

# "Cottontales"

**BONDS**

*in Cessnock*

1947-2009





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Cover illustration: Celeste Coucke

# Slump hits home in factory closure

By GREG WENDT  
Business Editor

THE global economic slump cast its shadow over Cessnock yesterday as the company that owns iconic Australian brand Bonds announced the closure of its factory with at least 80 jobs to be axed.

Cessnock MP Kerry Hickey said he was shocked and disappointed at the big loss of jobs.

"It's a sad day as the Bonds factory has been a part of our region for as long as most of us here can remember," he said. Mr Hickey said his late mother, Bronwyn, had worked at the factory years ago.

Clothing manufacturer Pacific Brands said its Cessnock factory, which had been in the area for about 60 years, would be among seven manufacturing sites closed around the country.

The company posted a half-year loss of \$140.6 million yesterday.

About 1000 jobs will be cut from its Australian operations, with 82 redundancies in Cessnock over 18 months.

Pacific Brands has numerous household names in its portfolio including Bonds, Holeproof, Berlei and King Gee.

Company chief executive Sue Morphet said the economic climate remained challenging and uncertain with consumer confidence at low levels.

Ms Morphet said it was no longer competitive for Pacific Brands to make clothing.

"No one is in any doubt we are in the toughest market conditions in 30 years," she said.

Ms Morphet said Pacific Brands would meet all retiral needs of affected staff, who were told of the company's decision at meetings at seven sites yesterday morning.

However, the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union slammed the company's decision and called for urgent talks with the Federal Government to save jobs.

"It's a black day for the industry," NSW assistant secretary Steve Davies said.

"Australia will be importing not manufacturing again."

Mr Davies said the union called for urgent talks with the state and federal governments to save jobs or have people retrained.

He said the union did not accept the closure of sites such as Cessnock was necessary.

"This has a devastating effect



CONTRAST: Workers leave the Cessnock factory yesterday and, next, celebrate the production of Olympic uniforms in 1999 with track great Rastene Boyle. — Main picture by Peter Steop



UNREALISED DREAM: Not even model Sarah G'Haré could keep Chesty Bond at home.

## Brands stitched up offshore

WHILE iconic Australian clothing brands Bonds, King Gee and Hard Yakka will now be manufactured offshore, the company that owns them insists the heart of the business remains Australian.

But the decision by Pacific Brands to move its entire clothing manufacturing workforce to Asia means labels such as Bonds will be the latest in a long line of Australian brands headed overseas. The brand goes back to the 1920s when the Vegemite trademark was acquired by US giant Kraft.

More recently, Ansett's Biscuit Company was bought by US-based Campbell Soup Company in 1997 and Aeroplane jelly was acquired by Jelly McCormick Goods two years earlier. Another iconic Aussie product, the

Vets lawnmower, was bought last year by US company Briggs & Stratton while American company Heinz gobbled up Golden Circle.

General company Uncle Today's was bought by Swiss outfit Nestlé in 2006 and the makers of "Budgee smugglers", swimwear company Speedos, was snapped up by the UK-based Portland Group in 1990. But Pacific Brands chief executive Sue Morphet is adamant that while Bonds singlets and undies will now be made in countries like China, the ideas will continue to come out of Australia.

She said although 1800 jobs across Australia would be lost over the next 18 months, the company still employed about 7000 people. But she said there was no future for the company in manufacturing.

on the workers, their families and the whole community," Mr Davies said. Cessnock Mayor Alison Davy said the loss of jobs would damage the Blumberg economy. "It will mean tough times for some families and it will flow down right through the community," Cr Davy said.

"There will be very little opportunities for the women to get jobs in the Cessnock area or elsewhere," she said.

A former Bonds employee, Cessnock resident Jennifer Sheridan, 50, who worked at the factory in the early 1990s, said she was saddened by the news. "There were about double the

number of employees when I worked there and I have a lot of memories of the factory," she said.

"Many of the girls have been working there for years, some of them began in their teens."

Workers refused to talk yesterday when they left the factory at the end of their shift.

People cried and cried and cried. It was like a fire engine had been in there. It was devastating. But it wasn't life threatening. It was just a heck of a change. And it was sad for the people who were nearly ready to retire, but just wanted a couple more years.

I can't believe that any one person can contribute enough to one company that they are worth two million dollars a year. I don't care who they are or what they are. I said to Sue Morphet, do you realize you could have paid every one of these people for 12 months and kept them employed? Do you think of that when you go to bed? It was like I had smacked her in the face with a dead fish.

It does a lot of things to you. It does a lot to your self confidence. I don't think I'll ever move on. I can't get over how somebody, high in a company can dismiss all the people, how money can be so important that they can stand and look you in the eye and know what they are going to do to you tomorrow. I don't get it.

The day before they came to Cessnock to tell us they were closing us down, we were in our conference room with a garment that we were bringing back from China to produce in Cessnock. We had the head methods man from Sydney and the designer, and we had garments all over the conference room table. Isabel and I were in conference with Ted all day, working out how we were going to sew them. Why play that charade for so long?



MEMORIES: Bonds workers Sandra Coyle, Glenn Gilbert and Jessica Crow are disappointed the Cessnock factory is closing its doors today. — Picture by Jonathan Carroll

### OUT OF WORK

SANDRA Coyle remembers the days when Bonds Cessnock was one of the region's biggest employers, with 400 people working at the factory and winning major contracts like the Sydney Olympic Games uniforms.

It will be with a heavy heart that Mrs Coyle walks out of the factory today when parent company Pacific Brands locks the gates for the last time.

The Herald reported earlier this year how the global economic slump cast its shadow over Cessnock when the company that owns iconic Australian brand Bonds announced the closure of the factory.

Pacific Brands posted a half-year loss of

## 'Family' farewells factory

\$149.95 million in February this year.

Yesterday Mrs Coyle and other employees reminisced about the factory that employed generations of Coalfields folk, pumped millions into the local economy and was a leader in textiles manufacturing.

Mrs Coyle started work at Bonds in 1973 as a machinist and has worked there on and off until today.

"There was a time when

400 people worked here. There were two lunch breaks because there was such a big workforce," she said.

Glenn Gilbert, who has worked for Bonds Cessnock for the past 14 years, said it was a great group and he had made some close friends.

He will start work soon with a websuit manufacturer at Beresfield.

Jessica Crow has worked at the factory for four years and is now retraining for work in the hospitality industry.

"I'll miss the people. It really has been like working with a big happy family," she said.

Pacific Brands developed an extensive retraining program with funding of \$3000 for each employee.

— Donna Sharpe

On 25 February 2009 Pacific Brands announced the closure of seven of its factories across Australia and the loss of 1850 jobs. The announcement was shocking and unexpected.

One of the seven factories that shut down their Australian production was Bonds in Cessnock in December 2009. A strong, resilient community of nearly 100 workers became unemployed. While many have found jobs, most of these jobs are casual and part-time and cannot replace the stability workers had in full-time work.

Retrenchment causes considerable economic and emotional difficulty for most workers, but what has also been lost is the community and shared identity gained by the experience of working together on a day-to-day basis with a common goal over decades.

To help workers deal with this difficult transition the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA) set up an advocacy and support project, with financial assistance from Pacific Brands, to help workers to get training and support, to find sustainable employment and to engage meaningfully with their communities.

From this project emerged a community arts project component, which gives workers a chance to share their experience of working and documents the rich history created and shared at Bonds in Cessnock.

*Cottontales* Bond's in Cessnock – one of a national series of TCFUA arts projects and events – acknowledges the contribution of Bonds workers while also marking another historic turning point in Australian manufacturing.

