

To the Other Side of the Bridge

The Browns go fishing. The fish were safe. Nobody else was

May 1961

The Brown family was not accustomed to taking holidays. Its first effort, in 1957, was a two-week trip from Sydney, where they lived in a light-industrial suburb, to Melbourne, mainly to visit family - some of whom they liked, and some of whom liked them. The trip was undertaken in Uncle Keith's sky-blue Standard Ten car, slightly bigger than a Morris Mini Minor: Roy and his younger brother Keith, who drove, in the front; mother sitting between two bickering children, seven and four years old, in the back. The trip took two full, hellish days each way.



This is not the Standard Ten behind us but Uncle Bill Scott's Hillman Humber. Alas no photos survive of the mighty Standard Ten.

The second holiday, and the objective of this history, took place three years later - indicating the average frequency of Brown holidays. This was to a beach-side resort town about 120 kilometres north of Sydney: in the off-season, stopping in affordable accommodation situated about a mile and a half from the town itself and the nearest swimmable beach - though, being May, it was too cold actually to swim. The lodging comprised a converted garage: a single-room structure with a heavy curtain suspended from a rope dividing the main sleeping quarters from the rest of it. The kids, still bickering, slept on make-shift beds in the rest of it. Sheets and towels were not provided: we brought our own.

Getting there was not obviously easy: it entailed a hang-the-expense taxi ride to the nearest railway station, a two-hour train ride followed by the mile-and-a-half walk to the converted garage, with mother and father each lugging a large suitcase containing ten days' worth of clothes, sheets and towels for four people.



Aerial view of The Entrance some years before this story. It hadn't changed very much by the time we got there.

The town was set on two sides of a pretty lagoon with an ancient wooden bridge connecting the two sides. The holiday atmosphere was enhanced by the aromas of salt air and fried, battered fish - and the obligatory boat hire kiosk where one could rent a wooden rowing boat by the hour.

Roy, being an Old Salt, suggested, and everybody agreed, that it would be a fine idea to rent a boat for a couple of hours and do some fishing. Basic fishing tackle was bought, consisting of four fishing lines wrapped around four cork cylinders, four hooks and four sinkers, together with the minimum amount of live bait. You catch some small fish that were good only for using as bait for the

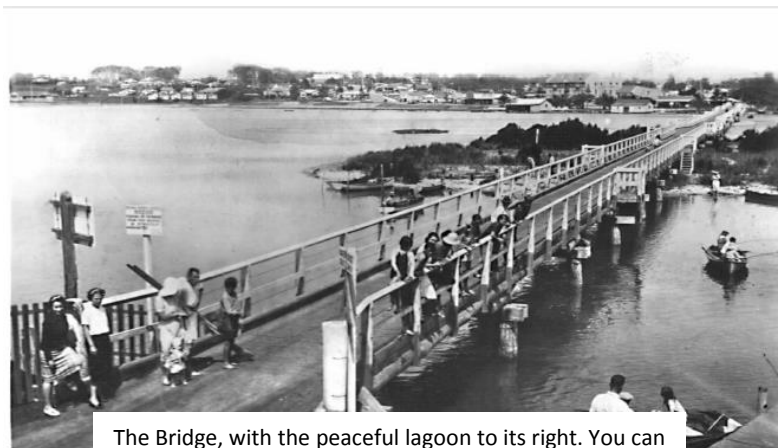
bigger fish you would inevitably catch, thereby providing for the family's evening meal. Right.

kiosque gave the impression that it was boiling, rather similar to the boiling effect given by the thrashing of thousands of fully-grown salmon in those disgustingly overcrowded fish farm tanks. In this case the boiling effect resulted not from distressed salmon, but from the flailing of oars and limbs of dozens of amateur rowers who'd had the same idea as we had. Into this mêlée we launched.

Soon after take-off we discovered the absence in our boat of any rollicks. Now, if you've ever tried, you'll know that rowing, in itself, isn't very difficult. Without rollicks it is. Add to this the fact of continuous collisions with perfectly rollick-equipped but otherwise inept rowers and the experience was proving stressful. So stressful was it in fact that the kids had stopped punching each other for a moment. We could have returned to the kiosque and demanded some rollicks, but that would have spoiled the stre - er - fun. The Browns revelled in adversity.

The lagoon was in fact part of a large lake, the main body of which was to the west of the bridge that connected the north and south parts of the town.

Being a far-sighted family, the Browns observed that, just as the lagoon was seething with jostling row-boats, so the lake, extending for several square miles on the other side of the bridge, was virtually empty: three fishing boats enjoyed perfect tranquillity. Perfect tranquillity and eternal domestic happiness would therefore come to any family who could get to the lake proper, which of course entailed rowing under the bridge.



The Bridge, with the peaceful lagoon to its right. You can see the No Fishing signs at the start of the bridge.

