Gallery Artisan

Tinsmith: An Ordinary Romance

Barbara Heath

7/10/10 – 13/11/10

An exhibition of 'new tricks from old trades' by Jeweller to the Lost that pays homage to the Tinsmith trade.

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THIS PROJECT HAS RECEIVED FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FROM THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT THROUGH ARTS QUEENSLAND.

Research for the exhibition investigates 19C Queensland Tinsmith's work produced for the building trade; functional and decorative design adapted to the conditions of this environment, that now form part of our design vernacular.

Above: Ian Williamson, Heritage Tinsmiths, Highfield, Toowoomba.

Front & Back Cover Image: Occupational portrait of a tinsmith with tools and newly made teapots, 1850. Contributing Institution: Bancroft Library, USA.

Inside front & back cover images: H.K.Vosbergh The Tinsmith's Helper and Pattern Book.

Right: Tin slag specimen under glass dome, Warwick Oakman Antiques, Sandy Bay Road, Hobart.

Tinsmith: An ordinary romance.

This project attempts to trace the work of one category of metalsmithing which was common in the mid 1800s to early 1900s in Queensland, which has now mostly disappeared. Understanding the work of this era, produced by artisans whose methods were so closely related to ours, informs and contextualises the Jeweller to the Lost practice.

In particular the work of early Queensland tinsmiths forms a unique and integral component of local architectural detailing at the beginning of the colony. The simple wares made by colonial tinsmiths required only tinplate and a few simple tools to produce, but their response to the needs of a growing building trade saw an increase in the scope of their products and often resulted in the development of locally unique solutions.

Items such as roof ventilators produced in workshops such as R C Verney & Sons factory 1902 in Fortitude Valley were objects both ornamental and practical that form part of the visual language of this time in our history.

References to the vernacular in early Queensland architectural detail in our work with lattice and screens, has already characterised our practice. The aim of this project is to identify the shapes and forms fabricated by these metalworkers and from these findings, enable the scope of this work to expand.

The outcomes of the project will inform new sculptural work for this exhibition as well as strengthening the iteration of Queensland cultural content in my work.

Tin: The white metal.

A couple of years ago we saw this tin sample under glass bell, a curious object at Warwick Oakman Antiques, Hobart. Given the context, we assume the object under dome is perhaps some surrealist's handiwork. In fact it is tin, a frozen molten spill of the lustrous grey metal here strangely unfamiliar in its natural form.

It is a metal we've mined and put to use for thousands of years, it all began when humans first alloyed tin with copper and created bronze. The 49th most abundant element, tin is used to coat iron and steel to prevent corrosion and to line containers for food storage.

In the search for new sources of tin people have traversed, mined and colonised the furthest reaches of the globe. Indeed, tin deposits of historical importance put Tasmania clearly on the map in the mid 1800s. All of which is reason enough you'd think, to place it under a glass dome and display it as a worthy object.

One particular history of tin provides enough intrigue to want to look more closely, because this metal was once as common in our everyday lives as plastic is today: 'Few things better exemplify the impact of the industrial revolution in 19C England

and America than the explosion of tinware, the rapid evolution of its manufacturing processes and the profusion of tin pieces it produced. By the end of the century virtually every household utensil was made of tin'. **1**

Tinware replaced heavy cast iron cooking utensils with modern lightweight ones that were tough and durable and allowed for shipping over rough roads and great distances. Indeed, a durability well suited to a population on the move.

Colonial tinsmith beginnings.

A tinsmith, tinner or tinker, is a person who makes and repairs tinware. Early tinsmiths used tinplate, wire, solder and a few simple tools to produce utilitarian wares that ranged from downspouts to kettles, bath tubs and weather vanes. Interestingly the term 'tinker' refers to an itinerant traveller or peddler and indeed early tinsmiths did hawk their wares, often on foot, to rural farms and villages.

In Australia tinsmiths numbered amongst the trades of the first convicts and free settlers and they quickly adapted their skills to meet the needs of the farmers, miners and builders of the new colony. Even a brief survey of the trades required for the new colony of Queensland indicates that a substantial number of tinsmiths were well established by 1874. As towns and populations grew the tinsmith diversified and we find advertisements for roof guttering, ridge capping, spouting, baths and fittings of every description.

Tin mining at Stanthorpe.

