



North Sydney

# Heritage Leaflet

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## BOATBUILDING IN NORTH SYDNEY

**Due to its location across the harbour from the city of Sydney, boating was always an important and essential connection for the lower North Shore and its future development.**

'Watermen' like Billy Blue plied their trade as boatmen and rowed people and cargo across the Harbour from the early 1800s as can be evidenced from an advertisement in the Sydney Gazette, 2nd August 1807...

*William Blue respectfully informs the public that he being the only waterman licensed to ply a ferry on this Harbour, they will be accommodated with a tight and clean boat, an active oar and an unalterable inclination to serve those who honour him with their command...*

Many boatbuilding yards sprang up around the foreshores at Careening Cove, Neutral Bay, Lavender Bay and Berry's Bay. Some of these firms included W.M. Ford, Holmes Bros., Dunn Bros., Groom Bros., Neptune Slip and Engine Co., Woodley's, and Lars Halvorsen's.

Many fine boats and ferries were constructed at these yards and portray a long and handsome marine history. These included the "Lady Hopetoun" built by W.M. Ford, the "Woy Woy" built by the Dunn Bros., and the "Ena" built by W.M. Ford for Thomas A. Dibbs of "Graythwaite", a Commodore of the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron.

The first steam vessel to be constructed in Australia, the ferry "Surprise", was built in 1831 at Mallard's boatyard, Neutral Bay. Quiberie Park, an Aboriginal name to honour the area's original inhabitants, at the foreshores of Lavender Bay features the remains of the Neptune Engineering Slipway. Historic markers highlight the former boat-building heritage of the Lavender Bay area. Disputes over the erection of the boat yards arose from time to time by the local residents who found the yards noisy and untidy. However, not all objected to them and some even felt the yards were essential for local industry and development. Some of them supported a petition favouring the erection of a boat shed on the waterfront in Ben Boyd Road by Lars Halvorsen.

Mystery and intrigue has also played a part in the history of North Sydney's local boatbuilders. The infamous 'Shark Arm Case' can be traced to the boat yard of the Holmes Bros. The investigation of the Shark Arm Case led the police to a network of conmen, forgers and smugglers. The police were able to identify the man belonging to the arm, disgorged by a shark in the Coogee Aquarium in 1935, via a tattoo. The man was a known small-time criminal who had connections with Reginald Holmes, the North Sydney boatbuilder. These macabre sequences of events eventually led Reginald Holmes to his death and the mystery of the Shark Arm Case remains unsolved.

### **"Boatsheds all around"**

Boatsheds, workshops and wharves dotted the water's edge of Berrys Bay for much of the 20th century. Well-established boatbuilders such as William Dunn, Walter Ford and William Langford moved their yards to the bay in the 1870s.

W.M. Ford established in 1870 in Berrys Bay was a thriving yard known for its well-built yachts. By the 1920s it was described as 'probably the most extensive works in Sydney'.

The Stannard family were intimately connected with the maritime industry in Sydney Harbour beginning in the mid nineteenth century when watermen still rowed passengers across the harbour. Stannard Bros Launch Services later operated from Man O' War Steps but sites in Careening Cove, Lavender Bay and finally, Berrys Bay were important to the business.

On the eastern shores of Berrys Bay, for over 50 years, Groom Bros operated a ship engineering and marine yard. Albert Groom and two of his brothers founded the business in 1938. The firm moved from its waterfront location in 1992.

Another well known boatbuilding family with long connections with Berrys Bay was the Barnetts. Four generations of the Barnett family lived in McMahons Point and built boats. Bill Barnett was renowned as one of Sydney's finest

wooden boatbuilders. Sailing dinghies, 18-footers and America's Cup yachts have were all crafted in the Barnett shed in Berrys Bay.

### ***"All the vessels coming and going"***

Boatbuilding came to Lavender Bay in the same period when William Dunn established his business on the western side of the bay (before relocating to Berrys Bay). Small boat yards also sprang up on the eastern shore. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became a thriving strip of engineering workshops, launch and yacht building yards.

The last major boatbuilding and engineering yard in Lavender Bay was Neptune Engineering and Slipway Company. For almost quarter of a century, the site at the head of the bay was used for boatbuilding and ship repairs. Four generations of the Meredith family have worked in the business. The company moved from its Lavender Bay site in 1987.

Bob Gordon continued a tradition of family boat building in Lavender Bay extending back to the 1870s. He first came to Lavender Bay in 1937. He built his last boat at the historic Neptune Engineering site in Lavender Bay in 2005.

### ***"Far Enough Away"***

Neutral Bay and Careening Cove also had a number of well-established boatbuilders including Sandemans, Hayes Bros, Pritchard Bros, Pattons and Halvorsens.

Former Kirribilli resident Bob Kirk spent much of his leisure time and working life on the harbour and around the foreshores of Neutral Bay. He recalls working for Sandeman who had the slipway and moorings in Careening Cove near the Ensemble Theatre:

*If he wanted a job done, painting or something, I'd work and other fellows would work too if the job came in [and it] had to be finished in a week...*

*there was Hayes Brothers. Hayes built beautiful big boats. They built the first boat that sailed around the world from Australia. It was called the Sirius. And then next door to them was Pritchard Brothers...well they were in the speedboat business. They got hit badly with the Depression.*

### **Interviews held in the Merle Coppel Oral History Collection, North Sydney Heritage Centre**

- Bill Barnett OH 78
- Donald Barnett OH 171
- Bob Gordon OH 68
- Alan & Hilda Gill OH 25
- Albert Groom OH 8
- Harold Halversen OH 162
- Reginald Holmes OH 20
- Robert Kirk OH 167
- Peter Meredith OH 7
- Frederick Orreill OH 175
- Allan Stannard OH 176
- Bob Gordon: Lavender Bay Boat Builder (DVD) available for viewing and loan

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