

PYRMONT: A MARITIME HISTORY

Peter May

Ship repair skills came with the First Fleet, all sailing vessels having carpenters, sail makers and blacksmiths as essential crew members (14 ship's carpenters were known to have sailed in the First Fleet). These skills were at first employed by Governor Arthur Philip to establish the early settlement.

When the First Fleet arrived in 1788 Darling Island was a rocky inhospitable place. For the first 40 years of European history Darling Harbour was known as "Cockle Bay", and the Island "Cockle Island".

In 1796 Governor John Hunter established a government shipyard in Sydney Town somewhere near the present day Customs House. It was originally called the King's Slipway but later the "James Underwood Yards".

Shipbuilding in Australia commenced soon after the arrival of the Second Fleet with the construction of the 10 ton "Rose Hill Packet" at the King's Slipway. This vessel was built from local timber and it was propelled by sail, oars or poles and, strictly speaking, was not a "ship" but merely a "boat". The European carpenters were not familiar with the hardness of the local timber, nor were their tools suitable to work the dense wood. The early boat builders also found difficulty with local timber as it was heavier than the oak and other European timber they were familiar with and it did not have a natural buoyancy (it sunk to the bottom rather than floated). It did not retain its shape when seasoned, and bending to shape was not as easy as traditional timbers. Later shipbuilders discovered more suitable timber and it became easy to craft timber boats needed in the colony. Nevertheless, in spite of the early difficulties with timber, the "Rose Hill" was constructed and launched in September 1789. It was used to support development along the Parramatta River, ferrying passengers, cargo and mail services between Sydney Cove and Rose Hill (Parramatta).

The first "ship" built in the colony was a three-masted schooner called the King George which was built by James Underwood and his business partner Messrs Kable and Co. at his Sydney Cove Yard in 1805. One difficulty in securing permission to build the ship was a proclamation by Governor King that no ship could compete with the East India Company's trade in the Asian Waters. However, it is probable that Governor King recognised the need for the colony to have a substantial and fast ship and so the King George was fitted out as a whaling ship and expected to work off the Eastern Australian coast.

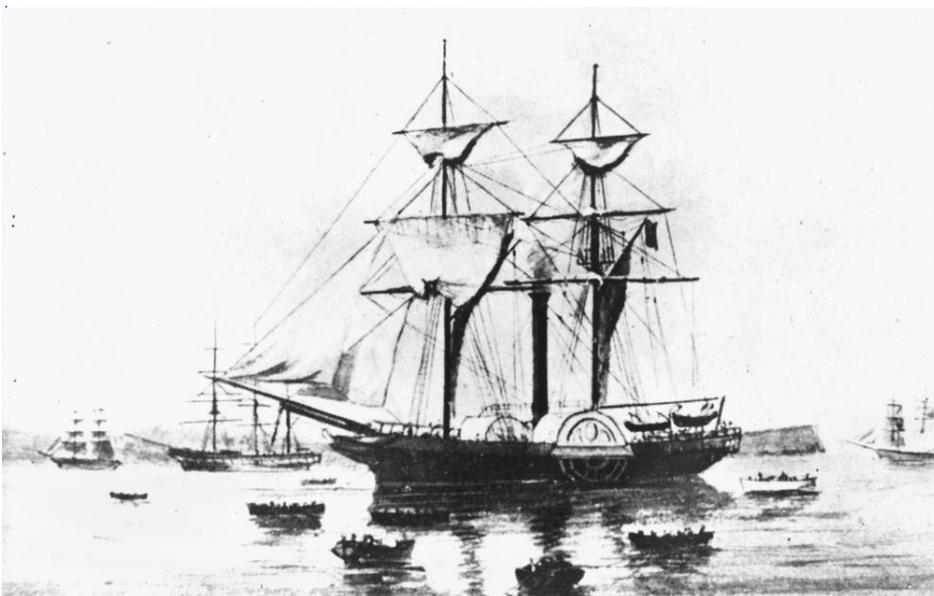
Private shipbuilding was prohibited in the early days of the colony to discourage convicts from trying to escape. It was not until 1813 that Governor Macquarie lifted the ban and a local shipbuilding industry began.

The small rocky island at the mouth of Darling Harbour was an ideal place for ship repair and shipbuilding. It was briefly known as Macarthur's Island, but Governor Darling thought Darling Island sounded better and renamed it "Darling Island". It was surrounded by deep water ship moorings and, conveniently, shallow mud flats at low tide whereby large vessels could be dragged on to land.

