

FOREIGNERS

SECRET ARTEFACTS OF INDUSTRIALISM

Edited by Jennifer Harris

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FOREIGNERS: Secret Artefacts of Industrialism

© Jennifer Harris and individual contributors

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Making Foreigners at the Midland Government Railway Workshops, 1904-1994 - *Bobbie Oliver*

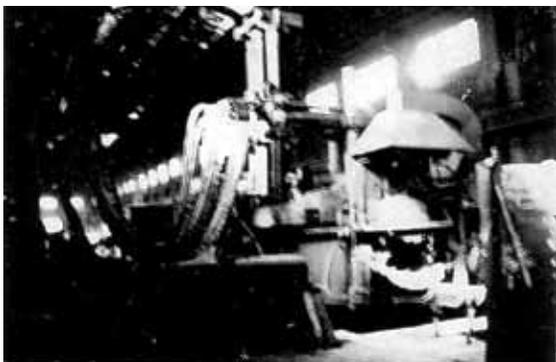


Figure 21 The foundry roof had to be raised seven feet to fit the new electrical steel furnace which was supplied by the federal government to enable the workshops to undertake defence contracts. Photograph by Ron Watson (1943).

Whether it was in the dark days of the 1930s Depression, when the work force almost halved,⁷ during the boom period of the 1950s, or the decline of the '80s, 'foreigners' seem always to have been a part of the culture and practice of tradesmen working at the Western Australian Government Railway [WAGR] Workshops at Midland, on the outskirts of Perth. At Midland, 'foreigners' were items made without an official government railway order, in Workshops time, and with Workshops materials, for the private use of the maker, or in some cases for profit. Products ranged from the very small - twenty first birthday keys, bottle openers and the like - through tools, children's toys and radio sets to the truly impressive boats and sheds that some past employees have described. How and where this practice began, and why - and to what extent - it was tolerated by management, are just some of the questions that need to be addressed in researching the history of this covert activity.

This chapter, firstly, considers the origins and precedents of 'foreigner' production - for instance, was this practice a feature of industrial workshops in other parts of the British Empire or Commonwealth or the wider world? It then discusses the historical development of the practice at Midland, the types of objects made, and how these practices and products compare with those of other railway workshops. Issues considered include: How did the workers rationalize what was essentially stealing? Did 'foreigners' become more elaborate

and sophisticated over time? Were there 'cycles' of foreigner-production, dependant upon how strictly management and foremen stuck to the rules? What were the penalties for being discovered making or removing 'foreigners' from the Workshops site, and how diligent or consistent was management in exacting these penalties? Finally, can any definite correlation be made between the extent of the practice and the circumstances of the workplace, and if it can, what are the possible implications regarding worker/management relations; job satisfaction; rates of pay; union activity on the shop floor, and workers' roles in decision-making?

Both anecdotal and written evidence suggest that 'foreigner making' was a common practice in other Australian workshops and elsewhere in the world. As an example, workers at the North Ipswich Railway Workshops (Queensland) referred to 'foreigners', but also called them 'take home fringe benefits'. According to Bronwyn Roper, the foreigners made at Ipswich:

... ranged from tools to 21st birthday keys to fishing reels ... Nothing was too hard for the men to make or repair. In fact, a lot of their skills can be attributed to this practice as the 'foreigners' often proved challenging.⁸

Roper's description of men walking 'stiff-legged' out the gate parallels that of Midland workers.



Figure 22 In the 1970s a recycled hacksaw blade was turned cleverly into these foreigner tweezers. Photograph by Gina Pickering.

At the South Australian Railway (SAR) Workshops at Peterborough, 'homers' or 'foreignies' - as they were known - included Hill's clothes hoists and perambulators. According to local historian John Mannion, the Hill's hoist 'foreignies' production flourished in the Machine Shop until some time in the 1950s, when:

One day the 'd's [detectives] from Port Pirie were heard to be coming to investigate. Most of the clothes hoists ended up at the local dump and consequently they ended up in non-railway workers' back yards.⁹

Rotary clothes hoists were also among the larger foreigners produced at the Rockhampton (Queensland) Railway Workshops, along with water heaters, washing machine bodies and a host of smaller items such as spatulas, cake tins and fishing line sinkers.¹⁰

