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Far left, top Stephen Arnott with fresh loaves of dough ready for the oven. **Far left, bottom** The attractively presented range of breads in the refurbished shop.

Heartfelt Heritage

A descendent of certain bakers of note, Stephen Arnott is giving the craft his own interpretation in the Hunter Valley.

WORDS BY ALI GRIPPER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW LEHMANN

Stephen Arnott has the unique distinction of being a baker with his own personal cheer squad. As he loads his oven with tins of rye bread or baguettes, the locals often pop in with encouraging words.

"Good on you, dear" or "Keep it up, laddie," they'll tell him. Sometimes they'll ask, "Is the young Arnott here?" or remark, "It's so good to see an Arnott baking again."

Stephen, in case you haven't already guessed, is the great, great grandson of William Arnott, the founder of the iconic Arnott's biscuit company.

"I think people have these nostalgic memories about going to the Arnott's biscuit factory when they were young," he says. "They recall growing up during the war, or the Depression, and going down to the factory and coming home with their pillowslips full of crushed-up biscuits.

"It was an era when you couldn't really afford luxury items. They'd crush up Arrowroot biscuits with hot milk to make a kind of milk purée for babies, and have cute baby companions, that kind of thing."

Despite being born into such a famous dynasty, Stephen resisted the call of baking until he was 42, when he and his wife Allison

began to consider the alternatives to living in inner-city Sydney.

Stephen was a printer, and Allison a food technologist, yet as if by some kind of gravitational pull, they took a short break one weekend to Morpeth, near the Hunter Valley of New South Wales, vaguely aware Stephen's ancestors had once lived there.

That day, they heard that the original Arnott's bakery, which had once been the headquarters for David Arnott, and most likely his brother William Arnott, was on the market.

Walking inside, says Stephen, "made my hair stand on end". Out the back was the original wood-fired stove used by the Arnotts in the 1860s, making it the oldest industrial oven in New South Wales. Even the shelves, which had once been loaded with tins of ships biscuits* during the two world wars, were still in place, although badly dilapidated.

The clincher was walking over the stone floor, polished smooth by the former inhabitants' millions of footsteps carrying trays of biscuits from the oven to the shop in the main street of Morpeth, which was once a bustling industrial port.

"We knew Mrs Arnott used to sweep this floor," says Stephen. "The



Far left A new generation of Arnotts — Allison and Stephen with their children Alice, left, and Mackenzie.

sense of history was amazing. There was a feeling that you're not alone."

Two years later, Stephen and Allison were walking over that polished floor themselves, having bought the place and moved to Morpeth with their then one-year-old daughter Alice, and another baby on the way (their son, Mackenzie).

They immediately felt at home in the heritage-listed town, with its wide quiet streets, its willow trees hanging beseechingly over the Hunter River, and its weatherboard cottages with front gardens loaded with old-fashioned roses.

As Stephen organised his first big bake, though, his emotions were spinning as much as his electric dough kneader.

"My mother and grandmother were always baking, they always had fruit soaking in a bowl somewhere in the kitchen, and I'd baked at home myself, but this was different. Our family had baked for 147 years, so I had this expectation that it had to work straight away. The benchmark was really high."

He peered anxiously inside the oven as the loaves rose above the tins. "I really expected disaster, but it turned out beautifully," he says. "I was so excited I felt like yelling out, 'It's working, it's working!' I was so nervous I don't think I ate a slice of my own bread."

From then on, he knew there was no turning back. His new vocation had been put into his hands. Since then, as the business has found its feet (they opened in January this year), their days have become long, sometimes up to 18 hours at a stretch.

Four days a week, from 4am they make, among many other types of bread, ciabatta and baguettes, casalinga, rye, organic wholewheat, white tin loaf, and fruit and nut. All of it is sourdough. Some

customers are known to drive up to two hours to the bakery to stock up for a month.

Stephen says that when he gets tired, he has a sense of William peering over his shoulder.

"He had a reputation for hard work," he says.

Meanwhile, the orders continue to increase. Morpeth Sourdough now supplies to Harris Farm markets in nearby Charlestown, David Jones in Newcastle, and many fruiterers and delicatessens.

Setting up the bakery itself was relatively stress-free: they bought a modular, three-deck electric oven, a French kneader, rack trolleys, bread tins and cutting tools. And they built lots of storage space where the bread could rise.

The building itself is charming, with pine French doors that open onto a deep, shady verandah on the main street. Upstairs is a vacant flat, with high ceilings and period details, overlooking a bend in the river.

Downstairs, the front showroom has been snazzyly refitted with the help of design firm Landini Associates in Sydney. Formerly a bootmaker's workshop and, most recently, a craft shop, it was created by demolishing a series of small poky rooms, ripping up the carpet and polishing the wide floorboards. The design firm also advised them on colour schemes, logos, branding and stylish ways to display the bread.

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Stephen, whose first career was in joinery, did much of the renovation himself. He lost the fingers of his right hand in an industrial accident, but these days just carries on regardless.

The difficult part of the renovation will be how to handle the historic bakehouse at the back of the building. It's one of the few industrial sites left in Morpeth.

"It's quite fragile out there, so we really need expert advice," says Stephen. "If you pulled one brick out of the wall, it would be like dancing with death. The whole wall would tumble down."

Soon they'll hear if their application for a State Government heritage grant for the restoration of the bakehouse is successful.

Morpeth Sourdough is open Thursday and Friday, 9am to 5pm; Saturday, 8am to 5pm; and Sunday, 8am to 4pm. Telephone (02) 4934 4148.