By the late 1980s, Australia was the world’s third-ranking mining country — the largest producer of aluminum and lead, second-largest of iron ore and zinc, fifth in coal, eighth in copper. More importantly, changes in gold processing technology meant that a massive increase in gold production was also underway. With demand for specialist services on the increase and more and more clients offering work Down Under, SRK wanted to be a part of the action.
At the same time, civil unrest in South Africa was taking an increasing toll on SRK SA. Many of those who wanted to leave weren’t interested in moving to the U.K. Brian Wrench was one.

“At the crux of the political changes in 1993 — before Nelson Mandela was elected,” Wrench says, “I worried about the outcome, about what the change would mean. It wasn’t clear-cut as to how it was going to go.”

Gary Bentel, whose brother Dave was running the Reno office, was another who wanted to move away from South Africa, but wasn’t feeling the pull towards the U.K. Throughout his graduate work, Oskar Steffen had been a mentor to him — and the firm was a second home. “Dick Stacey really kicked me off in my career, because he gave me a job in a coal mine in Swaziland. I never saw the light of day for about two weeks,” Bentel says. “It also forever ensured I had an understanding of the potential hazards of underground mining, because a rockfall nearly came down on us. I wasn’t hurt, but it was frightening.”

Bentel joined SRK in 1992, working initially in Johannesburg and then in Cape Town. He had indicated on joining that his plans were to leave South Africa, and he was considering Australia. Andy Barrett, who was running the South African practice at the time, didn’t want to let either Wrench or Bentel walk across the proverbial street to another firm in Australia or anywhere else. He and Steffen discussed the options and SRK’s long-held interest in a move across the Indian Ocean. They asked first Wrench and later Bentel if they were interested in opening an office in Australia. “Oskar was very keen for me to do that and pushed me quite hard,” Wrench says. “I just felt I wasn’t the right person. I hadn’t worked long enough in the tailings field to feel totally confident. I made the decision to leave the company, which I was very sad about. In the end, I joined Woodward Clyde in Perth.”

As a result, Barrett and Bentel headed to Australia to assess the opportunities there. They met with Peter Loubser, a slope-stability and open-pit specialist who was Steffen’s client at the Kalgoorlie super-pit. Bentel and Loubser opened an office in Perth in August 1994. Bentel left soon after arriving to join another consulting firm.
Sending Reinforcements

Clive Seymour volunteered to move over and reinforce the SRK beachhead. Born in Malaysia to a tin miner, he was another Neal Rigby student who had done his undergraduate work and PhD at Cardiff. Rigby had planted in him the seeds of consulting and the benefits of working for SRK — its camaraderie and culture. Like so many others, Seymour initially worked for a South African mining company. In 1987, while he was at a mining conference, he ran into a group of SRK staff having a laugh. He strolled over and asked, “Have you got any jobs?”

A week later, Seymour got a call from Steffen and joined SRK in January 1988.

“I eventually transferred from SRK to Gemcom, the mining software subsidiary,” Seymour says. “But in 1995, I decided that South Africa, after the political transition, was getting a bit too dangerous. I was doing a lot of traveling and I was married with two young kids and probably spending about 120 days a year out of the office. The safety of my family was a concern, with me being away so much.”

Steffen suggested that he return to Cardiff and join the team there. Seymour was thinking about that when Barrett offered: “We’ve also got an office in Australia; do you want to go out there?”

That appealed to Seymour, but by April 1996, when he and Barrett arrived in Perth, Loubser had left as well, and SRK had an office with no staff. They spent two weeks visiting Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

“We decided Perth was the place to be, so we hired a secretary on the spot, Zelda Langton, who was married to Chris Langton, previously of SRK in South Africa,” Seymour says. “We drove around West Perth looking for offices to rent. We found a place, and I then went back to South Africa. I left a message for Zelda to move the office from its existing location to West Perth. About two weeks later, I came back to fire up SRK in Australia.”

It was very much like Robertson’s experience in Vancouver or Rigby’s in Cardiff — Seymour rattled around the office on the phone, constantly building contacts, very much the new kid on the block. As in South America, Chris Page was frequently in Australia servicing the big international mining firms that were his clients.

