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ando's talk of the north with John Anderson john.anderson@news.com.au

THE new \$23 million Waltzing Matilda Centre in Winton is a sight to behold. And it is a credit to Townsville builder Adrian Gabrielli of Gabrielli Constructions. They started on the job on April 24, 2016, stopped for Christmas December 23 and were back on the job on January 4 last year. There's been a minimum team of 30 staff and for the last 25 weeks 60 workers have been on site. They worked through the Easter break and the recent flooding to finish the job. They've endured temperatures of 50C and have slogged through grasshopper and fly plagues. "Hell hath no fury in Winton. We didn't let it beat us and finished it and got it open," he said this week. There will be some fiddly exterior work that will take until July to finalise. Adrian said he'd promised Butch Lenton, the Winton mayor who died last year, that he'd have it ready for handover. He reckons Butch would be happy with the result.

brothers bash

BROTHERS BASH START training now. Brothers Rugby Union is having its 50th reunion on June 29-30 and July 1. The plan is for a Meet and Greet Friday, Brothers versus Teachers-West games at Ignatius Park College on Saturday and a Blue and White Ball that night at Iggy Park Hall. On Sunday there is a recovery and bocce at the Centenary Hotel. Contacts are Deidre Walsh (deidre.walsh@nqwm.com.au) and Terry Fanning (Tfanning@mackeywales.com.au).

The Brothers reunion bash is not an exclusive blokes' event where fellers stand around drinking beer and talking about footy. It's all laid on for the ladies, especially when it comes to the champers. Currently engaged in sampling and approving bubbles for the three day celebration are well-known Townsville champagne connoisseurs, Deidre Walsh and Jenny Fitzgerald. They have been doing a top job, but we did hear that exhaustion was setting in. If you would like to sacrifice your time and give these brave ladies a hand you can contact Ms Walsh at the above address.

RUMOUR MILL I KNOW, I know, I know. We shouldn't listen to rumours. But a senior sugar industry source confirmed last week that there is a possibility that Wilmar might buy beleaguered Mackay Sugar Ltd.

It's just too juicy to ignore. And it gets better because if Wilmar goes after Australia's second largest sugar miller it might sell its two Ingham mills, Victoria and Macknade. Mackay Sugar Ltd is carrying \$180 million in debt and has \$18 million in cash reserves. The feeling is that if Wilmar, which already owns eight mills including Sarina south of Mackay moves to buy Mackay, it will need to go cap in hand to the Foreign Investment Review Board.

This will be a lot easier to do if the Herbert mills aren't in its portfolio. Just say this scenario plays out. Who might buy the two Ingham mills? My source says you wouldn't rule out Cofco, the Chinese company which owns the Tully sugar mill. And then of course there is Thai-owned MSF Sugar which owns mills at Maryborough, Mulgrave at Gordonvale, the Tableland, South Johnstone.

This is all shed talk, pub talk and cane field gossip. One sugar milling executive who knows how to spoil a good story assured me that Wilmar was not chasing Mackay Sugar Ltd and that Wilmar was not selling its Ingham mills. I bet that if you walk into the Ashton Hotel outside Ingham or the Euramo pub south of Tully this afternoon, you'll get three or four different stories.

CANE FANTASY FARMERS at Tully told me that when Cofco bought the Tully mill in 2011 the company said it would invest in the mill. Hasn't happened. More cane has been planted, especially since the commercial cabinet timber industry went belly up, but milling capacity has not kept pace. A big crop now can see the Tully mill still huffing and puffing away in January when it should have finished the crush in November/December. Farmers tell me another one million tonnes could be grown at Tully, bringing production up to around four million tonnes. But, until the mill has enough grunt to process this sort of tonnage within the normal crushing time frame, it's all just a fantasy.

