



# Open all hours...

*An owner built renovation to commercial premises, using recycled materials and thinking outside the square*

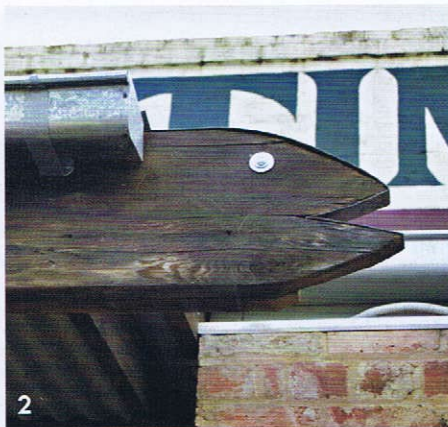
— BY ROB HADDEN —

In an age when nearly every small hardware store is a scaled down version of a supermarket, Tonks Bros. manager, Jason Mills, spiritedly defends the comforting old fashioned setting which has so long been a part of the local community. Behind the Dickensian facade though, this is a very modern business and as such it has been upgraded to represent this fact. What follows is an account of how this was achieved by building with recycled materials and lots of creative endeavour.

Owner builders in the region of Central Victoria, and in particular Castlemaine, have been dealing with



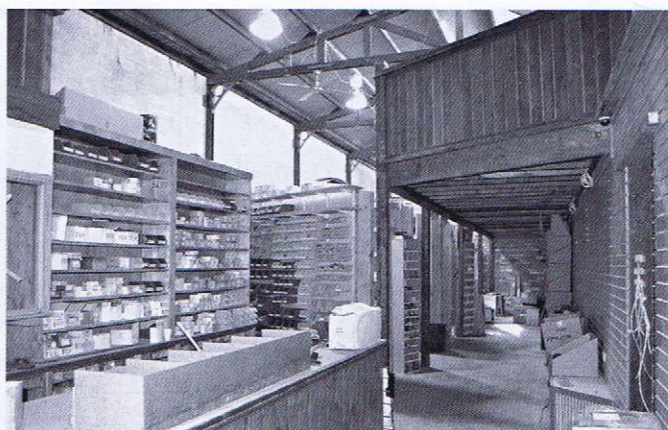
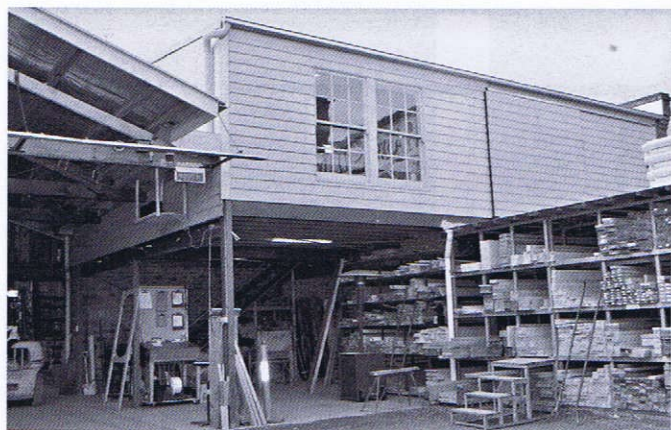




1. One of several old handpainted signs retained in the shop.
- 2.-3. Decorative 'fish' form barge board ends.
4. Recycled copper sheet finds a new home.
5. Bricks were salvaged and reused - some on edge to decoratively show the frog.
6. Thoroughly modern plumbing section retains the building's historic character.
7. Looking down to the main counter area with its much loved wooden storage boxes.
- 8.-9. Recycled timber and panels form some of the massive doors between sections.
10. Ancient post from Station Pier still has its inscribed 1869 date.







the infamous Tonks Bros. store for many years now, and have been beating a path to their doors for building supplies. Even Major Mitchell, having passed through this exact spot in 1836, is reputedly still waiting to be served! It is common folklore that one should come prepared with a cut lunch and thermos, as the store is so popular.

This is no ordinary hardware emporium, my friends. This store is an institution presided over by the affable raconteur, Jason Mills; a larger than life character who dispenses wit, wisdom and good humoured banter, along with a brown paper bag full of nails. This must be the only store where, if you find your object of desire to be out of stock, after an informal chat with Jason you can still leave with a smile on your face.