“I got support from people like Oskar, too,” Seymour says. “With clients in Australia, he came across on a regular basis.”

On one of Steffen’s visits, Seymour had returned from
a mine site and found people were working during the weekend.

“I came into the office — Oskar was already there, of course.” Seymour chuckles at the memory. “He had all his notes on the table. I arrived with my eldest daughter, who was about five years old. Oskar put her on his knee and was chatting away with her. Emma grabbed some pens that he had on the table and started drawing all over his notes. He only smiled. These were the site notes that he was going to use to write this report, only now my daughter had annotated them by colouring in all the zeroes. He had no problem at all with that. It was lovely.”

He asked Steffen: “How do you employ really good people?”

“You’ve just got to get them on board and then trust them. Give them the opportunity to excel.”

That was it.

On his return to South Africa, Steffen bumped into Geoff Bull, a Swazi-born former student and friend. An expert on very deep mining, having worked on some operations with shafts 3 kilometres below the surface, Bull told Steffen he was looking to leave Zimbabwe and take his one-man consulting business overseas.

“We need help in Canada and Australia,” Steffen said, hoping one of the opportunities would entice him.

“I’m not an Eskimo, so forget about Canada,” Bull replied. “I’m not going to a cold climate, but Australia appeals to me. What’s the situation there?”

Steffen explained Seymour’s predicament.

Bull flew to Australia where he and Seymour did a familiarisation tour, visited a few mines and discussed the market and how the office might develop.

“I thought, this is rather nice, and so we called back to South Africa and spoke to both Oskar and Andy Barrett about terms and conditions,” Bull says. “I went back to Zimbabwe to wind up my business and transfer my clients to SRK Harare, and SRK went about getting me a work permit and residency visa.”

It would take Bull months, however, to close down his practice.

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**BULL:**

“I’M NOT GOING TO A COLD CLIMATE, BUT AUSTRALIA APPEALS TO ME. WHAT’S THE SITUATION THERE?”
Getting Traction

Slowly, slowly SRK started to pick up work, Seymour says.

“I recruited another two guys from the Johannesburg office — Joel Ray and Gary Dempers,” he adds. “We became the three amigos.”

They did mainly geotechnical work at mining sites. Ray arrived first.

“Joel got off the plane from Johannesburg with his family,” Seymour recalls, “dropped them at a new home, left and didn’t see them again for four or five months while he was in the Western Australian gold fields on the edge of a giant salt lake, Lake Lefroy, about 600 kilometres east of Perth.”

A Merger

The seniors at SRK who had long recognised the potential of the Australasian market would have preferred to have opened the practice with a local partner. They hadn’t been able to find one. A chance discussion at a 1995 conference in Vancouver, however, triggered preliminary talks with EHW — a respected Australian firm based in Canberra, established by Mike Etheridge, Dick Henley and Peter Williams. A few months after SRK opened the West Perth office in 1996, Etheridge turned up in Johannesburg and introduced himself to the SRK principals. By the end of the year, Barrett and Henley were formally discussing a merger.

Etheridge was a geologist reared and educated in Australia. He worked as a scientist doing applied research in mining exploration for the first 18 years of his career at Adelaide and Monash Universities, and at the government’s Bureau of Mineral Resources. By then, he was ready for consultancy. He began as a sole practitioner before partnering with Henley, who had worked with him at the bureau. They became Etheridge and Henley until another colleague, Peter Williams, joined in 1993 to create EHW in November 1994.
EHW specialised in structural and economic geology. In many ways, their consultancy was a near clone of the early SRK and its development followed similar lines. The principals realised you either worked night and day saving for a rainy someday or you hired other people to do the technical work while you rounded up contracts and built a sustainable business that began to grow on its own.

Within three years, EHW had expanded to about 40 people in domestic offices in Brisbane, Canberra and Perth. Canberra was the headquarters, and the largest office. Peter Stuart-Smith joined in March 1997 to work on mineral geological mapping research projects. Brisbane was started by Paul Pearson in 1993, and he was later joined by David Adams, who drove EHW’s business development throughout the 1990s. The original work in Brisbane was geology, with a dedicated group including Nicki Netherway, Renate Sliwa and Steve Windle. Perth was started by Peter Williams in 1994, and quickly grew to 10 staff.

