

Classic Yacht Association

O F A U S T R A L I A

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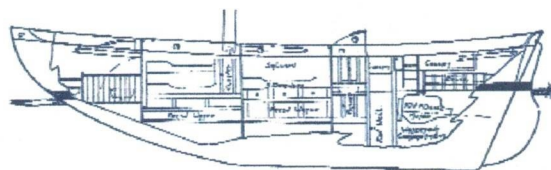
UNKNOWN LEGENDS

England has its yacht designing legends, such as Charles Nicholson and Robert Clark. Scotland has the Fife dynasty, and GL Watson. The list from America is too long to name here. Herreshoff 1 & 2, Stephens, Alden and Rhodes come to mind immediately. The Scandinavians have Reimers and Anker among their greats and a long list of equally talented but lesser known designers such as Bjarne Aas. The German Abeking and Rasmussen yard is renowned for design as well as construction as are the Italians at Sangermani. New Zealand's hero, Arch Logan studied under Fife, became his protegee, and went on to dominate southern hemisphere yacht design for twenty years.

There is no doubt that over the first half of the last century Australian boats competed on level terms with or even better than any nation in the world and yet we do not tend to idealise individual designers, and they tend not to be recognised on a world stage. Perhaps Chas Peel springs to mind, but his designs have always been considered derivative of his European contemporaries; perhaps the Tasmanian Jock Muir, or towards the latter part of this era Alan Payne.

Is it really the case that Australia's great boats were created by many varied but less famous designers or is the Australian habit of not fully acknowledging its artistic heroes (and yacht design of this era was surely more art than science) once again standing in the way of true recognition? Your thoughts on some of the "sleeping" Australian names from the era of Classic Yacht design would no doubt provide thought provoking reading for the next newsletter.

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Jock Muir's dual Sydney Hobart Winner *Westward*

NOT THE SYDNEY HOBART

The transition from the traditional gaff rig to the Bermudan rig in the late 1920s was accompanied by shift to the use of the RORC ratings system that seemed to provide a fairer handicap for racing. Inevitably, the boats that were built to race under these rules began to take on a new appearance. The long bowsprits were truncated and eventually disappeared. Yachts racing to RORC rules were generally sturdy, more simply handled and safer at sea. These features encouraged the proliferation of ocean racing in yachts that could handle the tempestuous conditions that typically arose in the coastal waters of southeastern Australia. One of these Australian ocean races, the Sydney to Hobart, is now among the top five ocean racing events in the world and has an appropriately high level of media interest. Many of the stars of the classic yacht association register proved their mettle in more than half century of the Sydney to Hobart. However, other Australian and Trans-Tasman ocean races have not gained the same prominence, but have provided all the same dramas and heroics of our most famous race. Some of Australia's lesser-known ocean races long predate the Sydney to Hobart race. These races provide an important legacy of stories for our fleet of classic yachts.

The Bass Strait Race

There were four entries in the 1907 Bass Strait race from Queenscliff to Devonport – the 38ft yawl *Elida* (Messrs Pool and Cobbs); the 51st ketch *Rambler* (Mr. Murphy); *Shamrock*, a 38ft Yankee yawl. (T.A. Dickson); and the 48ft yawl *Thistle* (E. Newland). They raced for a trophy offered to T. A. Dickson, Commodore of the Royal Geelong Yacht Club, by T. Fleming, editor of the American magazine *Rudder* in the hope of encouraging ocean racing in this part of the world. The race was won by *Thistle* with a time of 351/2 hours. The trophy was intended to be an annual challenge cup, but Mrs. Newland, who sailed with her husband in *Thistle* thought that yachtsmen should never again be tempted into so dangerous a race, and she flatly refused to relinquish the cup.

OCEAN CLASSICS Continued

Twenty-two years passed before there was another Bass Strait race. This was organised in 1929, at the instigation of F.J. ("Doc") Bennell, by the Royal St. Kilda Yacht Club (now the Royal Melbourne Yacht Squadron), which also donated a silver trophy. There were six entries, and the start was postponed until the yacht *Wanderer* arrived from Sydney. The Victorian yachts met *Wanderer* in Swan Bay inside Port Phillip Bay, and all the crews joined in repairing her gear and getting her ready for the race. F.J. Bennell's 42ft ketch *Oimaa* won the race to Low Head with a time of thirty-six hours. The success of *Oimaa* no doubt influenced Mr. Bennell in issuing soon afterwards a challenge to all yachtsmen for a Trans-Tasman race. How that race started is described later in this article.

