



HELM



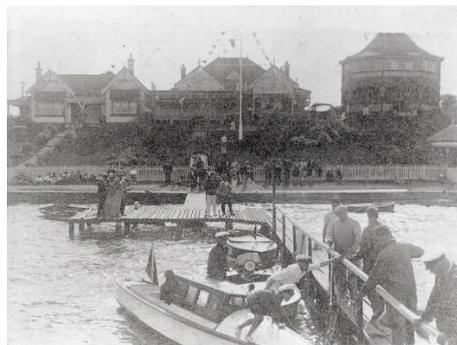
Heritage of East Lake Macquarie

DECEMBER 2018

email: helm2281@gmail.com

SAIL AWAY

In the early days of Lake Macquarie, most transport around the lake was on water, as roads either had not yet developed or were often not in a good condition. The lake drew crowds from the various mining communities and Newcastle as a venue for holidaying, recreation and sporting activities. Speers Point Park (originally known as Lake Macquarie Park) was renowned for sailing and sculling regattas held on Australia Day. Beginning in 1880, the January highlight grew rapidly, by 1904 drawing a crowd of some 10,000 people and 100s of horses and vehicles. Regattas were held at various places around the lake – such as Belmont, Toronto, Wangi, Sunshine.



1. Boat called "Blue Gum" built by James L Boyd at Swansea returning from a day excursion to sailing regatta at Wangi in 1925. Pictured off Coon Island. 2. Opening day of racing season, Royal Motor Yacht Club Toronto, 5/10/1929. 3. Horse drawn bus bringing spectators from Newcastle to Speers Point 1891. *LMCC Comm. Hist.*



We would like to extend a huge thank you for the support you have shown for HELM during the year as we have grown from humble beginnings; and our audience has grown with us. We wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. May the season be festive but safe for you. **ENJOY!**



Regattas	1-2
Yachts, clubs	2
1 st Sydney-Hobart	3
Rani; Les Steel	4

We are now on **FACEBOOK!** Check us out at: **HELM (Heritage of East Lake Macquarie).** If you have interesting stories or photos, please contact us and help keep our heritage.

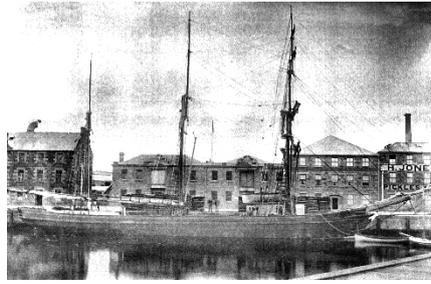


first national
REAL ESTATE | Andrew McGrath

Kindly supporting the community – including Caves Beach Surf Life Saving Club; this edition of HELM newsletter.

4972 1066 - NOW AT SWANSEA!
SWANSEA PLAZA ARCADE
Near Coles and Blondies.

“RAHRA” - AT HOBART REGATTA 1913; AT CONSTITUTION DOCK, HOBART



Building "Swansea" – adzes; frame.

“Rahra” was a 103 foot, 150 ton Lake Mac boat built at Black Ned’s Bay, 1912, by well known Swansea boat builder James L Boyd; Tom Humphreys as builders foreman. The 3 masted schooner was destined for Hobart to be part of the fastest sailing fleet, for Henry Jones (IXL products). Christened the Jam Fleet, it carried trade between Hobart and Melbourne. The “Rahra” became legendary for her record breaking performances. Her sister ship, “Swansea”, had broken all records for the Sydney – Twofold Bay run (on the south coast near Eden). *George and Noelene Boyd*

The Royal Hobart Regatta began in 1838, arranged by Governor Sir John and Lady Franklin. The festival with on-shore activities, novelty events, entertainment, as well aquatic events became extremely popular with competitors and spectators, drawing huge crowds to the Derwent River. The regatta was visited by The Queen and Prince Phillip in 1963. It is the largest aquatic carnival in the Southern Hemisphere, extending its appeal by adding fireworks, and aerial displays. [Right: Huge crowds at the Centenary Regatta, 1938.] *royalhobartregatta.com*



16s – Now the largest dinghy sailing club in Australia.

In 1922, the Belmont Sailing Club was formed as a breakaway from Toronto. The first race was held 7th October without any clubhouse; the handicap winner



LMCC

being “Aeneas” built by Tom Humphreys of Swansea. The following year a one room clubhouse was built in Brookes Parade, between the jetty and the baths. It remained there until 1952, when they were granted a liquor licence and began building on reclaimed land at Mill Creek, opening in 1954; continually making improvements.