As with gold, prospecting for tin became one of the incentives for exploration and development. In Queensland, tin mines were established in Stanthorpe and Herberton but without a milling industry here to turn the resource into product the raw material was shipped back to England to be processed into tin plate. Even as late as 1889 the process of tin plating sheet steel, indeed the tinplate itself, had changed little since its beginnings in 14C Bohemia.

A description of the manufacturing process reveals many stages and much labour as the metal is repeatedly passed through rolling mills, furnace and acid baths then further rinsed and scoured and dipped in palm oil before at last, the tinman places the sheets in a large iron pot of molten tin. Then follows more palm oil and rolling, degreasing in a tub of bran and then rubbing with a skin 'duster'. Inspected then sorted into 'perfects' and 'wasters' the plates are counted and boxed up into elm wood boxes which are marked by branding irons and finally placed into the freight car, ready to be forwarded to their various destinations. **2** The labour intense process which includes young girls and boys as well as adults, keenly evokes the harsh, noisy and soot blackened conditions of late nineteenth century industrial life.

Even so, tinplate can be understood as a crafted product not without its own mystique, produced by many hands, its method of creation reveals a layered history of empirical knowledge.

Our own St George tin figure.

Tinsmithing as a trade no longer exists today, like so many other skill sets, it has been subsumed by the nature of human inventiveness. The skills have not been erased however, rather they have evolved and migrated; mechanisation and new technologies not only speed up a once hand laboured process they also extend the parameters of the product. Tinplate was for centuries manufactured to a size (14 x10 inches) determined by the convenience of handling by one man. Today sheet metal workers use computers to cut and form metal at scales more akin to the urban landscape.

It is interesting to trace the tinsmiths' Australian history

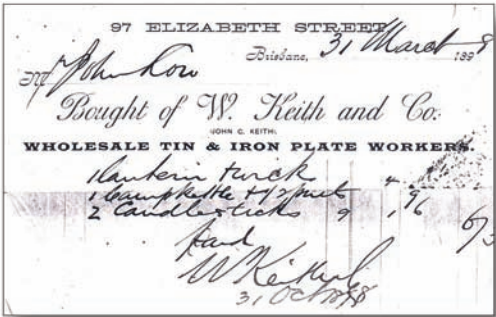
through the evolution of the trade unions: Originally registered as the Amalgamated Tinsmiths' Sheet Metal Workers' Canister Makers' Gas Meter Makers' & Assistants' Union in 1911, this union's lineage actually dates back to the United Tinsmiths' Ironworkers' and Japanners' Society of Victoria which operated from 1883. From 1913 the aforementioned union had changed to become the Sheet Metal Working Industrial Union of Australia. During the mid 1940s, members of the soon-to-be de-registered Federated Agricultural Implement & Stove makers' Porcelain Enamellers' & Ironworkers' Association of Australia began to fill the ranks of the Sheet Metal Working Industrial Union of Australia to the extent that by 1945, the union changed its name to the Sheet Metal Working Agricultural Implement & Stove Making Industrial Union of Australia. This union was itself de-registered in 1972. Many of its members, however, were inducted into the Amalgamated Engineering Union, which a year later became the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union. **3** The inclusive wordiness of each of these union incarnations provides a helpful clue to the shifts in skills and market needs of the day and reveals how the sometimes itinerant, often self taught craftsman has gradually morphed into the powerful political force of our present time.

Labour Day commemorates Australian workers winning the battle for an eight hour working day and the original 1856 celebration march became a hugely popular annual procession. In 1915, The Argus described the procession: 'Eight Hours Day dawned grey and unpromising, with a raw wind and a threat of rain. The faint booming of drums from the Trades Hall kept the waiting people happy and hopeful, looking down the street whence swept majestically the first banner, its colours subdued by the distance, and led by the professional musicians. The banner of the timber-workers, drawn by white horses, gaily decked, was followed by a good muster of workmen. The banner of the painters and decorators was in a florid style, one of the best designs in the procession. It was one of the new banners for the year. Leading the tinsmiths were two knights in shining armour, they gleamed like animated tinware booths, and were very impressive'. **4**

Immigrant tinsmiths:

The very name 'Tinsmith' evokes nostalgic, romantic connotations; nomadic fixers of things, outsiders, tricky, silver-tongued salesmen who charmed the farmers' wives with their glinting wares. Numerous stories exist of peddlers who started out hawking their tinware on foot, then

buying a small cart, next a wagon and finally owning the hardware store. Its the story of the immigrant, of a fresh start in a new place, one un-encumbered by the constraints of the homeland.