### Humble beginnings

Tonks had its beginnings as a haberdashery business in 1858, when two small rooms backed by a laneway were all that existed, created by a young Welsh lady and her husband, who unfortunately died on the goldfields. She later took the children back to Wales, probably circa 1865, and sold the business to the McBeans' who set about creating the present hardware store. The original two rooms were extended and added on to, creating the basic layout that still exists today. Being entrepreneurial, they also had a brick kiln; these bricks were sent all over Australia as well as being used to create some of Castlemaine's finest buildings and domestic dwellings.

By 1895, McBean was keen to concentrate on building alone and sold the business to the Tonks brothers, who promptly added the ornate verandah

*Clockwise from above L: The yardies domain with the new 'Annie's Room' area above; massive ancient timbers in new and refurbished structures are used throughout.*

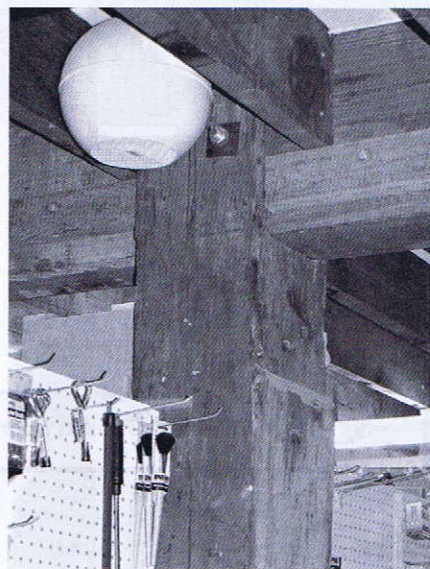
and tarted the premises up somewhat. This refurbishment was to last for some 100 years, during which time the accumulation of detritus and dust was to continue unabated, adding to the rich patina and charm along with a gentle air of graceful dilapidation.

In 1963, Doug Mills and John Mills bought the business and kept things running along as they always had till 1989, when Jason and Alan Mills bought out John. Together, they have been at the helm ever since.

### Tarting up

The first hint that the old girl was ready to get tarted up again was when the front verandah was restored and the cast iron lace work replaced. Geoff Hocking (a local graphic artist of note and author of many historical books on Castlemaine) took one look at the signage to be used and offered his services to get the lettering right. The Tonks Bros. name was emblazoned across the front and the logo will always reflect that the original Tonks Bros. owned it.

By now, 100 years of benign neglect, leaking gutters and roofs (which always deposited a goodly amount of water into one of the plastic bins of washers and flooded out the glazing room), rampaging voracious termites, rising damp, and daylight that was visible through the north brick wall were all cause for some minor concern. Indeed, the 'bouncing floor' leading into the accounts office turned out not to be due to rotten bearers, but the fact that



there were none – the floor was sitting on a termites nest nearly a metre across. These little buggers would have soon been eating into the profits as well unless something was done to halt their inevitable march through the building; and fairly smartly at that.

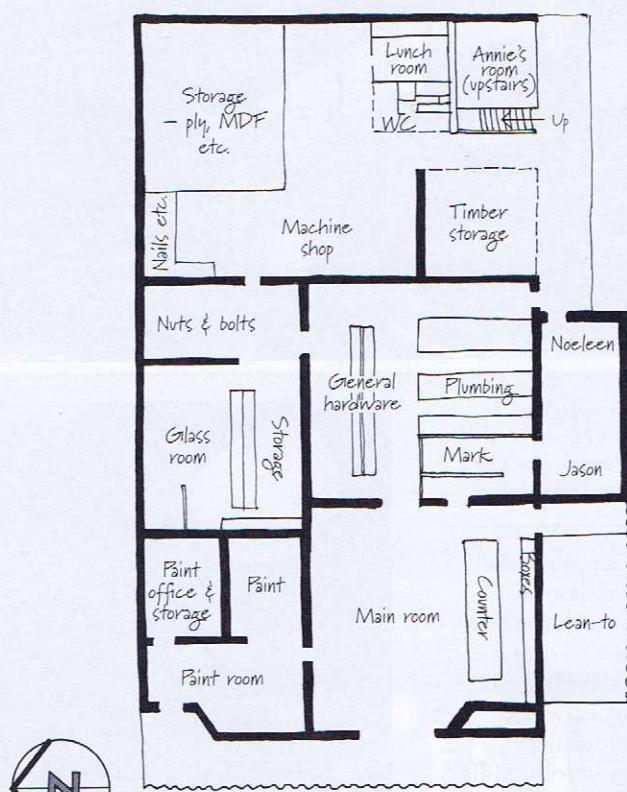
Boldly springing into action (OK, OK, shuffling along) Jason decided to completely revamp the whole building from one end to the other – no mean feat and something that was guaranteed to put the accountant's teeth on edge for some years.