There were also offices in Vancouver, run by Roland Bartsch, and in Santiago, run by Deborah Lord, a Melbourne-born geologist. Their clientele included companies that originated in North and South America and were expanding into Australia; EHW opened the satellite offices to be close to their clients’ head offices.

“We made all the mistakes that a rapidly growing, successful small business makes,” Etheridge says. “We learned from the lessons of cash flow, cash flow and cash flow, but survived. We saw that good times could come to an end, given the cyclical nature of our business. And we knew we needed to broaden our base geographically and across the resources sector so that we were less exposed to the fluctuations of mineral exploration, which was our main client base. That was one of the reasons we set up a petroleum consultancy group — as a way of diversifying.”

By late 1996, the managers at EHW were convinced teaming up with a mining consultancy would provide an entree into a more sustainable and a less volatile area of the market.

“SRK Australia was tiny at that stage,” Barrett says. “We had roughly 220 people in South Africa, nearly 50 in the U.K. and 150 in North America. Australia had five professional staff and a secretary. The synergies with EHW from SRK’s perspective were compelling — their structural geology services could add value in several of our traditional areas as well as in their core exploration market.”

Barrett made five visits to Australia over the following months and spent hours on trans-oceanic telephone calls.

“Things happened very rapidly once we began to talk with Andy, largely because — apart from the good will on both parts — there was a real cultural fit,” Etheridge says. “SRK was a consulting business that provided the best possible expertise and relied upon real intellectual heavyweights in various aspects of the business. That part of the culture, which is most important, was a real fit. Meetings took place, and everything happened very quickly. In October 1997, we became SRK Australia.”

He smiles. “SRK was pretty happy to have a willing partner to help them to grow, somebody who was keen to become part of SRK rather than retain their own identity. We were very happy to give up what we were, to become part of what was clearly a very successful and well-run organisation. I think it was a remarkably smooth transition. It helped that EHW operated in an area that was not a significant part of SRK’s global business.”
Three Important Things

Three things about the merger most appealed to EHW.

“Employee shareholding,” Etheridge emphasises. “We’d made a huge effort to encourage our employees to acquire shares in EHW. That leads to a certain culture where most of the key employees are invested in the company financially as well as nine to five.

“Second, was an emphasis on excellence. SRK has tried to attract the best and the brightest in the various fields, building teams of capable people around them. We hadn’t been going very long, so we were in the first stage of that process. Still, the three principals had reputations in the scientific community as well as in industry and that enabled us to attract clients and good people. There was respect for doing things at a high intellectual and scientific level.

“The third important element for us was internal independence,” Etheridge adds. “SRK was a group of largely geographically separate, semi-independent businesses that contributed to the whole. That enabled us to continue to grow within Australia with a measure of independence, but with a fair degree of help.”

SRK saw the deal with EHW as strategic beyond their Australian presence. It brought a range of skills that allowed SRK to enter the exploration market with some of the best people in the world. It felt like a well-made union.

“We appreciated that Andy saw we brought another vein of business,” Etheridge says. “I got the impression he had to push pretty hard in some parts of SRK, because they thought they were already covering off that area. Brian Middleton was heavily involved in the process as well.”

The merger allowed SRK to offer the Australasian market its own renowned mining services along with EHW’s specialisation in geology and exploration. “There was almost nobody else who had those two services together in Australia or Asia,” Etheridge says. “It was one of those classic 1 + 1 = 3, if you could get it right.”
PROJECT: Raleigh Underground Feasibility Study
Kundana District, Western Australia, Australia

CLIENT: East Kundana Joint Venture

SCOPE: In 2002, the client commissioned SRK’s Australasian practice to conduct a feasibility study of the Raleigh underground gold project.

The project was the Australasian practice’s first large, multidisciplinary study. Running from 2002 until 2003, the project covered a wide range of core technical disciplines from resource estimation through to financial modeling. Given the practice’s relatively small size at the time, SRK SA, SRK-Turgis, associates and associate organisations were brought in to assist with the study.

Two different mining approaches were considered for the project. The first involved a highly selective mining method with relatively high operating costs.

