

Background to the McCann Bros. "ghost sign" restoration

A PROJECT OF THE BOB BROWN FOUNDATION

About the restoration of the McCann Bros. "ghost sign"

The restoration will involve painting the lettering of the sign as per the original with care taken to match in with repairs to the brickwork. The lettering will be painted with a traditional, high-opacity gloss enamel suitable for painting directly onto masonry. One or more letters may be left in their present state for future reference.

Work will commence on Monday 20 November 2017 and should be completed before Christmas.

The Bob Brown Foundation is refurbishing the sign with the support of the current owners, Hobart City Council and the Tasmanian Heritage Council.

This heritage project is significant because it was painted by a local signwriter, for a local business that remains in the hands of the same family, and there are few large pre-decimal advertisements remaining in Australia.

About the McCann Bros. "ghost sign"

The McCann Bros. sign is visible on the south-facing wall of "Loretto House" on the corner of Macquarie & Warneford Streets.

It was painted by Max Towell in the 1930s, while an apprentice to George Harrex who had his workshop in Bathurst Street between the pet shop and the shop on the corner of Elizabeth Street.

While we cannot precisely date the McCann Bros. sign, we know it was painted sometime between 1923 and 1935 because the sign references "McCann Bros." and the address 180 Elizabeth Street.

McCann's music was founded by James R. McCann in 1881. On 21 May 1923, Bernard McCann, James' son, changed the name of the business to "McCann Bros." Then in 1935, the business relocated from 180 Elizabeth Street to 141-143 Elizabeth Street, where it is currently located.

Source: <http://mccannsmusic.com.au/about-us/> as well as anecdotal information from Geoff McCann, current owner and son of Bernard McCann, and Don Prairie, Max's apprentice.

"Loretto House", 287 Macquarie St, Hobart

"Loretto House" was built by convicts in 1846.

The original grantee was Charles McLachlan (1795 - 1855), a Scottish businessman and early settler in Hobart arriving in October 1824. He was a prominent figure in the Hobart mercantile

circle. He helped found the Commercial Bank of Tasmania and was managing director for a period. He was also a member of the Legislative Council from 1832 – 1842.

He was described by Henry Savery as “a little undersized man, of very repelling features, a short, stout gentleman ... whose temper was seldom ruffled, or his equanimity disturbed.”

Source: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mclachlan-charles-2411>

Very little is known of the early years of the property. Records from the early 20th century show it was run as a boarding establishment from 1904 to at least 1934. There is an old faded “Boarding Establishment” notice painted onto the side wall of the building that also evidences this.

The Tasmanian Hotel & Boarding House Directory shows that from 1924 the property could accommodate six tenants at 4 shillings per day or 25 shillings per week. These rates remained unchanged through to 1934.

In recent years the property has been converted into professional suites and offices, but it retains reminders of its original Victorian character.

Source: “*Mansions, Cottages and All Saints*” – Book by Audrey Holiday & Walter Eastman

Michael Bremer-Trainor, restorer

Michael Bremer-Trainor will be undertaking the restoration of the McCann Bros sign.

Michael Bremer-Trainor is an expert in the decorative restoration of historic buildings. With 30 years experience on projects in the UK and internationally, his range of skills include water-gilding, oil gilding, trompe l'oeil, woodgraining, marbling and stencilling.

Michael trained in water-gilding and specialist decorative finishes in London in 1987 – 1989. During the period 1989 to 1997, he was the principal Restorer, Decorative Artist and Colour Consultant for Hare & Humphreys Ltd and worked in the UK, Canada and Mexico.

Between 1998 and 2006, he worked as a freelance Gilder, Restorer and Colour Consultant, in the UK, South Africa, USA, Mexico and Germany.

He established THOUGHT-TANK product design studio in London in 2003 and continued to make products for THOUGHT-TANK innovation & design until 2015, while advising on Historic Colour and Decorative Restoration.

He moved to Tasmania in January 2016.

His major projects include:

- Windsor Castle
- Frauenkirche, Dresden.
- The Palace of Westminster
- Spencer House, London
- The National Gallery, London

- The British Museum, London
- The Royal Academy, London
- The Institute of Directors, London
- The Athenaeum Club, London
- The Reform Club, London
- The Ritz Hotel, London
- Claridges Hotel, London
- The Savoy Hotel, London

Recent local examples include: restoration work at Woolmers Estate and Narynna Heritage Museum.

Max Towell, original signwriter of the McCann Bros. "ghost sign"

Maxwell Renton Kerr Towell, born 22. April 1914 in Hobart, died 12 October 2003 in Hobart. Married to Phyllis Winifred Moore, born 11 August 1918, now deceased. They married during WWII on one of his periods of leave.