97 ELIZABETH STREET

Brisbane, 31 March 189

Mr John Low

Bought of W. Keith and Co.

(JOHN C. KEITH)

WHOLESALE TIN & IRON PLATE WORKERS.

2 Candlesticks

Paid

W Keith

31 Oct 1898

Brisbane tinsmiths:

In 1874 the Postal directory for Queensland lists 42 tinsmiths across the state with 17 of these located in Brisbane; JP Smith, Queen Street. W Keith, Queen Street. John Walter, Charlotte Street. J Wylie, George Street, C Klingner, Queen Street and Silcook and Co., Albert Street. An article for the Queenslander in 1869 states 'some working merely for themselves, others employing one or two, but none employing more than three or four'.

Interestingly this comment contradicts this image of William Keith's shopfront and 18 staff. We read of a fire in 1864 destroying amongst other buildings, the tinsmith shop of William Keith. However the Keith business continued, as the 1876 Postal directory places W Keith in Queen Street - on the western side between Edward & Albert Streets - south from Finney Isles Department store (now David Jones). It is interesting to note that there was a hardware store in this section called 'Ironmongeries Pty Ltd' up until the 1970s.

What we do know is that even in the mid 1800's there was a nostalgia for lost skills no less poignant than today - as a reporter for The Queenslander in 1869 writes: 'We have a distinct recollection of a tinsmith's shop in a midland county town in England long, long years ago, and the absorbing interest with which we used to watch the workmen with their hammers and pliers fashioning various articles, slowly and with much labor but with marvellous deftness and skill, as we then and still think.' Somehow or other we lost sight of our old friends the tinsmiths from that time until a few days ago, when we visited the Brisbane tinsmiths workshops and could not recognise a single tool again except the hammer and soldering iron. The Americans have completely revolutionised the tinsmiths' trade, as they have so many others, by introducing machines to perform nearly every operation required. At Mr W Keith's we saw some of these modern machines. First, there is an enormous pair of shears,


HEESE

standing up from the workbench at an angle of about 45 degrees - merely cutting tin seems child's play to it. Next an edging machine, by which the cut edges of tin are turned to the required angle. Then a grooving machine in which, by turning a handle, a little iron roller travels along a groove in an iron plate. The two pieces of tin are laid on the plate, the handle is turned and the two pieces are firmly and neatly joined together. Lastly, a wiring machine, in which a wire is rolled up in the edge of a tin vessel to strengthen it. Both at Mr. Smith's and Mr. Keith's all kinds of ordinary tin goods are made, such as dairy utensils, kitchen utensils of all kinds, street lanterns, grocer's show boxes and canisters, japanned boxes and all kinds of japanned goods in fact, everything required'.

By the 1860s newly developed companies in the UK and USA were offering pre-fabricated and pre-cut parts which the tinsmith could purchase and assemble into whole items in his shop. While this enabled the tinsmith to increase his production capacity dramatically, it also effectively led to the machine manufacturing of complete items by the late 19C. Eventually displaced from their traditional profession by the new machines, the tinsmiths turned their skills to the plumbing and roofing trades that ultimately left more lasting evidence of their work in our built environment today.

Tinsmiths in the building trade.

Simple items of tin used in early Queensland houses often came from the local tinsmith. Allen Cooper, a master builder expert in colonial restoration explains; 'Examples of local sheet metal workers and tinsmith's skills that can be seen around Ipswich range from Gutter Acroteria, Ridge Cresting, Roof Finials, Ridge End Cap Treatments, Roof Ventilators, Rainwater Heads, Window Hoods and of course Fascia Boards, similar to the Centurion Skirt frieze on Mona Cottage. The list goes on forever, in fact everything that was produced in Terracotta, Cast and Wrought Iron could be produced cheaper and of course at a much lighter weight, in sheet metal. I have seen roof finials mimicking the

archetypical Queen Ann Terracotta finials even down to applied floral decoration, such were their skills. Now sadly it's all disappearing, both the physical examples (rusting away) and the skills in manufacturing. Remember all you see at first glance may not be what it appears, they were very skillful.'

Unfortunately the roof crests and finials are often the first to be discarded when hasty repairs are made - erasing the scrolling shadows they traced across corrugated roofs and the delicate silhouettes they gave to the skyline. The Australian House, with photographs by Ray Joyce and text by Balwant Saini records some noteworthy examples. The book's focus includes many fine details of cut tin ridge caps, window awnings as well as some inventive, highly decorative roof finials. Roof ventilators permitted heated air to rise out of the roof cavity, producing a flow of air which cooled the building and these can still be seen atop old commercial buildings around Brisbane.

