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**AUSTRALIAN ICON: THE BUNNY KNIFE -  
ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY YEARS ON.  
A PERSONAL VIEWPOINT BY KEVIN COLEMAN**

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This Bunny Knife pictured above is a two blade by Joseph Rodgers & Sons. The blade face is marked "JOSEPH RODGERS, BUNNY KNIFE, HAND FORGED". The tang is marked "NO. 6 NORFOLK STREET SHEFFIELD" which dates this knife to pre 1927 (1929).



The real story behind the bunny knife. The men like Ian Anderson who has fond memories of cattle musters and camping in the Victorian High Country who carried their beloved bunny knife.



## AUSTRALIAN ICON: THE BUNNY KNIFE

Those of us who have grown up in country Australia, either living in country towns or on the land, would have in one way or another come across our little four-legged fury friend, the rabbit and would likely have had a Bunny knife at some time in their life.

As collectors we sometimes overlook some of the smaller items which have played a role in our colonial history, and which continue to this day. The story behind what we have come to call the “bunny knife” which originated from events in Victoria in 1859 is such an item.

While rabbits came out with the first fleet in 1788, they were never released into the wild or at least did not spread across the country. Before being introduced on to the mainland the rabbit was introduced to the Southern part of Tasmania and by 1827<sup>1</sup> the number of rabbits had spread widely throughout the colony. However, the spread of the rabbit on mainland Australia has been acknowledged as being started on Barwon Park, Winchelsea, Victoria, in 1859 on a property owned by wealthy landowner Thomas Austin<sup>2</sup>.



Internet Download<sup>3</sup>. The photo above is of Thomas Austin's Mansion, Barwon Park Winchelsea, Victoria. Now in the ownership of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

Austin wanted to create a game sport for his wealthy friends to continue the sport of shooting he enjoyed back in England. He imported from England 12 pairs of European rabbits, 5 hares and 72 partridges for his property, Barwon Park.

Eventually, these rabbits broke loose from their enclosure and over the next 50 years or so spread across much of Australia - which then became part of our rural history.



Internet Download. The above plate is of a drawing showing H.R.H The Duke of Edinburgh rabbit shooting at Barwon Park in the 1860s.<sup>4</sup>

Over time the rabbit population spread Australia wide causing damage both to the natural habitat and crops alike. As a result of the borrowing of rabbits, and destruction of habitat this caused erosion and reduction in the food supply for sheep and native animals. This damage necessitated ways to try and stop the rabbit population from growing and indeed spreading further afield.

In addition to eventually using poison of various types, rabbit traps and the rabbit hunter came into their own, from the professional hunter to the young boy going rabbit hunting. Sadly, the poisons also had negative impact by way of poisoning farm dogs and other wildlife.

The photos shown below are, on the left, two of the many rabbit traps which my father used back in the 1930s and we used in the early 1960s, which correctly, became illegal in the 1980s. The photo on the right is the author (in the middle) and his best mates, Ian on the left and his brother Brian on the right after a weekend shooting in the late 1960s.





During the worldwide economic depressions of the 1890s and 1930s rabbits became a major source of food as was the case during our many droughts. A major benefit of the rabbit was the creation of employment.

Rabbit skins were used for many purposes including the iconic Akubra hat. One other major benefit became the need for knives to gut and skin the humble rabbit. Hence knives from Sheffield, England became a major import in these early years, which continued for many years, even today to a lesser extent. The Bunny Knife, hence become the Australian Icon. My collector friends in the UK tell me very few with Bunny Knife marked on the blade turn up in the UK.





The two photos shown above are family photos of rabbits and a hare from our family farm in the 1920s.



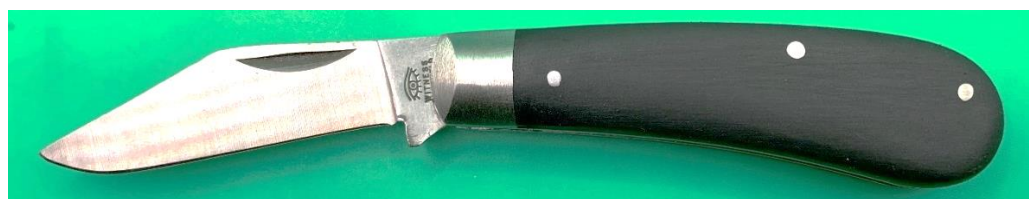
Internet download. Museum of Australia<sup>5</sup>. Impact of the rabbit plague across the Australian Landscape 1939

Before poisons were used, farmers, trappers and weekend hunters used the .22 rifle as one of the weapons against the rabbit. The photo shown below is our Winchester 1904 .22 short model used by my family since the early 1900s and myself since the 1960s.



One of the main knives used by farmers and trappers to gut and skin the rabbit was a pocketknife which became known as the “Bunny Knife”. These “Bunny Knives” had a clip point blade and measured 9cm closed.