## Acknowledgements

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This book has been made possible through the generosity of three generations of Cessnock Bonds workers.

Thanks to the workers who agreed to be interviewed and who trusted me with your stories and your photographs. Thankyou for your warm hospitality and friendship in the process. With you I have shared laughter, tears, anger and grief. I have been inspired by your humility.

Thanks to the workers who were recorded by Helena Spyrou and to those of you who participated in the film taken by Russell Hawkins just before the factory closed in December 2009.

Thankyou to the organisations who provided education and training to the workers, in particular...

Thankyou to the Union advocates- Donreve Miles.....- who supported the Bonds Cessnock workers for almost 18 months, both before and after retrenchment.

And finally thank you to Helena Spyrou whose clear vision helped make this project a reality.

*Celeste Coucke*

## Contributors

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Heather Stacey (Scott)

# Bonds Cumberland Street

1947 - c1954



Cumberland street workers, 1953

All the girls - there might have been 150 or maybe 200 - every girl would be singing in that factory. You could hear them down Vincent Street, 200 yards away. You could hear the girls singing in the factory, every one. They'd play music over the loudspeakers, over their heads, and they'd all be singing to that. The songs in them days, you could sing to them. Them days, they'd play "She wore red feathers with a huly, huly skirt"- Guy Mitchell, I think it was. And all them real easy to listen to songs. But now you'd be lucky to get one song a day that you could sing along with - unless you're a teeny bopper or something like that.

The first manager we had was a fellow called Jim Oliver. I'd be going to work, riding my push bike, as everybody done at the time. And if the boss Jim Oliver was running late he'd give me a whistle and say, "Give me a double will ya!" And I'd be doubling the manager of the factory to work on my push bike. "Come on, I'm running late!" He'd give me a whistle and off we'd go. Can you imagine that happening today?

Can you imagine that happening today?

On those old benches that we had, up the end there was a massive motor that used to run a steel shaft right through the full length of the bench. It might have been thirty feet long and there were 20, 25 girls on that one long bench. The girls were all facing each other. Off the main shaft that spun around, there were big pulley wheels. Different machines - overlockers, elasticators, buttonholers - had different sized pulleys for different speeds.

We used stuff called Brahma belting. One or two of the belts would have to be changed by the mechanics on a daily basis, because they'd stretch and that would slow the machines. When it stretched you had to take a few lengths out and then put it back on. These days we would have got shot if we'd done what we used to do! We would climb underneath the bench with all these massive wheels, spinning at high speeds. We didn't turn the power off, we'd just get a screw driver and flick the belt off and on as it was going around the pulley. If you'd get your cardigan or anything caught, you'd be wound around 50 times because there'd be no stopping it! It was highly, highly dangerous. You'd never do anything like that now.

They did come in handy for one thing. In the summer time - we had no air conditioning, or anything like that - we used to tie cardboard around these main shafts - cardboard about 18 inches, a rectangle - and we used to strap them around the main shaft. And as the shaft was spinning it would create a breeze under the legs of the girls! They'd sit with their skirts up, just to get that breeze! Not that it was cold - it was a tin shed hot box.

For a practical joke we used to throw a cup of water on those bits of spinning cardboard. And naturally, where did the water go. Straight up the girl's dresses!

It would have been a hundred degrees there, absolutely, in the middle of summer. What the manager told us to do was to bore some holes in the floor. Underneath the flooring there was a five or six foot gap. Everybody would put their push bikes under there. We went around and bored holes, three quarter inch holes - underneath the girls. The theory was to let the air come through from these tiny holes. Didn't make a scrap of difference, naturally!

We had a floor lady called Belle Oldham. She was a very strict woman - no hanky panky with her! She used to always wear big, clod hopper heels - everybody would duck for cover when we heard her coming around. Underneath the factory floor was the canteen also. Belle happened to have her table directly underneath one of the holes we'd bored in the floor. We looked down there, and there was Belle, sitting there, eating her lunch. So we packed up all the floor sweepings over a couple of the holes and took a look - oh yeah, she's down there - and flick, flick, flick... Mate, she was up there like a flash, we could hear her boots coming up the stairway, coming after us. What's going on! We pleaded our ignorance, but she made us block up them holes. She was furious!





The Bondellas 1949



Christmas at Bonds: Frances Roddy (O'hern), Laurel Mears, Heather Stacey (Scott), Daphne Lepisto (Mitchell)

Bonds Float  
Jubilee Celebrations  
1951. March.

Daphne  
Shirley  
Kath  
Joan  
Florence  
Thelma  
Francis  
maureen  
melva.  
Jenny  
Beryl  
Pat.



Dorris Mc Lennon and Heather Scott  
Bonds Christmas party, 1949





Jan Crosdale and Gaye Hugo

I was working at Holdaway's Newsagent on Vincent St. I didn't like the boss so I put my name down at Bonds. Mum wasn't really happy, people thought that they were a rough mob that worked there. I talked mum into it. I was 15

I was a plain sewer. They put me onto the trimming first up, trimming the cotton by hand with little clippers. Later on that was all automated.

I did a bit on the cutting table with Audrey Hunter and then they put me onto flat lock. The machine that does the 2-3 needle stitch. I hated it. It kept playing up and you had to have a mechanic there all the time. It's an overlock flat stitch with two stitches running side by side on the top of the garment. I was sewing athletic singlets.

When I first started I was put on the table where they were doing the packing. I used to have to glue the labels on the boxes and put on the tags with cotton and thread. Belle Oldham - she was the supervisor - she couldn't understand why I couldn't tie a knot - how you put two pieces of cotton together and knot them with your finger - she showed me how to do that so I could do the tags on the garments. From there I advanced to trimming the cottons and from there I went to the cutting table and that's where I met my best friend Daphne. She was the cutter. She had been to Sydney to train as a cutter.

There was another girl on the cutting table with us called Beatrice Skinner. There were rolls of materials at the end of the table and we used to pull the material off the roll and lay it on the cutting table. We used to do two or three dozen "lays". The material was sort of double and when you got to the twelfth layer, you put a marker through and then another one, all the way to the top. Each of those "lays" would be 2 dozen or 1 dozen garments. When Daphne cut them, Beatrice and I used to get all the parts. There were the fronts and the backs and the gussets of panties. We'd draw them out off a cardboard pattern on the top layer so that Daphne could cut them out. Then Beatrice and I used to get the first top layer, the back, front and gusset of the panty and roll it all up and tie it and put it into a bag. The bag would have a ticket on it for all the processes it would have to go through before it became a complete garment.

We'd go from one machine to the other. We used to have a bin each side of our machine. We'd have our incoming work in one bin and another bin for the outgoing work. The floor girls would come and get them in their little trolleys and take them to the next machine where the next process would have to be done. Like when we'd finish overlocking the panties, we'd leave half a seam that we didn't sew right up to the top and the elastic was put in there. Then it was sent back to another overlocker and the rest of that seam would be joined up. Sometimes they had little leg bands and some other girls would put those on. It would go from one machine to the other until the garment was finished and then it was sent to the trimmers and then the ironers; the ironers examined them for any faults - if there was a problem they would tie that garment in a bit of string and send it back. As you did your process you'd put your number on a ticket. They knew by your number who did the work and who to send the faulty garments back to.

We used to have an industrial interlude on the wireless of an afternoon. It started about 2.00 pm and went to about 4.00 pm on the radio stations 2HD and 2HR and we could send in requests. We would write out our requests, all the factories used to do it, and they would play our songs. We used to sing along with them, to Bing Crosby and Perry Como and Teresa Brewer.