Jason had a vision of how he wanted the place to look and paramount to this was the desire to retain the antique 'feel' of the building and its contents. The old battered counter, the wall of hand-made wooden boxes, the old original Baltic floorboards; in fact, everything that was as far removed from a modern conventional chain store as possible.

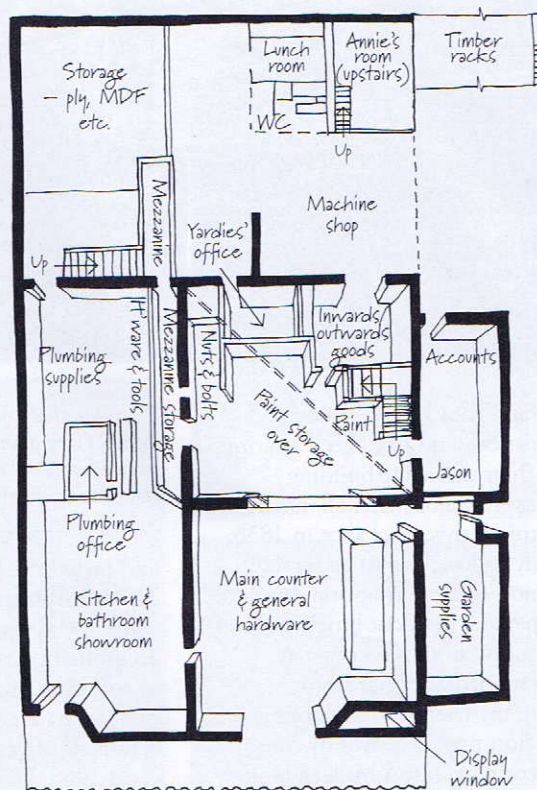
Sometimes fate just plays into your hand and in this instance it arrived



Not to scale



Ground floor - before



Ground floor - after

through the front doors in the form of Matt Boyle - rebuilder extraordinaire whose reputation had been growing and had reached Jason's ears. Jason (who is not backward in coming forward) saw someone on his wavelength AND who had the confidence to accomplish this daunting task. Matt, at this stage, was not yet a registered builder and so Jason by default became the owner builder who would oversee all the construction.

A grand scheme was soon hatched, and a rudimentary set of plans drawn up and presented to council. This plan was much like those of many owner builders - put aside and then constantly altered, adjusted and re-jigged as it went along. It had a life of its own. Ideas could change at the drop of a hat (and did) and many an 'informal discussion' took place between senior staff members over these changes.

The plan of attack was to divide the main building down the east-west axis and work on one section at a time, allowing business to continue as normal (!?) in the other. Two years of constant disruption was about to begin... 'Ladies and gentlemen, hold on to your

hats because demolition is about to commence.'

That this project would happen, there could be no doubt. Jason has a way of making things happen - people have joked about his walking on water and sitting on a throne dispensing wisdom to all and sundry who pass by. I laughed at this notion till one day I realised that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all worked here as well! And now he has put St. Stephen to work in inward/outward goods. Might yet get to see water turned into turpentine!

Gather round now as I take you on a guided tour of this very fine establishment to see the results of two years reconstruction work.