Following a review of this method, an alternative approach using larger mining equipment was investigated. While increasing dilution, this method would boost productivity and lower costs. This second option was therefore selected.

OUTCOME: The mine was constructed and continues to operate today.

The inset images show the planned mining sequence for each of the first six years of operations. The focus in year one is construction of the underground decline and stopes (horizontal access tunnels). As operations continue deeper underground and the ore is removed, the voids are paste-filled to provide support for the lower levels.

The large image to the right shows the final phase in year seven.
Integration and Expansion

Brisbane and Perth offices were immediate beneficiaries of the merger. The Brisbane group expanded into geochemistry and environmental work when John Chapman and Tracey Delaney transferred from North America in 1998 to join Kim Bryceson. Chapman had joined the Vancouver office in 1990 with a specialty in geochemistry for mine waste and tailings. His emphasis was on water quality prediction and water quality impact assessment for mining projects from inception through to closure. He had also contributed to ESIA, operational management strategies and closure plans.

Chris Langton was appointed in 1999 to start up a water department.

Geoff Bull arrived in Perth from Zimbabwe a few months after the merger. He marketed his caving expertise — and that paid off. The most significant initial contract was with Newcrest Mining Ltd. in New South Wales. Chris Page, who had been working regularly in Australia and consulting to Newcrest, introduced the Australian team into the project.

Scott McEwing, Wayne Trenning and John MacIsaac joined the mining team in Perth, and it wasn’t long before the office was running two major feasibility projects: the Ridgeway sub-level cave design, and a study on a narrow-vein underground gold mine in Raleigh, Western Australia. These two projects provided a platform for future growth.

“We took the Ridgeway sub-level cave mine right from concept through to final feasibility study. It was, I would say, a textbook caving operation that we designed,” Bull says. “It turned out to be an extremely successful operation.”

Danny Kentwell helped with the computer modeling and design and recalls the team regularly doing 70-hour weeks to keep the project on track.

“We also did a lot of work for sub-level caving operations at Western Mining’s nickel operations,” Bull adds. “They were really battling, and the changes that we made were very significant in terms of productivity because of the better layouts, designs and ways of going about their work. There was also work at the perpetually troubled Mount Lyell copper mine in Tasmania.”

Kentwell opted to take an opportunity to work with SRK in South Africa following the merger.

“There was a chance to work in the Congo. I took a six-week stint that turned into six months in Johannesburg,” he says. “I was also working quite closely with guys from Cardiff — Martin Pittuck, Iestyn Humphreys and John Suthers — who all turned out to be key principals for SRK in several offices in the coming years.”

Kentwell returned in early 1999 to the new and much bigger Perth office. The geological and geostatistical element in the firm had been bolstered and he was in his element. Kentwell did a range of 3D modeling and
design work for a year in Perth before moving to the SRK office in Brisbane.

Henley, who ran the merger process with SRK from initiation to conclusion, almost immediately began negotiating the important 1998 takeover of Geoval, a small Australian consulting practice specialising in resource geology. It had been created several years earlier as a joint venture between the Paris School of Mines and Areva, the French uranium-supply organisation. It was another important strategic move — the new SRK Australia unit had not a single resource geologist who could provide the necessary input to support a full mining or financial services study. The EHW structural geologists could establish the parameters of the ore body; resource geologists were needed to turn that information into a comprehensive evaluation of the ore body’s economic potential and the expected value of a mining property. This merger brought into the practice Daniel Guibal and John Vann. Guibal was an icon in the field of geostatistics from his early work at the Paris School of Mines in Fontainebleau, where he was a senior research engineer. He joined Geoval in 1991 from Silomines in Sydney.

Etheridge moved to Sydney in February 1998 and opened an office to bring SRK closer to the country’s mining-financing industry headquartered there.

**James Clegg**

Joins SRK Perth in 2000 as CFO with the mandate to integrate operations more closely with SRK Global

**Equinox Resources**

Four years of major mine-based studies and regional interpretations on the Zambian Copperbelt

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**PROFILE: Cam McCuaig**

Born in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Cam McCuaig obtained an undergraduate degree in geology from Lakehead University, his local university. He continued his studies at the University of Saskatchewan, and in 1996, completed a PhD in geology (on gold deposits in Australia) before being hired by Etheridge Henley Williams (EHW), an Australian-based geoscience consultancy.