Evidence of the extent of the practice internationally can be gained partly from the variety of names by which it and its products are known. While 'foreigners' and 'foreignies' are common Australian usage, 'homers' is widespread term in the United States, and, according to Michel Anteby's study of the practice in French industrial workshops, French tradesmen are likely to speak of '*les perruques*' (a word meaning 'wig') - if, indeed, they can be persuaded to speak of them at all.¹¹ This reticence may not be confined to the French. Alfred Williams, a blacksmith, whose *Life in a Railway Factory* - an

account of his twenty-three years at Swindon (UK) Railway Workshops - was first published in 1915, mentioned 'theft' only once in his narrative:

Theft is sometimes practiced by the workmen ... Some of the schemes adopted for getting the stolen materials outside the works have been quite artistic, and others were ridiculously open and daring. Years ago loads of timber and other valuables were regularly smuggled out in the middle of the night [with the connivance of the watchman] ... On at least one occasion a brazen-faced fellow wheeled out a new wheel-barrow, unchallenged, amid the crowd at dinner-time and was never suspected. At other times wheelbarrows and other tools have mysteriously disappeared in the night, as though they had been swallowed up by an earthquake. They were quietly lifted over the fence and received into the neighbouring field and so got safely away.¹²

Even so, Williams did not specify whether the 'wheelbarrows' and 'other tools' were actually made on the premises - therefore, making them 'foreigners' - or whether they were implements, made under factory work orders, that were simply stolen from the premises. The surrounding narrative suggests the latter, in which case, his account never actually mentions the illicit production practice, known variously as 'foreigners', 'homers' or '*perruques*', at all.