With the change from sail to steam propulsion in the early 19th century the need for heavy machinery and modern metal engineering facilities became essential to support the international shipping industry which, in turn, supported the developing colony.

Besides the introduction of steam-powered engines the industrialised 19th century saw ships with hulls of iron rather than timber. The colony's locally made timber-hull sailing vessels could be hybridised by fitting engines to them, usually in the form of side-mounted paddle wheels. These vessels were suitable for the river and short coastal work on which the growing colonial economy depended before roads were built. The steam engines themselves were often recovered from vessels that sailed from England and, through accident or other reasons, were broken up or abandoned. As ship designs evolved the Paddle Wheel Steamer (designated PS) was replaced with screw propellers and vessels were known as Screw Steamers (SS).

The first steam-driven vessel arrived in Sydney in May 1831 (a brig-rigged paddle steamer named "Sophia Jane").



Paddle steamer "Sophia Jane"

At the same time a locally built vessel built at Neutral Bay and named the “Surprise” was to be fitted with a steam engine and it entered service in June. Thus the Australian colonies entered the “Age of Steam”.

Companies operating the ship-borne trade both locally and internationally needed to establish repair facilities and to develop local manufacturing capability.

Shipping companies were established to operate a growing fleet of vessels - initially to conduct trade between Sydney and Newcastle (Hunter River) settlements, and progressively extended to include coastal commerce between Brisbane and Melbourne. Most vessels were purchased from shipyards in the UK, but locally built vessels were also used. The first iron hull ship wholly constructed in Australia was the “Ballarat”. It was built in 1853 and there is now a small park on the eastern tip of Darling Island to commemorate the achievement. Although trade drove the rapidly growing marine engineering enterprises on Darling Island, the skills and technical capability gathered there were put to other purposes. The vessel “The Pioneer”, a gunboat, was built to serve in the Maori Wars in New Zealand in 1863.

Shipbuilders occupied Darling Island as early as 1851 when Thomas Chowne’s shipyard built the first Manly ferry



The Brothers, First Manly ferry, built at Chowne’s shipyard

Another early pioneering shipyard was Goodlet & Smith. The need for metal workers attracted other industries such as iron foundries. Fyfes Iron Foundry was established in 1855 and the City Iron Works in 1865.

The Hunter River Steamship Company, established in 1839 to service the coastal settlement around Newcastle was reformed and moved to Darling Island as the Australasian Steam Navigation Company (1851 to 1895).

In 1855 the Australasian Steam Navigation Company (ASNC) acquired Darling Island and began building one of Australia's foremost slipways and engineering workshops. ASNC built the first iron ship (brought piecemeal from England). To develop the shipyard further the company contracted Robert Saunders (son of Pymont quarryman Charles Saunders) to level the island and connect it to the mainland.

A slipway was constructed and extended into the harbour. Workshops and sheds were built. Heavy machinery was required to handle large ships, for making boilers, casting, and machining metal.



Australasian Steam Navigation Company (ASN) works, Pymont 1871

The Darling Harbour slipway grew to become one of the major shipyards in the southern hemisphere and ASNC occupied the Island site until 1895. At its peak the ASNC operated 26 ships trading along the Australian coast and between America, Asia and Africa.

In 1899 the New South Wales Government purchased Darling Island and, as part of an extensive wharf building program, began extensive reconstruction. The Sydney Harbour Trust was created in 1900 following the outbreak of bubonic plague. The Trust was formed under an Act of Parliament in order to reclaim and redevelop the numerous poorly controlled privately owned wharves. The government intended to effect tighter control on shipping and the Sydney Harbour Trust resumed control of Darling Island. By the beginning of the 20th century Darling Island was completely lined by wharves and in continual use by overseas ships.

Extensive reclamation and quarrying changed the island and by the 1930's it was known as Pyrmont. Between 1928 and 1938 the Maritime Services Board transformed grain handling facilities to include general cargoes and built extensive railway infrastructure, wharves and sheds. After World War I an influx of European migrants saw Darling Island wharves reserved for passenger liners and, again, during World War II the Darling Island wharves served as an embarkation point for the military arriving by train from all over the country.

Thus the slipway, engineering workshops and shipbuilding ceased in Pyrmont, to be replaced by the transport interface and industrial port facilities that would remain until that too was replaced as industry gave way to residential use and urban renewal.