Of an afternoon we always used to have about five minutes out the back to get ready to go home. A lot of the girls came by bus and traveled up from Ellalong and Paxton and Weston and Abermain and they needed to be a bit tidy to get onto the bus. Each bench used to go out in their turn at a certain time. We'd get ready to go home, do our hair and put on our make up.

Jan Williams would do your hair if you were going out. You'd have to watch where Mr Oliver was if you wanted to do that! He used to let you go out for the five minutes, but he would keep an eye on some of them because they'd stop out too long. He'd send Belle out, if you were there for too long.

# Bonds Mc Grain Street

1955 - 2009

In 1923 George A Bond established Australia's first cotton spinning operation at Wentworthville, Sydney. In the following decades Bonds Industries expanded, manufacturing staple textile products and garments that all Australians recognised.

Bonds moved from Cumberland Street to Mc Grain Street in about 1955. Previously a Dri Glo factory, the new factory was much larger, purpose built for textile manufacturing. In the early seventies it was expanded to accommodate more machines up to 400, mostly women, workers.

*Other than the shops, the factory was the life blood employment for every girl in Cessnock. They used to come from Bellbird, Paxton, Ellalong. Kurri Kurri. Bus loads of girls coming in from the outlying districts. It was nearly the only employment available.*

Bonds was bought by Pacific Dunlop in 1987. In 1990 George Innes, the then CEO of Bonds Industries made a plea for Bonds to maintain its manufacturing in Australia:

*Our company was founded on the faith that Australia could provide viable employment for her people... We have the choice as to whether we will turn our raw materials into finished products, and in the process provide wages, employment, and a quality of life well above the norm, or to take the easy way and enjoy short term gains at the cost of future generations ... The decisions we make today will determine our future. We have the technology, the skilled people, the raw materials and forward thinking unionswilling to work closely with management and workers. The only thing in question is whether we have the national will to come to grips with industrial realities.*

More recently Bonds changed ownership to Pacific Brands.

Bonds Cessnock closed its doors on 18 December 2009, leaving 79 workers out of work.



Sister's in-law Doreen Trotter and Jean York

Both our husbands were miners. With the pit closures and the strikes, times got tough. But you always knew you'd get work at Bonds. You just went and they always seemed to take you on. I was in and out. There were always women getting pregnant and finishing off, so you could always get a job. Always.

My husband was on strike for about six weeks. We were paying off a house and a car and I had three children and it was really hard. That's why I went back to Bonds. We'd go to mum's for meals. I was lucky we had help. I stayed on to get a bit of money behind me to pay off the house. It's hard with children. I went to work at 7.30 and my husband would get up to get the kids off to school and I'd get home at about 4.30 just as he'd be going to work. We sort of passed each other. We'd see each other on the weekend.

When I first got married we were living with George's grandparents and we had nothing. Absolutely nothing. We saved to get our home through me working at Bonds. I knew it was always there. If I wanted a job I could get a job. It's sad that it's not there anymore because it was always a steady employer for people. It was also close to home. Now people have to travel, like go to Newcastle. We have the vineyards, that's something. With my grandchildren, it worries me. ... When the mines closed years ago, at least BHP employed thousands of the men. I feel sorry for all the young ones. I worry about my grandchildren.



Betty Thompson

I was one of them. "Ask Tommo, she'll get it for you."

We were all going out on strike because we thought Bonds was sacking Mr Lockyer. He was one gentle, beautiful man, getting on to retirement age. He knew everybody. He knew if we had troubles. We were his family. And all of a sudden Mr Lockyer told us he was leaving. Well, of course, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. This Mr Stevenson was coming quite a lot in the months prior to Mr Lockyer's retirement. He was a Pommy and that didn't go over well at all. We still feel to this day that it was a forced retirement. John Stevenson was there for quite a few years and he became one of my best friends. There were two supervisors there and we used to clash something terrible. "Betty Thompson will you come to the office?" And I used to say to him, "This lady ... I just want to flatten her." And he said, "If you want to hit her, take her over that bloody bridge and off our property!"

Always a cleaner. Always a cleaner. They put the straw broom in my hand and said go for it.

I was a little nervous at first but being on the floor and not on production wasn't as hard. Mr Fred Lockyer was our manager then. I had a big three-wheeled trolley that was much higher than me. It had pins, big steel pins up the top and you used to pin a big bag to it. You'd go around emptying all the girls buckets, full of fabric bits and pieces, off the machines.

The boss called me in. He said, "You're one of the few people we have that's not on production." So he handed the social club over to me.

Come Christmas time and I got the blame for everything. Heather Campbell was the forelady. "You're wasting all this money Betty," she said, "using the Bonds toilet rolls." So she reported me to Mr Burridge. I used the toilet rolls to make streamers and big bows. Every body had to bring in their famous pin up boy and tape him to the wall where you washed your hands. So when I went to go to the office, Mr Burridge was with Heather. "I believe you've been a bit naughty Betty" he said, "you've been decorating our toilets with our toilet rolls?" "I was blamed for it but I'm not guilty" I said. And Heather is standing there. He said, "You just came in this morning and it was all done?" "Yes" I said. "It was all done when I came in this morning." He leaned over me and he said, "I'm going to tell you something little lady. Next time that fairy comes in overnight, would you tell her to do my bloody office too, because I love Christmas decorations." Heather just melted.



Bonds picnic swimsuit parade.

We had our Christmas party at the big town hall. Loretta Meers and I got the town hall ready. We got material from the supervisors and made big Bombay bloomers, the ones old ladies wear. But we made them much bigger than they were supposed to be, they came up above your chest and went down all the way to your ankles.

A young fellow lived across the road here, Colin Bell, and he had this Billy Cart. So we borrowed Colin's Billy Cart and painted it all up. Clyde Burrige was managing us at the time. "Have you got a Santa yet?" he said "I love being Santa." So we got him a Santa suit. Clyde thought he couldn't get into the cart, so we all pushed and flopped him into this cart and the music starts, jingle bells, jingle bells. Six of us come running in wearing these bloomers stuffed with paper, making out they were so heavy! We ran all around the Town Hall and took old Burrige around, everybody saying Happy Christmas and all that. When we got to the steps of the stage, he couldn't get out of the bloody cart! He was jammed in. There we were, trying to pull old Clyde out of his Santa cart!







Bonds Cabaret, c1969. Shirley Mc Cabe, Dawn Ward, Gaile Douglas

Well, the boys were the babies and they were up the top end of the Town Hall. We were down the bottom end of the Hall, we were the mums, and we had the nappies.

When they blew the whistle we had to run up to our baby and we had to put their nappy on. We had great big pins, like kilt pins. None of us got a nappy on!

The highlight of our social life were the Christmas parties and Cabaret. They were something to look forward to, everybody was excited. When the list went up, you had to get your name on straight away because they would only take so many. If you were in the second lunch, you would ask people in the first lunch to put your name on the board, because otherwise you may be left out. It was all about what you were wearing and how you were getting your hair done. And you bought new shoes, new stockings, a new bag, new undies, new everything. People would come in with their hair in rollers. Oh, we looked beautiful. Scarves on, tied around the neck. We couldn't wait to get home and take them out. We had a ball afterwards, too, talking about everybody back at work. Did you see what she had on?



They were brilliant. They were the biggest night of the year.

Fred Lockyer was a very old-fashioned man. He'd say: "Girlie do this or girlie do that." He scared me, he scared a lot of people because he was the boss. He come up to me one day and he said: "That skirt's a bit tight under the arms there girlie, isn't it?" And I'm sitting there thinking, what's he talking about? And it was that my skirt was too short! It took me a while to work it out. But he was a fair man. And he was considerate of families, in his way too.

