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“BUILDING TASMANIA’S FUTURE”

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The Huon Valley is a picturesque region on Tasmania’s south-east coast, known the world over for it’s remarkable natural timbers and their superior boat building building qualities. It is also the home of a unique boat school that aims to maintain traditional timber craftsmanship and construction techniques. The Wooden Boat Centre is located in the town of Franklin, and is cultivating a reputation for quality and integrity while providing a foundation for our future generations of timber boat builders.

RESPECT FOR TIMBER

Although we are presently enjoying a healthy renaissance in the awareness and popularity of classic yachts, in recent history there has been a reduction in the number of people with the skills to restore and build them. Cultural changes in Australia have seen a decline in the handing down of skills and careers from father to son, and with that decline the knowledge and experience in working with timber becomes increasingly rare. It is not your average shipwright who chooses a life of timber and varnish over fiberglass and steel. It is natural for those of us who wish to sail on the majestic classics have a compelling respect for the men who build them, and so the Wooden Boat Centre should be of great interest to all of us.

What makes this centre unique is the opportunity for students to hone their skills on the building of a large scale vessel from start to finish. From lofting to launch the students are equal partners in the endeavour. The course runs for twelve months and each student has paid a significant fee to confirm their place. During the course they will complete a series of modules before progressing to the major project, building a large scale yacht. Initial modules are intended to establish basic wood working and tool skills while giving instructors a chance to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of each student. They move on to plywood boat building, experimenting with elementary design and lofting. During the modules and throughout the major project consultants are brought in from all over the region to provide expert tuition, guidance and knowledge.

SPONSORING THE BOAT

Before the major project can proceed the centre must find a sponsor for whom the boat will be built. The sponsor pays a single fee to cover administration costs of the project, plus supplies the materials used in the construction. The current boat sponsor, an interesting fellow by the name of Kelvin Aldred, became involved after visiting the centre on holidays. Kel went one step further than just sponsoring the boat; he is one of the students in this

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year's class. We spoke with Kel about the pile of huon flitches that line one section of shed, and he explains how the wood is carefully measured to ensure minimal wastage. The manner in which he tenderly holds the slabs and planks reflects his deep respect and admiration for the wood itself – "These planks are 1200 years old. The timber we sourced was reclaimed from a river and milled into planks. We take the planks and cut them as required. It's a remarkable timber. It has taken all those years for this piece of wood to find its way into my boat. It grows at a rate of 1mm per year." You have to be patient to build a 30ft timber yacht.

Huon pine is a protected species and the remaining trees in Tasmania are largely "locked up" for preservation. The log from which Kelvin's slabs were cut came from reclaimed timber, felled trees that probably spent the last 50 years lying at the bottom of a river. Such is the quality of the timber, and its resilience to water, that less than a centimeter of the outer edge is deemed unsuitable as a result.

Terry Lean is the Principal Boat Builder at the centre, and he explains how the division of labor proceeds when building the boat, "I try and give everyone an equal taste of the different learning and application of skills. We roll through different tasks continually. One person might work with a partner doing the painting for quite a few weeks, etc, we spin the boys off into different partners to do different tasks. It works pretty well and at the end of the day we pick up all the skills from across the board." The team nature of the work is another factor that stands out at the Wooden Boat Centre. Each student is cultivating skills and knowledge alongside their colleagues and learning to work with other builders as well. There is a tendency for boat builders to work alone – maybe that's why they are increasing few!

SHIPWRIGHTS POINT

The Wooden Boat Centre was started back in 1992 by John and Ruth Young, and operated at Shipwright's Point (Port Huon) for the first two years before relocating to Franklin. There is no doubt that the original school setup by John and Ruth is a very different concept to what is now in place, yet their original vision and inspiration is clearly evident today. The first yacht built at the school in 1992 was named the "Lady Franklin", and her owner was also a student of that class – Ted Studwicke. He was not a young man when he took on the challenge of learning to build a yacht and he passed away 8 months after the launch, undoubtedly with a sense of satisfaction for his efforts.

