

JOHN BORTHWICK

With red rattler trains to the right and a green toast-rack tram to the left we're heading into Sydney, across the bridge. My grandfather steers his Vauxhall Wyvern with one hand while he juggles cigarette papers and tobacco into a "rollie" with the other.

When a pomaded rocker in a V8 Custom-line cuts across our bow at the tollbooth, Pa growls "mongrel" in the general direction of the bloke's tailfins and Brylcreemed quiff. Reaching the booth he passes a zack (sixpence) to the collector and they swap curt opinions about "bloody bodgies". Such was road rage in the late 1950s. Such was Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Like any enduring pile, the bridge is as much a structure of legend and porkies as it is of rivets and load-bearing beams. Its '30s nickname was "the Iron Lung", because it kept Sydney working during the Depression. Others later called it "the Coathanger" but for locals it has always been simply "the bridge". Whatever the missed metaphors, Sydney's great iron maiden aunt still hurdles Port Jackson from The Rocks to Milsons Point and is about to turn 90.

As far back as 1815, convicted forger and the colony's founding architect, Francis Greenway, proposed a harbour bridge. With the sense of urgency that thereafter has propelled many of the state's major projects, the job was completed 117 years later. To be fair, actual construction took less than nine years following which, with a Pythonesque mix of pomp and stuff-up, the bridge opened on Saturday, March 19, 1932.

Working from both sides of the harbour, British engineering firm Dorman Long & Co began construction in 1923. Hundreds of tenant families living on the approach paths were turfed out with no compensation, and their dwellings levelled. Their displacement echoed the experience of the original occupiers of those foreshores, the Gadigal people of Tar-ra (Dawes Point) and the Cammeraygal of Kiarabilli (Milsons Point area), who similarly had been shunted aside 130 years earlier when European settlers spilled out of Warrang (Sydney Cove).

As a kid I could see the bridge from my window in McMahons Point. Back then, as today, it seemed impossible to imagine the harbour without this great iron skyhook. From the time it opened, the arch-and-pylons profile image became an instantly recognisable ideogram signifying "Sydney". And yet our so-called iconic structure was far from unique. Defined as a "through arch bridge", it shared sibling-like similarity with three other spans of that era: Newcastle, England's 1928 Tyne Bridge and New York's 1917 Hell Gate and 1931 Bayonne bridges.

Its raw statistics are humongous. Six million hand-driven rivets. Five hundred and fifty thousand lengths of steel, weighing almost 53,000 tonnes. At 134m high it is the world's tallest steel arch bridge and, with a 503m span, the ninth longest spanning-arch bridge. And so on.



# TAKE IT TO THE BR

Sydney's boldest landmark is celebrating a big birthday

For every bland fact there is a back story that better tells the tale of this behemoth. Fourteen workers died on the site during construction, two of whom fell to the harbour. Urban myth has it that one builder survived the long drop by jettisoning his tool belt so it broke the surface tension of the water ahead of his impact.

It takes 30,000 litres of paint to give the bridge's 485,000sq m of steel a good once-over – a never-ending task, as Paul Hogan would attest. Today's paint is so quick-drying that should drops fall, by the time they reach the roadway or its vehicles they've dried to harmless flakes. No mess. No lawyers.

The bridge roadway, known as the Bradfield Highway, is at 2.4km probably Australia's shortest highway. An average 11,000

*This was born of brainpower, pen, paper, slide-rule and log tables. Computers and calculators were still decades away*

vehicles a day crossed it in 1932, each paying sixpence while a horse and rider paid a "trey", threepence. Today's figure is about 160,000 vehicles. No horses. The toll, originally imposed to recoup the £6.25m construction cost, was paid off in 1988 but 34 years later an auto-

matic toll still pings us up to \$4 each trip. Even though horses were banned long ago, the Bradfield Highway is classified as a Travelling Stock Route. You may still legally herd a mob of cattle across it – strictly between midnight and dawn – although no one has done so since 1999.

A roll call of curious bridge crossings began with 96 steam locomotives parked end-to-end along its tracks to stress test the structure. No cracks. All good to go. Seven Wirth's Circus elephants soon ambled across, paying tuppence each. Mark Webber fanged over it in a Williams Formula One car in 2005, probably the fastest-ever toll evasion.

In 1973 Frenchman Philippe Petit illegally stretched a highwire between the northern pylons and tripped a light fandango five times



Sydney Harbour Bridge, main; toll booths in 1996, far left; Mark Webber and the F1 car he drove across the bridge in 2005, left; reconciliation march in 2000, right



PICTURES: AFP; CHRIS PAVLICH

# BRIDGE

back and forth above the traffic. Notably, 250,000 people walked the bridge in May 2000 to support reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Has any obsessive-compulsive commuter kept count of the times they've crossed the old 'hanger? I've done it by car, truck, train (red rattlers onwards), bus (double-deckers onwards), tram (discontinued in 1958), bicycle, motorbike and on foot (last week). In all, perhaps 5000 times, give or take plenty. More precisely, I've climbed it three times, all of them memorable.

