 Words I Jane Bannon

MULGOA QUARRIES STORY.

Last month I met with Rob and Adrian Wearn, brothers who own and operate Mulgoa Quarries Pty Ltd, a company started by their father back in the early 1960s.
I had spoken briefly the week before with Rob and he had told me that after his father, John Macquarie Wearn, had completed his schooling he had begun studying dentistry at Sydney University - just like his father before him. I was keen to learn how a man goes from dentistry to quarrying. How does such a career change come about?

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EARTHMOVING EQUIPMENT REVIEW MAGAZINE

The Flintstone Story

Two issues ago Earthmoving Equipment Review Magazine featured a story on a wonderful family by the name of Wearn. When I was interviewing brothers, Rob and Adrian Wearn for the first story, the subject of their Flintstone Mack kept arising and I could see that this truck held a very special place in the hearts of Mulgoa Quarries and the men who work there. So I ventured back to Penrith to learn more of this fondly thought of truck, and met up with Adrian Wearn and Brian Wall.

In 1968, John Wearn, founder of Mulgoa Quarries, was happy with himself when he purchased a brand new 1968 Flintstone Mack in Mack green. It was a great deal at the time as one of the Mack dealerships in Sydney, Chipping Norton to be exact, had taken delivery of two Flintstone Mack trucks with 44,000 pound ass ends and a double-chassis rail for one client. However, the sale fell through and the salesman, apparently, lost his job over it. However, that still left two unsold trucks sitting on the lot.

According to an official price list from February 1969, the top-of-the-line R685RS (with a powerful 237hp engine!) had a standard price of $25,170 plus tax.

John Wearn was able to negotiate a deal for the purchase of one of these trucks and two rows of eight steel float. The original engine was an ENDT675 Maxidyne, although it only developed 237hp it produced a massive (for that time) 906 ft lb of torque. It produced this torque from 1100 revs up to 2100rpm with a five-speed gear box.

The trucks number plate was registered as FTK963 and I was surprised a truck that is so well loved hadn't been given a name other than FTK or the Flintstone.

FTK963 is now 43 years old, and she has had many replacements and many drivers but it has all been a labour of love.

TRAVELLING THE PACIFIC HIGHWAY IN A TRUCK BUILT IN THE 60s IS NOT A COMFORTABLE EXPERIENCE.

Four years after the purchase money was a little tight; John Wearn made the decision to sell the float. This meant the Flintstone was now being operated solely as a steel tri-axle tipper.

Now that the Flintstone was being used as a tipper only, she was mainly being worked out of Mogo Quarry carting hard rock. This meant several trips a day on the punt at Wiseman's Ferry where she had several adventures. On one particular trip, the weight of FTK swamped the ferry, even breaking through timbers. It was than discovered that inspectors were on their way to investigate this incident. But the locals rallied around the stricken punt and truck, grabbing shovels and began moving shovel loads of gravel off the truck to reduce the load. Whilst this was happening one lady in the post office actually drove back to the quarry for the sole purpose of obtaining a different weigh ticket for the driver to hand to the inspectors. Fines were averted, the punt regained buoyancy and FTK was able to continue its job for the day.

Adrian's early duties in the workshop were numerous, but one was to have FTK started and running by 6.00am. As it was an air start, getting the engine started up on winter mornings, especially, was a rehearsed procedure. The truck would run out of air before the engine fired up. You would then need to use a tank of compressed air to increase the volume of air the truck required. It would also be necessary to climb under the truck, undo the air-start supply hose and pour a cup of diesel into the hose before hitting the start button; the truck finally turned over and roared into life.

One thing I learnt whilst researching and learning more about air starts is the incredible din they cause. Many years ago in the 1950s, an incident occurred on the Harwood Ferry on the Clarence River. A husband and wife, crossing the river that day by horse and sulky, boarded the ferry along with a Mack truck with an air start. All went well; the ferry was almost across when the truck driver started up his engine in preparation of disembarking. However, when that key was turned pandemonium erupted. The horse, no doubt, rested and thinking of quiet pastures was not prepared for such a noise, especially up so close. He reared up, with the sulky and its occupants, he came down, kicking out wildly and kept on kicking. Fortunately, the couple were able to get clear, as the horse continued to kick at the sulky until nothing much was left of it. After that a sign went up on Harwood Ferry that read: "Drivers with air-start Macks do not stop your engine on the ferry."

The boys' earliest memory of the Flintstone is of it parked outside their home at North Rocks. I can only imagine what the neighbours must have thought when FTK burst into life each morning. Fortunately, the Wearn family's closest neighbour was the School for Deaf and Blind Children and the kids didn't start school that early.

The Flintstone would have its roof replaced as it was completely rusted through. The cab would be replaced completely after there were just too many cracks - there have been quite a few speedos installed over the years. The steer axle, rated originally at 5.5 tonne, was replaced with an axle capable of more heavy duty loads and perhaps less fatigue.

A weak point in the Flintstone was the through shaft and, as the years passed, Mack ran out of parts. Fortunately, Mack's design didn't alter their trucks enormously, so they used some later model diff centres to take a heavier duty through shaft; this also saved axles from snapping, which would invariably happen not long after a broken through shaft.