McCuaig worked out of Calgary for about a year then transferred to the Perth, Australia, office in 1997, just before SRK and EHW merged. He still remembers Andy Barrett and Chris Page working to smooth the transition. “We were very fast-moving and innovative in those days, and it was a great group to work with,” McCuaig says. “I did everything from greenfields exploration to mine-based geology and project valuations. I became the geology manager of the Perth office and then all of Australia.”

During this time, McCuaig’s work spanned six continents; geological terranes aged from Archean to Eocene; and commodities including gold, nickel, iron, copper, uranium and zinc. He joined SRK’s Global Principals Group in 2003 and became a director of the Australasian practice in 2004. Shortly afterwards, in August 2005, he left to assume the prestigious post of director for the Centre for Exploration Targeting, now a global leader in mineral exploration geoscience research.

“I cried the day I left,” he says. “I loved SRK.”

Mapping the Tanjianshan Au project on the edge of the Tibetan plateau near the Handmaiden’s Tomb. The tomb, on a small pinnacle at the base of the distant mountain, is where a Mongolian princess died on her way to marry a Tibetan prince.
“My wife and I wanted to move there, and so I pushed it, even though we were still struggling pretty hard in the Australian practice,” he says. “SRK gave me every support, and we grew into a pretty successful office. I was grateful that my personal needs were taken into account, which is one of the great cultural things about the organisation — it’s trying to look after people.”

He was joined later by Stuart Munroe, and they formed the core of the new team in that office.

But the deal making, and the downturn in commodities that occurred almost immediately afterwards, took its toll on Henley. He eventually came to the conclusion that the new arrangement and all the extra stress didn’t work for him. Within two years of bringing SRK and EHW together, Henley had left the new firm.

Middleton, who had resumed an international co-ordination role, negotiated with the remaining principals on who would lead the company. Williams assumed the helm of SRK Australia with Henley’s departure in August 1999.

Up until then, Canberra had been the headquarters, with smaller offices in Brisbane and Perth. By the turn of the millennium, though, Perth had eclipsed Canberra. It was now not only by far the largest office, with half of the total Australia staff complement, but it also was generating most of the business opportunities. During his first year as managing director, Williams decided it was a mistake to maintain the company’s financial nucleus in Canberra.

In mid-2000, Williams moved the administration and financial offices to Perth, establishing a new SRK Australia headquarters. He also hired James Clegg, a CPA, as his chief financial officer in August 2000. Clegg had grown up, earned his degree and worked in the wine industry in Adelaide before moving to Perth where he had extended family and the economy held more promise. He completed his MBA there.

“My first day at SRK, I hopped on a plane and went to Canberra to make myself familiar with the finances of the company,” Clegg says. “I was in Canberra for two weeks. I must admit I didn’t feel very welcome and there was an undercurrent of resentment. But it all worked out.”

Williams was determined to integrate the Australian operation more closely with the global SRK group and to return the company to a much stronger financial footing. However, the mining industry was still in recession, and commodity prices were going nowhere.

In an effort to weather the downturn in the marketplace, a number of changes were made in Brisbane and Perth in particular. The Brisbane office employed Don Hunter to provide mining services, Kentwell relocated from Perth to mix mine planning and resources while Chapman focused on the environmental side. Andrew Vigar, a resource geologist, was recruited in early 2001 to rebuild the geology team in Brisbane.

Clive Seymour understood why SRK Global had merged the Australian office with EHW, but he was never thrilled about the outcome. The autonomy and freedom Seymour and the others had enjoyed in the small SRK office were more constrained in the new entity — simply because of its size.

“SRK Australia went from 5 people to 50 people overnight,” Seymour says. “The whole emphasis of the company also swung around to the geology side of the business, which is what the EHW people specialised in, rather than the mining service that we provided. It was difficult. I hung on for a couple of years after the merger.”

Gary Dempers, one of the original three amigos, left to start his own practice in 2000; Seymour joined him about a year later.
Deborah Lord, who had been working for EHW out of her home in Chile for only a couple of months when the merger occurred, returned in September 1999 from Santiago with numerous stories, including one about a mine in Peru at about 5,000 metres altitude.

