

THE GWENDA HEGINBOTHOM COLLECTION

COFFEE AND BRIDGE, ANYONE?

This year Australia celebrates the seventy-fifth anniversary of the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. This famous arch symbolises a triumph of cutting edge design, technology and engineering in a time of great need. Today, it has become one of the most enduring icons in the lucrative domestic and international tourist markets.

A modest reminder of the intense public interest associated with this great event now lies nestled in a protective layer of tissue at the National Museum of Australia's repository. The Gwenda Heginbothom collection, donated to the Museum in 2006, is a fifteen-piece coffee service in a classic white ceramic design, embellished with gold edging and a transfer depicting the bridge stretching over Sydney Harbour. Mrs Heginbothom's aunt purchased the set to celebrate the opening of the bridge, and then passed it on to Mrs Heginbothom's mother. The coffee service has never been used and was always considered a prized heirloom. The set is an elegant specimen in its own right. However its real appeal lies in its graceful reflection of the bridge itself, the conception and dramatic opening ceremony of which has become a popular Australian legend.

Like other heroes of the Great Depression such as Phar Lap or Sir Donald Bradman, the hype surrounding the building of the bridge and its opening ceremony helped to inspire a sense of public confidence in the future at a time of otherwise crippling economic depression. Over one million visitors from Australia and New Zealand attended the opening, which was the greatest gathering of people into a single area ever witnessed in Australia. The progress of the bridge was a national obsession, and on its long-awaited opening day the Melbourne *Argus* reported that, 'for months every shop window has been filled with bridge souvenirs'.

The opening of the bridge emptied Sydney's suburbs as over a million people converged on the city centre. This spectacular event, which included interstate floats, a range of sporting and cultural events, fireworks and other entertainment, is also memorable for its controversial ribbon-cutting ceremony. Before the opening ceremony, J. T. Lang, the outspoken Premier of NSW, decided that he would cut the official ribbon. Lang's decision outraged members of the right-wing militia group, the New Guard, who believed that Lang not only had Communist sympathies, but that the bridge should only be opened by a member of the British Royal Family.

In the weeks preceding the opening ceremony the leader of the New Guard, Colonel Eric Campbell, had made news headlines when he vowed that Lang, whom he referred to as 'that tyrant and scoundrel', would never open the bridge. These threats came to fruition on the opening day. In a notorious act that has become a key element in the folklore of the bridge, Captain Francis de Groot, a former Hussar and senior member of the New Guard, posed as a member of the Governor-General's escort in the parade before breaking away and riding up to slash the opening ribbon with his sabre. Captured exclusively by Cinesound Movietone, De Groot was heard to shout that his actions were 'In the name of the decent and loyal citizens of New South Wales'. Following De Groot's arrest, the ribbon was subsequently re-tied and the bridge was 'officially' opened by Lang.

At a time of high unemployment and poverty, the bridge project (although many years in the planning) employed thousands of Australians and took only eight years to build. On its completion in 1932 it stood as testament to Australia's burgeoning industrial culture. In 1938, a book entitled 'The World Wonders' was published in Britain, and suggested a list of the 'Seven Wonders of the Modern World'. The final selection included the Sydney Harbour Bridge alongside such technological innovations as the Battersea power station and the *Queen Mary* cruise liner. Describing it as the 'engineering wonder of the age', the book endorsed Australia as an emerging industrial nation.

A substantial tourism industry has also developed utilising the physical design of the arch itself. The south-east pylon has been periodically open to the public since 1934. The pylon lookout was the highest point that tourists could legally climb on the bridge and





Photos: George Serras

indeed the highest public view available over the Sydney cityscape at the time. The pylon lookout was closed during World War II when it was redeveloped to make way for gun turrets. It reopened in 1949 as a museum and small scale amusement park run by Yvonne Rentoul. After visitors had sampled the '5 million acre view', they could purchase any number of bridge-related souvenirs from the shop on the top level of the pylon. The lookout had become Sydney's premier tourist destination, whose patrons could choose to purchase 'any of the beautiful jewellery or useful leather, china, plastic or wooden gifts with a distinguishing harbour bridge motif', on offer in the pylon gift shop. In the mid-1990s the world renowned 'BridgeClimb' experience opened, allowing visitors to walk up to the summit of the arch.

Souvenirs are the quintessential mementoes of a holiday or visits to notable attractions. As one of Australia's most recognizable landmarks, the Sydney Harbour Bridge is also intrinsically linked with

the concept of leisure time. It has been a successful marketing device in the promotion of Australia as a holiday destination, and a key image on the ubiquitous range of souvenirs and mementoes associated with a visit to Sydney. Peter Lalor notes the long-term trend in utilising the bridge as an advertising motif, by observing that 'In Sydney, the bridge as a design icon sees it represented in various designs for plumbers, electricians, tourist operators and a thousand other businesses. It has been painted in every artistic style, sold on myriad t-shirts and rendered into endless forms to create souvenirs for visitors'.

The bridge still occupies a lucrative position in the contemporary souvenir market as well as remaining an integral part of the Australian cultural consciousness. The Gwenda Heginbotham coffee set is a charming example of the public excitement surrounding the great occasion of the bridge's opening. Its admission into the National Historical Collection in 2007 will ensure that it serves as reminder of the glory of this event for generations to come.

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