According to an article in the 2009 AKC Knives magazine by the late Keith Spencer<sup>6</sup> the two main pocketknives imported from Sheffield were the Joseph Rodgers single blade clip blade model JR90 and the Taylors ‘Eye Witness’ model T260 shown below.



Author's collection

Over time a two-blade version was made by both Rodgers (see photo following) and Taylors 'Eye Witness'.



**Author's Knife (EDC)** The photo shown above is a Joseph Rodgers two blade version. I purchased this knife in 1964 from the Melbourne Sports Depot in Elizabeth Street Melbourne aged 15 for Australian £1/10 which was the equivalent of two Saturday morning pays for me at that time.

The plate below is one of my Bunny Knives marked Bunny Knife on the Blade. Whilst this knife is unmarked, I believe it may have been made by H. Kaufmann of Solingen Germany. As can be seen from the photo it has had a lot of use.



Author's collection



Author's collection

c.1960s two blade Joseph Rodgers Bunny Knife with imitation stag scales.



Author's collection

c.1960s Joseph Rodgers Bunny Knife with Delrin scales.



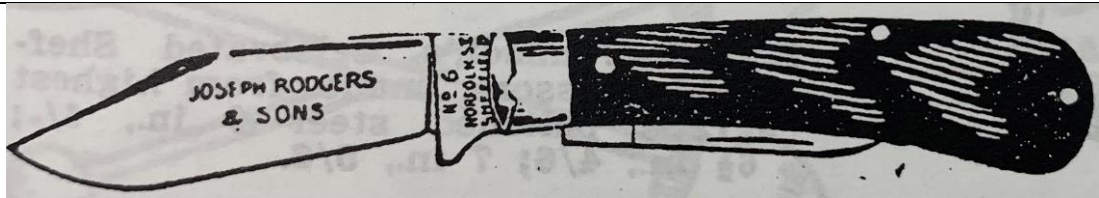


Photo of a Joseph Rodgers two blade Bunny Knife from an Edments Catalogue of Melbourne 1927.<sup>7</sup> Author's photo.

It should be noted the blade is only marked, Joseph Rodgers unlike the plate below which is marked Bunny Knife, hand forged also on the blade.



Author's collection.

Joseph Rodgers two blade (clip blade and pen blade) Bunny Knife marked 6 Norfolk Street Sheffield which dates this knife to pre 1927 (1929). The blade is also marked Hand Forged. Although I been unable to find any written evidence, based on my research here and speaking with collectors in the UK I believe it is fair to conclude that the Joseph Rodgers knives marked Bunny Knife on the blade were specially made for the Australian market. This also applies to Taylor's 'Eye Witness'.

From these early advertisements and various newspaper ads from at least the 1880s it becomes clear that the design of Joseph Rodgers Bunny Knives has not changed in over 100 years. I believe the same can be said of the Taylors 'Eye Witness' Bunny knives.



Author's collection

The Two blade Bunny knife shown above is a c.1960s version by Taylors 'Eye Witness' Bunny knife based on the Barlow style first introduced in Sheffield by Obadiah Barlow in 1670 using the longer bolster to strengthen the blade or blades.









Authors Photo from a W. JNO. Baker Catalogue of 1921.<sup>10</sup>

W.JNO Baker model 710 2-blade Rabbit Knife.



Photo courtesy of Adam Liversedge

During the years from the 1860s to the mid-1940s the rabbit created employment for many Australian workers including the building of rabbit proof fences.