“It was quite extraordinary — the local artisanal miners were mining gold underneath a glacier that was absolutely spectacular,” she says. “I had to go in and advise the Peruvian company on the deposit’s potential and how they might come to terms with it, because there were thousands of local people living on the property, in a mountain village beside the glacier, doing artisanal mining. It was probably the most amazing place I’ve ever done fieldwork.”

She had spent her final months in South America working in the SRK office, where she got to know Steffen.

“Oskar came through the Santiago office regularly,” she says. “The Chileans were very social and at the Friday Happy Hour they would take out their guitars and sing. Oskar was always trying to get me, or actually anyone, to sing with him in English.”

Upon her return to Perth, however, Lord found herself working on a portfolio of early stage exploration assets and subjecting them to SRK’s newly developed probability-based techniques for valuation.

“We applied those techniques in a real situation for the first time, and it was very successful. I ended up specialising in that area, and with Peter Williams, we really developed it,” Lord says.

New sources of data, particularly satellite and other imaging that became available in the early 1990s, arrived as emerging interpretive tools triggered a reassessment of traditional geophysical data. SRK Perth moved aggressively to develop expertise in this exciting emerging area.

“Initially, it was a small number of people and the projects were fairly small,” Williams says. “But that was the key driver of the business in Perth. We had four or five people just doing that on the geological side.”

From 2001, the Perth geology team consolidated around Cam McCuaig, Jun Cowan, Deborah Lord and Nicki Netherway. Williams juggled management responsibilities and major studies undertaken by Equinox Resources on the Zambian Copperbelt. It was four years of geological interpretation and fieldwork supporting an Anglo American–Equinox exploration joint venture. McCuaig was heavily involved in Australian and West African mine-based studies and regional interpretations.

Despite early challenges, with Williams pushing for some changes at an SRK global level and encouraging market growth in key business areas together with assistance from Steffen and Middleton on the SRK Australia board, the merger began bearing fruit. Most importantly, the prolonged downturn in the local commodity markets that began in 1998 ended in 2002.

During the downturn, SRK Australia was looking at ways to improve visualisation and analysis of 3D structural geological data. Nothing practical was available to contour data in 3D: everything was done by manual interpolation between observation points. Jun Cowan saw results from a New Zealand software company on the Web and approached them to learn more. They had solved the problem, but in the medical sphere, using implicit modeling without the need for manual interpolation. Thus, Leapfrog was born. A three-year development program was spawned by negotiations between Williams and the New Zealand company chairman, which resulted in the development of a completely revolutionary 3D geological and mining modeling package.
As recently as 1999, the idea of structural geology as a key component of mineral deposit interpretation and a cornerstone of geological modeling was a foreign concept in the mining industry.

Structural geology consultant Dr. Jun Cowan (SRK Perth) changed that in 2001 with his use of 3D interpolation methods for geological modeling. His combination of rapid 3D interpolation with structural geological practice resulted in rapid geological modeling and the development of Leapfrog software.

Cowan led the design and marketing of Leapfrog from 2001 to 2007 as general manager of Zaparo Ltd., a joint venture company formed by SRK Consulting Australia and Applied Research Associates NZ. More than a decade after its inception, Leapfrog software is a best seller and has revolutionised how geologists and mining companies interpret and model deposits from drill-hole data. Thanks to SRK’s innovation, modeling tasks can be performed in hours instead of weeks, resulting in significant cost savings.

The ability to visualise an ore deposit in 3D in minutes, rather than digitising shapes on screen for weeks, was a monumental boon to the mining industry.

“I produced these two images as a demo in 2001 to illustrate what Leapfrog could generate from the same data,” says Cowan. “The angular wire-frame ‘Pre-Leapfrog’ image was generated with Gemcom software, and the smoothly modeled ‘Leapfrog’ image was generated with a command-line code which was the precursor to Leapfrog. At that time the product was still in development and we had not named it yet!”

The large image on the right is the Boddington gold deposit modeled in 2009 with Leapfrog.