LMYC – Belmont



The founding members held a meeting in a tobacconist/hairdresser’s shop in Hunter St, 1929. They continued to race skiffs at Toronto until 1932, when the “Old Stone Jetty” at Belmont became available. It had been built some 70 years previously and was in need of a fair bit of work. When racing first moved there, they started and finished at a timber landing on the western end of the jetty. The clubhouse opened on Sat 28th April 1934 for the Easter Regatta, unveiling the club burgee (red on white flag).



LMCC

LAKE YACHT WINS FIRST SYDNEY – HOBART RACE

In 1945 after the war, a group of sailors from the Cruising Yacht Club discussed having a cruise to Hobart from Sydney. Capt. John Illingworth, the British Fleet Engineer Officer, stationed at Garden Island and a noteworthy yachtsman, persuaded them to make it into a race. And so, on Boxing Day, 9 yachts set out to traverse the 630 nautical miles in what was to become the inaugural Sydney - Hobart Yacht race, an icon of Australian sport. One of the smallest yachts was the “**Rani**”, a double ended 35 foot cutter built by Les Steel at Speers Point. Capt. Illingworth enlisted a crew of Royal Navy officers, engineers and local amateur yachtsmen to fine tune, scrub and paint. Rani was made from Huon pine planking, copper nailed to the frame. The sails were made from hand stitched cotton; ropes - Indian hemp; mast of Oregon pine. Most of the boats were heavy cruising yachts with deep keels. In the line-up was the 52 foot “Winston Churchill”, patriotically named, and considered to be the foremost yacht in Australia; its hull was polished with floor wax so it would glide faster through the water. Radios were not compulsory back then. Rani had loaned one, but 2 valves burnt out before they set out; so, they departed with no viable means of communication. Safety controls were almost non-existent – no life rafts, rescue ships; no helicopters to rescue or guide. They sailed with only traditional navigational aids – paper charts, compasses for steering, sextants for position.

As often happens, the weather turned on the second day of the race and they had to battle against gale force southerly winds (force 9) and wild seas with waves up to 50 feet high in the Tasman Sea and across Bass Strait. The storm lasted for 36 hours and all the yachts hove to or sheltered, except for Rani. The men were exhausted as they worked hard to keep control of Rani as they headed vertically down waves, then popped back up. The main sail ripped, but was repaired by one of the crew. Water below decks floated the labels off bottles and tins, which consequently choked the bilge pump; and left no clues as to the contents of the food containers, making meals a total surprise – baked beans or custard?

Memories of crewman Ray Richmond

Race officials and the RAAF were unable to make contact or locate them in their searches. Rani had disappeared from sight and contact; even the RAAF Catalinas despatched to track boats were unable to sight Rani. It was presumed she was lost, and that in hindsight it was a mistake to let such a relatively small yacht join the race. The storm was followed by a calm, and the Rani crew despaired that they would be last as they seemed to be moving ever so slowly. A RAAF Catalina eventually spotted them in Storm Bay at the mouth of the Derwent River. As they moved up the Derwent and came closer, messages began to be flashed in Morse Code using car headlights, to ascertain that it was Rani and she was safe. Illingworth wanted to know how many boats were in; astounded by the answer that they were the first. They crossed the line and berthed at Sullivan’s Cove to a hero’s welcome at Constitution Dock, where they opened the bottle of whisky handed to them to celebrate their historic win. Rani took both line and handicap honours in 6 days, 4 hours and 22 minutes; arriving on 1st January, 1946. (The record now is 1 day, 18 hours, 23 minutes – Wild Oats 11 in 2012).

Offshore yachting

Rani entered the history books, not only as the winner of the inaugural race; but also as the smallest boat to take line honours; and one of only 6 to take the double of line and handicap honours.



