considered sufficient to include most of the answers to Bill’s questions which would, in turn, complete his notes for the “*Bendigo Library*”.

As a mark of appreciation for his initial approach, Bill was invited to lunch and a tour of inspection of the current note printing works as a further opportunity for the Reserve Bank of Australia to learn more of the early times which had not been recorded.

Bill and his daughter Pat accepted the invitation. They were both surprised by the presence of Mrs. Mavis McCracken, wife of the late Gordon who Bill had joined with back in 1912, (Mrs McCracken, had been invited also to add a little intrigue to the day’s events).

In April 1982, I received a six page letter from Bill expressing his thanks for the interesting day provided for him and his daughter at the Craigieburn works.

He added that the visit brought back nostalgic memories of those early days and the pride in his having been associated with that important and now historic commencement of the Notes Branch, but for one who played such a small part in its early history. Bill said that “he was overwhelmed and flattered by the hospitality offered to them. He confessed with the memory in mind, of that old original small and austere King’s Ware-

house, he was bewildered by the beauty and enormity of the present vast note printing complex at Craigieburn.” (Fig 4.)

The main impression gained from his visit was the realisation of the high speed and sophistication of the present day machinery and he marvelled at the intricacy of the mechanical suction note counting process reflecting, the increased tempo of life and industry since those early days.

Bill went on to describe in great detail the functions of which he was involved and personalities he came into contact with at the branch (over leaf). In March 1982 more old photographs had come to light and together with those taken during their visit, were sent on to the Comerfords.

Now, the next letter from Bill is the trump card in this story.

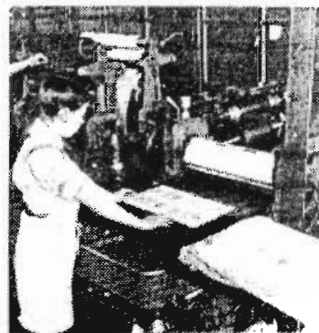
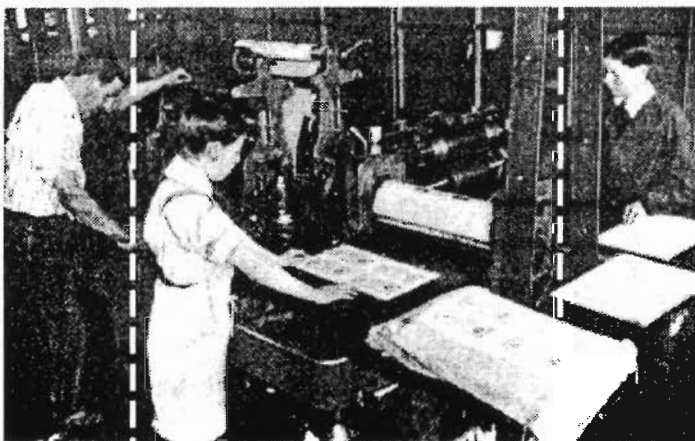
In September 1982 I forwarded an extended copy of a photograph which appeared in one of the publications provided to Bill earlier. Bill had requested we research the

whereabouts of the negative as he was sure he was there at the time the “*Melbourne Herald*” photographed the first complete note to come off the old “Hoe” flat-bed printing press in 1913.

Figure 2 (below) shows the complete scene sent to Bill. The lines represent the incomplete and cut down version originally published in one of the Reserve Bank publications as part of a montage of historic events. The dotted lines indicate why it had been considered that the person in the centre was the sole printer. (Fig 3.) But not to Bill. That’s also why he requested the full photographic print. He knew he was there when the cameras snapped. (Fig 2.)

On locating the negative, two other people had ultimately crept into the picture. This in turn made the printing process on the old “Hoe” flatbed machine - a three man operation and not only one as first thought.

In my letter I asked Bill if he could identify who these three people were. In Sep-



*Fig. 3. Cropped image*

*Fig 2. The full printing detail L-R Jack Knight (foreman), Dave Grieve (apprentice), W. (Bill)Comerford (apprentice)*

These old belt driven "Hoe" machines were typical of the slow tempo of that early industry. They contained four heavy flat beds, heated by gas, on which to each was attached a steel plate with four Hae engravings.

These beds rotated slowly around on a square base enabling the engraved plates to first pass under ink rollers, then mechanical wipers to be finished wiping and hand polished by the machinist in time for an assistant to feed the sheet of Hae paper on to the plate, which then passed under a pressure cylinder, and received and stacked by another assistant on the other side.

To accept the engraved imprint, the Hae paper had to be damp, and this was previously effected by a process of dipping the paper quickly through water, five sheets at a time, and stacked and covered to stand until all the sheets were evenly damp. After this basic printing, they had to be dried out on racks, then pressed, and ready for the same routine all over again, for the reverse side printing. They were then passed on for further dry colored letterpress printing, cutting and numbering etc.

I hope these few notes will enable a comparison of the early Hae printing methods of 1913 with those of 1952, and that perhaps my personal reminiscences, will add a little human interest to the early history of the Branch.

Yours Sincerely

Bill Comerford

5-4-52

Bill Comerford's description of printing method

tember 1982, I received a remarkable response from Bill after he had received all of the photo he had requested (see extract over leaf).