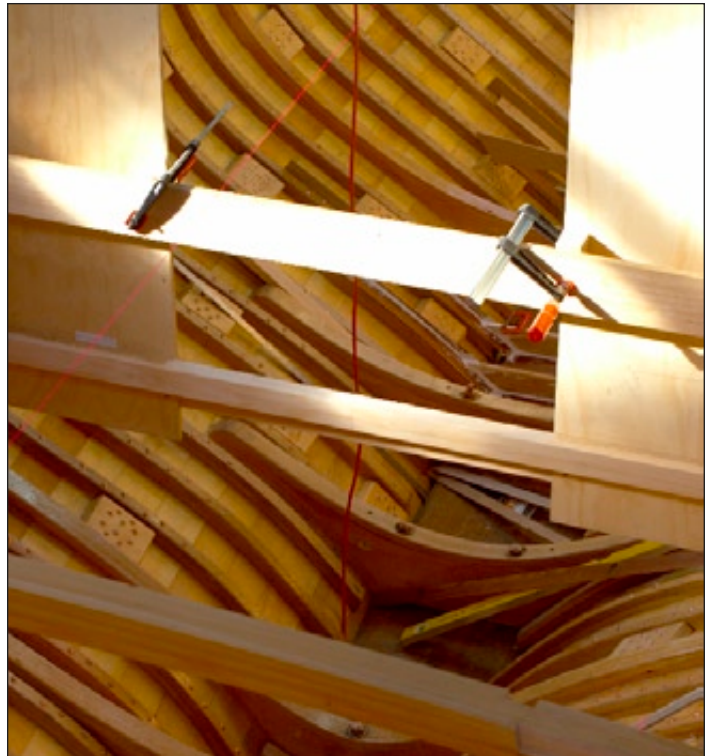
Since the year 2000 the centre has been operated by STEPS (Southern Training, Employment & Placement Solutions Inc), who have undertaken to upgrade facilities and ensure the financial viability of the centre. While boat building is not the core business of STEPS their ongoing support is a reflection of local community support and the importance of the centre to the region and Franklin itself. The centre includes the boat sheds, the school, the foreshore and marina. Its presence on the river front at Franklin is unmistakable. The next course to run will start in April 2006, and there is an application process for students who wish to join the program. A decision

has been made to move away from accreditation based learning and focus on the skills themselves. The administration demands and assessment tasks were proving too much of a burden for all concerned - the primary goal is to build the boats and give the students valuable knowledge. So for now, the boat itself is the assessment.

Grahame Dudgeon is the centre's official patron, and a more informative and passionate advocate would be difficult to find. In Grahame's own words, "I call myself the minister for enthusiasm". He laments the difficulty in bringing younger people into the wooden boat scene, and this is surely noted by the average age of this years enrolments. When we think of 'students' we think of young lads and lassies with eager minds, strong arms and soft hands - yet the majority of the class of 2005 are eager in spirit, strong in years and soft in disposition. The mix does vary from year to year of course, and it is people like Grahame that will help to convert interested observers into active participants.

Sometimes when you leave a place you end up taking some of it with you. In this instance we decided Kelvin Aldred himself was too good to leave behind, and Kel has agreed to come onboard with the CYAA as our Tasmanian representative. It would be hard to imagine an individual with greater commitment to classic boats.

By the end of this year Kel should have a brand new wooden yacht in the water. There will be a good deal of celebration in Franklin for the launch, such events are milestones for the community. They are milestones for the history of classic yachts in Australia too, another foundation laid for the future of timber boats and the preservation of traditional crafts. When we asked Kel where he will sail the yacht for his first cruise he said, "Probably Hobart I suppose – I'm just dying to go for a sail!"



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“WOODEN BOATS IN GEELONG”

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An impressive collection of beautiful classic yachts featured in the inaugural Wooden Boat Festival of Geelong, March 12-14 2005. A strong showing from the Queenscliff Couta boats plus the CYAA fleet added to the character and flavour of a well organised event which can only grow stronger in the years to come.

A MAGNIFICENT DISPLAY

As you walked down the main pier at Royal Geelong Yacht Club you were greeted with the sight of dozens upon dozens of classic wooden boats - over 60 in all. The yachts on display included double enders from as far afield as Queensland, working boats of many varieties including the Coutas, the tall ship replica *Enterprize*, cruising yachts of all shapes and sizes, and the elegant lines of a gaff rigged Fife - *Sayonara*.

Only one boat is awarded the Concourse d'Elegance however, and in the first year of the Wooden Boat Festival of Geelong a relatively young vessel called *Zuline* took away the honors. *Zuline* is a 32ft Lyle Hess designed bermudan rigged cutter. The judges were swayed by the expertise and range of traditional techniques that had gone into her construction.

A couple of other boats received a commendable mention as well; the little green Tumblaren *Zephyr*, her larger and significantly older namesake *Zephyr*, *Nellie Rose*, an impressive motor launch named *Erica*, and one of the more unique entries for the event, a canoe called *Wee Lassie*.

CORIO BAY COUTA CUP

A major feature of the festival was the running of the Corio Bay Couta Cup. I must confess to having a soft spot for the Couta boats. These straight forward working vessels are filled with character and charm. When gathered together en masse they are a formidable sight, with their wide open cabins and uncomplicated gaff rigging.