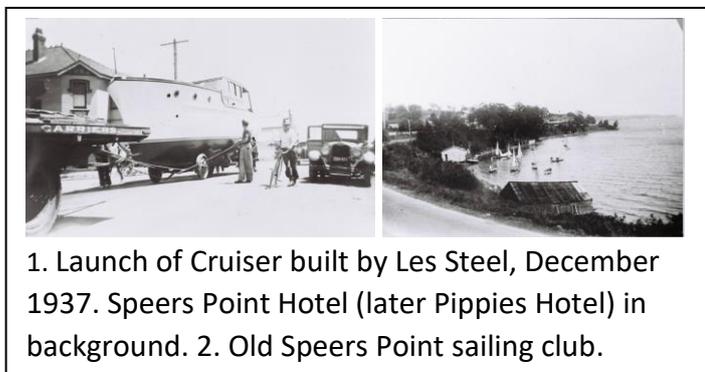
Other Lake Mac boats to enjoy success on handicap honours have been Struen Marie 1951, Rival 1961 (both built by Les Steel) and Picollo 1976. In 2017, 3 Hunter boats competed – She’s the Culprit; Dare Devil; and the 70 year old grand lady from Newcastle – Freya.

2018 will see the first all female crew on Wild Oats 10, including MP Julie Bishop.

“RANI” – THE LITTLE BOAT THAT COULD!

Before the war Les Steel built a 35 ft yacht for one of the local doctors – Dr Rowley Pittar, in 1936, called **Doris**. Designed by A C Barbour, and costing 258 pounds for materials; 358 for labour totalling 616 pounds;- engine and sails were another 600. She was built as were many other boats of different shapes and sizes at Speers Point. (Row boats, motor boats, cruisers, skiffs, yachts, VJs). Les lived 2 blocks from the water with a laneway at the back of his boat building shed. To launch the boats they had to be placed on a long cradle trolley with rail wheels; then winched on to a pair of long rails. Upon reaching the end, another set was placed in front and the boat guided onto them. Then the previous ones were manually shuffled to the front. This process was repeated many times from the boat building shed, across the main road until the lake was reached at Speers Point. She was sold in Sydney after the war by a broker to Capt. Illingsworth, who renamed her Rani. We know that despite all odds she won the first Sydney – Hobart, Dec 1945. But what happened to her afterwards? Acquired by a new owner in the late 1940s Rani was returned in 1951 for repairs and a major refit in Les Steel’s shed at Speers Point. – materials 185; 1466 hours of labour 1150 = 1335 pounds. Sadly, after her refit, she was driven ashore onto Mungo Beach, north of Port Stevens – a total loss; but fortunately, no lives were lost.

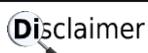
LES STEEL - THE BOAT BUILDER



LES STEEL: Born at Wallsend 1888, died 1974. He began his early career as a carpenter, building timber railway coal wagons with Pacific Colliery at Cockle Creek, further extending his skills into boat building to follow his love of the water, being a champion rower and sailor. Les built his first sail boat when he was 17 and went on to become a prolific, highly respected and renowned builder of race winning boats and yachts.

These skills were passed on to son Barry and grandson Dennis. Les designed the hulls and laid the frames; while Barry concentrated on the detail in fit-outs, metal work and engine installs. His parents had a house next to the boatyard, helping when they could. During the war, Les like most boat builders around the lake, built boats for the services. Many vessels had also been commissioned for service during the war from their private owners. After the war many had to be repaired and restored in order to be returned to their pre-war owners. Being thrifty he bought scrap lead and melted it in a 44 gallon drum, then poured it into moulds to make the keels. Les often spent his holidays on the north coast checking out timber to be brought back from friends in the timber industry - mainly cedar. Trees were selected; whilst being chopped were not allowed to crash to the ground as this often split or fractured the heavy logs. Instead they were lowered to the ground; hauled to the timber mill, processed, then trucked to Les’s boatyard. The boatshed in Speers St was a simple affair with an earthen floor; timber flooring in the section which had work benches and machinery.

Les was probably one of the original members of LMYC. A competent Builder – he was also contracted to build Speers Point Picture Theatre in the early 30’s, which became the RSL Club in 1963. Les Steel’s own and last yacht was “Caress III” – built from Huon pine and spotted gum in 1952, it was one of the fastest yachts on the lake in its day. Les continued sailing into his 80s. *Fred Thomas – “Boat-builders of Lake Macquarie and beyond”.*



: Whilst every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of the information in this newsletter, however, the accuracy of statements or opinions expressed in articles cannot be guaranteed.

© Material contained in this publication is not available for use, duplication or modification in any other publication without the express permission of the editor; published under the auspices of Lake Macquarie and Districts Hist Soc Inc.

HELM IS PRODUCED INDEPENDENTLY FROM THE EAST LAKE MACQUARIE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR MORE OF YOUR HERITAGE STORIES!!!