Collin Bennett was crimson with rage. You see, when your machine had a problem, you put a yellow flag up for the mechanic. There were so many yellow flags up and the girls were howling. He had everyone in the cottontail room after him. He was trying to get my machine going, too. I looked up at him and you could tell he was angry. I said, When did you start hating your horse? And he got up and he had to walk out. He just walked out shaking his head and I thought, well it made him laugh anyway.



Gordon and Faye Timmins

## We had a good mill, good management, good people

I was a finisher to start with and then I went onto the machines. I was there 11 years. It was go, go, go all the time. You weren't allowed to talk. It sounds silly and trivial now, but one of my jobs was making the little bows that went on the singlets. They had a little tie and you'd sit there threading that and come home with blisters on your fingers. It was hard work. I had a few different jobs which was good because you learnt different parts of the process that went on. When I first started they had "Beatty" roller irons- everything was ironed before it went out. All that ironing really was just a waste of time. When we folded them and put them in boxes, that flattened them out in time. At Cumberland St they went into fancy boxes but in the last years they were wrapped in paper and then into plastic bags. The finishers did the final work and those girls would put the garments into paper parcels and then they were packed into big wire cages – 6-8 on a truck.

There'd be a woman come from Sydney with all the stuff for our house sales. We would write our order down and she'd take them up to Sydney. They'd be delivered to us in a couple of weeks or so. When we got our own sales store it was just like a shop, like a factory outlet but it was only for the workers. It was very successful. Through Bonds I bought all my towels for the glory box and I think I still have one pair. The weave was different – it was thin. Things weren't as advanced as they are now.

After the garments were designed we would make 3-4 dozen samples and they was given to the traveling salesmen. We made summer stuff in winter and winter stuff in summer. The fabric of the samples was just the same but the sewing was very high quality- the sample had to be spot on. Mostly it was overtime work, putting the lace on the garments. I used to enjoy putting the lace on the garments. It was interesting. Keeping your mind on the work, to do it right so it would look pretty when it was finished. You really felt like you did something for your days work.

When John Stevenson was manager he would never say no to extra work from Sydney. We were the fashion factory. Nearly all the fabric was knitted by Bonds. Originally about 90% of the fabric was cut in Sydney. When they got into making fashion swimwear, it was all cut here. When Coats-Patons bought out Bonds, the management and everything was virtually the same, the only thing that changed was that we got Coats-Patons cottons. Before that, Bond's used to make its own cotton. Just before I left, in about 1984, Dunlop Pacific took over and that's when things started to go down hill.

## The Blokes On the Floor

We were comrades from the day we started to the day we left.



The one on the left there, that's Ray Lambley. He accidentally lost his leg on a bobcat, later on. There's John, sitting in the wheelchair. John was in a road accident and became a paraplegic. We built a special bench for John, he was not inhibited as far as fixing machines, he did his job. That's me, there on the right of Ray. That's Paul Hailes... this is Steven, Steven Smart - he came out from England. And that's my son Russell, next to Steven. That's Gordon Lomas, who was the original foreman. And that's Paul Radnidge, on the right hand side. We were comrades from the day we started to the day we left.

I would take all the boys fishing. Ron Cowlshaw, he loved fishing, and Peter Ford, another manager. And Fred Markus. One fella, John Myers - he had no idea of fishing, he'd never been fishing. So he goes, all dressed up. He looked like he was in one of his old tuxedos! Frost nearly on the beach it was that cold, freezing in the winter time. He was a sight for sore eyes sitting there on the beach. This chap here, Paul Hailes - he wasn't a fisherman either. He only had a short fishing rod - you have to have a long rod to cast out beyond the breakers. He waded out up past his knees and a breaker came in. It must have been in June or July, you couldn't get it any colder. Anyhow he got dumped. All you could see was his head sticking out of the water. He said, "Take me back!" I said, "Blow me, I'm not taking you back. You went out too far!"



Everybody had to be a good sport. If you gave it you had to take it.



Glen Drayton, Ray Haswell, Evan Stacy, Ray Brett

At the picnics and cabarets we used to dress up as women. The laughter... I used to hear them roaring! Me and my skinny legs - I'd be walking around in bloomers.

Steven Smart and Neil Lightfoot.



I started for three weeks and I was there for nearly 42 years.

I learnt my trade on the job, no Tech involved. No qualification. Just got a kick in the bum if you bunged up the machine.

Well I might have been 17 or 18 when I started at Bonds. The reason I went there was to fill in time while my parents bought a business in Newcastle... I only went there to get three weeks work. It happened to be that the business fell through, so I stayed on in the Bonds' packing room for six months or so. When somebody left I was asked if I wanted a job as an engineer. I started for three weeks, and I was there for nearly 42 years.

That was in Cumberland st, in the original old building. Gordon Lomas was head mechanic then ... Gordon taught me the in's and out's of being a mechanic ... he was there for about 20 years, then I took over as head mechanic and it just went from there. I learnt my trade on the job, no Tech involved. No qualification; just got a kick in the bum if you bunged up the machine!

The machines changed dramatically over the years. They went from low speeds to high speed machines. For an overlocker, probably from 3500 revs a minute... when I left it was getting up to 7500 - 8000 revs a minute. Plus all the motors were modernised, all electronic gear on them... that changed towards the end. And even after I left - I've been gone 17 years - it got really, really much more electronic. I probably wouldn't know what was going on now, it's improved so much.

We didn't have any trouble getting girlfriends. It was paradise, really! I married a girl that started at Bonds. Paul Hailes and Paul Radnidge married girls from Bonds. Gordon married a girl from Bonds. Russell - my son - he married a girl from Bonds, Steven - he eventually married a girl from Bonds. And Ray Lambley married a Bond's girl, too.

My dad told me about a job going in a sewing machine factory. He said, "Go along, it's good money. Five pound a week!"

So that's how I started, working for Marks & Spencers, St Michaels was the brand.

I worked there until I emigrated to Australia in 1969. I got a job straight away at Thorpe and Company, a sewing machine company in Newcastle. I worked there for five years and then I came to Bonds. John Stevenson was the manager at the time - he was an Englishman. And all we did was talk about England! Never talked about what I knew, we just talked about England for about an hour. I started two weeks later. It was the best job I ever had.

It makes be feel bad to think we don't even make undies anymore.

That's what I've done all my life, sewing machines for 37 years. I followed right through from basic domestics to big industrial machines, followed the new technology all the way through over the last 20 years, when everything became computerised. A lot of the sewing machines now are computer controlled.

To lose it all, now... I think to myself, I should've learnt another trade. I never would have thought it would have just gone like that.

# Tariffs & Textile Workers

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In 1986 the Industries Assistance Commission investigated the future of the clothing and textile sector. As a result of the enquiry, in 1988 Australia began to liberalise its trade policies. Among other things, tariffs that had been in place to protect Australian manufacturing were cut, opening our market to imported clothing.

“Before trade barrier liberalisation, garment importing had been governed and constrained by the quota system. But after liberalisation, larger manufacturers ‘hollowed out’ their operations, retaining management, design and logistics functions in Australia whilst shifting their manufacturing activities to low wage countries, principally to China. In effect, they became importers. Australia’s largest clothing manufacturer Pacific Dunlop initially closed down local production (with the loss of some 10,000 jobs) and opened its own factories in China. But these factories were later sold, and Pacific Dunlop became a sourcing wholesaler, Pacific Brands. Before trade liberalisation, Pacific Brands had been Australia’s largest clothing manufacturer.”

In August 1986, Hunter Valley textile workers vigorously demonstrated against IAC recommendations. Within two months, then Prime Minister Bob Hawke visited Cessnock Bonds to assuage fears that jobs would be lost. Hazel Hawke visited the following year.

