



Fraser

life

Saturday, September 25, 2010

MASTER OF INVENTION

Maryborough's Peter Olds reflects on a lifetime of workshop creations

foodwineinterviewgardeningbooksartmusicpeople

Passion fuels the engine

As the mechanical mind of Peter Olds keeps ticking over with inventions and ideas, retirement is a way off yet, writes **JOCELYN WATTS**



Peter Olds' replica of the Mary Ann (left); with his Olds Elevator; looking over a model of the Mary Ann; and pottering around his Maryborough workshop.

PASSION for engines and everything else mechanical is the fuel that keeps Peter Olds ticking.

The popular, modest man has been at the forefront of engineering in Maryborough for more than 60 years and recently celebrated his 80th birthday. While son Robert now plays a major role in running the North Street business, Peter's retirement is not about to happen soon.

Drop into his workshop any time of the business week and you will almost certainly find Peter milling about the floor, checking the books, chatting to customers, friends, relatives and historians or designing new devices on the drawing board he made for himself more than 60 years ago.

"Jan and I have kept well and I sincerely believe it's better if you can keep occupied in what you want to do, although it is nice to

get away for a day or two every now and then," Peter said.

"While I'm still useful and can pass on techniques and information ... I think I've still got all my marbles ... the new Olds Elevator has made life more exciting," he says, swiftly turning the conversation from himself to his work.

The Olds Elevator is among Peter's proudest achievements along with building Mary Ann, a replica of the first steam engine built in Queensland, and special care beds, one of which was donated to Pope John Paul II in the mid-1990s when he needed rehabilitation for a broken hip.

The team at Olds Engineering also turns out street furniture and heritage litter bins, seen in Maryborough and as far afield as Victoria, plus anything from horse stirrups to aircraft engine parts, ship propellers and diverse items

for local industries as well as state, national and international companies.

They also produce many train components from humble coat hooks to headlight assemblies for

'This elevator improves plant safety and enlarges the scope for elevating bulk solids'

Australian and overseas customers.

Peter said the Olds Elevator's unique vertical design had attracted world-wide attention, particularly in the USA. Unlike the con-

ventional bucket and screw elevators, the casing of the Olds Elevator rotates around a stationary screw fixed to the frame.

When working in the fully flooded mode, the tube carrying the product did not allow air inside, eliminating dust and the chance of explosions.

"This elevator improves plant safety and enlarges the scope for elevating bulk solids by overcoming many of the drawbacks and limitations of conventional machines."

Peter is not resting on the elevator's laurels, however.

His inventive mind won't allow him to stop trying to solve the world's problems.

"There's an engine I dreamed up in the 1970s and went to the states about 1979 when the so-called energy crisis was on. Americans could only buy gasoline

every second day depending on the last digit of their licence plate."

That engine still being worked on and has some way to go before being released; Peter does not have time to retire.

Meanwhile, he nurtures young apprentices and workmen knowing they are the way of the future.

"We hope that bright young minds might be stimulated in the endeavour to make the fullest possible use of this old world's resources."

"This earth with her treasures is the only one we will ever have."

What happens next with Peter's inventions and their uses is anyone's guess.

Who knows? The Olds Elevator may one day be used to lift dust off the moon's surface. (I've been privy to inside but confidential information here.)

Delicate balance in question

A DIRE prediction that shifting so much of our heavy mineral resources from Australia to the Northern Hemisphere might cause a slight tilt of the earth's axis is no joke.

Unlike the French prophet Nostradamus, who predicted future events through divine inspiration, Peter's predictions and those of engineers before him are based on knowledge and skill.

"We are using minerals including coal and oil at faster and faster rates. We used more oil fuel from the end of World War II to about 1968 than was used from when we first started using oil up to the start of the war."

"It's probably better now but the first time I went to the US in 1979 when it took 40,000 gallons of fuel to fly a 747 to Australia from the US's west coast. You can't imagine how that heavy consumption can keep going. It's frightening really."

"We've usually got about 50 or 60 ships waiting at a time off the coast of Queensland near Bowen, Mackay and Gladstone, off Newcastle in NSW and on the West Coast of Australia and it's all going to the northern hemisphere."

"Is this having any effect on the delicate balance of the earth?"

Australia's losing manufacturing to China

PETER Olds has achieved a lot in his 80 years and now spends much of his time pondering the industry's future in Australia.

"I'm saddened by the way industry has declined," he said.

"Just about everything you pick up is made in China. We, and many other countries, have virtually lost the ability to make even simple things."

"We used to do the maintenance for Wilson Hart (sawmill) and their country mills such as Elgin Vale out between Goomeri and Nanango. Gone are those smaller smokestacks. Gone are the many opportunities where workers could grasp the basic knowledge of the power sources and gain experience in a working environment."

"Now we just press a button and expect a machine to spring into life."

"After I served my apprenticeship at Walkers I was offered a job with Riley Dodds who produced boilers for the power industry. Howard Station had Riley boilers. When that power station was built it was the most efficient in Australia but it's all gone now."

