

# Alex Gill works his potter's magic in Bendigo

After 50 years at the wheel, there are few who can match his prowess, and few as fast, either

By HEATHER WABY

It is fortunate for the pottery business that Alex Gill could not get a motor mechanic's apprenticeship in the Depression-ridden days of 1935.

For it was that same year his older brother, Frank, was asked by his boss at the Bendigo Pottery works if there were any more like him at home, and 13-year-old Alex started what has become a lifelong career with the company.

Today, 50 years on and a year before retirement, Alex is Bendigo's master potter and his skill at the wheel, turning out wine barrels at three-and-a-half-minute intervals, astounds all who watch him.

Alex is a major attraction for tourists, who have been visiting seven days a week since the factory opened its doors to the public in 1971. Last year close to half a million people passed through the factory, situated on the outskirts of Bendigo, 150km from Melbourne.

Alex seems oblivious to the people sitting on tiered wooden seats adjacent to his work area.

He wets his hands in a bowl of warm water, puts a ball of clay on the machine and sets to work. Quickly he opens the clay out, raises it up, and with the thickness controlled by finger pressure, the shape of the wine barrel appears. After a few more rotations of the wheel, the iron oxide, which gives the barrel its bands of colour is applied. Taking a taut wire Alex then cuts the barrel from the wheel and carefully puts it on a rack.

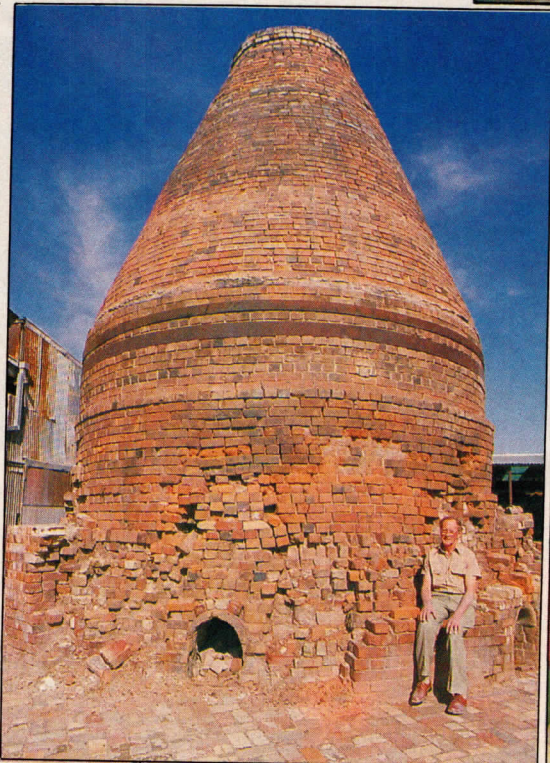
The wine barrel is of his own design, developed in 1968, and according to David McCann, a director of the company, its production will cease when Alex retires.

"We think that would be a fitting tribute," he said.

While Alex obviously enjoys being the centre of attention ("I didn't like people watching me at first"), he said the job had not been easy.

"Since the first day, when I was given a wheelbarrow and told to bring the agricultural pots from the kiln, I have had to work hard," he said.

"While I was unloading the pots one at a



time, the boss, who was watching me from a window, rushed out of the door and said, 'Good God, man, that's not the way to unload . . . two at a time, two at a time'. I was only a slight lad — I'm not much bigger now and the pots were reasonably heavy. But I did what I was told because I didn't want to lose my job on my first day. There were no jobs around."

Alex's weekly pay packet of 15 shillings, coupled with brother Frank's, went towards supporting the family. "Dad was sick. He had been a miner all his life and had the miner's complaint, dust on the lungs. He couldn't work. There was my sister, Alice, and my mother, who used to take in washing to help with finances."

When a position for an apprenticeship on the wheel came up six months after joining the pottery company, young Alex jumped at the chance. "I was trained by Tom Mathews, who was the best thrower in the place," said the master, who now has five apprentices himself to train.

Alex showed definite promise as a potter. He honed his skills so finely that today he makes a sugar bowl and a perfectly fitted lid almost with his eyes closed.

However, in Bendigo Pottery's history (it was established in 1858) there have been some difficult times.