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The large image on the right is the Boddington gold deposit modeled in 2009 with Leapfrog.
The rebuilding of the practice began in earnest in 2002, with the appointment of Paul Hodkiewicz in the geology section and Amanda Buckingham in a geophysics section. The combination of Hodkiewicz, Buckingham and Williams created the right basket of skills to tackle the large Arctic Platinum geology project, which established SRK Australia as a key supplier to Gold Fields Exploration. Williams's initial work on the structural evolution of the host intrusion to the platinum, based on geophysical interpretations by Buckingham and geological logging and mapping on site by Williams, was groundbreaking. Hodkiewicz followed up by applying the Leapfrog technology to the mineralisation, and revolutionised the approach to drilling and resource estimation. The targeting work resulted in additional discoveries and new concepts on PGE metal remobilisation into basement structures.

Major clients then started to arrive: Shell Exploration, the Aluminum Corporation of China, WMC, Gold Fields and Placer Dome.


Bull hired a top open-pit engineer named Sjoerd Duim to join his mining team in February 2003. On the back of his expertise, the Perth mining team achieved a major coup in 2004 when it successfully tendered for the massive Olympic Dam expansion project pre-feasibility study. This involved engineers and geologists from a range of SRK worldwide practices. It positioned the mining and geotechnical teams for further expansion. Scott McEwing was also providing innovative solutions to clients, and landed a major mining project for Fortescue Metals in 2004.

In Papua New Guinea, Haines negotiated the Ok Tedi Mining open-pit expansion, drainage tunnel and underground conversion project, a massive undertaking for the geotechnical team. That developed into an ongoing client relationship managed by de Bruyn.

The geology and resources business units were combined, providing synergy and strong revenue growth. Williams also decided to start a tailings and waste initiative, which led to David Luppnow from the Reno office joining in March 2007, and that November, Caroline Holmes, who had enlisted with SRK in Johannesburg in 1994 before moving to Perth earlier in 2007.

In April 2007, Geoff Bull left to join Fortescue Metals Group Ltd., the world's fourth-largest iron producer.
PROJECT: Sydney Basin
Regional Structural Framework and Structural Risk Analysis, New South Wales, Australia

CLIENTS: Xstrata Coal, Anglo Coal Australia Pty Ltd., Excel Coal Pty Ltd., BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto Group, Centennial Coal Company Ltd., Whitehaven Coal Mining Ltd., Sydney Gas Ltd., and CSIRO’s Division of Petroleum Resources

SCOPE: SRK was appointed in 2003 to conduct this key basin study for a group of four clients. The study’s principal goal was to provide the clients with a GIS-based, integrated, regional-scale geological data set and interpretation applicable to resource exploration and mine geological studies, mainly in the area of structural risk management. In 2005, the study was updated for a group of 9 clients and a follow-up study of two major black coal basins in Queensland was later conducted on behalf of 12 clients.

The project provided an excellent opportunity for SRK Australia’s geology team to showcase the company’s capabilities to a wide range of clients. It also enabled the team to evolve from offering niche structural geology risk services to delivering a broader range of consulting services. The study’s initial release budget was very tight, necessitating an aggressive timetable.

OUTCOME: The data sets produced during the study have been used extensively, including in support of mineral exploration and evaluation work. “Anglo Coal Australia is very satisfied with our participation in SRK’s Sydney Basin structural synthesis study,” said Dr. Peter Jorgensen, project geologist (Growth & Strategy) of Anglo Coal Australia Pty Ltd. at the time of the study. “We have used the project database on a number of occasions to date, both for general information purposes and for specific geological projects. We believe the data package to be a good compilation of applicable information, and as it has been provided in a format that can be easily integrated into our existing geological databases, it has been very straightforward to use.”

Base of Permian surface for the Sydney and eastern Gunnedah basins; model initially developed in 2003, updated in 2005.

Inset image shows the Permo-Triassic boundary contours (defining the top of the coal-bearing sequences).
In Sydney, Etheridge's plan to build the company's financial work also paid dividends. From the start, he landed a major due diligence coal project in China. He hired Mike Warren in August 2000 to lead the team, and Warren became the business manager in the Sydney office.