A practised eye can differentiate the local handmade type from later imports. Ian Evans writes in The Queensland House that R C Verney & Sons factory in Fortitude Valley combined tinsmithing with jam making. 'Verney's ventilators were the most popular in Queensland and many are still in service. Verney's business, which united the production of canisters and items of tin and steel with the manufacture of jam, appears odd today but such combinations were not unusual at that time.'

Our own house built in 1906 has examples of 19C design such as the placement of the kitchen stove in an alcove that extends outside the building proper - to lessen the risk of fire the alcove is sheeted in corrugated iron with a flue and chimney cap of tin. Most charming are the acroteria, decorative cut-outs rising from each corner of the guttering, when backlit by the ubiquitous Queensland blue sky the design reveals a 'blue' bird in flight.

Gillespie patterns.

Perhaps one of the best known examples of the tinsmith's repertoire is the window hood which provided shade to any window not protected by the verandah, these are often embellished with various patterns cut simply from the sheet metal by hand with a pair of tin snips. Graeme Gillespie was one of Brisbane's last working tinsmiths, his shop; Smith & Robertson at Woolloongabba was well known to heritage architects and builders. Apprenticed to the firm as a plumber in 1948 at 15 years of age, he spent his working life at the premises on Logan Road, which dated back to the 1850s. Throughout the 1980s and 90s there was an upsurge in the restoration of early Queensland houses and many home renovators were seeking to replicate heritage detailing. Importantly, many of the tools and machinery at Smith & Robertson were the same rollers, brakes, guillotines, edging and grooving machines made in 19C USA, that had mechanised the trade over a hundred years before and now facilitated the authentic replications this skilled maker produced.

Highfields - working tinsmith museum.

The remnant of several tinsmith businesses from South East Queensland are held at one repository at Highfields Pioneer Village. The collection of Ron Douglas of Toowoomba, elements from Smith & Robertson at Woolloongabba in Brisbane, the Williamson Brothers in Toowoomba and other local plumbers & drainers; M & EA Garvey, F J Charles and Douglas United. The Williamson brothers have created a purpose built housing for the collection where Ian

periodically demonstrates tinsmithing skills. Taking time out to discuss the collection with us, Ian also demonstrated various rollers, edgers and folding machines and explained the processes used in his trade.

He alluded to a culture of co-operation with other skills and trades, especially the tinsmiths working at the Ipswich Railway Engineering Works, where various skill sets combined in a manufactured outcome. He explained the specific tinware needs of the railway engineers and showed us the patterns and rollers used to make the various oil cans required.

Tinsmiths - Queensland Rail.

Queensland Railway's major workshops were located at Ipswich from the 1850s to the 1990s, the workshops employed a large workforce and were an important skill centre for over 140 years. Generations of skilled craftsmen built, repaired and overhauled locomotives, wagons and carriages. Blacksmiths, carpenters and metalsmiths - including tin and coppersmiths used their skills and knowledge to produce a wide variety of products. It was here that many tinsmiths would have learnt their skills, apprentices were trained across all the trades. The tinsmiths custom made oil cans in a huge array of forms to meet the needs of the locomotive mechanics as well as fittings for the carriages. You can see remnant examples of their work throughout The Workshops, functional articles such as drip trays and exhaust vents, as well as some very early lamps and oil cans in the museum's collection. We had been told that this was the last place in Queensland where tinsmiths were trained and took the opportunity to find out more at the annual Workers Reunion at The Workshops, which provided an opportunity to speak with some current and ex QR staff.

Several men recalled the tin and coppersmiths shop which was in a caged area beside the carriage workshops. One man told of his father; Peter Nunn, who had worked as a tinsmith there for 48 years and 7 weeks, beginning as an apprentice. Unfortunately however the tinsmiths cage had been demolished the year before. Amongst the artworks commissioned for the site, two evocative quotes embedded into the pavement at the gateway to The Workshops encapsulated the human story - 'sometimes several generations of a family worked here' and 'at the end of each day 1,000 bicycles streamed out through the gate'.

Summary.

Even by the late 1880s the tinsmith trade began to fade as tin plate gave way to galvanised iron. The intervening 20C brought with it plastic, which usurped demand for their utilitarian wares and even more sophisticated mechanisation which made redundant their hand skills.

