

Mashman Brothers Pottery in the 1950s

A Caster's Recollections



Don Soper at Mashman Kiln c.1950s

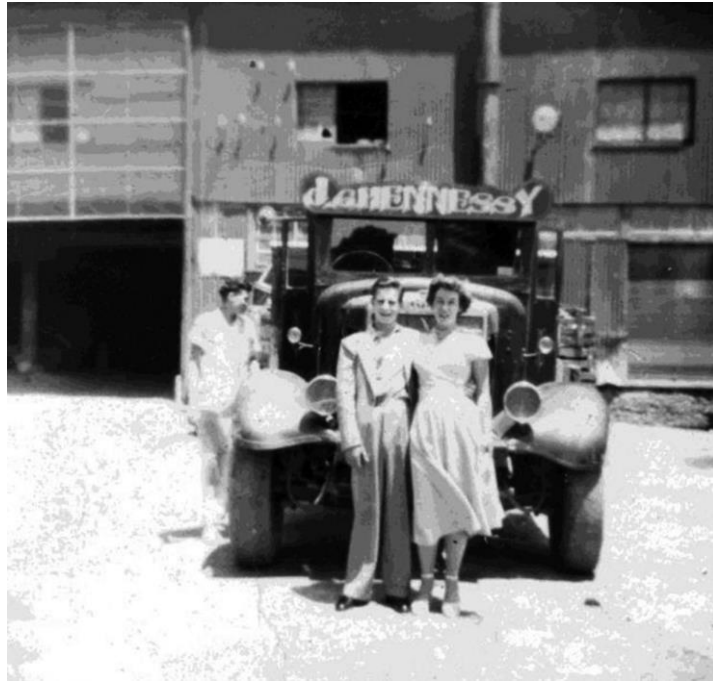
Don Soper was born in Muswellbrook, New South Wales in December 1934. His family moved from Lawrence near Yamba to Northcote Street, Naremburn in Sydney when he was about 12 years old in 1947. On leaving school his older brother Garnet Soper went to work at Mashman Brothers Pottery in Jacques Street, off Victoria Avenue Chatswood. At 15 years of age Don worked for several weeks at Steelcraft before joining his older brother at the pottery in early 1950. Garnet had suggested he could get him a job there, which he did, Don commencing as a caster.

Don began as a lad of 15 years and when he left in 1979 he was a Production Supervisor at what was then the Doulton Factory. He worked there for a total of 29 years. The following is an account of Don's recollections of the Mashman Brothers Pottery in the 1950s before it was taken over by the Doulton Company in 1960.

The Mashman Brothers Pottery in the 1950s

Don worked in the bathroom ware section as a caster of toilet pans and basins. He was located in the two storied building at the side of the block off Jacques Street. The pottery was then divided into two main sections – earthen ware pipes and ceramic bathroom ware. When Don started work in 1950 the pottery still had dirt floors downstairs in the earthen ware section. The casting area upstairs had wooden floors.

When Don commenced work the coal strike of 1949, which extended into 1950, resulted in rationing of electricity in zones. As a result, the factory was only allocated 3-4 days of electricity a week and had only 3 electric lights and was therefore dimly lit. A generator was installed in the back of the factory after this to ensure this problem never happened again. The following describes the operational areas of the pottery in the 1950s and how they functioned.



Don Soper & Jennifer with Hennesey Truck

The Clay Slip House

Liquid clay slip was made here. Big presses were used to compress clay into slabs which were then transferred into tanks fitted with agitators. Water and chemicals were added and mixed with the clay to make liquid clay slip to the right consistency. The resulting slip was then pumped by old English Willet pumps through pipes to the casting area.

Casting of Bathroom Ware

The layout of the casting benches in the 1950s was as follows:-

A U shaped arrangement of two parallel long benches with racks above the back of each bench for cast wares. A hand operated potter's wheel was permanently located on the inner end bench between the two long benches. There were multiples of these bench arrangements, one for each caster. There would have been around 25 caster's benches at that time.

The process of casting a toilet pan required artistry. The mould had a foot, two pan sides, a top and a chock for the S or P trap. The moulds were laid out on the long benches before being filled with slip from the overhead pipes. A bung was placed in the bottom of the foot of the mould, later removal of which would release the slip. A spreader was put into the mould to make the flushing hole at the rear of the pan and the weep holes. The caster operated a tap on the hose in order to control the flow of the slip into the moulds. A pan generally took two and a half hours to cast to 3/8 inches thick. The bung was removed and the waste slip drained away after the appropriate time had elapsed. The caster would demould the pan in stages, starting at the top by taking out the waste clay from under the rim of the top of the pan, inserting a plate and sponging and smoothing the pan by hand. The pan was then turned upside down onto its rim to work on the foot, trimming off excess clay. The trap was also rubbed and smoothed. It was then turned upright. When the pan was firm, the side moulds were taken away and the pan was placed onto the rack near the wheel. The wheel at the end of the bay was then used by the caster for smoothing away any rough edges. The pan was left to dry before being taken for firing. This process took one day to make one pan. A similar process was followed for the casting of basins. Casting was a very physical, hands-on operation requiring considerable strength and skill by the caster.