The weekend of the wooden boat festival clashed with the already scheduled National Couta Boat Championships in Sorrento, but a dedicated fleet from Queenscliff decided to join in the festival fun and make the event worthwhile. Organisers hope to avoid such problems in future, but in this inaugural year the efforts of the Queenscliff fleet to ensure an event was greatly appreciated by everyone - officials and spectators alike.

The winning yacht earned some notoriety by being the only all girl crew in the fleet - *Lyndal Lea* C911. It was a very proud Carmen Bell who accepted the award at the festival dinner and shared a few words of feminine triumph. It is encouraging to observe that the growth in popularity of sailing amongst women is not limited to the plastic yachts.

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INTERCOLONIAL CHALLENGE

The highlight of the Geelong weekend for CYAA members was to be the Intercolonial Challenge, with Grant Taylor bringing down a contingent of Historic 18ft skiffs and eager NSW crew. The Victorian lads were champing at the bit to try out these over-canvassed flyers on the wide open waters of Corio Bay. A better location would be hard to imagine. But it wasn't to be. Grant Taylor wasn't able to make the trip south with the Historic 18's as planned but did manage to send a small team of representatives, including his sons Nick and James.

In the absence of the Skiffs the CYAA Victorian fleet put up two closely matched classic yachts for the event. Barry Purcell's *Scimitar* and Mark Chew's *Fair Winds*. These two Rhodes designed sloops have very little between them - *Scimitar* being a few years older on the drawing board, a few feet longer in the water, and overall carrying more sail. *Fair Winds* has the advantage of a more modern rig and sail wardrobe. An interesting twist was added to the event when Mark Chew missed the Geelong weekend but entrusted his yacht to Damian Purcell for the duration. Damian is usually found on the foredeck of *Scimitar*, but for this Intercolonial Challenge he was found skipping head to head against his father - instead of crewing for him!

Of the two boats *Fair Winds* was deemed to have the closest connection to NSW. Geelong is pretty much a home coming for Barry Purcell's *Scimitar*, so the odds were already stacked against the northerners. A broken start to the race led to some confusion and when the wash had settled *Fair Winds* had a healthy lead running to the first mark. The second leg was a beat and the fleet divided along strategic lines - the leaders tacked towards the shoreline while *Scimitar* and a handful of other yachts headed out across the bay. When our two Rhodes yachts converged on the second mark it was evident that the local knowledge on board *Scimitar* had worked very much in her favour.

Final race results put the Victorian yacht ahead of NSW on both time and handicap. So it would seem the next generation of Purcell skippers can still learn a thing or two about sailing from the current generation. Without a doubt *Scimitar* was sailed equal to her handicap and earned the result accordingly, while *Fair Winds* may have benefited from her regular skipper had he been available. Grant Taylor can take some satisfaction as well in the knowledge that his son Nick proved himself a valuable member of the *Scimitar* crew on the day.

MORE THAN AN AMATEUR

Overall handicapped results for the Corio Bay Classic Wooden Yacht Cup put *Renene* in 3rd place (a very welcome return to sailing and competition for a fabulously presented boat following her dismasting 12 months ago), *Eleanor* in 2nd place (we really must get Stuart Stubbs to write an article one day entitled "Winning from the back of the fleet"), and none other than *Sayonara* in 1st place.

While the Intercolonial Challenge was won by Victoria the Classic Wooden Yacht Cup winner, *Sayonara*, was skippered for the race by none other than the commodore of the Sydney Amateurs Sailing Club - Rob Evans. There's no doubt that Rob has an impressive track record at the helm of *Sayonara*. Rumour has it, however, that Doug Sheilds makes one hell of a crew member and this may also be a significant factor in the yacht's success at Geelong!

The commitment to the event demonstrated by Rob Evans and his participation is greatly appreciated by the CYAA, and as our former NSW representative we do hope he will continue

to be involved - so long as he doesn't take a trophy back home with him on every visit.

WHAT MADE IT A SUCCESS

The two day event was a first for Royal Geelong Yacht Club and its Wooden Boat Festival organising committee. The committee consists of Jack Finlay, Nick Viner, Stuart Dickson, Bill Newman, Harry Farnell, Tony Minchin, Peter Spear and Rod Driscoll. Our hat is off to you gents for a wonderful event, and for the success achieved on so many levels.

Of particular merit is the terrific result to have secured sponsors for the event. Naming rights for the overall event were offered to and accepted by lawyers *Whyte, Just & Moore* of Geelong. Put simply, the festival would not have proceeded without a naming rights sponsor. In return the exposure for the sponsor is Geelong alone has been extremely worthwhile, "It's like dropping a stone in a pond - you drop it in and the ripples just continue going out".