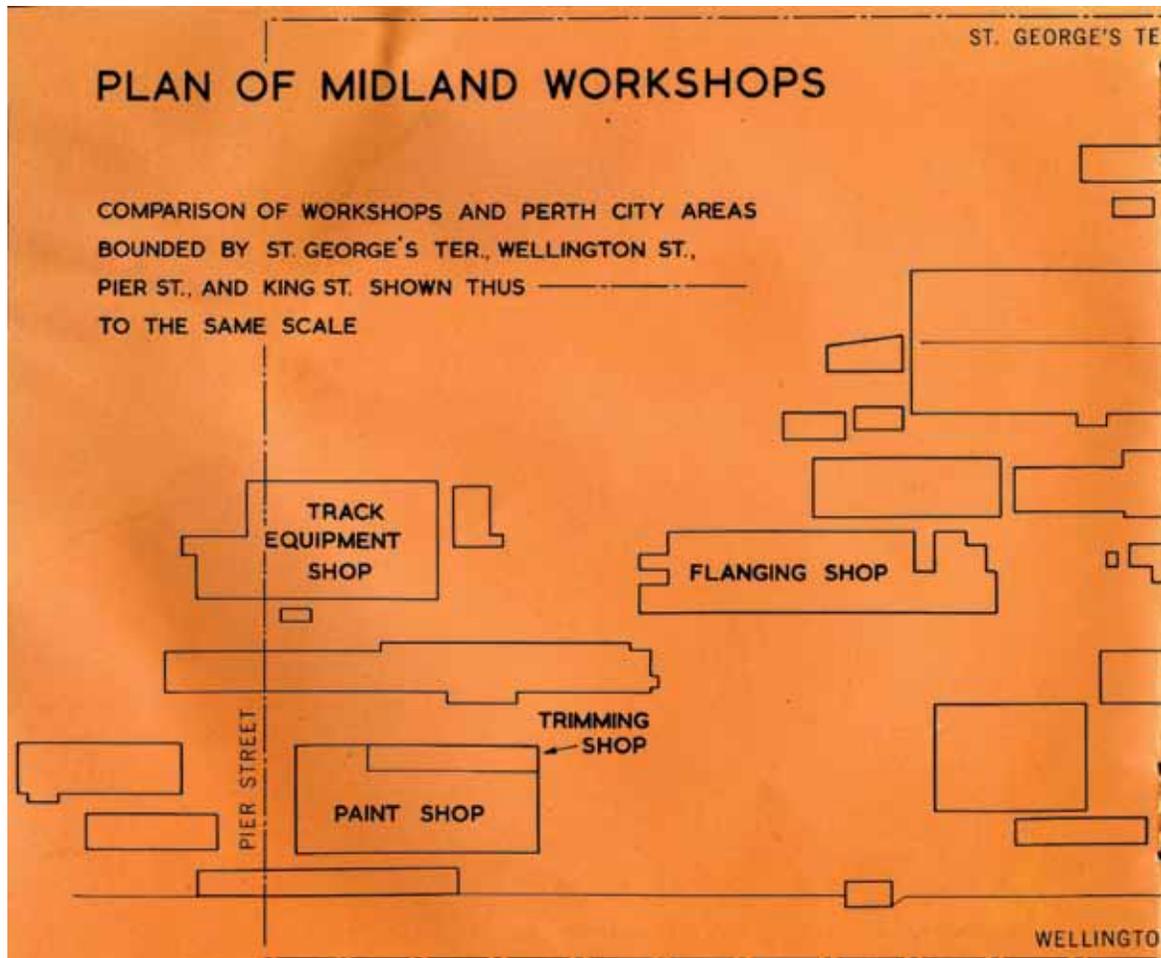


Figure 23 A 1972 plan of the workshops which was given to new apprentices. It compares the vastness of the Midland Railway Workshops to the centre of the city of Perth. Photograph by Stephen Smith.

Does this silence indicate that foreigner production is a later phenomenon - Williams having written in a pre-World War I context? And, more intriguingly, did this practice increase in extent and ambitiousness throughout the century? A French study by Bozon and Lemel in the latter half of the 1980s, for example, stated that:

...28 per cent of male factory workers ... indicate that: [on their job] they [frequently or occasionally] manufacture 'something' or 'do a job not designated for their employer'. [Furthermore], in 40 per cent of cases cited by male factory workers the 'something' is an 'object'.¹³

Other studies reveal evidence of 'homers' being produced in the United States and Britain; in a Hungarian tractor factory, and in France at Renault, the Paris Subway, Air France and the French national railway.¹⁴ In his 1959 study of management in the United States, Melville Dalton found widespread 'appropriation of services and materials belonging to the organization for [employees'] own use'.¹⁵ Similarly, in a British context, Gerald Mars concluded that 'in many occupations, fiddles [his broad, collective term for workplace 'crimes', which includes the illicit appropriation of materials for personal use or commercial gain] were accepted by workers as an everyday part of life'.¹⁶ Consequently, it would appear, that by the mid- to latter-twentieth century, many workers in Britain, Europe, the United States and Australia regarded 'foreigner production'

and other means of 'cheating the bosses' as - if not morally acceptable behaviour - at least common practice.

How do these findings relate to the practice of foreigner production at the WAGR Midland Workshops throughout the twentieth century? Firstly, it is useful to examine the context in which this practice took place. The Workshops were transferred from the port of Fremantle to Midland, an outer suburb on the eastern side of Perth, in 1904. For much of its existence, the WAGR (Westrail, from 1975) Workshops was the largest industrial site in Western Australia. It was one of only three or four large workshops that trained apprentices in a range of industrial trades such as blacksmithing, boiler making, fitting, mechanical and electrical engineering, machining, coach building and carpentry, and many other skills required to manufacture and repair locomotive engines, rolling stock and railway tracks, tools and equipment, but which also fitted the men for a wide range of trades outside the railways. The Workshops was a tightly knit community, within which a range of sub-communities, centred on the different trades, thrived in a proud and highly competitive working culture.

While existing records throw no light on the extent of 'foreigner-making' in the first two decades of the twentieth century, interviews with tradesmen who were employed during the 1920s and '30s reveal that foreigners were common by the inter-war

period. They were purportedly made from 'scrap materials', although the workers acknowledged that these materials still belonged to the Railways Department. According to Kathy Bell, during the interwar period, 'the practice was very widespread and foremen generally turned a blind eye, for it was seen as harmless enough and was arguably a good way for apprentices to practice new skills'.¹⁷ It may also have been ignored because of the severity of the economic depression during the early 1930s. This apparently lenient attitude was not confined to times of hardship, nor to 'small' objects, however. When car and wagon builder apprentice Alan Bright built the cabin and fixtures for an ocean-going boat in 1949, he did so 'under the tutelage of senior tradesmen, foremen and sub-foremen'.¹⁸ Yet, as will be discussed shortly, the Workshops Regulations plainly stated that 'stealing' was a crime punishable by instant dismissal.