Today plumbers use PVC pipe and silicone sealant in place of galvanised pipe and solder. Sheet metal workers rivet and spot weld their products devoid of decorative flourish or signifier. The artisans who once folded, soldered and fixed sheet metal to homes and factories throughout Queensland have disappeared from the yellow pages of the 21C.

Nevertheless, in investigating this category and imagining what objects we might make in response, one of the themes that has become evident is that of continuity. There is a continuity of skill sets and methods which have a changing language around them which can both reveal and conceal their origins. The analogy might be a watercourse that flows along the surface of the landscape then suddenly disappears underground, yet reappears again further downstream.

Some of the tinsmiths skills are evident in metalwork trades today, others are lost, others have morphed and evolved. To cater for renewed interest in learning historic crafts, several museums in the USA run tinsmithing workshops and a quick search on YouTube reveals local artisans keeping the skills alive.

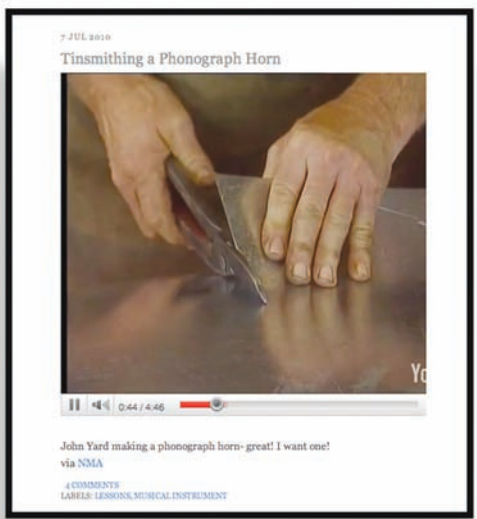
Threads of continuity, belonging and inheritance are expressed in the making of objects as utilitarian skill sets migrate across centuries and continents. Workers re-iterate designs and patterns as if compelled by a genetic code and their output enables us to scope ideas of place and of a collective history.

The playful new objects made for this exhibition, materially express this genealogy as well as the shifting, permeable boundaries between craft, trade and industry.

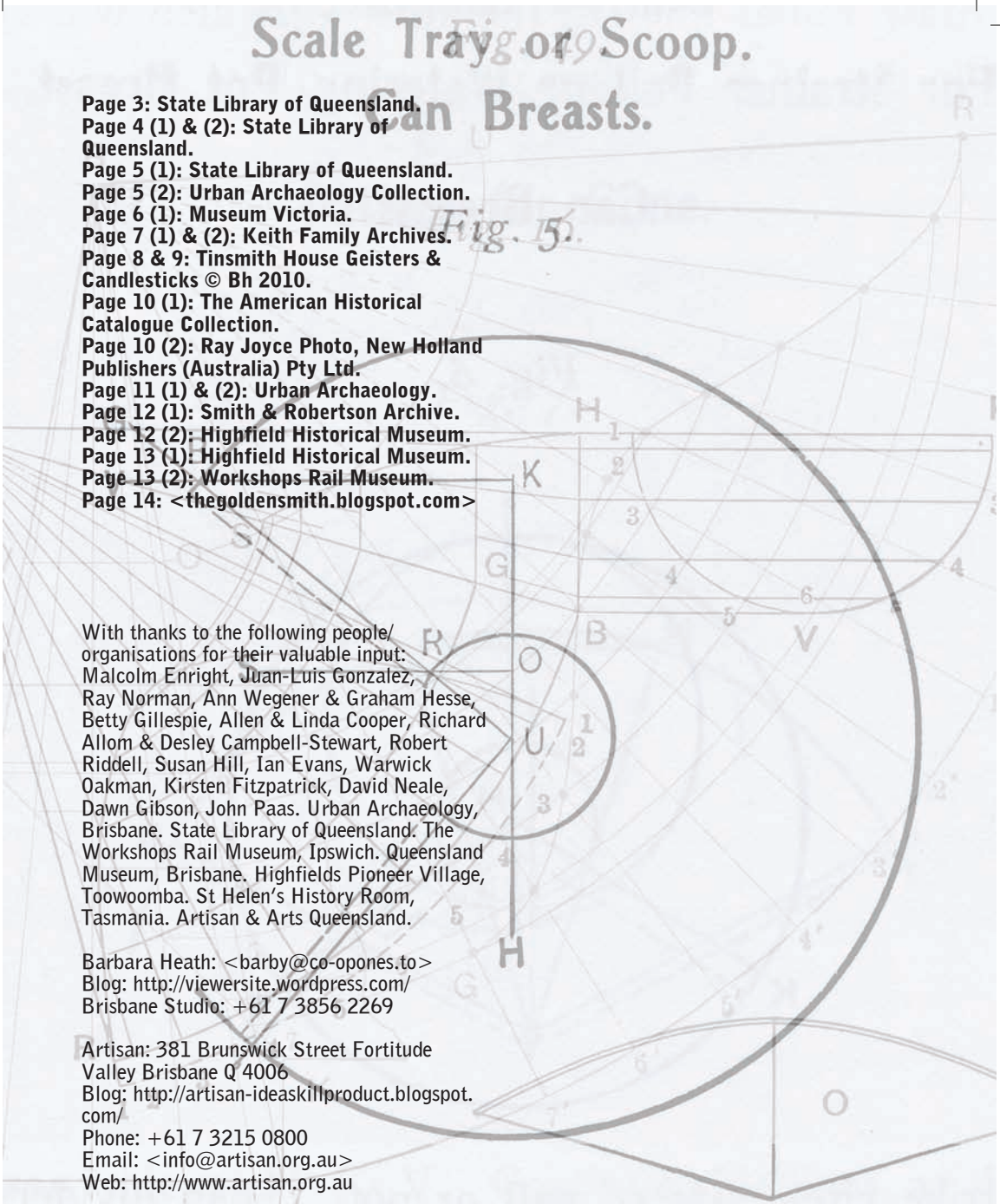
Barbara Heath 2010.