We went to Maitland to demonstrate about the tariffs. The tariffs were a worry. We knew we couldn't compete with overseas. Everyone was worried about losing their jobs. We went to Maitland and marched with Rutherford and some other factories down there. We had our banners. There was Bonds, it was the biggest, then two at Kurri, one at Weston. You had so many factories with experienced people producing textiles in those days. There was a lot of factories producing for the textile industry. It was a big textiles area here.

In the 20 years between 1985 and 2005, full time employment in the textile, clothing and footwear sector fell 60%. Many of the jobs lost were those held by clothing machinists, most of which were women.



IAC protest march 29/7/86



Bob Hawke visits 1/10/86 ... Hazel Hawke visits 9/6/87





Cessnock Bonds was special. The workers were already a community that knew each other, whether from school or through family connections or simply because it's a small town. Bonds was an extension of their family. They supported each other when things went wrong in their lives. A lot of them were rough diamonds but they'd give you the shirt off their back. And they worked bloody hard.



Trevor Jones

Ron Cowlshaw, Ethel Jackson and myself were responsible for setting up Just In Time at Cessnock. It was 1987. We had to learn how it worked because Cessnock was the first Bonds factory to use JIT. Prior to that the operators worked independently using a method called progressive bundling. With JIT the work came in stacks from the cutting department in Sydney. One garment at a time would get passed down the line. I had to do a lot of statistics on this. Before JIT it used to take 4.7 days from the time a particular consignment of polo shirts arrived in the factory to the time they left to go to the warehouse. After JIT the same quantity of garments would take about half an hour throughput time.

When we started JIT we went back to basics for each operation and came up with a time and then added it together. So the operators knew how long they had to get one garment through the line. Pre-determined time standards were used to identify how much time it would take to complete each process. So we would work out the simplest and the most physically economical way to do each action. You had to take into account each individual motion. That's what we did with the machining as well. You are dealing with huge volumes, so every second counted. We would go out and test our pre-determined times with a stop watch, to see if we missed anything. I'd time the machinists making maybe a dozen garments and I'd formulate according to those observed times, with all the allowances added. Often as not I would record everything that they did as a production study. Some would get pretty jittery, because they felt pressured.

I would be the first to admit that they were under a huge amount of pressure.

I felt I was part of a bigger machine, sure, but I felt that I was contributing something that was making that machine work better and I invested a lot of myself in it. It was challenging, looking for new ways to see how to make the work more efficient and being creative about it. And you could see the results of it. Particularly if you engineered a whole product, got all the teams working on it and moving smoothly. There was a lot of job satisfaction in that.

We felt very hostile when the products started going off shore to Taiping. We felt offended. You put a lot of effort into these garments and then they just disappeared. All the work and skill that was involved, and then it was gone. Pacific Dunlop went in there with a baseball bat. We felt threatened. They demanded that we reduced costs on things otherwise they would go offshore. We could see that if we didn't reduce the costs people would lose their jobs. We wanted to keep Australian made. So we engineered the crap out of the products. It might be as simple as taking half a centimetre off the hem of a chestybond singlet ... that's the sort of things we were doing, pinching little bits from here and there. It evolved into justifying your existence by reducing the costs of things. When I started there were 14 of us in method engineering. By the time I was retrenched there was only 4 of us. After 20 years at Bonds they gave me three days to go.

What more can I do to improve things? That's what we thought would be the saving grace of Bonds in Australia. It was very emotional to see people who had mortgages, women who were the breadwinners, single mums, losing their jobs. What were these people going to do?

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In the end you're just a number. You weren't considered as a person.

That they would write poetry when people were retrenched, that really encapsulates the essence, the feel of what it was like to work in the place. Even though I was a bit of a villain to some of them, because I was the one with the stopwatch.

They've left it to the last  
minute,  
To say you were going.  
It's hard to write poetry,  
While you are sewing.  
On a JIT line it's impossible  
to do,  
But we wanted one last rhyme,  
Just for you.

The grieving process went on for a long time. My whole identity was there. It consumed a lot of the hours of your day and of your life, and you put a lot of your self into it. To see it go, there's a lot of hurt in that. Being the breadwinner I had to find a new identity. Even though I wanted to scream or punch someone, I had to see it as an opportunity to do something different.

In the clothing industry, it is all gone or going. I don't think there are any method's engineers around now. The job doesn't exist anymore. And the mechanics, all those skills are gone too. It would be a very difficult thing to resurrect because you would need to have somebody to know where to start.

When I look at the labels of the products in the stores I secretly hope I will find one with "Made in Australia"



Geoff Forbes



Sisters Sandra Dorrington and Gaile Hartcher

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## JIT lines changed the whole culture of work

The company transferred the responsibility to the girls, it was girl putting pressure on girl. Not everyone worked at the same pace, but you were all thrown in the mix.

Come Christmas we'd go stupid and get up and cut everybody's cotton or we'd put a cotton reel under their peddle so they couldn't sew. It lightened things up. Took that pressure off or you'd crack up.

Every job was timed. Some jobs took longer than others. If you joined a shoulder, you got so many seconds, whereas the girl who did a more complex operation, say the side seam, had a longer time for her job. So once the girl who was joining shoulders had finished a certain amount she had to go up and help the others. And if that person thought, "She's not helping me enough today" - then they would start arguing. Or they'd notice how many times you went to the toilet, or whether you talked to much. The JIT lines changed the whole culture of work.

The JIT lines changed our social lives, too. We went out together as a line, not as a section. It ended up that some lines didn't go out together because people didn't like people any more. You've got your strong personalities, you've got your leaders, you've got your followers, you've got people who like to plod along and you've got your person who really likes to work hard. In a whole section, that was fine but in a JIT line, between five or six people, it could be a dreadful combination. The JIT lines changed our attitude and our good-will, the good feeling, the fun feeling. A whole line shared the bonus which was a terrible thing in my mind. Because if you were having fun you were stopping the line getting a bonus. Once there was more pressure on people, the injuries went through the roof. Girls were sick in the stomach. It's not a good way to work.

I think that when the company's attitude changed, the pride we workers felt about the products wasn't as strong. When the quality wasn't as good, it changed your attitude towards the garment that you were making. In the old days they used to thread the elastic through a tube. Back then the fabric was such high quality that the elastic would fail first. When they changed that, people used to complain when they found out that you worked at Bonds. Like it was your fault that the products changed! Up until then I was a true Cottontail's girl, later I stopped admitting that I made them.

They came up to show us a video of the Bond's set up in China. What they were producing, how they were producing it, how they were working flat out. He just came up to show us what Cessnock was competing against and that we had to get our game up to compete with them. Here we were, with less and less workers on the floor but they still wanted us to produce more!



I saw a Four Corners documentary about factory conditions in China. I don't know if the Australians went over and set them up like that but what I was seeing on TV, it wasn't Bonds! What they were showing us were poor workers living at the factory in dorms as big as our toilet with bed on bed on bed and no space for the people to move. It was horrific. Those poor buggers had to work so hard on hard chairs with no backs. They weren't looking after them, the way we had to be looked after. It was quiet obvious.

Once they got what they wanted, Pacific Brands or Pacific Dunlop or who ever they were by this time, they didn't care what happened to those Chinese workers. They didn't have a conscience about what was happening to them, as long as they got their products out at the right price so they could sell it here at the same price as what it was costing for the Cessnock girls to make.