Another type of 'foreigner' was made off the premises, using material from the Workshops. Graeme Bywater, a boilermaker, benefited when the Workshops changed from steam to diesel locomotives. He acquired a load of brand new, but redundant, boiler tubing and plating from which he constructed a shed in his Morley back yard. The cleats that fixed the shed roof to the walls were made in the Workshops, and sections of railway line were used for the roof trusses and the floor.¹⁹ As Graeme bought some of this material cheap in Salvage and also paid for a Workshops truck to deliver it



Figure 24 Twenty-first birthday keys reveal the high degree of co-operation between men and the various workshops. Making a key and a velvet inlaid box was an exercise in co-operation between the pattern shop, the foundry, the plating shop, tool room, wood mill and shop. Photograph by Gina Pickering.



Figure 25 These patterns which are thought to be for sinker moulds (c.1950) have been identified as foreigners. It is not always possible to identify a foreigner, especially among the hundreds of patterns which were some of the easiest foreigners to hide. As they were often used many times, they were likely to be left on-site with the maker being spared the ordeal of smuggling them out.

Photograph by Gina Pickering.

to his house, the shed is probably much less of a 'foreigner' than many items made in the Workshops and smuggled out.

A similar story about a shed, this time involving not salvage material but the use of Workshops equipment, comes from South Australia. This story was shared between tradesmen, so there may be a hint of bravado in it, but, as the joke turned out to be on the teller, it is quite likely that the truth is not 'embroidered'.

A former welder/boilermaker [at the SAR Workshops] told me the other day that, as he used to go out and repair various items/structures around the town and on railway property on a tractor fitted with PTO [power take off]-driven arc welder, he decided to finish off a shed frame he was building at his own place. He cautiously drove around to his house and into the almost finished structure, avoiding the foreman etc. Shutting the door so he couldn't be seen, he set about finishing the job - a good job too, he reckons - only to find that in his haste he had welded the tractor 'in'. All his work was wasted as he cut the welds and went back to work!²⁰

At Midland, workers used a variety of methods of getting foreigners off the premises. As at Swindon, these varied from the 'artistic' to the 'ridiculously open' and 'daring'. Perhaps one of the most ingenious methods concerns a wire worker who spent his lunch times building a large birdcage to house his

carrier pigeons. The cage was the subject of much speculation among his workmates who could not envisage how he would get it past the watchman at the gate. Eventually, the cage was completed. After that, each morning when he came to work, the man would bring in a pigeon hidden in his clothes and put it in the cage. When he had about a dozen pigeons in the cage, he went to the night watchman and told him that he wanted to give some of his pigeons a trial flight. He asked the watchman if he would release the pigeons at a certain time in the evening so that the man's wife, who was waiting at home, could time them in. The watchman agreed and even looked after the cage until it was time for the worker to end his shift, at which time he collected the cage as he passed through the gate.²¹

When Anteby interviewed retired workers from the 'Pierreville' French aeronautics plant, he encountered a marked reluctance to talk about their 'foreigners'-including one retired worker who was obviously proud of the good quality chimney he had built in his garden, but 'How it came to my garden? That's something I know, but I won't tell you about that!'²² Australian factory workers, as the above anecdotes show, seem to be much more candid about admitting to the practice. This openness could stem, at least in part, from the fact that the factories where they had worked were now closed, and the railway companies largely privatised.²³ Perhaps this made the prospect of prosecution seem less likely. Indeed, Barbara Webster found that most of the former employees

Figure 26 A foreigner garden fork.
Photograph by Gina Pickering.



of the Rockhampton Railway Workshops, despite having been retired for up to two decades at the time of their interviews, responded with 'coy laughs, sham denials and requests for anonymity' when asked about foreigner production.²⁴ Rockhampton is one of the few government railway workshops still in operation in Australia.

Workers were also keen to justify the practice, thus attempting to remove the stigma of illegality. According to employees at the North Ipswich Workshops, the practice benefited the community as it 'made life a little bit easier' for young families when 'money was tight'. Money saved from not having to purchase items that could be made as foreigners, so the argument went, could be spent in the local community. Furthermore, some workers donated toys made as foreigners to local charities, thus invalidating the charge that the products were made for their personal gain.²⁵ Perhaps some of the rocking horses made at Midland were similarly donated, although there is no record of this having occurred. Kevin Mountain related the finding of a template for rocking horse sections in the Wood Mill, several years after the factory's closure. The pattern was in sections so that the rocking horse could be smuggled out in pieces and assembled at home.²⁶ Other workers have spoken of furniture, including 'whole dining suites' being made piece-by-piece and smuggled out in the same way.²⁷