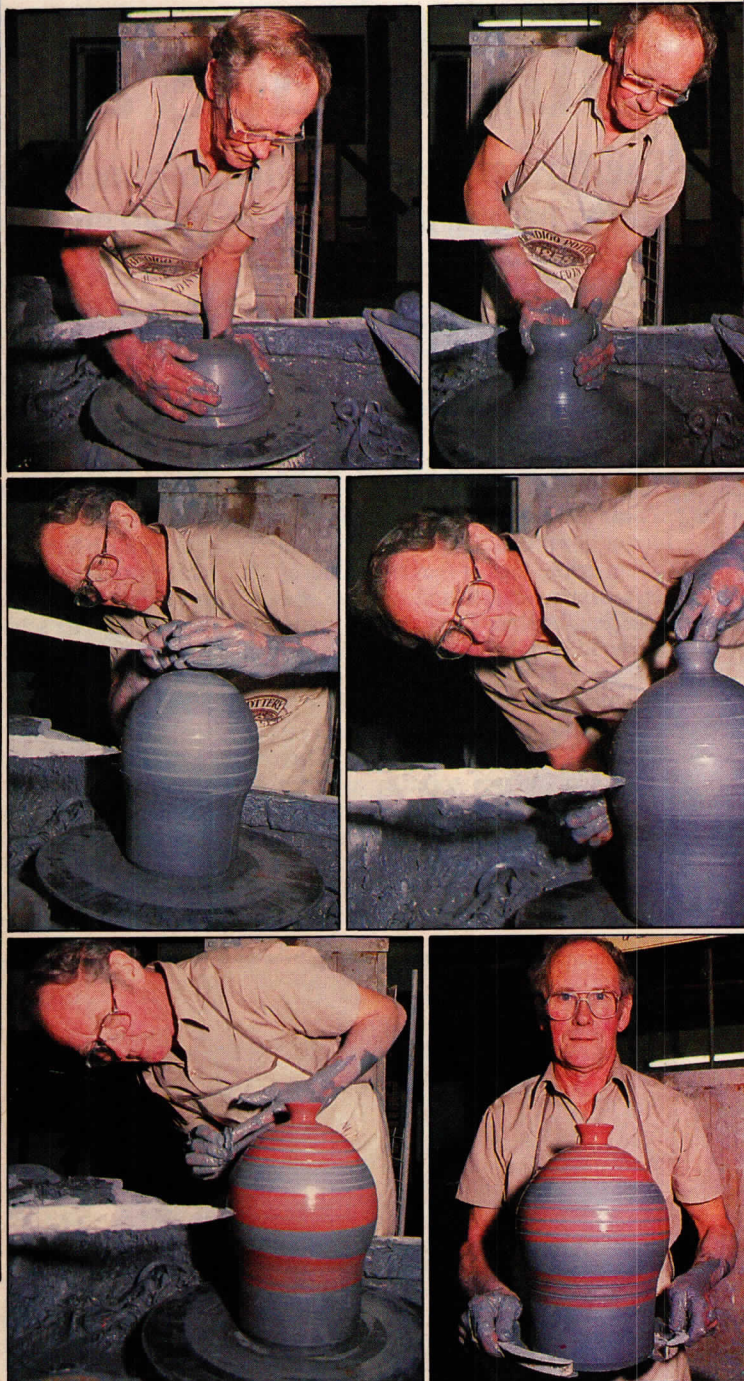
In the late 40s, domestic pottery ceased production altogether. Then the only output was roofing tiles and pipes. And when that ceased in 1968 the future of the factory was in doubt. Frank Gill, believing the writing was on the wall, left. But Alex was persuaded to stay on.

"Vic Lane, the works manager, begged me to stay. He said, 'Alex, don't leave me or they'll close the place.'"

Sixteen others and Alex, who was the only skilled potter, started working on developing the Epsomware wine barrels, crocks, canisters, sugar bowls and other household items, renowned worldwide.

"It is unique because it is a salt-glaze stoneware. We glaze it, using the same





**Alex with some examples of his work. Right: The various stages in making a wine barrel, which takes him less than four minutes. Left: The kiln at Bendigo Pottery.**

PICTURES: GIANNI MARZELLA

method that we used for glazing sewerage pipes," he explained.

For 18 months Alex worked alone at the wheel, developing the first range of designs, before training other throwers. The dedication of that small band of men paid off. In 1975, the dark brown Epsomware was awarded the Good Design Label by the Industrial Design Council of Australia.

Heritage is the other main ware being produced today. But apart from the jugs, all pieces in this range are made with modern machines.

At one time Alex worked 48 hours a week, starting at 7.30 am after cycling about seven kilometres along a dirt road ("In the winter we ended up pushing our bikes") and finishing at 5 pm. On Saturdays he worked four hours in the morning and thought nothing of taking on another

eight-hour shift to make some extra money.

"It was a cold job in the winter months. We had no hot water system, so we heated a bar in the fire and stood it in the water pot so our hands wouldn't freeze when we wet them to mould the clay."

Today Alex throws 63 wine barrels a day. Each barrel is moulded from three kilograms of clay, the basis of which comes from Axedale, 17km away.

"And some comes from a place called Potter's Flat which was where George Duncan Guthrie, the founder of the company, first discovered the clay deposits. He went looking for gold and found clay."

Over the years Alex has had offers to move away from Bendigo and join other pottery businesses. But he turned them all down. "I love this town. My family is here and when I retire — my wife says I have to

so I'll have more time for her and the family — I'll probably spend most of it gardening. That's what I love next to this work."

Alex met his wife, Laura, whose brother worked at the factory, at a church social. They have four children and eight grandchildren.

Over the years Alex has seen the company and the employees go through good times and bad, but he has never minded hard work. "We never had the dole and you were never paid if you were off sick. Also when the factory closed down for a fortnight at Christmas and Easter you were only paid for a couple of days."

As another tour was about to be ushered in, Alex selected the clay to demonstrate a talent that comes so easily to him, saying, "I must have been destined to do something with my hands." **D**