

Veteran set to turn 109

By LINDA CANN

THE last World War I veteran in Australia, and possibly the oldest man in the country, is set to reach another major milestone when he turns 109 next week.

Claude Choules, who served in Britain's Royal Navy in WWI and the Australian navy in World War II, will celebrate his birthday on March 3 with family at Gracewood Hostel in Salter Point.

When he was born, Orville and Wilbur Wright were still two years away from successfully flying at Kitty Hawk, Australia had been a federation for a matter of months and the British Empire was still mourning the death of Queen Victoria after a 64-year reign.

Mr Choules' daughter, Anne Pow, said he was still able to communicate "when he wants to" and had his favourite treats — chocolates and mango juice — on hand.

"He has his ups and downs. Some days he's talkative and some days he's not so responsive, but he always knows when we're there," Ms Pow said.

Mr Choules, who had a 41-year career as an explosives expert, has lost most of his hearing and sight, but remained active until a few years ago. Born in Wyre Piddle, near Pershore Worcestershire, he was married for 80 years to Ethel, a Scottish children's nurse, who lived to 98.

Mr Choules wrote an autobiography, *The Last of the Last*, which was released late last year, making him the world's oldest first-time published author.

There had been a flurry of interest in Mr Choules from around the world since he became Britain's last surviving



BACK IN CLAUDE'S DAY (1901)

Population

Australia 3.8 million
WA 193,601
Perth 70,700

Life expectancy

Men 55.2 years
Women 58.4 years

Unemployment rate

3.9 per cent

Average weekly wage

\$4.35 for 50 hours

■ Australia's first car, the petrol-driven Tarrant, was manufactured in South Melbourne

■ The world's first aircraft was still two

years away

- Loaf of bread 2c
- Milk 3c a litre
- Average weekly rent for a three-bedroom house \$1.30
- A newspaper 1c
- Queen Victoria dies and eldest son Prince Albert Edward becomes King
- Ragtime music growing in popularity
- First UK cinema opens
- Federation of Australia
- Edmund Barton becomes first Prime Minister of Australia

Ongoing wars:

- Second Boer War (1899-1902),
- Thousand Days War (1899-1902) and Philippine-American War (1899-1913)
- WA had four premiers during the year
- Football admission 10c
- Essendon beats Collingwood 6.7 (43) to 2.4 (18) in the VFL grand final on September 28
- Victoria wins the Sheffield Shield
- Most popular babies' names John and Mary

To assist in making comparisons, 1901 prices have been converted to decimal amounts, with \$1 equal to half a pound. Price statistics sourced from ABS.

LONG INNINGS: Claude Choules with daughter Anne Pow last year; in the British navy in World War I; Australia's first car, the Tarrant; and the view from Crawley towards Kings Park at the turn of the 20th century.

World War I veteran last July, but he didn't care much for the records any more.

"He doesn't do interviews anymore — it's too exhausting for him," Ms Pow said.

"And the sort of questions he's always asked, he's not so interested in any more.

"He's had: 'What do you think about the war?' questions over and over again and he's bored with all that now, not interested.

"When we talk about the past, it's about something we've shared as a family that's interesting to him.

"People always ask, 'What do

you put your long life down to?' and he says, 'I just keep breathing'."

"He's very much a man of his time — a very good man. He was a wonderful father and still is."

While serving aboard HMS Revenge, Mr Choules witnessed the surrender of the German Imperial Navy in 1918.

In 1926, he was seconded to the Australian navy, in which he served until 1956. But Mr Choules always told his children that, though war featured moments of high danger, it was boring for much of the time.

Ms Pow said her father, who met his wife on a voyage to Australia, was a very devoted husband.