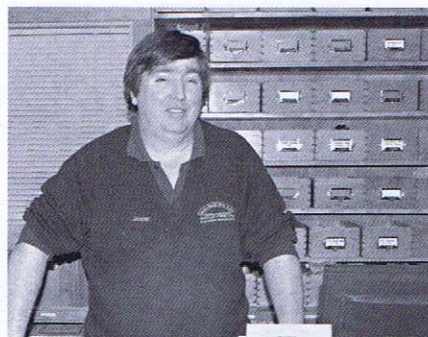
## Timber!

We will start out in the timber yard, which underwent refurbishment before the main building. Matt Boyle didn't do the work here but, nonetheless, it sets the scene for later action. This area is the domain of the 'Yardies' - Alan, Larry, Ian, John and Roger - with back up from James and Matt, two part-time schoolies.

This bunch of miscreants spends all day playing with piles of cellulose and keeping warm by the fire in winter. These guys had their entire machinery shop moved from the north side to a new concrete floor on the south. Here they can enjoy the benefits of a ripping southerly from Ballarat as they serve the hordes during the day. Hence, keeping warm by the fire (Rule #1).

The upstairs storage area was formerly an enclosed room with old sash windows and a magnificent set of old stairs with a decided list to the west, so much so that at any minute they might suddenly wander off. This all went and was replaced with a replica in steel, but clad in weatherboards to mimic the old one. This room has always been known as 'Annie's Room,' and there is no truth in the rumour that there were screams and bumps down the stairs accompanied by frigid air as the wrecking ball fell; nobody can recall where the name came from but it has stuck. This room has also now been reinstated as a carpentry room as it was originally. Still feels a might chilly in there sometimes tho...





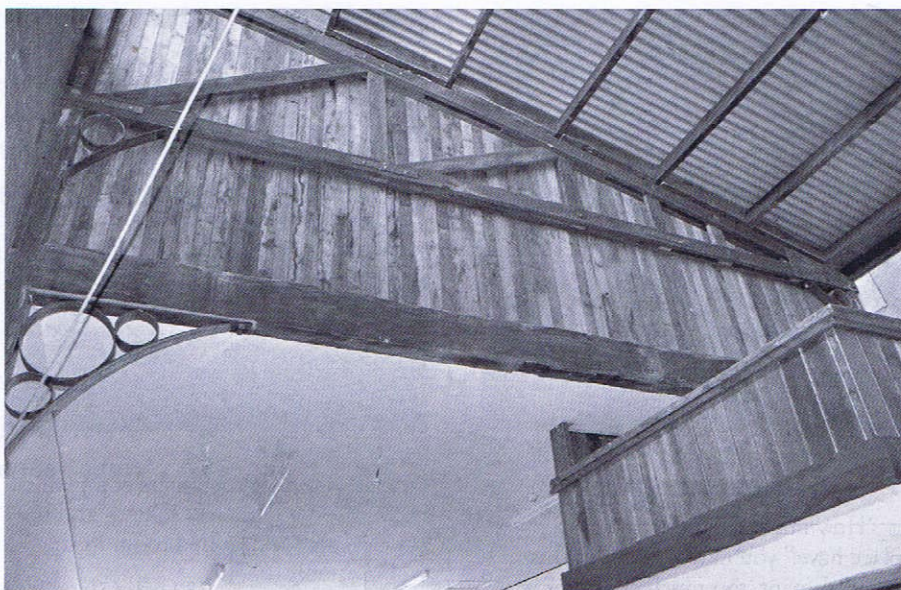
## Pipes and more

Now folk, if you will follow me out onto the sidewalk and we will enter into the new plumbing section with its state of the art showroom and totally revamped plumbing set up. If we sidle up to the counter we will find Mark and Rod, our resident water experts, just waiting with bated breath for your plumbing questions... 'I've got this bit of pipe here see, and I wanna try and join it to this thingy here - how do I do it?'

The plumbing section saw the complete demolition of the old paint room and machine shop to create one giant cavernous room complete with show room, mezzanine floor, storage shelving and office space. All the timber here is recycled, including the roof trusses which were hand made to look industrial but old. As is usual with Matt's work, the attention to detail is what counts. His understanding of what makes something look REALLY old is what sets him apart from the rest. Even the plumbing counter was recycled from a coffee shop down the road. Pity it doesn't still dispense a great espresso. You will also notice that most of the displays are mounted on recycled boards as well, helping to lend an aged air to the room.