Since 1998 the BridgeClimb company has ushered four million paying customers to the top of the arch and safely down again, making ours the "most climbed bridge in the world". The usual suspect celebrities have had a go – Beckham, Oprah, Nicole, Kylie and the like – plus upwardly mobile aristocrats, Harry of England, and Fred and Mary of Denmark. Long before BridgeClimb, however, there was the DIY version, plain old bridge climbing.

"It was almost obligatory in the late '70s for us to take international visitors for a midnight climb," recalls my friend, a retired Sydney businessman we'll call Charlie. "We were in our twenties, adventurers, loved climbing. We'd jump a few barriers then head up the western archway. No security, in either sense of the term. It was a thrill but the best part was the beauty of the view from the top – glittering Sydney and the whole harbour laid out like something magic."

Don't even think about it today. With the coming of BridgeClimb, then 9/11 and international terrorism, security was seriously beefed up. Everything, and everyone, is now intensively surveilled. But, for \$198 you can still buy a thrill. Zippered into a grey Gitmo-style jumpsuit, a BridgeClimber surrenders watch, camera, jewellery, phone and anything

## MORE TO THE STORY

Five hotels with fabulous bridge views:

### Shangri-La Sydney

It's hard to beat this property for its bird's eye perspective on Sydney's famous landmark. The Harbour Bridge suites feel so close to it, you can almost read the number plates on cars as they cross. In the top-shelf Royal Suite, tickle the ivories on a baby grand while watching the traffic below.  
[shangri-la.com](http://shangri-la.com)

### Pier One Sydney Harbour

Perched over the water on a historic Walsh Bay wharf, this hotel is in prime bridge-watching position, especially from the Balcony Suites and ultra-luxe Admiral Suite, which delivers an intimate look at its underbelly.  
[pieronesydneyharbour.com.au](http://pieronesydneyharbour.com.au)

### Four Seasons Sydney

Plenty of the guestrooms in this five-star establishment offer partial views of the Opera House, bridge and harbour but for the full eye-popping experience, find your suite spot. Three of the seven suite categories include the arch in their expansive range.  
[fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com)

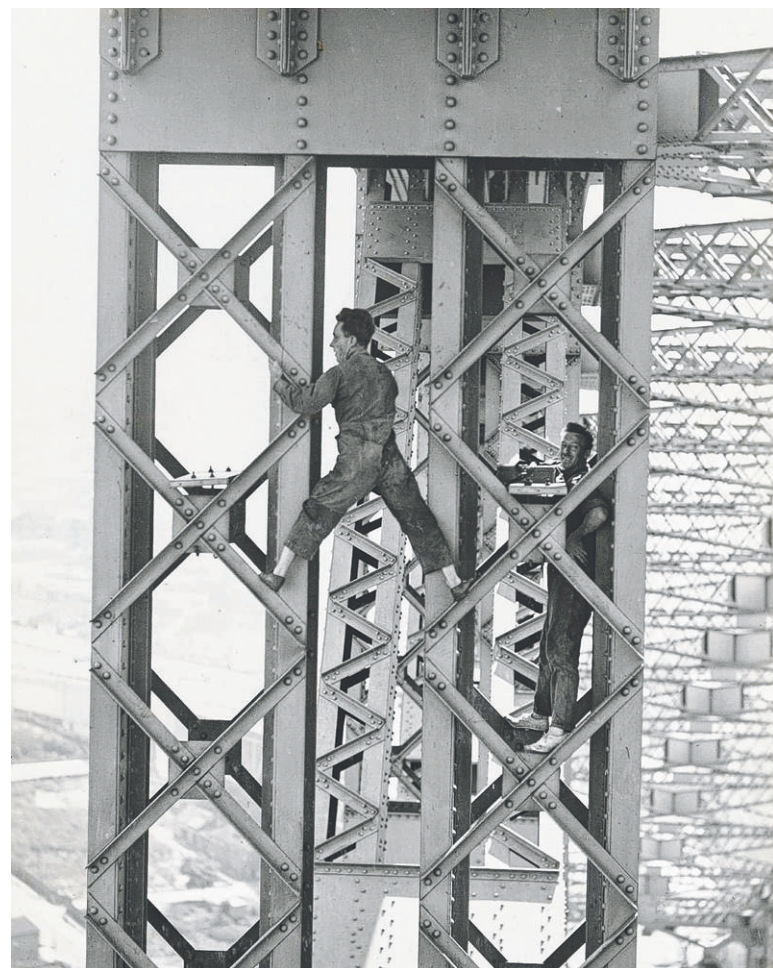
### Pullman Quay Grand Sydney Harbour

Choose a newly refurbished Deluxe Harbour-view Suite, available with one or two bedrooms, kitchenette and spacious lounge. Enjoy the bustle of Circular Quay and dramatic bridge vistas from your balcony or through floor-to-ceiling windows.  
[pullmanquaygrandsydneyharbour.com](http://pullmanquaygrandsydneyharbour.com)