There seems little doubt that most tradesmen who produced foreigners did so to supplement their income, either directly or indirectly. Some Midland ex-employees have spoken of 'foreigner kings' - tradesmen who appear to have spent most of their working day making 'foreigners', sometimes in collusion with management,²⁸ as we shall discuss shortly. Some of this foreigner traffic took the form of stolen materials, from which buildings, including 'beach shacks' and sheds, were constructed. These illegal exploits rival some of the examples from French and American studies. Anteby has pointed out how:

Access to certain skills, materials, tools, machines, scrap parts, etc. condition the possibility to manufacture ... homers. Specific functions ... are more prone to homer making. The 'golden hands' workers (*des mains en or*) as other 'Pierreville' employees call them, are without doubt the ones most in demand as far as homer making goes...²⁹

Dalton's American study provides examples of large-scale, systematic theft on the part of individuals, including foremen who would have been expected to report and curtail such activities among their subordinates.

A foreman built a machine shop in his home, equipping it with expensive machinery taken from the shop in which he worked. The loot included a drill press, shaper, lathe and cutters and drills, bench equipment, and a grinding machine.³⁰



Figure 27 *Janice* was an ocean-going boat constructed by Alan Bright who made this model for the 2004 exhibition. In 1949 as a young car and wagon builder, Alan Bright set out to impress a girl friend by making 'Janice'. The hull was made in Claremont and every other part - including, ropes, windows, canvas, rollicks and cleats - were made in the workshops and smuggled out for assembly. Photograph by Gina Pickering.

In another example from Dalton's study, the foreman of a carpentry shop in a large factory, 'spent most of his workday building household objects - baby beds, storm windows, tables [etc]' - for 'higher executives' and in return received, not only his pay, but 'gifts of wine and dressed fowl'.³¹ In such situations, a number of shop floor workers - and the management - must have been involved for these activities to continue over long periods of time.

In many instances cited in the above-mentioned studies, including the author's research at Midland, a significant factor appears to be the roles of foremen and gatekeepers in preventing and detecting, or alternatively colluding in, foreigner production and removal. This is not surprising, given the authority vested in these positions. Perhaps what is surprising at Midland is that many of the stories involve 'hoodwinking' the gatekeepers rather than implicating them. The Midland Workshops Rules (quoted below) clearly stated that it was management, the foreman or the sub-foreman who 'authorized' which work tasks were to be performed and which tools were to be manufactured or repaired, and who gave permission to individual workers to leave their work area. Foremen at Midland had all 'risen from the ranks' and, consequently, all would have known about the practices and how to detect evidence of them. Some anecdotes - such as Alan Bright's assertion that he was encouraged by senior tradesmen, sub-foreman and foreman to build parts for his boat - indicate definite collusion between

foremen and workers. According to Mick Hyde, a car and wagon examiner, this extended beyond the foremen, to management.

The bosses would come around. See, there was the real boss, the Chief Mechanical Engineer; he was up in the office. You never saw him and then there ... were the under bosses. I used to get it a lot because I was working on ... the only drill in the foundry, and chaps that made foreigners that had to have a hole in it, and it had to be precise, used to bring it to me to drill the hole in it. [They'd] want a certain size hole and sometimes if the boss came around and saw you working on this foreigner, he'd have a look and he'd say, 'That's nice. Did you get one for me?'³²

This raises the question of penalties, especially in cases where there is apparently substantial evidence of widespread collusion. Did the Midland management similarly collude in the production of foreigners? Hyde's comments indicate that 'white collar' bosses, as well as foremen, were 'in the know' about foreigner production. But were they recipients of foreigners? The evidence is not conclusive and is largely anecdotal.

Certainly, there was a strict official policy, banning the practice of any form of theft. On entering employment at Midland, each employee was required to sign - and abide by - a set of Workshops Rules, which were under by-Law 84 of the *Government Railways Act*. Copies of the Workshops Rules were

posted upon walls in the various Workshops.³³ Several of these Rules forbade practices that were either conducive or essential to foreigner production.³⁴ Rule 20 confined each employee to the part of the premises where he was engaged in work, unless he had the foreman's or sub-foreman's permission to visit or work in another part. Some of the most ambitious or ornate foreigners - such as inlaid furniture, birthday keys in wooden, velvet-lined and inlaid boxes, boxed cutlery sets and display cabinets - involved cooperation among skilled wood and metal workers, upholsterers, pattern makers and other craftsmen. Consequently, any rule restricting movement from one section of the factory to another would, one might assume, limit foreigner production to a particular area, but in practice, it appears that workers did move about with reasonable freedom.³⁵

