

Mud Flats and Flowing Tides

The History of the Newhaven Yacht Squadron

1962 – 2012

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'If you can build a boat, you can build anything.'¹

Introduction

Choosing this quote from Lars Halversen was not an accident. When I consider the history of the Newhaven Yacht Squadron this is exactly what happened. Members knew how to build boats and they went on to build a yacht club.

My own association with the Newhaven Yacht Squadron is only recent but I was struck by the enthusiasm and energy of the club when I joined them on 15 November 2008 in the celebrations to mark the opening of the new marina. This was an event attended by the membership old and new and it overflowed with the camaraderie and pride of a job well done – and with many tales of tenuous veracity. Four years later the squadron would celebrate its Golden Jubilee – just over two hundred years after the area was discovered.

When George Bass sailed his 28-foot whaleboat into this stretch of water on 3 January 1796 he found a safe haven that he believed could anchor an entire fleet. He named it Western Port, a name that for many years had puzzled my Melbourne-centric brain. What I failed to recognise, and what my future research would reveal, was that in 1796 Port Phillip had yet to be discovered and therefore this western port was the largest safe haven found west of Sydney. What Bass also discovered is what every fisherman, boatie and yachtie familiar with this region will tell you, that it is the tidal flows and mudflats that influence what you do and when you do it.

The reminiscences and tales of daring at the Opening of the New Marina Extension corroborated Bass's impressions. Boats moored apparently securely in the Gutter, that stretch of deep water in front of Newhaven, would – during particularly strong tides – find themselves drifting into Cleeland Bight or Western Port Bay depending on whether the tide was coming in or going out of the Narrows.

Yacht races were enlivened by skippers who had failed to carefully study their maps and ended up sitting out the race solidly settled on a mudflat until the next high-tide lifted them off and allowed their safe return to the marina – long after their competitors' boats were securely moored and the victors had drunk to their own successes and laughed at the misfortunes of those stranded on the flats.

Also, before the marina was constructed, people who moored their boats out in the Gutter could never reach them by taking a leisurely walk on a marina jetty. Instead, they would either row out in a dinghy or swim out with the boat's keys securely gripped between their teeth. This was followed by a rather wet sail or fishing excursion.

The boats and the sea were the reason for Phillip Island and Newhaven being settled in the 1800s. Similarly, during the 1900s families would holiday in the Westernport region, as the landmass surrounding Western Port Bay came to be known. There they met like-minded islanders who shared their love of boats and all things associated with the sea. They combined their knowledge of boats with their 'do-it-yourself' attitude and in 1962 they founded a yacht club.

The chapters in this book are named after Newhaven Yacht Squadron yachts and boats. These silent characters are the life-blood of the sailors and fishermen. They represent the enduring passion of the island, the club and its members. It comes as no surprise that the names of boats reflect this love. *Emma*, *Joalda*, *Aphrodite* and *Liesel* pay homage to the tradition of the other woman in a sailor's life. *Breakaway*, *Impulse*, *Laafin* and *Synergy* eloquently describe the feelings of their owners. Free-spirit and humour is celebrated in *Pass the Port*, *Cheers*, *Knot Awake* and *Bombora* – which in an Aboriginal dialect means a large wave and makes me wonder about the experiences of that particular skipper. *Trevally*, *Fin*, *Sea Fly* and *The Dolphin* testify to the yarns of the 'one that got away'.

It was the camaraderie and larrikinism of previous and current members that caught my attention. It is the involvement of the whole family – from grandchildren to adults – in yachting and power boat races; in the Angler of the Year and the Winner of the Biggest Other Fish competitions; in the off-shore dinghy races; in the training and safety sessions; in the 6 o'clock Drinkies, the 'bring your own' (BYO) casserole functions and formal Annual Squadron dinners; in the Opening Day Sail²Past, the cruises to the Quarry and out past the Nobbies; in the involvement with the local community, the sharing of resources, the hard work of committees and volunteers and in the development of its facilities, that ensures that this club continues to flourish while many of similar ilk have failed or languish. It is the spirit of people who enjoy each other's company and nurture each other's passions that will ensure that the Newhaven Yacht Squadron celebrates its centenary in the future.

1 Lars Halversen (1887-1936) in 'A Dictionary of Sea Quotations' by Edward Duyker, The Miegunyah Press 2007, p. 145

Acknowledgements

‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts’.²

The Newhaven Yacht Squadron, like any club, could not exist without its membership. Every person who has paid their membership supports the existence of this club. Every person who has ever made a contribution, no matter how small and irrespective of what it was, reinforces the existence of this club. Without each person’s contribution this club would not be the place it is today.

It is the nature of clubs that committee appointees, and some members, are remembered in its history but I would like to reassure the readers of this book that there are many un-named members who have made this club what it is today. It is in celebration of those un-named members that this book is written.

There are some I do need to thank by name: Ex-Commodore Hamish Hughes who first granted me permission to speak with members and to access the squadron’s archives; Ex-Commodore Noel Street who continued to provide support and encouragement for this project; Commodore Peter Buitenhuis and his committee who have driven the final stages, accepted the copyright for the work and therefore the toil that goes into final publication.

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To my husband, Robert, who introduced me to the Squadron, to his boat and to the sea and to that magical moment just before dawn when a fisherman’s hopes know no bounds.

And finally, to all members of the Newhaven Yacht Squadron over the past fifty years, congratulations on the amazing work you have accomplished. Even though we do not know you individually nor know your names, thank you for contributing to the amazing fabric that is the Newhaven Yacht Squadron.

² Aristotle 384–322 BCE