When Sue Morphet came along I thought it was fantastic. I thought it was great when women got those jobs. And she came up and introduced herself and I thought this is great, we are going to go somewhere with her. I was stunned with the decision. I just thought, oh god, she has really sold out. I was really disappointed in her. And then when I heard on the grape vine that Pac Brands didn't gain a cent by shutting all of us down, I was just so disheartened. In my time, Bond's was injecting three and a half million dollars into the local Cessnock economy, annually.

Out of the factories that I worked at, Bond's reigns. But you know what, I don't want to buy Bonds now. I won't buy it if I can buy something else.



Bonds changed our lives completely. Your direction, your way of thinking, how you perceive things. I hope I'm more tolerant. Mentally, you grow. Even though I had really stressful times, it changed me for the better.



Margaret See

Bonds will never go away. You always think of it. You think of the people.

I worked at Bonds Cessnock for 32 years. I was 15 when I started. It was, "Go to school or go to work." So I went to work. I always remember the first day. It was fascinating. You couldn't go on a machine till you were sixteen, so we had to do all different things, work out the back, cut out fabrics... You didn't think you would ever sew, the machines were scary. I turned 16 the year I started, so it was four months before I went on the machines.

I'm a Bonds worker. We had opportunities where we learnt a lot in the early years, when it was good. We always worked flat out. And the quality had to be spot on. We were proud of what we were doing. A lot of us used more machines than probably anybody will ever see, working in big factories. Some people won't like the Bonds girls coming into a factory. We could probably sew three or four times faster than others ever had to do.

I think we got comfortable where we were working, not thinking it would ever close. And that's why I think we were so shocked. Years ago they were talking about it, but it never happened. You don't listen, you think it will go on forever. But Bonds didn't. And that's what the anger was, it was more fear of the future. Especially with a lot of us oldies who were working out when we were going to retire, how much longer we got. Most of us were good at what we did, so we were comfortable. It wasn't hard work. It was physically hard, but not mentally hard. You just did it. I loved working there, I did. I think most of us did. You wouldn't stay there that long... not thirty two years. I was hoping to get forty, actually; trying to get up to the forty.

If Bonds opened again, I'd go back. I wouldn't think about it, I'd go back. I love what I'm doing now, don't get me wrong. It's a challenge. But I always liked working in the factory. It was something I could do, and I was good at it. At the end I was a utility worker, I could work every machine. I loved it. At the end it got boring, just doing the one thing. When we did fashion, we got on five different machines a day, so the boredom wasn't there. That's what I like, I like a challenge.

When we first walked out that door we were thinking what are we going to do? So we stuck together, and that was good.

Doing the courses helped me to make the move away from Bonds. I was scared - thinking am I going to handle it? But people around you, the ones that were doing the courses, they were the best. There was about a dozen of us, all together. We were all in a group, there for each other. We talked each other through a lot of things. For some things you'd think, "I can't do this!" And then someone would say, "Keep going, keep going!" I left school at 15, I didn't have much education. If it wasn't for the work mates after we left I wouldn't have done it. A few of us wouldn't, we would've quit. I think we were just scared, more than anything. And most of us got jobs out of it.



Maree Thomson

I put the gussets in Cottontails. A few people frown on factory workers. I used to say, "I think I contribute pretty well because I would hate to see the world without the gussets in their knickers." And they just absolutely come undone. It's like everything in the world; everyone is part of a wheel. I don't care what you do, I don't believe that you are better than me because of the job you do. I don't care who you are, I think that we are all equal. And I think everyone in that mill contributed something very important.

I'm a very strong union person and I think it is a necessity. I know a lot of people don't. And I'd say to them, where do you think you got your sickies? Where do you think you got your holiday pay? We had maternity leave long before anyone had maternity leave. I've seen first hand how important the unions have been to the miners- my husband and son work for the mines. There has got to be a line as to what is fair pay for a fair day's work. It's important to care about what is really going on. And it's important to care about workers because we matter.

We had 12 months to try to accept what they had done to us. It was very confronting. We had to adapt emotionally beyond anything anyone could ever imagine. There were young ones there that had just got their home and they got their big mortgage. So you were trying to prop them up. And then there's those whose life was the mill. They come to work, but they come for the company too. It was their life line away from a very hard home life. Everything that happened in the mill was like a family. I absolutely loved it. I loved the people.

I worked until the day I walked out of that factory. There were stacks of fabric pieces sitting in the corner that was just going to be chucked. I went up to the office and I said, "Can we make it all up?" Rather than sitting idle we made up all these men's support briefs and women's Cottontails in all different sizes. We filled something like 30 boxes with underwear that would have just got thrown. The girls that lived in Maitland took them to Maitland retirement villages. I took them around the Cessnock villages. The girls at Kurri took them there.

It took me a long time to come to terms with retrenchment. The hardest thing was that when I was working I felt that I was worthwhile. I felt that I was contributing, I thought that I was doing something that the world needed. When I wasn't doing something substantial with my time I felt like I was just sort of floating around and taking up space. So I'm back to doing something that is needed and is positive. When we left the mill, I bought machinery from work. Now my girlfriends and I sew, we have a day together each week. A couple of the other's are ex-Bonds, too. We do lots of little washers, things they can sell in the Red Cross shops. When my girlfriend lost a breast a few weeks ago, I realised that there was a call for someone to sew cushions to support the drains and so on, where the girls have had their surgery. So I come home and just started to put them together, I call them a breast cancer show bag and we've had great, great feedback from them. My friends and I do nighties for still born babies. When parents have a stillborn, they have time with their baby, to bathe them and dress them in the nightie. We also make a butterfly to be put on the door so the staff know not to disturb the grieving parents. And when my sons friends had a premi baby, we started making little clothes for prems, too.

Because we did  
it as a routine  
thing, you tend  
to forget just  
how much skill  
it requires.



Sister's in-law Leonie and Jenny Smith

They're not thinking of Australia. They are not thinking of my kid. My kid needs a better job than what she has got. She only gets a couple hours a week. What have the kids got? Bonds has shot off to China and places where the labour is cheap. They're not really benefiting those people. They're not paying them the wages that they should be paid.

We did all the Olympics gear and I think there was probably only us and our families knew that we made them. I don't think anyone in Sydney knew that they were made in the Hunter Valley. We were very proud. And when we got the contract for that, it was so nice to think that people were going to put something on that wasn't made in China.

I needed work and I heard that Bonds was a good place to go and put your name down. The next day I got a phone call to come in for an interview. I even took my little three year old son with me. I still got the job so that was good back then. You couldn't do that these days.

I could plan when I was at Bonds; I could plan my holidays, I could plan my weekends. Now I work most weekends, and if I've got a weekend off, they can still call and ask me to come in. When I was at Bonds, I used to ride a push bike and it would take me eight minutes to get home. I knew exactly what time I would get home and exactly what I had to do. But now you just can't plan anymore, you can't. I don't like it.

If we ever saw t-shirts or Grand Slams in a shop, and I had my kids with me I'd say, "Betcha I made that shirt!" And yeah, I was proud that I'd done it. The time that I liked best was doing the Olympic shirts. I was very proud of that. There was a lot of secrecy. You couldn't even tell your family what the colours were, or anything like that. It was good, different.

There was a lot of noise in the factory, but it was comfortable. In the winter it could get pretty cold. When the heaters were working it was unreal. But sometimes they'd run out of oil and you'd just sit there and freeze. You'd leave your jacket on but you couldn't put gloves on because you were using your hands and your toes would be freezing. But that didn't happen often, most of the times the heaters would be working. In summer it gets hot. A couple of days we went home, it got that hot. It was 43, 44 degrees inside. It was terrible. There was one time I felt so faint, I had to go and lie down it was that hot. The coolers weren't working or something. They used to breakdown a lot because they were as old as the factory.