At the end of the room you will also notice a huge recycled door set into a wall of bricks that were themselves recycled from the original building. Alluding to a sense of aesthetics, they put in a row of bricks on edge to reveal the diamond shaped frog on the base - a nice touch that relieves the pragmatic approach. No need to set the muse to flight just because this is a hardware store.

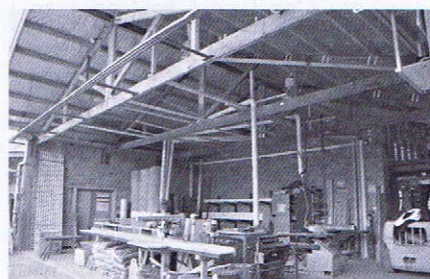
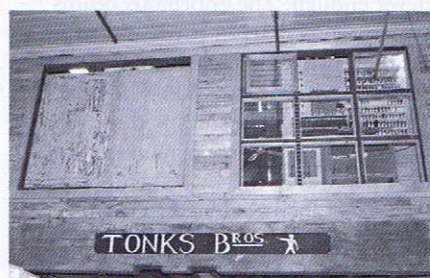
Next we go through here into... 'excuse me - you, up the back there, get your hand out of that jar of chocolates on the counter, they're mine!' (Rule #2.) ...er, where was I? Ah yes, into the main store area now and this is a visual delight.



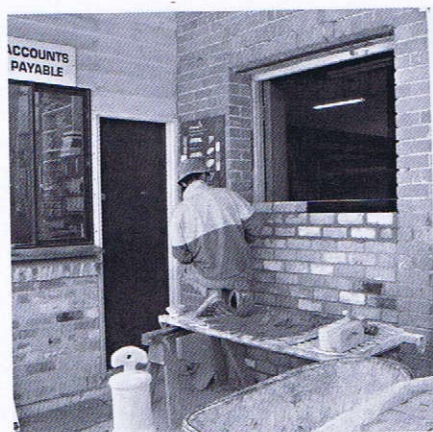
*Clockwise from above L: Jason Mills, owner and owner builder; some of Matt's trademark handiwork in recycled timber and metal; massive old beams were used in the front counter room; new roof for the machine area; recycled bricks and trim; previously restored front verandah paintwork and signage.*

Notice the main post holding up the paint storage area above our heads. I'm sure that you will be suitably impressed by its handsome size of 300 x 300mm and hand broadaxed finish. Look closely and you will see the axe marks still there on this former bridge timber from Muckleford. Cast your eyes due west and go out into the main original and least altered room - this is the nerve centre presided over by Jason and assisted by his band of merry argonauts, St.Luke, St.John, St.Peter, St.Stephen and occasionally myself, in casual capacity, and the argonettes, Bec and Cassie. Steve has the most important job in the store; he protects the cache of chocolate in his little bolthole.

The bank of small wooden boxes behind the antique counter give this room much character and are a feature universally loved by all, except for the staff who have to learn by practice what is in them when experience is not on their side. The original floorboards were lifted and recycled as wall cladding throughout the store. In their place are the very floorboards used in the locally made film 'Romulus my Father'. The charming asceticism of bare polished boards and minimal decoration show that the less sybaritic approach is a sign of different thinking at work here.





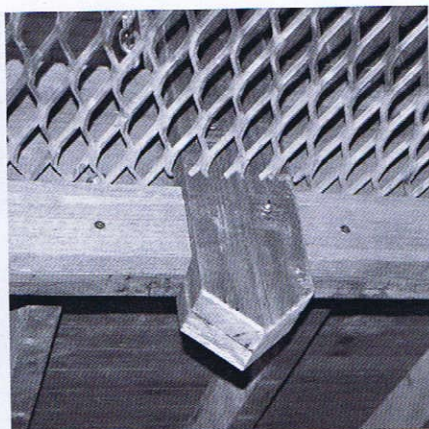


## Character galore

'How much character can a place have?' you may ask, but in this establishment, too much character is never enough. The enormous beams and uprights that cut the main counter room in two are recycled from the Station Pier at Docklands. The date of 1869 is still to be seen carved into the side of one of them; time has not dulled the crispness of carving. The upstairs floor is reached by way of the stairs. As you go up (past the accounts office, home to Noleen), you ascend the hand made stairs (pride and joy of Dean Nendick who constructed them) to the converted loft. Originally it had kingpost Oregon trusses and two were cut down into sling braces to give head height and storage space. An elegant solution to the problem of headroom and space. Two little doors opening out into the main room from upstairs had a former life as toilet doors from the MCG.