### Meriton Suites North Sydney

Here's a chance to look the other way. From the northern end of the bridge, the apartment-style Harbour Suites can accommodate two or four people in one or two bedrooms, with panoramas over the "coat hanger" and water towards Vaucluse and beyond.  
[meritonsuites.com.au](http://meritonsuites.com.au)

PENNY HUNTER



FROM THE BOOK BRIDGING SYDNEY, HISTORIC HOUSES TRUST NSW

Working on the structure in the 1930s, above right; highline walker Philippe Petit in 1973, inset

loose, including your chewing gum. Dentures exempt, so far. Then, breathalysed and body-scanned, you're ready to join Vertigos Anonymous and clamber up the grand nonagenarian.

The standard climb is 1332 steps up the south end of the eastern arch but there's an alternative route that begins with crossing the gantries beneath the road deck, which reveals the structure's extraordinary underbelly. You duck through a geometric cat's cradle of trusses, beams and box-girders that suggest the weavings of a giant industrial-era arachnid. It strikes you that all this was born of brainpower, pen, paper, slide-rule and log tables. Computers and calculators were still decades away.

The 89m tall granite pylons are hollow, non-structural, mainly decorative. Bypassing the southeastern one you're soon on to the archway, reaching for the sky. You pause halfway up to look east, panning from Campbell Cove's old bond stores, across the churning ferry wakes of Circular Quay and the battery of exclusive egg-tray apartments overlooking it. The sails of Utzon's still-audacious Opera House billow out on Bennelong Point where I vaguely re-

member its predecessor, an ancient tram depot that looked like a clapped-out Arthurian castle that had been banished to the colonies.

Keep climbing. The conga line of jumpsuits (an unfortunate name, given the location) reaches the top. We're on the roof of the harbour, 134m above the criss-crossed wakes of waterbug taxis and Balmain ferries.

Our guide points out the orphaned mid-harbour island known variously as Muddawahnyah, Fort Denison and Pinchgut. In the past she has been asked by visitors, "Is that Tasmania?" The sight of North Sydney, half a kilometre distant, has prompted others to inquire, "Is that New Zealand?" Another, pointing at the rising moon, asked, "Is it the same moon we have back home?" Above us, the huge Australian flag that ripples in the afternoon breeze provoked one geographically challenged newbie to ask pointedly, "Why isn't the American flag flying?"

I look north to see the magical bays and points – Lavender, Milsons, Blues and McMahons – of my childhood adventures. The white tower of the late Brett Whiteley's house still peeks out behind Lavender Bay and the botanical wonderland of his wife Wendy's Secret Garden. Further west is the jigsaw shore-



## IN THE KNOW

Celebrations to mark next weekend's 90th birthday of the Sydney Harbour Bridge include:

- Evening light show projections on the bridge pylons, 8pm-11pm, March 17-20.
- Saturday, March 19:**
  - Vintage steam locomotive 3801 will cross the bridge to meet a vintage electric train that includes carriage C3426, which participated in the bridge opening in 1932.
  - Historic double-decker buses will operate from North Sydney and Wynyard while vintage ferries run between Milsons Point and Campbells Cove.
  - A walking tour around the CBD with a pop-up art gallery featuring historic images.
  - Dancers, buskers and street party performances between Town Hall and Campbells Cove.
  - A community hub at Campbells Cove including a Welcome to Country, children's events and performances by Aria Award-winning musicians James Morrison, Christine Anu and others; from 10am.
  - BridgeClimb will offer \$90 discounts on day climbs.  
[roads-waterways.transport.nsw.gov.au](http://roads-waterways.transport.nsw.gov.au)  
[bridgeclimb.com](http://bridgeclimb.com)

line of islands, coves and peninsulas formed where the Parramatta River flows into the harbour. A fire and brimstone sunset flares beyond Barangaroo and the gossamer cable-stays of Anzac Bridge. Later in the year, the bridge we're standing on will be primed for its own firestorm, Sydney's annual night of pyrotechnic delight when the Old Coathanger self-immolates to emerge at midnight reborn from the flames, along with a new year.

It's time for us to cross the summit beam and descend the western arch back towards town. I stop midway to recall one of my writing heroes, the late Peter Pinney, a fearless traveller and author whose favourite school-boy stunt in the late '30s was to climb to this point and hang upside down above the traffic.

Just the thought of it could give you the yips. Instead I do a final, 360-degree scan of the darkening horizon and confirm what Charlie said about his own illicit climbs, that the best part was the beauty – to see Sydney glittering and the harbour laid out like something magical. It still is.