

ROBERT LAW AWARD IS NEW

Since our centennial year in 1998, the Master Builders Association has presented the Robert Law Award to an individual or organisation that has made a significant contribution to the building and construction industry in Western Australia. Master Builders director Michael McLean reports on this year's recipient.

NAMED after Master Builders' first president in 1898, the Robert Law Award is determined by Master Builders' Board of Management after assessing the credentials of a variety of worthy candidates from across all spectrums of the building industry.

This year's recipient was born in Perth on August 25, 1914 and left school at age 14 to work as a carpenter with his father who was a builder.

After World War II, Charles Richard (Ric) New soon became aware of a severe shortage of building supplies, especially bricks. Being an innovative person, young Ric experimented in his wife's oven with balls of clay he collected from the Darling Range.

With only 200 pounds which he borrowed from his mother in 1946, Ric decided to establish a brickworks in Middle Swan.

Ric and his brother Gerry designed and built their first kiln with second-hand bricks. The brothers made their own machinery using mainly war-surplus materials and equipment. The gearbox of a Sherman tank was modified to become the brickwork's first auger, and three Bren Gun carriers were converted into the state's first commercial forklifts, which zipped around the brickworks at a hair-raising 40 miles an hour.

Ric often roamed the local area looking for suitable clay deposits. Once, in the early years when they were short of money, the brothers sold the office typewriter to pay wages. In 1953 they established Midland Brick Co Pty Ltd. On a trip to the USA in 1963, Ric persuaded a kiln manufacturer to sell him the plans for a new and more efficient tunnel kiln, which Midland Brick then built. Within 10 years they had five in operation.

As the managing director of the company, Ric led a successful campaign to make Perth the double-brick capital of the world. Mechanisation and a stream of innovations reduced production costs. When the Dongara to Perth gas line opened in 1971, Midland Brick became the state's first customer for natural gas, converting its oil-burning kilns to this much cleaner and cheaper fuel.

In 1972 Midland Brick introduced its first purpose-made clay paver and the New brothers formed the Midland Contracting Company to train and develop a new skilled workforce. The first contract for the company's paving team was the Perth Concert Hall. These pavers still remain in place today, which is testimony to the quality of the product and the skills of those early paviours. In the same year, the company began its long-standing

relationship with Telethon, donating bricks to the first Channel 7 Telethon Home.

By the end of the 1970s Midland Brick was making 83 types of bricks, including the unique Fastwall – another of Ric's early innovations. Ric was also one of the early believers in the power of television and became the driving force behind the long-running and well-remembered 'Knock-Knock' campaign.

Midland Brick continued to grow throughout the 1980s and, with the acquisition of Whitemans Brick from the Bond Corporation in 1985, became the world's largest brickworks on one site, an achievement recognised by Guinness World Records. Also, in the early 1980s Midland Brick started a major export drive to Japan and Asia, and closer to home major paving projects were undertaken, including the supply of 25,000sqm for the refurbishment of Hay Street Mall and a massive 42,000sqm for the Albany Highway upgrade.

By 1989 Midland Brick employed 850 people and produced nearly a million bricks a day, supplying about 80 per cent of the Western Australian market and exporting a proportion interstate and overseas. With sales of \$100 million annually, it was reputedly the world's biggest brickyard.

Although Mr New was opposed to militant unions, he was generous, paying long-standing employees quarterly bonuses even when the company was short of cash. To alleviate a labour shortage, he advocated recruitment of bricklayers from England and Europe and in 1973 he introduced a shorter, more intensive training program for bricklaying apprentices. Known affectionately as the 'quickie brickie' scheme, it was effective in fast-tracking young trainee bricklayers into the bricklaying trade to learn the balance of their skills on the job.

Ric was renowned for his unwavering support of freedom of association and enjoyed the intrigue and drama of politics. Shy of public appearances but direct in speech, he fiercely pursued his business goals through entrepreneurial flair.

Following his death in June 1989, Boral purchased Midland Brick from the New family in late 1990.

Over the years, Midland Brick has produced well over 10 billion bricks – enough bricks to go to the moon and back three times; a far cry from those early days of one kiln built from second-hand bricks.

Ric New, the founder of Midland Brick, is a worthy recipient of the Robert Law Award, as he and the company have made a significant contribution to the building industry in this great state.