As a young man in the workshop, Adrian recalls making new fuel tank and cab mount brackets, welding up the cab and rebushing the ass end, changing springs, replacing all the cross members (from cast to pressed steel), replacing most of the copper air lines, rebuilding the engine and the gear box once again, replacing the slide rails and u-bolt mounts (only to find out at the RTA on completion that u-bolt attached five-wheel mounts were now outlawed). A new short motor was required as the block was finally worn out.

In the mid 1970s FTK continued carting the hard rock out of Mogo to Kincumber to the Gosford Concrete Plants, as well as shale to State Bricks at Schofields and Rooty Hill, Clark Bricks at Prospect and Zacuba Bricks at Cecil Park. FTK did this type of work for the next 20 odd years. By 1990 she was carting shale to Boral Bricks, Austral and PGH. As it was it was still on slide rails, many other duties beckoned including moving dozer blades and mobile crushers, etcetera. In 1999 the FTK was an internal tipper at Mulgoa before finishing up the year by becoming a float again, mind you still on rails just in case she was sitting around. It's amazing what odd jobs do come up around a quarry, almost always an adventure.

The more modern "big rigs" of the mid to late 70s had Cummins 335 horse power engines but still only put out similar torque numbers. The difference was "the old girl" had this torque from 1100 revs and she only needed a five-speed gearbox (Maxitorque triple countershaft). The big rigs had their torque from 1600 revs up and needed 15-speed Roadranger gearboxes.

The FTK's longest serving regular driver would be George Besant. George drove her as both a tipper and a float for about five years. He kept her working every day, all day, hauling the same number of loads and carrying the same tonnage as the newer trucks which had more horse power. However, as the other drivers of these "modern" trucks went home tired and exhausted, George went home feeling pretty good due to the fact that he only had to deal with a five-speed gear box. ▷

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whilst the new trucks had 15-speed gearboxes that their drivers had to work through constantly.

Eventually, the cab was completely worn out as was the engine and the gear box housing. And so, the FTK sat, for months, in the yard. There was a shortage of time to work on a truck when so much work was required on everything else, but eventually Rob, Adrian and Brian could no longer bear the sight of the FTK just sitting there in the yard neglected, and to use Adrian's words, "forlorn and unwanted."

So they set to work on her. Rob Wearn approved a newer 350 E7 4 valve engine to be installed; the original gear box was replaced by a second-hand 13-speed Roadranger. She was also given a new paint job – from the original Mack green to the bright yellow of Mulgoa Quarries (new Mack yellow).

Repairs and replacements have become almost legendary on FTK. Speedos have been replaced numerous times and the truck has operated for extensive periods of time without a working speedo, but by Adrian's estimations the FTK has covered more than three million miles!

The cab was completely replaced in the mid-80s by a second-hand Mack cab. Guards and the bonnet have been replaced with stainless steel ones (so no more rusting out these parts).

Another float was purchased for the old girl and the Flintstone went back to float duty. She has certainly carried some heavy burdens with dignity and without any fuss. One of her largest loads would have been the time she carried a 50 tonne Euclid that has two engines interstate.

By the mid-1980s the FTK "broke-in" the new recruits to Mulgoa Quarries. They would drive FTK until they understood the dynamics of the company and the jobs involved before moving on to the more modern trucks in the fleet.

Adrian, after Rob, was also another young driver who cut his teeth on the FTK. Doug Frater was responsible for teaching Adrian how to handle her and he did this with a quick swipe to the back of the head each time he grinded the gears. Eventually though, Adrian would achieve his truck licence with the help of Doug and the old girl. Doug Frater was also a terrific role model for the Wearn boys. Doug was proud of working and taking care of such a straightforward and hard working truck.

Speaking with Brian Wall, who has overseen the care of this truck since 1972, it is clear that the truck has become a bit of legend with the staff of Mulgoa Quarries. Brian was responsible for putting in a later model turbo from a "coolpower" 285hp Mack engine with a bit more boost so that the old girl could keep up with the 350s. Doug Frater, who was driving her at that time thinks this turbo, along with a slight fuel adjustment made her a hard truck to pass going up any steep hills.

By 1999 another float was purchased which they rebuilt and repaired; although the FTK was still doing occasional tipper work.

The FTK has travelled far and wide in this country. Across to Perth carting dumpers, she has travelled north and south, east and west when playing the role of a courier and delivering equipment for Wabco; and up to Brisbane in 1999 to Drake Floats for an updated float. She was already well known and Rob Wearn received a call from JK Williams' owner, who'd spotted her just outside of Coffs Harbour, cheekily enquiring as whether the FTK's driver was lost...it'd been awhile since the FTK had gone on a long haul.

Travelling the Pacific Highway in a truck built in the 60s is not a comfortable experience. The shock absorbers on the FTK are virtually non-existent. She sits on a huge spring pack on the rear suspension and the cab is bolted down. Adrian says it is much better to stand up whilst crossing bridges. Any items that you might think to put on the seat are better off being put on the floor in the first place because that is where they are going to wind up anyway before too long.

In 1988 power steering was eventually put in. Air conditioning had been installed some years before (out of an XB Ford and handy for about half an hour). One of the FTK's long-term drivers had been given a choice – air conditioning or power steering. The driver, known to all as Popeye because of his muscular arms, chose air conditioning. The air conditioning is still working in the truck just as well as it did way back then – freezing cold

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