The presentation of sponsorship was very professional, demonstrated the essence of a win/win partnership, and balanced perfectly with the quality and historical focus of the wooden boats themselves.

The committee will review whether to schedule the next festival for 2006 or 2007. They must decide if there is more advantage in keeping in sync with Hobart's Australian Wooden Boat Festival, or to run during the off years. Whenever it happens, the CYAA is looking forward to the next one.



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“LASHED TO THE MAST”

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Renene’s first ocean voyage was in the 1956 Sydney to Hobart yacht race. A day off Gabo Island they hit 80 mile an hour gales and were blown 170 miles off course. With no engine, no radio and a broken chronometer they slowly worked their way back towards Hobart. Unaware of their dramatic achievements, the crew’s families spent an anxious week waiting for news of the 33ft wooden vessel. Upon safe return to Hobart the tales of Renene’s adventure made newspaper headlines like “Lashed to the mast in yacht ordeal”.

SYDNEY TO HOBART 1956

Renene was launched in 1955, built in Hobart by Perry & Murry. The Tasmanian cutter was more of a pleasure craft than a racing yacht, but she was designed to be sailed around the world. Her entry in the 1956 Sydney to Hobart was her first blue water passage. A few days out from Sydney Harbour the weather began to build. The crew described the feeling onboard... “We were fairly scared because we had no idea how she would take the big stuff, or if she would even stand up to it.”

HOWLING GALES OFF GABO

Renene encountered the storm on the third day of racing, about a day off Gabo Island. The sails were taken in, hatches battened down, and the crew planned to ride out the storm with a sea anchor. Two hours later it had broken away and she was adrift in heavy seas.

Crewman Tom Proctor describes the experience on board Renene. “We hit the tail end of the first gale a day off Gabo Island. Then we ran smack into the middle of three other beauties. We were carried 200 miles out. We didn’t have a clue where we were. Our chronometer was ruined and we couldn’t get a sighting to fix our position.”

The many accounts published in the press describe more than 60 hours of hammering waves, 20-30ft high, 80 mile-an-hour winds, and crew lashed down to the vessel to save them from being taken overboard. Fellow crewman Graham Williams conveyed the magnitude of the situation. “Yes, we were just like drowned rats. Every 10 minutes a huge wave would pound us with tons of water. Every time I thought we were going under. Believe me, I was scared. The nights were the worst”

FEARS GROW FOR RENENE

Back in Hobart there was growing concern over the fate of Renene, compounded by reports that one yacht had lost its mast in the heavy seas off Gabo Island. Despite calls by relatives of the crew for a full scale air search, the Hobart Yacht Club regarded it

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premature to call Renene overdue. Relatives however charted aircraft to look for the vessel, and after two days of sweeps there was still no sign of the yacht within a days sail of the Tasmanian coast.

Morale among the worried families must have been low when a crewman from another competing yacht was printed in a press article saying, "If Renene went through what we did she's probably in a pretty sorry state. She could have lost every bit of sail she had."

ARRIVAL IN HOBART

Over a week since Renene was last sighted headed for Gabo Island a commercial airline pilot spotted her off Mt Tasman Lighthouse. Early the next morning she pulled into Hobart with little fanfare and an exhausted crew. They were in need of water as much as rest, having ditched drinking water during the storm to reduce weight in the boat. Renene was essentially undamaged and survived the storm with all her sails - she was in fact the only boat in the fleet to do so.

Many of the other competitors had already departed, headed for their home ports. For the friends and family present that morning it was an emotional celebration. The father of one crewman couldn't be present to welcome the arrival so wrote a short letter to convey his emotions. It reads simply:

*Just look at the worry you caused us - don't do it again please.
Come home, Dad.*

POSTSCRIPT

Current owner of Renene, Kent Bacon, has been generous and helpful in gathering the old newspaper clippings from which this article was written. His father took ownership of the yacht in 1959, and together they have competed in countless races.

In this years Scandia Geelong Week on the Australia Day weekend it was Renene who earned first place for the passage race to Geelong, first place in the re-enactment race and first place again in heat four of the Classics. Unquestionably a spirited competitor.

This story ends with a final touch of irony. On the 4th day of the 4th month of 2004 Renene was sailing home after the final heat of the Classic Yacht Association Victorian Summer Series. In a bizarre accident resulting from spontaneous equipment failure she lost her mast. No one on board was hurt, the rigging and mast was towed back to Royal Melbourne Yacht Club and Renene eventually headed home under engine.

The CYAA wishes to express our sympathy to Kent and wish him and his crew all the best to get back on the water and competing once more.



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