Rule 50 stated that the construction of new tools must be authorised by the management before manufacture; nor could any tool be replaced without the foreman's authorisation. Apprentices were required to make their own tools as part of their training, and they then kept these as their tools of trade, so opportunities doubtless existed for making 'extra' items. Rules 53 and 55 were the most specifically aimed at combating foreigner production, however. The former prohibited employees from ordering 'work of any description' without the authority of the foreman, and the latter stated that employees must not convert to their own use 'any material or article'. Nor must they 'make tools,

patterns, models or articles of any description' for 'private purposes'. Rule 55 specifically stated that 'any infringement will lead to summary dismissal'.

Were any workers sacked for producing foreigners? The Workshops management could be arbitrarily strict regarding the illegal removal of materials, even when these were of no further use. The following instances, briefly outlined in *The Government Railways Act Appeal Board's Decision Book*, volumes 18 and 19 covering the years from the late 1970s to the Workshops' closure in 1994, contain several cases where a worker was charged with theft or 'misuse' of railway property. A blacksmith's striker who was dismissed in 1979 for 'removing a quantity of angle iron from the [Workshops] premises' was reinstated after he appealed, but was demoted to a fitter's assistant. Yet a mechanical fitter who was sacked in the following year after being charged with unlawfully removing material from the Workshops, had his appeal dismissed. In 1984, a foreman and a coach trimmer were both dismissed for each having been found 'to have a quantity of Westrail goods at his private residence'. The foreman's appeal against the severity of the punishment was upheld, on the grounds of appellant's long and previously unblemished record, and he was permitted to return to work but demoted to coach trimmer. Yet the coach trimmer's appeal was dismissed and he was not reinstated. Similarly, in 1990, one worker (a truck driver) was reinstated on appeal, with no loss of wages or privileges, after being charged with



Figure 28 The double pram made at Peterborough South Australian Railway Workshops for Mrs Harrison after the birth of twins in the 1950s. Photograph courtesy of John Mannion - Fay Crouch Collection, Port Pirie, South Australia.

involvement in stealing Westrail property, while two other men had their appeals dismissed and were not reinstated.³⁶

Of all the cases heard by the Railway Appeal Board in this particular period, only one is known to have been related specifically to foreigner production. This case occurred in November 1982, when a car and wagon builder and a moulder were 'summarily dismissed' when they were discovered smuggling a doll's house out of the Workshops. Railway detectives, who were on site attempting to apprehend the perpetrators of other criminal activity, spotted the two men, who were brothers-in-law. The car and wagon builder took his case to the Railway Appeal Board, where his foreman testified that the doll's house had been made out of scrap materials and was intended as a Christmas present for the worker's daughter. No doubt this and the support of the WA Amalgamated State Railway Employees Union, influenced the Board in re-instating the car and wagon builder, although he lost all of his accrued benefits. His brother-in-law, the moulder, did not appeal his sacking.³⁷

Kevin Mountain recalled one man being sacked for attempting to smuggle out dirty kerosene, which was to be thrown away. In another instance, an apprentice found making a trombone had the instrument confiscated and destroyed, although he does not appear to have been sacked.³⁸ Mountain admitted that double standards applied, and that

clerical workers would be much less likely to have their bags checked as they left the site. As Administrative Officer, he had responsibility for ordering stocks worth several hundred dollars, without requiring the permission of a more senior staff member. Arguably, therefore, salaried staff in positions of responsibility had a far greater opportunity to undertake significant thefts than did workers on the factory floor. As an example, on one occasion, Mountain's order book was stolen and used to order \$3,800 worth of portable refrigerators, but although the culprit was traced, he was 'exonerated'.³⁹ In another case involving a salaried staff member, a Progress Officer, dismissed for engaging in 'an act of dishonesty' had his appeal upheld, was reinstated to his former position with all his privileges, and was paid for the period of time between his dismissal and his reinstatement.⁴⁰ While it would be inappropriate to build an argument solely on the basis of these two instances, they do appear to confirm a perception among both 'white' and 'blue collar' workers that treatment of salaried and wages staff at Midland was unequal.