The bridge was old: at that time probably more than fifty years old, which counts as ancient in Australia. Made entirely of wood and about 50 metres long, it accommodated passage of one vehicle at a time, with alcoves to allow pedestrians to escape being mown down by passing vehicles. Anyone looking at it for the first time would immediately notice two other features. The first were prominent "No Fishing on Bridge!" signs, painted in large red letters on plywood and placed at short intervals along the length of the bridge. The second feature was the hundreds of people dangling fishing lines from it.

It happens that it was the weekend of the Bob and Dolly Dyer Fishing Competition, promoted by popular television quiz-show host Bob and his lovely wife, Dolly. The Bob and Dolly Dyer Fishing Competition would be won by whoever caught the tagged fish that had been set free in the lake. The prize was several thousand pounds, equivalent then to twice or three times the average annual income for a semi-skilled

Australian male, or four to six times the annual income for a semi-skilled Australian female.

The other most evident feature of the bridge was the curtain of fishing lines suspended from fishing tackle dangled by hundreds of would-be winners of the Bob and Dolly Dyer Fishing Competition. The Curtain was indeed dense.

The Browns not only revelled in adversity: they enjoyed a challenge too. To penetrate the Curtain without rollicks was, in challenge terms, a whopper. First you had to get to it. Somehow this was achieved, along the way acquiring a non-trivial number of sworn enemies-for-life who had marked the four of us for future retribution, come what may.



Bob and Dolly Dyer

Having taken up the challenge, they soldiered - or sailed - on, driven by the promise of Everlasting Peace and Familial Bliss that lay On The Other Side Of The Bridge.

Getting the boat through The Curtain was difficult but a family so accustomed to battling adversities was bound to succeed. The oars, arms, legs, picnic provisions, hairclips etc, were a different matter. There was also the issue of steering: the constant and unplanned changes in direction of the boat meant that The Curtain was penetrated not once but many times. The precise number of times it was penetrated was not recorded, but it is fair to suggest that it corresponded approximately to the number of colourful expressions added to my seven-year-old vocabulary. Extracting the last oar and hairclip from the tangle of catgut, we breathed a sigh of relief before coming face to face with two more problems.

The most immediate was the current that, as currents do sometimes, inexplicably sucked us against one of the wooden pylons supporting the bridge. Chris, being a bright lad and aspiring sailor himself, suggested he mount the pylon and give us a shove. That should do it, and indeed it did; but not without unintended consequences. As we drifted, abnormally care-free, away from the pylon and into boat-free space under the bridge, our joy at being one oar-stroke closer to the Unqualified Bliss that awaited us On The Other Side Of The Bridge was truncated by: "Hey, Dad!" Mother was clear about what we should do: "Leave him there!!" But, No, we couldn't leave him there - though I didn't really see why not. Sheer determination and innovation both united us and brought us clear of the pylon. And then we confronted the second problem.

The second problem was that there were not one, but two Curtains. It turned out that hundreds of would-be winners of the Bob and Dolly Dyer Fishing Competition dangled lines from the *other* side of the bridge *too*. Now it happened that this lot of would-be winners of the Bob and Dolly Dyer Fishing Competition were no more sweet-tempered or zen than the first lot. And the boat hadn't yet grown rollicks.

The challenge of achieving Nirvana on the Other Side of the Bridge had by now become an obsession. And one thing the Browns love more than a challenge is an

obsession. In retrospect the surprise is that we actually got through the second curtain with both oars and all four of us still in the boat, hairclips and all. This soon became a mixed blessing though.

Increasing the number of boats in the vast expanse of lake by approximately 33.3 per cent, we now observed that, apart from having no rollicks, the boat was equipped with only one anchor. We loved it! Wriggling worms were gleefully loaded onto fish-hooks, father gave instructions on how to fool the fish by occasionally moving the line up and down, and so we concentrated on the possibility of fresh fish that evening. Of course the drifting of the boat ensured that our lines frequently got themselves tangled with each other, but this was Nothing compared to the adversity we were used to surmounting. We took it in our stride.

Yet such tranquillity is unknown to the Browns and indeed represented an unstable situation: it couldn't last, and it didn't.

Mother had to go to the toilet. No, she couldn't do it over the side of the boat, we would have to find a toilet. This turned out easier than we thought: on the bank of the lake, a mile or so distant, was a public toilet block. You could just about smell it from where we were. We weighed anchor and rowed over. And, No, Mother couldn't possibly get out and wade to the shore: Father had to carry her. The reeds in the knee-deep water looked positively biblical and accurately warned of that squishy sort of mud that goes up between your toes. They got to the shore and mother disappeared into the stinky blackness of the toilet block. Father folded his arms to wait for her. But things would get worse before they got better: "I want to go too". More colourful expressions now added to my vocabulary: the school compositions were going to be rich when term started again.

By now of course it was time to get the boat back. Memory has filtered out the experience of penetrating the Curtains and the inevitable arguments about the missing rollicks and anchor, and deposits not refunded. To celebrate, we went to the shop and bought fish and chips for our tea.