The Bass Strait race was held again in 1934, the year of the Melbourne Centenary Celebrations, which also saw an ocean race from Auckland to Melbourne. This time *Oimaa* was sailed by Frank Bennell, Jr., who in 1966 was Commodore of the Cruising Yacht Club of Victoria. The 1934 Bass Strait race was from Devonport to Melbourne. *Oimaa* and *Phyllis* (W. Oxley) arrived at Port Phillip Heads together, twenty-seven hours after leaving Devonport. *Oimaa* won on corrected time.

In 1946, the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria organised a Queenscliff to Devonport race under R.O.R.C. rules, and Frank Bennell donated the "Doc" Bennell Cup in memory of his father. The entries in this first Bass Strait race after World War II were *Bluenose* (M. Burnett), *Larntarni* (W. Wakefield), *Oimaa* (Frank Bennell), *Tandanya* (Tom Clarke), *Warana* (Fred Werner), and *Landfall* (G. Lowe). *Landfall* took the race, with *Larntarni* second and *Tandanya* third.

The 1947 event again saw the entry of *Shamrock*, which had competed in the 1907, 1929 and 1934 events. She was sailed by Don Denton. The race was won by *Lorrain* (J. Savage) in half a gale. After the 1946 race it had been decided to make the Bass Strait race an annual event. The Queenscliff-to-Sydney race inaugurated by 1956 caused entries in the Bass Strait race to fall off, however, and no race was held in 1956 or 1957. The event got its greatest boost in 1963, after the Cruising Yacht Club of Victoria changed the competition rules to permit yachts with a waterline length of only 18 feet to compete. Misgivings aroused by this change among many C.Y.C.V. members were settled when the club tightened its safety rules and reserved the right, unconditionally, to prevent any yacht from starting. The relaxed entry conditions caused renewed interest in the race, and in 1963, there were thirty-two entries. It was won on corrected time by *Aiisa* (J. Marion). The South Australian yacht *Gip* (J. Polson) was first in division 2, following the 1962 decision to organise the Bass Strait race in two groups. A colourful "character yacht" in these events had been the 55ft three-masted schooner *Ile-Ola* (Geoff Wood), which raced and acted as radio-relay shop.

Queenscliff-Sydney

There were eight starters in 1956 in the inaugural Queenscliff-to-Sydney race of 540 nautical miles. It was one of the biggest fleets the race had seen, and the 52ft yawl *Winston Churchill* (G. Warner) won at the time by Sir Arthur Warner, and later by his son Graham Warner, took line honours and the race on handicap.

Victorian yachtsmen approach this event as a pre-Sydney-Hobart shake-down. It is sometimes considered an 'uphill' race, and although the fleet sails east and then north, the weather conditions and the length of the race approximate those for the Sydney-Hobart. (Landsmen often do not realise that Sydney is more east than north of Melbourne). In 1960 the fleet of four had a gale behind it practically the whole way and the hard-sailed *Winston Churchill* (G. Warner) again took line honours and the race on handicap with a course record of 71 hours, 34 minutes, 30 seconds.

Queenscliff-Portland

In 1960 the C.Y.C.V. in cooperation with the citizens of Portland, inaugurated a Queenscliff-to-Portland ocean race. This event of 166 nautical miles has since been held annually and, coming as it does in the first week of November, opens the ocean racing season in southern waters.

November is a period of unsettled weather conditions and, the Portland race being the first shakedown of yachts and crews after the winter refit, it can be very tough. In the first event, five of the nine starters retired, most of them being unable to round Cape Otway. The event was won by *Mistral III* (M. Dowd; skipper, E. Wilson), with *Winston Churchill* (G. Warner) taking line honours. Later races to Portland – up to 1965 – did not suffer quite so severely from bad weather, but crews of some boats face a time problem of getting back to Melbourne after the holiday weekend on which the race is held.

Queenscliff-Port Lincoln

By 1964, the Cruising Yacht Club of Victoria had ocean races finishing in Tasmania and New South Wales. In August of that year representatives of the tuna-fishing town of Port Lincoln in South Australia wrote to the C.Y.C.V. asking if a race could be arranged from Melbourne to Port Lincoln, finishing about the time of Port Lincoln's Tunarama festivities in January. The C.Y.C.V. welcomed the suggestion enthusiastically and invited the representatives from Port Lincoln to attend a meeting of its committee. The Vice-Commodore of the C.Y.C.V., Graham Warner, opened the meeting with a proposal that the race be held that year. The motion was quickly seconded and passed, and officials set about organising the race – a 600 mile event which, with its coastal and offshore navigation, was said by some of the yachtsmen concerned to approximate Britain's