"It was small by today's standards with much lower working pressure and became outdated ... but the industry hasn't stagnated. This gradual improvement in efficiency and cleaner consumption of good coal, (shows) we've got pretty



Peter Olds and John Day with John's Olds Mobile that uses the carburettor which Peter designed. File Photo

good power stations in Queensland and I think this is overlooked.

"Look at Tarong and our other power stations. You don't hear much about them but without them our modern society would grind to a halt."

"Each of the four giant boilers at Tarong can convert 290kg of water per second, that's 250,000 gallons of water per hour into steam at 2700 pounds per square inch;

totally they burn five million tonnes of coal per year."

Peter said a lot of work on clean coal technology was being done in China.

"General Electric is supposed to have its first clean coal power generation running in China this year sometime."

The increasing costs of materials and wages as well as complex red tape, however, will continue to

affect our lifestyle in ways that often go unnoticed.

"I remember saying years ago the time had passed when people on tradesmen's wages producing ordinary goods and services could not afford to pay for the work other tradesmen might do for them."

"We now work 38 hours a week. When I started my apprenticeship it was 44 hours. The 40-hour week came in, then we started to get smokos, then four weeks' annual leave (that used to be two weeks), long service leave and all our public holidays and sick pay. That's expensive and you've got to build it into your business."

"To get someone to paint your house who is employed under these sorts of conditions, they've got to charge high prices to cover all of our extra benefits."

● Peter Olds topped a Maryborough Herald reader survey in 2001, *Centenary of Federation, Faces of Maryborough – The 10 Most Admired People of Maryborough 1901 – 2001*, ahead of John Craig-Gardiner, Margaret Berthelsen, Cecilia Bauer, Thomas Braddock, Augie Sauer, Lambert Hyne, Jennifer Morris, Brendan Hansen and Olga Miller. ● Olds Engineering was established by Peter's father William Olds who moved to Maryborough from Gympie in December 1924.

that powers Peter Olds



Peter Olds still uses a traditional drawing board and the t-square he made more than 60 years ago.
Photo: JOCELYN WATTS 10m819

Ericsson predicted dilemma

MANKIND faces an uncertain future with oil prices predicted to skyrocket and the fallout causing a major shift in our lifestyle.

Peter Olds said American Swedish-born inventor and mechanical engineer John Ericsson, who was first to run a solar engine in 1873, predicted more than 130 years ago that in the course of a few centuries, the earth's resources would be diminished, and mankind would have to move to hot dry regions to secure power from "that never-ending supply in the heavens".

"Ericsson was no mug – he is credited with many inventions including the marine propeller for ship propulsion."

In his own book *Interlude at Elgin Vale*, published in 2006, Peter said: "I often reflect on the amount of our fossil fuels we are consuming, especially in our so-called 'developed countries'."

"It leads me to think that in the future we might be looked upon as the most wasteful generation to ever inhabit the earth, so far as energy is concerned."

"We seem to treat the use of coal and oil especially, as though there is a never-ending supply."



Pope John Paul II greets Frank Hickey, who organised the delivery of the special needs bed, inventor Peter Olds and Catholic priest Father Harry Bliss, all from Maryborough. Contributed photos.

Peter's tilting bed had Papal blessing

WHEN Pope John Paul II suffered a thigh fracture in 1994 and underwent hip surgery two years later, it was an invention by Maryborough's Peter Old that helped his recovery.

A tilting bed, invented to help transfer bedridden patients, was sent to the Pontiff when Peter (a protestant) heard of his injury.

The Maryborough inventor said the Special Care Beds, that feature a moving base, helped prevent

bedsores in patients who were unable to move for long periods of time. The invention came about following an orderly's comment at Maryborough Hospital.

"Further injuries can occur when transferring patients from their beds to a tilting table," the orderly said. "If you could make the bed tilt up, that would solve the problem."

Peter did just that and several of the beds are still being used in Fraser Coast nursing homes.



Frank Hickey (left) and Father Harry Bliss (right) on delivery of the special needs bed, invented by Peter Olds of Maryborough, with the Pope's valet.

Overcome by Olds' generosity

SANTA'S delivery of a shiny new BMX bike brought a wide smile to my seven-year-old son's face.

His joy soon turned to disappointment, however, when a small part broke soon after.

Getting a new part at short notice would be difficult.

My son wanted to ride his new bike but who would fix such a small part?

The year was 1992 and having recently moved to Maryborough from the Sunshine Coast, knowing where to take it was a mystery.

Olds Engineering in North Street, just a few blocks from our new home, was worth a try even if only to point me in the right direction.

"They would only deal with big projects," I thought, as I sheepishly walked through the door.

Peter didn't say much. He just wandered into his workshop and re-emerged five minutes later with the fixed part in hand ... and then refused to accept payment.

Such is the character of Peter and his team – generous and obliging. My introduction to the Heritage City was very welcoming.

– Jocelyn Watts,
Maryborough Herald
Editorial Manager, 2000