Apart from the threat of instant dismissal, the layout of the Midland site was another factor that militated against the secret production or removal of large objects. In each of the shops, the foreman's elevated office gave him a commanding view over the workplace and everything that occurred in it. As fitter and turner Dave Hicks expressed it, 'That was his ivory castle, where he used to sit up there and oversee his kingdom'. When not in his 'ivory castle', the foreman

would patrol the factory floor, 'nothing more than just a policeman, trying to catch out people doing things wrong and tell them off'.⁴¹ Apart from this constant surveillance on the shop floor, the site was fenced and entry and exit was only by the main gates. These were locked during working hours, with employees unable to leave the site except with the foreman's permission. Nor were any vehicles permitted on the site unless permission was gained for a specific reason, such as transporting salvage material that an employee had purchased legally. In contrast, the Peterborough Workshops were not fenced⁴² and, at Rockhampton, the workers were permitted to leave the site for lunch, and to bring bicycles on site, if not larger vehicles.⁴³ Such freedoms were unknown at Midland, where employees often had the feeling of existing in a prison atmosphere.⁴⁴ Consequently, in a workplace where employees were not trusted and were excluded from even the most basic forms of decision-making, production of foreigners was one means by which they could gain some control of their time, their skills and their level of job satisfaction. As discussed in other chapters, although few workers have expressed it in those terms, it was a form of rebellion against an oppressive system.

The evidence suggests that management and foremen knew about the practice and turned a 'blind eye' on most occasions, in order to preserve harmonious relations. In a closed shop, management had to take seriously the role of the trade unions when making decisions about the workforce that

might cause controversy. Dennis Day, an active Communist, who was employed at the Workshops as a fitter and turner, for example, claimed that he was sacked three times - not for offences involving foreigners - and reinstated by union might.⁴⁵ Consequently, it is easy to suppose that, provided a tradesman was a good worker and did not make a point of flaunting his illicit activities before the notice of those in authority, he would be left in peace. Furthermore, the long-established custom of having farewell gifts made by the tradesmen for retiring members of the salaried staff, made management complicit in at least this form of foreigner production. This practice was legalised by Works Manager Ron Wadham, who gave these projects a Works order, thus making them part of official WAGR business.⁴⁶ Another reason for the apparent 'blind eye' lies in a statement by Wadham that: 'We couldn't control everything'.⁴⁷

It is more difficult to ascertain whether there were 'cycles' of foreigner-making activity, and if so, whether these cycles were even partly dependant upon how strictly management and foremen stuck to the rules. The accounts of employees from the latter period of the Workshops' existence (especially the last twenty years) seem to suggest that either the practice was more openly permitted or that workers were less afraid of the consequences of being caught. From the beginning of the 1970s, the Workshops experienced a more transitory workforce, as the mining boom in the North West provided a lucrative, although less

stable, alternative source of employment for skilled tradesmen.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the introduction and increase of what some workers saw as ‘commercial’ strategies, including time and motion studies, multi-skilling, and an expectation that the Workshops would compete with private industries, all contributed to changing the culture of the Workshops.⁴⁹ Traditional patterns of advancement ceased or decreased. Between 1972 and 1989, the number of blue-collar employees was more than halved, consequently fewer apprentices were trained or retained at the end of their training.⁵⁰ Similar changes in other railway workshops around Australia have been blamed for reducing ‘the sense of satisfaction [experienced by tradesmen] in carrying out their craft skills’.⁵¹ There is some evidence to suggest that this turbulent period made Midland workers cynical about the value of their work and may have led to an increase in rule breaking, including foreigner production.

According to Patrick Gayton, a pattern maker, who left the Workshops in 1992, only two years before their closure, the practice of making foreigners flourished everywhere that he had worked. Gayton acknowledged that, if a tradesman made a foreigner for one of his work mates, ‘you [could] get into a bit of a slippery slide ... because if you do a foreigner for someone and ... he’ll tell his mates what he’s had done and then they’ll come and want one ... You could spend all your time making foreigners for people’.⁵² Patternmakers were particularly in demand for complex work, which took up more time,

such as items of furniture. Gayton used to say that ‘if ever they closed the pattern shop then we would re-open it ... and call it “Foreigners Incorporated”. I think we would have turned over quite a tidy little profit’.⁵³