FRENCH TOAST FROM Asian-owned sugar mills to tourism. Chinese interests now own Daydream and South Molle Islands in the Whitsundays. And now we have the French. Miners and solar farm workers at Collinsville could be soon be tucking into snails and frog's legs for dinner. French caterer Sodexo is due to start banging the pots and pans in camp kitchens at Morris Corporation sites around Australia, including ownership of the giant Collinsville Village camp. You can just hear those joyous shouts of "C'est vraiment magnifique" from the crib huts out on the mine sites when the fellers open their lunch boxes to discover they've been given goose liver pate, goat cheese and of course a crusty French loaf and maybe even a bottle of "vin". The only thing missing will be the lengthy lunchtime "la sieste". Another thing they won't be getting that the French hold dear is seven weeks' paid annual leave.

CRANE COUNTRY MASSIVE rebuilding of the wharf and infrastructure at Shute Harbour about to start. Some big cranes heading that way.

RIGHT OF WAY IN European countries except the UK and the Republic of Ireland, they drive on the right hand side of the road. Spain, Germany France, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark all drive on the right. The USA, Canada China, Korea and Russia all drive on the right. We have tourists and backpackers on working visas from all of these countries (although Russians might be in short supply) and they can come over here produce a licence from home. A bloke who runs a fleet of school buses wanted to know why young Australians were put through the hoops to get a driver's licence, but not foreign tourists. "I've seen foreign tourists going around roundabouts the wrong way. I met a young Korean bloke who was driving here on an international licence and he didn't even have a licence at home. He'd never driven before," he said.

BOWEN BONANZA IT has all gone quiet on the Adani front. I was down in Bowen this week and there wasn't a protester to be seen. Bowen is looking great. Buildings are being refurbished and painted and footpaths are under construction. Coal industry observers have been saying for a couple of years now that if Adani places its \$22 billion project in long-term mothballs, Gina Rinehart will move to develop her mine at Alpha and will build the rail line to Abbot Point. Alert readers will recall that Ms Hancock bought the mothballed Murray's Bay Motel at Bowen 10 years ago. It was going to be a holiday spot for her Galilee Basin coalfield employees. She still owns it. And, just quietly, it could do with a paint job.

CUTTING COMMENT JUST one tiny Bowen criticism. Running legends Whitsunday Regional Council Mayor Andrew Wilcox and his councillor Mike "The Flash" Bunker, probably gallop over Bowen's Horseshoe Bay to Rose Bay track at such blinding speeds each morning they don't notice the long grass at the sides which hides the brown snakes. If you slow down for a second fellers, you might notice it needs a haircut.

BARRA BARNEY WILL Janelle Flemming ever talk to her husband Brett again? If she doesn't, well, any fisho would understand why. This is how it unfolded. Janelle went and bought a new rod and reel combo. This was going to be the year she caught her first big barra. She had it all planned. The next morning she went for an early run. Brett got up, wandered over to the beach. There were bait fish on the move. He strolled back to the house, picked up the new rod and reel, tied one of the new lures to the line, walked back over to the beach, cast in the line and BAM. He hauled in this 102cm freight train barra. Things are thawing out. Janelle says that technically it is her barra because it was caught on her gear. Brett's response to that was a diplomatic "yeh...nah".

MEANWHILE, Brett's dad "Billabong Bob" had his 70th birthday bash at his Maggie Island home last Saturday. MC for the night was ex-Townsville newsman and radio identity Dave "Harro" Harrison. Harro and wife Sue live in Brisbane these days. When he wasn't on MC duties the water sipping (yes, he has seen the light) "Harro" did an excellent job as chief barman. It was only a couple of years ago, 2015 in fact, that Billabong Bob led a team of Townsville plodders over the Kokoda Track. He might be 70 but he still looks like he could skip his way over Kokoda.

PLANS ON TRACK ONE bloke who followed Billabong Bob over Kokoda in 2015 was retired Townsville lawyer, Colin Harkness. Hark was 75 at the time. Kokoda was a walk in the park for him. He's still one of the fittest blokes around. And look, here is a photo of him kindly sent in by his mate Richard Ferry with his new car. "He's been telling everyone for months that he's going to buy a new car. He's finally done it," Richard said. Not only is there a new car in Col's life, but there is a new walking adventure. Col and wife Eva leave Townsville this morning and are travelling to Crete when they plan to uncover the hidden mysteries of the Minoan civilisation ... by foot.