Warren held a degree in mining engineering and had worked around the world in every conceivable mining environment before returning to Sydney to do an MBA and become involved in the due diligence side of the industry. He worked first for Barclays Bank and then the former Düsseldorf-based WestLB AG, a West German state bank.

“I was employee number three in Sydney,” he says. “Mike Etheridge was employee number one. And then Stuart Munroe came to work with him from the Canberra office. He was number two. We were subletting office space from a company that was a friend of SRK, and we grew from there.”

The office soon offered a full range of services in geophysics, geology, mine engineering, project evaluation and environmental science, and had a raft of clients, including Mitsui, Posco and assorted Chinese companies wanting to list on exchanges outside China, heavily utilising SRK's financial capabilities and reputation.

By 2004, however, the trans-Pacific travel had taken its toll on Etheridge and he decided to ease back and move to part-time, finally leaving the business to take on a portfolio of board roles in 2005.

Sydney received another boost in 2007, when Williams, Chapman, and Warren, together with Daryl Hockley from SRK North America, negotiated the transfer of a small consulting arm from the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation, specialising in waste management and characterisation, the acquisition further bolstering the environmental credentials of SRK in Australia.

In 2007, Kentwell, the longest-lasting of SRK Australia's original employees, asked Peter Williams if there was potential for a Melbourne office as he and his family wished to relocate. Williams told Kentwell that he thought it was a great idea. The Perth office had grown to 50 and the company to 80 permanent staff by then, and there was a need to service Australia's second-largest city.

“I sat in Melbourne effectively on my own for a year while I sorted out budgets and things to get the Melbourne office up and running,” he says.

Building a network and marketing were not Kentwell’s strengths.

“I’m not an entrepreneur or a salesman,” he says. “I’m a very technically focused guy. To try and build that office was quite slow work and difficult for me. Louis Bucci, who’s a more outgoing personality, came to Melbourne from the SRK Perth office to assist. It took us a number of years before we got any real traction.”

With Peter Fairfield’s hiring in March 2011, they built up the Melbourne group to 13.

Chris Woodfull joined SRK’s geology team in the middle of 2001 in Sydney, working mainly with Etheridge and Stuart Munroe to help develop a broader platform of work in the local coal sector. At the time, the team provided only niche structural geology skills to the sector, most notably through some successful structural-risk-focused interpretive work at the Springvale Coal Mine.

Coal work was a bit thin on the ground, apart from Centennial projects, until the team was successful in getting four companies to support what turned out to be the initial phase of work on the Sydney Basin structural framework study, carried out over eight months in 2003 and released in January 2004. The success of this study, in conjunction with the start
of a small coal resource geology team, played an important role in SRK’s gaining broader recognition within the Australian coal geology market. Further major multi-client studies were undertaken, with the Newcastle office commencing in 2005 on the back of a second phase of the Sydney Basin study and the start of a much larger Bowen-Surat study.

As a result of these studies, a wider range of coal geology-related work developed. The Newcastle office was based in black coal country and provided a range of geological services that included minerals exploration and mining/resource geology.

In spite of the challenges created by the global financial crisis, in 2010, SRK Australia had more than 100 employees, with staff in Perth, Brisbane, Newcastle, Sydney and Melbourne.

“When I joined in 2000,” Clegg says, “I thought we were just a small service company and I would probably be here for about three years, because I quite like to have a variety of different experiences. But I’ve stayed because the company keeps changing. It’s not the same company I joined a decade ago. It keeps evolving into something new and that has been exciting.”

SRK saw the Perth office as not only a beachhead in Australia, but also as a future gateway to the burgeoning markets of the Pacific Rim. With an interest in the potential of China, Warren, Williams and Clegg moved to establish a Beijing office in 2004. Southeast Asia was also crying out for attention as a region of future potential, and a strategic presence, and SRK Australia established an Indonesian practice with an office in Jakarta in January 2009.

In 2008, Williams had decided it was time to retire from the hurly-burly of management and return to his consulting roots. In 2009, the Australian board started a formal succession process led by Warren. Middleton was selected as the new managing director and took over from Williams in March 2010. Two major initial objectives were to strengthen the east coast offices and to diversify the services offered by the company. He achieved both, as the company grew to nearly 200 staff by June 2012.