



**SKELLERUP**

## **Media Release**

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### **Fifty years on the job for Skellerup footwear specialist**

A lot can happen in 50 years. Just ask Brian McFall who joined Skellerup only months before the company's iconic Red Band Gumboot rolled off the Christchurch factory's production line for the first time in 1958.

Fifty years on and Skellerup's footwear specialist is still as fascinated by making shoes as he was when he joined what was then, Marathon Rubber Footwear, as a twenty-year old.

"My first job was putting the metal last for sandshoes on the conveyor belt which would then be taken away for someone else to fix the upper to. I gradually got moved around the factory working on many different operations involved in making footwear. I never realised making shoes was such a complicated process."

At that time over 500 people were employed by Skellerup in its Woolston factory making around half of New Zealand's total footwear requirements.

"It was like living in a small town really," says Brian. "The atmosphere was great."

Within three years of joining the company he was offered a promotion to be trainee manager of the sewing room. He was about to accept, delighted at the thought of being in charge of a room full of women, when Skellerup offered him an alternative opportunity to become a trainee pattern cutter and designer.

"The role suited me much better as it gave me the chance to be more involved in a hands-on way. It was such fun, I couldn't believe they were paying me to do it."

Brian went on to become Skellerup Footwear's Chief Designer and was instrumental in developing the huge range of gumboots, sandshoes, thongs, and other footwear that was produced in the Woolston factory.

Over the years other responsibilities fell to him including quality control and, at one stage, supervision of three sewing rooms. He became Assistant General Manager of Skellerup Footwear, a role he held for 12 years from 1984 – 1996 and sat for several years on the Skellerup Footwear board.

Brian has travelled extensively for Skellerup working in Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Philippines, India, Puerto Rico, USA, Italy and more recently China. He was a fundamental part of the success of the new Skellerup factory in Jiangsu where he was involved in staff training. He continues to fly to China every six to eight weeks to continue this role.

“It’s vital to ensure the boots are being made to the Skellerup standard before I can give them sign-off to start production,” he says.

“It is sad that production had to move but making footwear is so labour intensive that we wouldn’t have survived. We’ve always made sure however, that the quality never drops and that everything is made to the specific Skellerup formulations.”

As you can imagine, Brian’s seen a lot of shoes and boots over the years, and aside from the Red Band Gumboots, his other favourite model is the Commando.

“In its heyday we were selling about 220,000 pairs a year of the white canvas Commando. One season during the sixties we even released it as a “Doodle Sneaker” which came with a colouring-in kit which people could use to draw on their own designs.”

Brian says that part of Skellerup’s success has been that it “does the difficult stuff” and produces quality products that last.

“Working with rubber formulations is very challenging. You only have a short window to make the boots after you’ve made the rubber material. After a boot is cut and fitted together, it then has to be cooked at 133 °C for over an hour. You can’t afford to make a mistake anywhere in the production process.”

As Skellerup’s chief pattern maker, Brian would get called upon to cut patterns for special orders. He’s made a pair of body waders for the Duke of Edinburgh and countless pairs of boots for “very large legs and feet”. Cases for special shoes or boots that were referred from the hospital were only charged a dollar extra even though it involved an extra three or four days work.

“It was part of Skellerup’s service to the community,” says Brian.

Fifty years on, and on the eve of another trip to China, this time to check on the efficiencies of the factory ahead of a new release of boots planned for later this year, Brian is still passionate, enthusiastic and excited to be part of this continuing gumboot success story.

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