Our blog has recorded the progress of this research from start to finish <**http://viewersite.wordpress.com/**>**search** >**tinsmith.**

Sources: **1** William McMillen, Don Carpenter, Nicholas Coletto - Great American Craftsmen Articles - Tinsmithing. **2** Jeannette Lasansky, To Cut, Piece, & Solder: The Work of the Rural Pennsylvania Tinsmith 1778–1908. **3** Amalgamated Tinsmiths Sheet Metal Workers Canister Makers Gas Meter Makers & Assistants Union 1911–1913. Trade Union Entry Online Sources The Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University. **4** Museum Victoria - Trade Union Banners.



http://thegoldensmith.blogspot.com/2010/07/tinsmithing-phonograph-horn.html



Page 3: State Library of Queensland.
Page 4 (1) & (2): State Library of Queensland.
Page 5 (1): State Library of Queensland.
Page 5 (2): Urban Archaeology Collection.
Page 6 (1): Museum Victoria.
Page 7 (1) & (2): Keith Family Archives.
Page 8 & 9: Tinsmith House Geisters & Candlesticks © Bh 2010.
Page 10 (1): The American Historical Catalogue Collection.
Page 10 (2): Ray Joyce Photo, New Holland Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd.
Page 11 (1) & (2): Urban Archaeology.
Page 12 (1): Smith & Robertson Archive.
Page 12 (2): Highfield Historical Museum.
Page 13 (1): Highfield Historical Museum.
Page 13 (2): Workshops Rail Museum.
Page 14: <thegoldensmith.blogspot.com>

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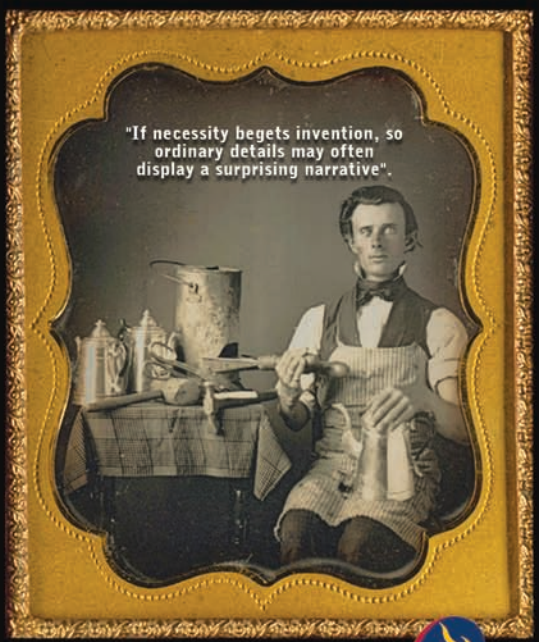

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