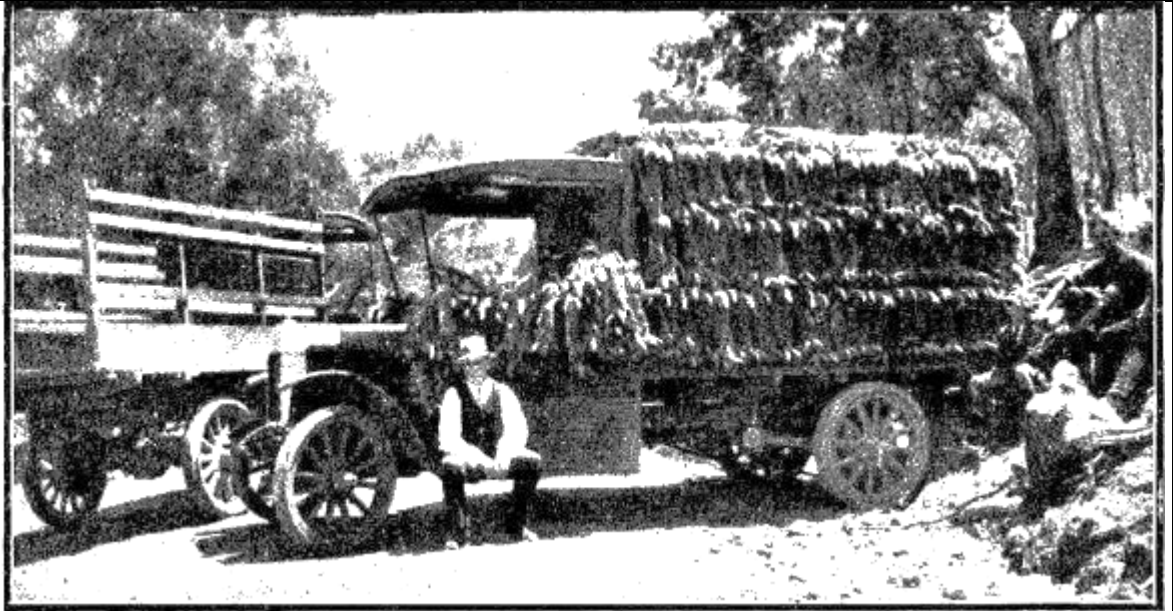
Internet Download<sup>11</sup>

The photo above is of a rabbit fence, Cobar NSW 1905.



Internet download

The above photo shows a load of rabbit skins from the Northern Tablelands of NSW. Date of photo unknown.<sup>12</sup>



Internet download.<sup>13</sup>

Load of 3,800 rabbits caught at Mudgee, NSW during the rabbit plague of 1919.

Notwithstanding my research from the various newspaper advertisements in the Australian Archives showing most of our cutlery, including pocketknives of many types were imported into Australia from Sheffield, England during these early years, two knives in my collection are Barlow styles made in Germany between 1890 and 1920 with well-worn blades. Clearly, these “Bunny Knives” as we Aussies came to name them, were also produced in Germany as a “fit for purpose” pocketknife which they called “The skinner.” The blade would have been a clip point blade.



Author's collection

A two-blade pocketknife by Korten Scherf, Solingen, Germany c1890 marked “The Skinner” on the blade.



Author's collection

Another example of a Barlow style pocketknife marked “The Skinner” on the blade. This knife is by Emil Schlemper., Solingen, Germany. I date this example to the c1920-30s.





Author's collection courtesy of Lawrie Wilson.

The final example is by H Kaufmann of Solingen Germany. It will be noted that the blade is also marked "Skinner". This is the same maker as the Bunny Knife shown on a previous page. Again, it is my conclusion that Kaufmann marked knives Bunny Knives and Skinner Knives to compete in the Australian and German knife markets. The second blade is a spey blade which was used for skinning as well as a castrating blade.

### AUTHORS COMMENT

One last point I should make relates to finding examples of the "Bunny Knife" before 1900. Whilst researching for my previous books, I have spent some three years researching the Australian Archives and other documents. Whilst finding references to "pocketknives" in Government Gazettes, Newspaper articles and advertisements dating from 1800, knives seem to be referred to in general terms, i.e., single, two bladed pocketknives etc.

I am still researching country papers like the Weekly Times out of Melbourne looking for advertisements dating back from the 1860s which may show "bunny knives" as in the ad from Murdoch's Cutlery, March 1928 as shown above.

The late Keith Spencer of A.K.C knives sums up his article “150th Anniversary of Bunny Power” written in 2009 by concluding with the following “By the way, of course, by association we can also celebrate 150 years of bunny knives.”<sup>14</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, Rabbits in Australia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbitis\\_in\\_Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbitis_in_Australia).

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, Rabbits in Australia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits\\_in\\_Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits_in_Australia).

<sup>3</sup> <https://vicscreen.vic.gov.au/choose-victoria/locations/barwon-parkmansion>

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, Rabbits in Australia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits\\_in\\_Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits_in_Australia).

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, Rabbits in Australia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits\\_in\\_Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits_in_Australia).

<sup>6</sup> Keith Spencer, AKC Knives magazine” issue 1/2009 150th Anniversary of Bunny Power” page 6.

<sup>7</sup> Edments Cash Stores Catalogue 1927 Prouds the Jewellers Pty Ltd owners of the Edments brand page 91.

<sup>8</sup> The Bulletin 14 March 1928 Vol 49 No 2509(14 March 1928) <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj597212663/view>

<sup>9</sup> Goulburn Penny Post Saturday 23 October, 1886 <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/98461465>

<sup>10</sup> W.JNO.BAKER, House of Steel, Catalogue September 1921

<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia, Rabbits in Australia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits\\_in\\_Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits_in_Australia)

<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia, Rabbits in Australia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits\\_in\\_Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbits_in_Australia).

<sup>13</sup> Wikipedia, Rabbit Plagues in Australia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbit\\_plagues\\_in\\_Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/rabbit_plagues_in_Australia).

<sup>14</sup> Keith Spencer, AKC Knives members magazine issue 1/2009 150th Anniversary of Bunny Power page 6 & 7.