The casters had a simple set of tools many of which were hand made. These included sponges, potters knives, scrapers, hole punches made from the brass ferrules of a fishing rod and a counter sinker often made from clock springs with a wooden handles, as well as pottery sticks.



Don Soper'd potter's casting tools (L to R)

1. Counter sinker for bolt holes in pans and basins
2. Knife
3. & 4. A variety of hole punchers were used
5. Kidney scraper pallet (square scrapers were also used)

Don recalls circa 1950-55 that if there was a westerly wind he would go up to the factory on a Sunday to check that the pans hadn't cracked. He would put dry bags over the pans to stop the wind from cracking them. At this time the bathroom ware was made in a tin shed and the wind would blow through the cracks between the panels. If there was a week of rain the pans took longer to dry out slowing down the whole process, usually taking a day longer. There was no drying system for the cast wares at that time.

The Sagger Potter

A wheel potter made the saggars – clay containers in which to place goods for firing to stop blistering of the glaze. Saggars were made of a special gritty type of clay and were oval shaped containers with sides and a separate top lid. The bottom container was loaded with goods for firing and then the top put over the filled bottom sagger. It was then sent down for firing in the kiln.

Bottle Kiln Firers

Kiln firers shovelled coal into the furnaces and set the kiln with the filled saggars. Firing the kiln using coal took three to four days to get the kiln to the correct temperature. Pipes were fired in the pipe kiln up to 600 degrees centigrade then salt was shovelled in and the fire box sealed. The firing took 3-4 days. Holes were then made in the sealed walls of the bricked in kilns by removing some bricks so that the goods cooled slowly. The whole process took 14 days to complete. Firing the ceramics kiln used a similar system. The old bottle kilns were fired with coal at that time and later replaced by Mashman Brothers with an electric kiln for a few years. A tunnel kiln powered by oil came later still which ran from east to west.

The Glaze Room

Toilet pans were first biscuit fired and then hand dipped in glaze. Glaze was then scraped off the foot before the second firing so that the pan would not stick to the saggers in the kiln. When dipped in glaze the pans would turn blue until they were fired, after which they were white. The coloured pans were hand painted with three coats of gelatine glaze before firing.

Toilet Testing

Towards the end of the Mashman era from time to time the Water Board would come in and test the toilets to see if they flushed properly using paper and plastic stools. Once they passed testing a wax seal with stamp was placed on them to indicate they had passed.

The Warehouse

This was where finished goods were stored before being transported to retail outlets.

The Pipe Yard

In the pipe ware section the pipes were punched out by a steam machine powered by a large steam boiler. Behind the boiler was a clay crusher with large revolving wheels on a platform. The clay was then mixed and crushed via a long conveyor. The operator pulled a lever and the pipe was stamped out. Subsequent processes used were similar to casting including removing excess clay and smoothing the pipes by hand. In the Mashman Brothers days the pipes made by machine were straight and then the ends and junction pieces had to be added later to the end of the pipes, including 'T' pieces. At this time there was a manual wheel driven by a leather belt for smoothing excess clay from the pipes. They also had electric rollers onto which they put the straight pipes and then grooves were cut into them as they spun around and they sponged them up. The grooves were put on the pipes so that the plumbers could make the cement grip when they put them together when laid.

Transport

Private contractors delivered the raw clay to the factory. Henessy Brothers were contracted by Mashman Brothers to provide truck transport for the clay pipe ware whilst John L Pearce transported the finished Sanitary ware.

Working for Mashman Brothers

Don recalls that Mashman Brothers were a good firm to work for as when you had filled your quota for the day (10 pans or 12 basins) they would allow you to leave early at special request to attend appointments and they would not dock your pay. Once your quota was filled for an item you were paid by the piece for each item above the quota. The working hours were generally 7am – 4pm with a three quarter hour lunch break. Up until the 1970's the pottery operated on the basis of 4 days casting and 1 day's finishing off. On a Friday afternoon if the work was finished they would sit around and play cards. In Mashman Brothers time the staff were paid in cash. One of the staff walked around with a box filled with their pays packets, handing them out to the individual staff.

Other Recollections

Don recalls a room at the pottery containing old moulds of various wall vases, chinese heads, bambi deer and platypus ashtrays. He remembers staff using these from time to time to make items for their family and friends. As well as Don's brother Garnet working as a fellow caster, his sister-in-law Pam worked as a glazer at the pottery.

Early on in his time at Mashmans Pottery Don had a Kerosene tin with hot coals inside it sitting on bricks on the factory floor as a means of keeping warm and Theo Mashman walked past and told him he would burn the place down, which of course never happened. Don also has memories of constantly getting chilblains due to his hands being in water all day.

Source: Information supplied by Judy Peters from Interview with Don Soper, April 2010