Front counter staff had to put up with horrendous levels of noise while the floor next door was ripped up, separated by only a sheet of black poly while bobcats and jackhammers were going sixteen to the dozen and most of us were suffering the flu as well. It was a strange time and made even more bizarre by the very good sales figures while all this was going on! Presumably people came to have a good look and then purchased goods at the same time.

I'm sure that by now you are all suitably impressed but more awaits – the new garden section has been built where the old lean-to verandah was simply waiting to fall down. This has been built using nearly all the remaining salvaged bricks and old timber to create the perfect add on. This complements the added on accounts section where



Noleen handles customers complaints, accounts, tall tales, bad jokes – and has the best air conditioned room in the whole establishment.

Back outside where we started, you have a look at the bargeboard on the garden room. Something fishy going on, eh? Quirky isn't quite the word for it but unique definitely is. One end has a fish tail and the other end is the head of a fish complete with an eye. Most people don't even look to see it, but those discerning few who do, most certainly have a sly chuckle at the crazy builder's expense.

Matt's eye for detail combined with Jason's vision have meant that the whole building was not compromised. Where else can you buy nails and screws by the old fashioned handful and have your architectural senses stimulated at the same time? The easy option would have been to shift shop, but the decision to stay and refurbish has meant that the building lives on and has been brought up to date with one foot still firmly planted in the past. Oh yeah – the dust is slowly coming back again as well. Some things will just never change. ■



### • Tonks Bros.

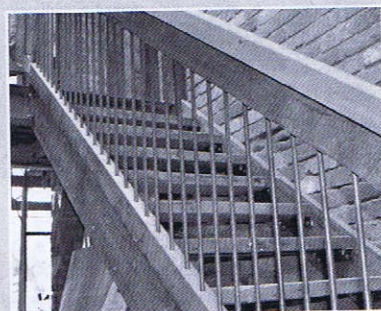
Nails, screws, nuts and bolts sold by weight – not prepackaged. Specialising in plumbing, hardware, tools, paint, glass, timber etc. 03 5470 5100, [www.tonksbrothers.com.au](http://www.tonksbrothers.com.au)

### • Pumphouse Design & Building Works

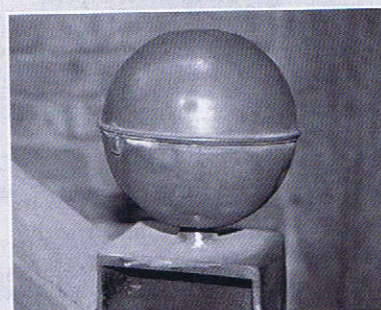
Sustainable construction using reclaimed materials and earth building techniques, offering a unique alternative to modern home building styles. 03 5473 4325, [www.pumphousedesign.com.au](http://www.pumphousedesign.com.au)

## Stairs the Tonks way

Some simple but really effective ideas have been used on several of the new Tonks stairs.



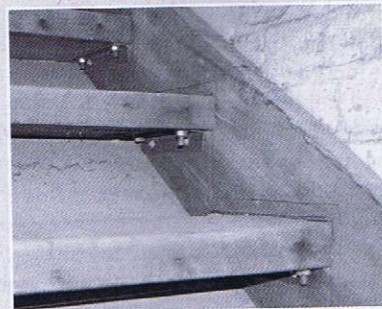
Steel rods make very robust and attractive balustrading – most fitting for a hardware store! Recycled hardwood has been used for railing.



Recycling lateral thinking – novel use for an old copper float as a decorative finish to the top of a newel post.



Handcrafted steel brackets support the oiled timber rails (from recycled beams).



Metal plates with bolt fastening make a simple attachment for treads.