In December 1987, the Reserve Bank's Note Printing Museum (Our World Of Money) was taking shape - at least on the drawing board. I had been appointed project manager to bring the Bank's Bicentennial year contribution to fruition.

As an interesting side issue, I had been chatting to a fellow archivist in Sydney and we exchanged details of our current projects. I mentioned I was to arrange a visit to Bendigo for an oral history taping session - with a gent who was involved in Australia's early banknote production. He enquired when I would be doing this. I said "In a few weeks time, if I get the chance."

He scalded me. He said, "If Bill is 89 years of age, you may not be able to pick and choose when to record him." Having received this smack on the knuckles (by

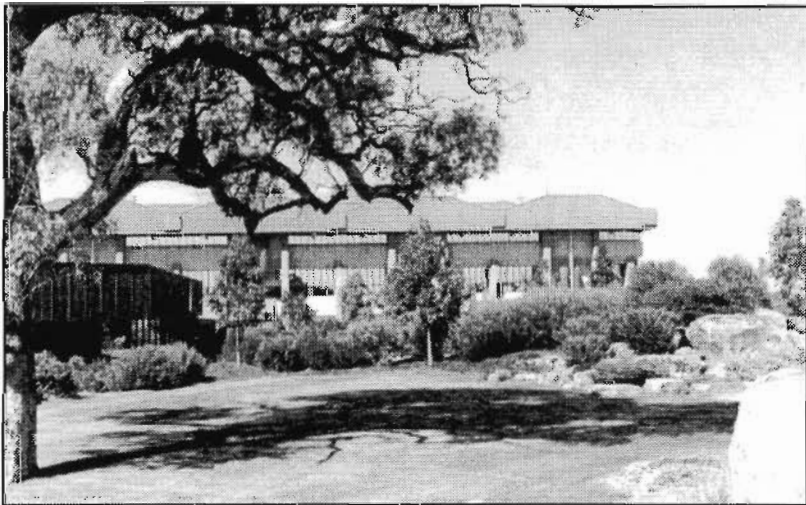
phone) caused me to go to Bendigo two days later, to voice record Bill answering specific questions on Australia's early note printing methods for posterity. (Fig. 5)

Incidentally, the Bicentennial Travelling Exhibition visited Bendigo on 11 January 1988 - on its second stopover en-route around Australia.

Prior to this event held at the Queen Elizabeth II oval, I arranged for Bill Comerford to visit the note printing display to re-aquaint himself with us.

This proved a special occasion because we were promoting the forthcoming opening of our museum and the introduction of Australia's new hi-tech \$10 polymer note to be issued two weeks later. Our intention was to have the local press photograph Bill pointing to himself as a 14 year old in a large reproduction of 'that photograph'. (Fig. 6)

This was hailed by interested bystanders as a very fitting way of following the theme of our Bicentennial display 'the old to the



*Fig 4. Note Printing Australia Ltd, Craigieburn, Victoria*

RECORDED  
INDEXED  
56 OCT 1982

M.P.A. DEPARTMENT

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Notes of Bill  
(written up)  
re: Flat Bed

Bendigo 3550 30 9-82

Dear Alan

Thank you so much for that photo of the flat-bed machine, and particularly for all the trouble you have gone to in persevering with your enquiries, which has been rewarded with the complete picture. The two others referred to, are Jack Knight, the foreman printer brought out from England with Mr Harrison and his son Ronald, and, and the other "boy" is "Yours truly"!

That is why I was so anxious to get the full picture, as I remembered it being taken and then appearing in the "Herald". The boy "feeding" the machine was Dave Greene, the next boy to be appointed after the machines had been assembled.

Do you remember me showing you an engraving that Gordon had arranged from a small photo taken on one of our picnics to the beach showing Gordon, Dave and Bill. That was Da Vinci's.

Incidentally, I think it was Dave who, some time later was playing a little game while "feeding" the note paper under the cylinder, seeing how close he could let his fingers go, but got caught, and with his scream and the fingers coming through to me on the other side, as white pulp, it was too much for me and I had to be carried outside to revive.

Fortunately Jack Knight was quick to shut down

Extract from Bill Comerford's reply





*Fig 5. Bill with author's wife Elaine at the recording session*

new'.

Sadly, Bill passed away a few weeks later without ever seeing the note printing museum completed.

However, Bill's recorded voice was converted to a compact disc which eventually operated by push button in the museum's main viewing gallery. This display was erected directly above the intaglio machinery seen on the production floor below. This (raised printing) process was the same as Bill had been apprenticed to in 1912.

Although Bill never witnessed his name up in bright lights, his daughter Pat was present when the display of the printing of Australia's first distinctive note was first revealed for public enjoyment.

Unfortunately, the current Note Printing Australia Ltd. management has chosen to close its note printing museum until further notice. Lets all hope this closure is temporary and will re-open again in its former glory.

So, from 1981-1988 the Bill Comerford memoirs had developed as did the friendship of yours truly with the person who probably put his hand on the first completed distinctive Australian banknote.

A numismatic product was produced in



*Fig. 6. Bill points to a photograph of himself at the Bicentennial Travelling Exhibition in Bendigo*

1993 to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the first Commonwealth Note. This meaningful product would not have been created without the romance associated with the printing of that first distinctive Australian note back in 1913.

## **Bibliography**

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