Foundry worker Fred Cadwallader was another employee who suggested that standards changed over a number of years. In the 1950s, one foreman, named Eugene Eagles, earned the nickname of ‘dive bomber’ because ‘he used to swoop on [you when] you’d be doing something you should not have been doing’ and would shout, suddenly, ‘What are you doing here?’ much to the alarm of the startled worker. Cadwallader described Eagles as being ‘very efficient’ and ‘of the old school’. If he found someone making a cast for a foreigner, he would ask, ‘Have you got an order for that?’ and when the answer was in the negative, he would say, ‘Well, knock it out, knock it out’ and the cast was destroyed. But, according to Cadwallader, later foremen ‘weren’t quite so stern’. In fact, one found him making the top of a gas stove for his father in law, and gave him advice on how to finish it to save himself some work.⁵⁴

In conclusion, given that there appears to be some correlation between the extent of the practice and the circumstances and culture of the workplace, might there be some implications for worker/management relations; job satisfaction; rates of pay; union activity on the shop floor, and workers’ roles in decision-making? Several studies have examined

the ‘bind’ in which management may well find itself over the issue of ‘foreigners’, ‘homers’ or ‘fiddles’ of a similar kind. As Sean Silverthorne, the Editor of Harvard Business School’s publication, Working Knowledge, stated:

A factory worker uses company time and materials to fashion a lamp he will take home for personal use - an artifact called a ‘homer’. The practice is probably illegal and clearly against written company policy. If discovered, the worker could be fired on the spot for his action. The consequences of homer making seem cut and dried. But...⁵⁵

Anteby’s research at the ‘Pierreville’ aeronautics factory revealed the existence of ‘a quiet complicity between workers and management’. He argued that the practice might even increase worker productivity as it kept ‘teams together and skills sharp during idle times in the highly productive aeronautics business’. He also cited the value of the ‘source of pride’ in a ‘well-crafted homer’.⁵⁶ Gerald Mars went so far as to assert that, ‘fiddling’ played so important a role in worker-employer relationships that:

Management and unions... need to broaden their perception of the occupations they control or represent. They need to be able to look at jobs through a worker’s eyes ... A ‘promotion’ may look nothing of the sort to a worker if it moves him out of a fiddle-prone job into a fiddle-proof one.⁵⁷

The pervasive silence about foreigner production while the Workshops were in operation - still maintained by some past employees⁵⁸ - indicates that a degree of embarrassment remains regarding the ambiguous status of such objects. It is unlikely that workers would welcome Mars' suggestion that management look 'through workers' eyes', because it would be tantamount to admitting that such illicit activities exist and - from management's side - that they are condoned.

The evidence at Midland suggests that, while there were excesses, much foreigner production was carried on within a well-regulated system. It would appear that foremen, who were the level of 'authority' closest to the shop floor, were well aware of foreigner production, and took individual action - sometimes destroying objects, sometimes ignoring the fact that they were being made and sometimes openly colluding in the process. Certainly, past employees (quoted above) frequently expressed the opinion that, at least where apprentices were involved, foreigner production was either encouraged and or at least condoned as a means of improving their skills. Indeed, in the previously-discussed case of the car and wagon builder who was sacked for smuggling out a foreigner, the foreman testified in his favour, stating that he made the doll's house out of left over materials. Although some accounts indicate widespread collusion among workers and foremen, few suggest that security personnel were involved;

in fact most stories are told at the expense of the 'gateman' - a figure to be hoodwinked whenever possible.

Likewise, there is little evidence of management collusion in the practice, apart from the 'unofficial' activity of producing farewell presents for retiring staff. This is not surprising. Apart from the strict physical and social separation maintained between 'blue' and 'white' collar workers, in the eyes of both management and factory floor employees, an adversarial element existed. Works Manager Ron Wadham expressed it somewhat cynically as managers being 'appointed to screw the workers', while 'trade unions were formed to screw the management'. He said that the Workshops was 'a natural battleground' where relations were conducted by achieving some level of compromise.⁵⁹ One of those compromises appears to have involved being less diligent about detecting and penalizing foreigner production than a reading of the Rules would indicate. For the tradesmen, foreigner production was not only a source of personal satisfaction, pride and sometimes monetary gain, it was a way of getting back at the 'bosses' in this hierarchical, dangerous and undemocratic workplace. Consequently, it could be regarded - as were the flagpole meetings - as a means of 'letting off steam'.



Figure 29 A rooster shape for a wind vane.
Photograph by Gina Pickering.