Max went to school in North Hobart and lived in Claremont all his married life. Phyllis was a "Claremont girl", her father was the C.O. of the army station in Claremont.

He served in WWII for about 5 years, initially with the Australian navy before being seconded to the Royal navy. Toward the end of the war Max was transferred back to the Australian navy and stationed around New Guinea. Max later would tell about the "shocking conditions" he encountered.

Max was a signwriter his entire working life. He was trained by George Harrex and, on return from service, worked for JJ Harrington. He later inherited the business from George Harrex.

Max was also a keen cricketer and footballer and played for a time for the New Town footy club, where he won "best & fairest".

Don Towell, Max's younger brother by 16 years to the day, recalls how as a child he would often watch Max at work - "Max was ambidextrous. He would put his ladder up, start on the left side of the wall with his left hand and as he moved across he'd transfer the brush to his right hand, so he wouldn't have to move the ladder."

Max Angus, well-known Tasmanian watercolourist, was a good friend of Max Towell's.

Source: anecdotal information from Don Towell, younger brother of Max Towell, now 87y.o. and living in Launceston, formerly a photographer and journalist for the Examiner.

Max was an amateur landscape artist. He never painted on canvas, though. Instead he'd paint on burnie board or pieces of masonite.

"Everyone in the Towell family has an "Uncle Max" hanging on their wall."

Source: anecdotal information from Alan Towell, nephew of Max Towell.

Don Prairie recalls "Max signed up the day after" war was declared. "He served on the destroyer HMS Falkner on the North Sea escort runs to Russia out of Scapper Flow and the Mediterranean."

"Another sign of his in excellent condition is in the lane of Brisbane Street just above the Brisbane Hotel for the furniture maker Vallance."

Source: anecdotal information from Don Prairie, Max's apprentice

Don Prairie, apprentice to Max Towell

Don Prairie was Max Towell's apprentice.

Don began his apprenticeship in 1950 with Max Towell after completing his schooling at Hobart Junior Tech (now New Town High School).

Don's father was a "painter and paper-hanger". Like Max, Don was a signwriter for his entire working life. He worked in the family business, Prairie & Sons, which is still operating as Prairie Signs, although no longer in the family. Don retired in 2004.

Don and his son John Prairie have an extensive portfolio that includes: Theatre Royal dome scrollwork, Incat's Hoverspeed built for the English Channel ferry route, the Australian Spirit – the biggest catamaran built in Australia at the time, as well as branding for Wrest Point Federal during the royal visit by Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

A well-known example of Don Prairie's work is the "Bushell's" sign from the 1950s, still visible on the side of the "Olde Map Shop" near the Lark Distillery in Hobart.

Bushell's sign photo: <http://www.ghostsigns.com.au/ghost-signs-tasmania/nggallery/image/64>

Also like Max, Don is a talented watercolourist and has exhibited over the years.

Max Angus inscribed his book "A salute to Watercolour" : "for Don Prairie, who also wields a sable brush for his luminous watercolours – paint on, Don!"

They were, as Don recalls, part of the "brotherhood of the sable".

Well known signwriter Rod Busch, one of the few remaining signwriters in Tasmania who works by hand and has been commissioned to do works at MONA, was Don's apprentice.

Rod Busch source: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-11/hobart-man-signwriting-by-hand-for-51-years-and-loving-it/9037274>

There is a wonderful photo of the original Prairie & sons crew here: <https://www.prairiesigns.com.au/about>

Dale Campisi & Michael Brady, behind the "Signs of Australia" facebook group

We were able to connect with Don Prairie and learn about Max Towell thanks to the help of Dale Campisi and Brady Michaels, who run the facebook group "Signs of Australia".

This facebook group is an offshoot of a recent photo project from Brady Michaels that celebrates vintage signs, typography and old advertising from all over Australia and culminated in the publication of "Signs of Australia: Vintage Signs from the city to the outback", published November 2017 and features the McCann's Bros. sign.

Michaels has commented "The fate of vintage signs is uncertain and often left in the hands of business and building owners who ultimately decide whether to restore, erase or simply ignore the historical marks on their premises. In all too few cases, signs are heritage-listed for permanent protection and are celebrated as important local icons. For those signs that do remain (and there are still many), they offer a window into another time when all signage was produced by skilled artisans and manufacturers. Some signs are a testament to heritage buildings and businesses that have stood the test of time and still operate."

Source: <https://dailyreview.com.au/the-sign-hunters/67538/>

Michaels' photographs are currently on exhibition at "The Commons", 126 Bathurst St, Hobart.

Other "ghost signs" in Hobart

There is an online photographic archive available here: <http://www.ghostsigns.com.au/ghost-signs-tasmania>