Sister's in-law Carmen Camilleri and Lena Mercieca

We were at Bond's Cessnock for 28 years and 9 months. The factory was always supporting different charities, making and donating raffles, things like that. This town needed support, so we always donated a lot. I think us not being there would be affecting those charities. Towards the end there wasn't as many of us, but over the years there were a lot, so the charities got a big support. We even used to donate some of our pay each week to the Police Boys Club.

The Olympics work kept us going again for another few years. It was all secretive at the time, the colours and all that. Even the scrap materials weren't allowed to go out. Bonds took us all on a bus, down to the Olympics. It was really exciting. I probably wouldn't have gone by myself. It was interesting to go, the atmosphere was very different to when we see it on the television. We all got a volunteer t-shirt, too.

There's not much work around here now. All the girls went different ways. Some of the girls went into house keeping and waitressing. There's a few in aged care. I'm down in Newcastle now, working as a casual at a wet suit factory. It's only a small place I work at. Four of the others are there too- Shona, Jess, Glen the mechanic and Michelle. For Shona - she's deaf - there wasn't much for her. She's lucky she got a job down there too.

It's different sewing all together. Because it's wetsuit material, before we were using flimsy cotton. And the machinery is different. But it's more laidback than at Bonds, it's a very comfortable place to go work. You do the whole wetsuit start to finish, all just top stitch. They have gluers who glue it and then it comes to us and we stitch it. There are only two girls who do our job down there. Very heavy work, because you have the whole garment sitting up top, and wet suits are heavy. At Bonds I could do up to 1,800 units a day, but you were going flat out. It was constant work all day. Now I'm making between 10 and 20, depending on the style of the wetsuit.



Dawn Johns

So what can you do? You  
accept it and you move on



Helen Munday

There was a certain feeling about the factory, it had an energy to it, an energy of its own. I enjoyed the work. It's very satisfying to be able to work at high speed, to make bonus and to reach your production numbers. Bond's was very focused work.

There were three dates set for the retrenchment. First we were to finish in September, but things weren't ready yet. Then we were supposed to finish in November. But we ended up finishing in December. Each of those dates was like a little hump. Dragging it on so long was just horrendous. Week by week, not knowing. We were relieved in the end when we got the date. Those that stayed until the bitter end were all shell-shocked.

I injured myself very soon before the closure. The Safety Officer said, Helen you realize that you can't leave, because of your wrist injury? So technically I'm still with Bonds. Since then I've had two operations and I've got to have another one in September to take the plate out of my arm.

I miss the companionship. You didn't have to be best friends with everyone. You could just say, "Good morning, how are you today?" And you had your own space, your workstation was your own space. So if you didn't want to talk a lot you didn't have to. Afterwards, I don't know if it was depression or loneliness. You wake up and you think I should be some where. It took a few months to adjust, not having that companionship.

The workers never know how a company runs. Not even the unions know how a company is run. I think the decision to close was planned well in advance. I don't think the Company would have told us until six weeks before they closed us down, if it hadn't been leaked to the press. In hindsight, we should have been wary when Kate came on board knowing that she consolidated Berlei and got it to a stage where they could just move it offshore. Our union were great in forcing their hand once they heard, getting us the benefits that we did. People knock unions, but I don't think we would have got anywhere near the amount of retrenchment money and support without them.

Because I had been at Bonds for such a long time, you tend to lose track of what the market demands. And it's a lot more than what you think. It's a very different workplace, and a very different attitude. They are looking for people being flexible and switched on to technology, which a lot of us aren't.

So what can you do? You accept it and you move on, don't you? We all have lives and some have gone on to work elsewhere and some haven't. I just have to bide my time.



Patricia Ohm

It cut to lose your job. And it wasn't the girls fault. It's just that Bond's wanted more profit.

I am from Germany originally. I came out with my mother and my step father when I was 14. My mother worked at Bonds and she loved the place. So I went in one day with my mother. She introduced me to the boss, and he offered me a job then and there. I was 22.

I was the entertainment person. For Christmas I used to sometimes perform our safety exercises dressed up. One year I was Mr. Bunny, then I turned into a Playboy bunny. Another year I dressed up as Santa Claus, and turned in to sexy Mrs. Claus at the end. We had a lot of laughs that way. Another year I appeared in a mini skirt, cropped shirt, earrings, fishnet stockings and high heels. And the makeup and the hair. I did the exercises dressed like a prostitute! I had everybody in stitches.

I stayed dressed like that until after I did the last exercises of the day. When Ron Cowlshaw came along to wish us a merry Christmas he did a double take and he nearly flipped over! That was awesome! Then going home that day, still dressed as a prostitute, getting out of the car and getting whistled at from various places in the neighbourhood and my mother's angry voice, "Get inside Patricia. Now!"

Where are the jobs? Bond's used to be a place that you could go to. Now that its gone, you know, its very hard to find a job. Except for mining, and the mining industry, Cessnock doesn't have much. So it's a very, very sad thing that has happened. You get asked, "Why did we close?" They think that it must have been that the economy was bad. But the economy wasn't that bad because we still made a profit.

You had to have an understanding of the way the machine grabs the fabric, the way the machine releases the fabric and to be able to adjust the elastic so it would sit at the right tension. You can't control it; you have to become one with it. It was a combination of hand-eye-foot coordination as well. You had to understand the machine, you had to almost become part of it. It's all very fluid.

I just did what was easy. It suited my lifestyle. It was close to home, it took me seven minutes to walk around the corner. It fitted with my family. You always had weekends to yourself. It was perfect. It wasn't that I didn't know there were other things out there. But once you knew what you were doing you could go to work and do your quota, you could earn some extra money in bonus if you so chose, go home at the end of the week with a good pay.

Whether through natural attrition or voluntary redundancies, people just weren't replaced when they left. From the day I arrived there was speculation that Bond's was going to close. There was talk when I went there in 1986 because of government tariffs. I think that's why they brought in the JIT-lines, to increase productivity. "If we increase productivity the factory won't close, blah, blah, blah." These were the things they spruiked at us.

I don't want to come home covered in dust anymore. As much as there was a satisfaction fulfilling your quota and getting your bonus, I want work to be more. I didn't really make anybody else's life any easier or harder at the factory. I want work to be about other people rather than helping a company to earn millions of dollars.

Being a member of the union changed my perception of worker's rights. That you didn't just have to be satisfied with being lucky to have a job and as a worker you had the right to work in a safe place. And you were entitled to fair pay, not just be satisfied with whatever your boss deemed. Being union delegate was for the greater good, giving a voice to all the workers. I could be there to stand up for them if that's what they wanted. Somebody who would be prepared to get the answers that they wanted. I thoroughly loved being advocate and speaking up for people and empowering them and mentoring them. And I know that in those 18 months I made a difference to some of those women's lives, because if they'd just been made redundant and told to walk out the door they wouldn't be where they are now.

I get angry because they took it away, but I'm only angry because it's just so much more bloody easy to be there. I spent far too long working there, so it's much harder to walk away. I still think the closure was a blessing in disguise. It made me do what I should have done years ago, as scared as I am to take that next step. I think for a lot of people that's what it was. Especially if you went there not finishing high school or if you followed your mother in, for whatever reason. I suppose some people were there because they liked to sew too.



