

From my years as a primary school student at Hamilton South Public, Newcastle, two highlights remain with me. One was watching the moon landing on a tiny black-and-white TV (saw practically nothing, could easily have been faked) and the other was visiting the BHP steelworks, conveniently located within contamination distance at Waratah.

We students in fourth class were loaded onto chartered buses; they seemed to be Soviet surplus stock, which gives you an idea of the quality if even the Russians didn't want them. They had vinyl bench seats, no opening windows, barely serviceable brakes and no seatbelts, although smoking was permitted in the rear for any teacher or "fast" student lucky enough to have a pack of Escort in their port.

With scant regard for the confusing give-way-to-the-right rule, we sped towards the sprawling industrial complex where one day some of us would be given jobs for life and then heartlessly retrenched. On arrival, we were handed lumps of iron ore to inspect - in those days the country could find a use for it here - and then taken to watch a blast furnace being tapped. Safety equipment was basically whatever you'd turned up in: shorts, shirt and Bata Strides shoes.

Timothy Samway had animal footprints on the soles of his and a compass hidden in the heel, so the chances of us getting lost in a safari park were slender, but even we realised his deluxe footwear wouldn't be of much use here. The forward thinking had worn fire-retardant socks and the spectacle wearers felt good about themselves for a rare minute, but for most of us, the only protection between us and the river of molten steel 20 metres away was the teacher. And I suspect Mrs Auld, despite being a larger woman, would have vaporised fairly briskly had anything gone seriously wrong.

From there we were led through a light shower of acid rain, past the coke ovens - might like to hold your breath at this point, kids - and then to the wire mill, where red-hot lumps of steel were accelerated through a series of progressively smaller dies until they emerged at speed and whipped around stanchions to form reels of wire. Occasionally, our guide told us, workers were sliced in half when the wire broke and started slewing about like a red-hot garden hose, but thankfully fourth class remained intact.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/save-the-children-20130520-2jvel.html>

# Save the children

School trips today are a strenuous exercise in risk-management, finds **Jonathan Biggins**.



Illustration by Christopher Nielsen.

**“Unlike our foray to a steel mill, an excursion to Bakers Delight was apparently fraught with peril.”**

We sat on a steaming slag heap and had our sandwiches and GI lime cordial, then boarded the buses for the most dangerous part of the tour: the drive back to school. Two days later we handed in a project about the wondrous benefits of BHP steel - and that was it. Many of the less-interested parents would never have known we'd been there.

**Not so these days**, when a permission slip from a parent, carer or same-sex transgender guardian is required before a kid can visit the school's certified pedophile-free hygiene block if caught short.

Our children went on a field trip in year 4 to an industrial complex, albeit on a more modest scale: the local Bakers Delight franchise.

Thankfully, bread-making has yet to go off-shore, although I'm sure the Chinese are working on ways to get pane di casa and Vegemite scrolls into stores more cheaply. But unlike our naive foray into the bowels of a steel mill, an excursion to Bakers Delight was apparently fraught with peril. Lengthy risk-assessment forms had to be filled in anticipating every potential danger: slip or trip hazards, traffic management at the one pedestrian crossing the children would have to negotiate, nut allergies, gluten-intolerance, a repressed fear of bakers, an exploding custard Danish (could happen, could be nasty) or a loss of self-worth due to an inability to colour in Toastie the Easter Bilby without going over the lines.

Voluntary parental assistance was enforced, three to a child, and all students had to remain 10 metres clear of any active bread oven. All baking staff had to be vetted by the vice squad and any samples inadvertently removed from the shop destroyed under sterile conditions. Counselling was offered to anyone whose expectations weren't met, a blog was set up where students could post their thoughts on yeast, and each child got a voucher for a free croissant and a sticker from the principal saying, "You're Fantastic!"

But no OH&S risk matrix could guard against the gravest threat of all: a complaint or potential legal action from an aggrieved parent, carer or same-sex transgender guardian if their child did not receive a complete and self-esteem-building educational baking experience. So after mutterings about hot-cross buns being wilfully displayed and the absence of an unleavened bread option, the field trips were quietly abandoned.

So don't even think about an excursion to the BHP steelworks, even if it were still operating. But let me say it never did me any harm, although I do get the odd headache as the steel shavings that pierced my Bata Strides work their way inexorably through my bloodstream towards my brain.

And I know some of the higher-end private schools still offer educational travel experiences like skiing in Aspen or work-experience with the UNHCR in Monaco. But I can safely say my near-death experience (neatly dovetailed into a deeper understanding of vertically integrated manufacturing) remains my pedagogical watershed. Despite the fact Timothy Samway's compass never reliably pointed north again.