Donreve Miles



We were big bad  
Cottontail girls

Deborah Thompson

I was there when the strike was on. They tried to cut the times for every bundle. I think I might have only been just turning 16 or so. I'd made friends with the older ladies and they sort of took you under their wing. Cottontail's girls were known as tough - most of them had husbands who were coal miners and they just said, "No you don't do this. If you want to do this we are out on strike." So we all walked out, put tools down and all went out the front. We were standing around and they told us you had to go over the bridge because you can't stand on Bond's property. So we all went over the bridge and we all stood around and we didn't know what was going on. So we sat in each others cars and waited. And I'll never forget one of the girls had "Lady Chatterley's Lover" and she started reading me some. And the others said, "Oh no, we can't read this to you! You're too young." I was pissed off because they wouldn't let me read Lady Chatterley's Lover! So I went home and told Mum.

And they did cut the times, but they had a fight on their hands to do it. they didn't cut them as much as they'd first wanted, it was negotiated down. And I think it was the only time I saw the girls stand up and say, "No, we aren't having that."

I was hopeless at school. I hated every minute of the day that I was at school. I felt it was a waste of time. So Mum took me and I got a job at Bonds. At the time, you either went to Bonds or you went to Woolworths. I was quite proud of myself that I got a job at Bonds, my first job. I started when I was 14 and 9 months.

I was in the Cottontails room. And proud to be a Cottontail girl. Everyone was frightened of us, we were big bad Cottontail girls. If you were in the Cottontail room you had to be fast, you had to be a worker. Anyone who had been in fashion or nightwear, they did everything to get out of going in to Cottontails.

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I did the leg elastics  
on the mini Cottontails.  
I loved that job.  
It was as if I was made to do it,  
it just come natural to me.

You have to use your eyes. You have to use the right pressure with your hands. You have to be thinking and have a lot of common sense. I did the leg elastics on the mini Cottontails. I loved that job. I loved doing it. It was as if I was made to do it, it just come natural to me.

I always worked for the company. There were slow times, there were hard times. We went on four day weeks so they wouldn't lay off girls. And every time our hours were cut you thought that we were going to close. Over the years, there were so many rumours. But the week before we got the announcement I had worked 46 hours with overtime, trying to get our orders out. And a month before the announcement Ron Cowlshaw had come up and said we were going really well. We made a good profit, and the company was very pleased with how we were performing. He said no one was going to lose their jobs.

January 10<sup>th</sup> of 2009, at half past nine in the morning, a dark haired man in a suit came and said, "With regret there will be 1800 jobs lost over the next 12 months." I worked overtime that morning. I had started at six o'clock that very morning. And they've come in and made the statement and it was just shock and I'm just standing there and thinking, What did he say? I was union delegate at the time, and I had no idea what to do. Not a clue. We called Peter at the union, and I said, "Why weren't we warned? What's happened?" And he said, "We just heard too." Being union delegate it took me a while to process because I was worried what was going to happen to everyone else. Their priority went before mine.

The man in black said, "If you have any questions we will be able to answer them this afternoon." And then when the girls came back and asked questions, they had no answers.



Sandra Coyle

I started at Bond's in 1973. I remember my first day- I was 15. I walked in absolutely petrified. They sat me down at the machine and showed me how to thread it up. I sat there half the day threading, and then I started sewing on scrap. It was unbelievable because at that stage there were 400 people working at Bonds. You walked in and it was just a buzz, the whole thing. It was machines going 100 mile an hour. I was in awe of those people. I thought, there's no way I'm gonna do that! But I got there.



Isabel Skafte, Robyn Jackson,  
Tanya Adler, Lynette Wicken

We had the skills to turn a sample into something that was ready for production. Say they drew up a pair of bikinis. If we made them, then they would have to source their own fabric, source the elastic, source their packaging. Whereas if they drew up that bikini and sent it to China, they didn't have to source anything. China sourced it all. We might have made it for \$1.80 and China may have made it for \$2 but admin didn't have to do anything. All they had to do was send a sample over and say, "Can you make this and how much for?"

I first started there in 1969. I started as a machinist. Then when I came back after my son was born I was a packer. Once I became manager I had a lot to do with the management. They disappointed me in the end. I feel they let themselves down, too. They gave me a whole new perspective on big business and money. That's why they went to China. They didn't want to have to deal with people. They didn't want to have to deal with injuries, with superannuation, they didn't want to deal with people's stories.

When Bond's owned Bond's, people who were the leaders, the bosses, they knew the business upside down. They knew the business from growing the cotton to spinning the cotton to knitting the cotton to dyeing it, cutting it out... The people that are running the business now are people that went to university and got a business degree. It's a whole different thing. They never included the practical people in the decision making. Not until the end. And we were getting it right. That was the really sad part. We knew exactly what we should produce every day, we knew exactly what we needed to put on the truck each day to make the money. To meet the budget. To the last box. At the end of it all, we were the most profitable Bonds because we got it. And that was the tragedy.

Can you make this and how much for?



You needed to see how our girls worked. You couldn't believe it. None of their husbands could've done it. They'd give them heaps all the time but no man could have done what those women did. They sat and they did the same thing, all day, all day, all day. Even in 40 degree heat. They sat and they did not stop. They would whinge, and they would have an iceblock and they'd put a wet rag around their necks. They could make a t-shirt in a minute. All the trimming, the right size, the quality, everything right and ready to be sold, in a bag and in a box in one minute. I think half the people in Sydney used to think they just came in bags! It's like they don't know that eggs come out of chooks bums, they just come in cartons. I take my hat off to those girls.



There were a lot of union issues about the machinery going overseas initially, so they weren't going to be seen to be doing that. Some was sold in Australia. But I believe the machinery has gone. That's only heresay... but it doesn't take much common sense to work out that's where it was going to go.



The first time I went onto a Chinese factory floor I expected to see a hive of worker bees. But they were all drained. If they ran out of cotton, or buttons, they would put their heads down on their arms and went to sleep until somebody would come along. They did not have the drive. The only thing that China has over us is the cost of their labour and the amount of it. So something that we were sewing in under a minute, they could sew in four or five minutes for the same cost. They couldn't sew like our girls could! The Chinese people that came over here were stunned and amazed. Mr Lee was just flabbergasted. He said, "What are you coming to me for?"

I could walk into a mill over there and you'd look around and there would be no machinists. You might have had a couple of supervisors, trainers, people like that. They would wait until the work was there and was guaranteed and then they could get 250 girls at the snap of their fingers, like that! It was unbelievable. Some of the people would apologise to you. When they found out that we had lost our jobs for them to have jobs, the ordinary Chinese people were upset by that.



I take my hat off to those girls.

They had gone to China, but they didn't take into account air-freighting; they didn't take into account the fact that they can't turn around a style twice in one season if it's a sell out in Australia. When they brought out "Hoodies" they could have sold four times as many. But they didn't gauge the market right. China can't turn it around whereas we can turn it around. On only three Cottontail lines, our girls were sewing 12,000- 15,000 Cottontails a day. They could come in on a truck one morning and go out on a truck to a shop the next day - 15,000, just in ladies Cottontails. That's the beauty of making garments here.





I was sitting in the empty factory imagining all those spaces filled with people, picturing the sea of faces that had worked there. All transitory. All that effort, all that skill was just gone, lost to this immediate community as well as this country. All those things that had been going on for decades. It's a huge loss to society.

Donreve and I, we were the last ones to close the doors. That was hard. You know, the vastness of the place, the echoing. It was absolutely, unbelievably sad. Eerie, you know, its never, ever been this empty before.

My sister was a trainer there.  
My auntie was a supervisor there.  
My mum worked there. My two sisters  
worked there. My other auntie worked  
there. Her two daughters worked there  
for a while. I probably had about five  
cousins who worked there. At one stage,  
my husband's three sisters worked  
there. My two nephews worked there.  
And then my grandson actually got  
employed by them to help us close the  
factory down.

