



Memories of Oxley Sailing Club

Recollections from the period 1955 to 1958 by Anthony Goodwin ©

Memories of Oxley Sailing Club—

-----Where to begin? I haven't thought seriously about that marvellous part of my youth for more than four decades and yet the images, the smells and the feel come flooding back easily:

- memories of a way of life now largely disappeared,
- friendly people whose faces are clear but whose names are not, and
- sailing methods, technology and materials that are now only suitable for the museum.

I'll use a few headings to list out some of the recollections that I have. But first, a disclaimer. This is by no means an official history of the period. I was between 12 and 15 years of age at the time and there are many recollections here that may not be accurate. In particular I will not have remembered many of the names of the senior members at the time.

Chelmer and Graceville

In those days, we still had milk, ice and bread deliveries by horse and cart and Mum did the washing in a copper, usually on Mondays. If she needed a new clothes' prop for the washing line, an obliging vendor walked through the suburb selling his wares. You could hear him coming from a great distance: "CLAWWWWDS PRAARRRRPS!! CLAWWWWDS PRAARRRRPS" his raucous voice would cry. They were forked saplings that he had cut from the bush probably that morning.

The Postman delivered twice a day and also on Saturday morning. He lived across the road and if there was any problem we'd walk over and talk to him. His name was Mr Henderson and to our young minds he was very old.

The first supermarkets were just starting up and the local grocer was still a significant force in the community, as were the butcher (Mr Gersekowski) and green grocer. The local policeman (Sergeant Crompton) patrolled the area on his sidecar-mounted motor-bike and kept the local lads under control with the end of his boot.

Leybourne Street, which had originally been known as Riverview Drive, was like most streets on the Eastern side of the railway line: a dirt track with a centre strip of road base material. There were no drains or footpaths as we see today, and more than half of the allotments had not been built on at the time. However, one of the very fine homes was about half-way down: it was high-set and had a tennis court. I discovered that it belonged to Mr Lovelock, one of the stalwarts of the OSC.

The beginning

One Saturday morning in September 1955, my sister and I had been with Dad doing the weekly shopping when on the way home he diverted mysteriously to stop at a house in Yeronga. He told us he had to meet with a young man, Peter Virtue. Peter took us underneath his house to show us a little boat, which was upside down on some rubber tyres. As their discussion developed, the penny dropped —Dad was going to buy us a boat! I will never forget the excitement I felt at that moment and have been passionate about sailing from that instant.

We turned it over and I looked at the wonderful beauty of *Kurlamo* for the first time. I can now clearly see in my mind's eye, the varnished spars and bright-work, the grain of the timber, chrome-plated fittings, hemp rope, belaying pins, lashings, pulleys and blocks, snotters, wires, bags of sails, white sides, a navy blue sheer-line and a red bottom. It even smelt wonderful.

(What is a Snotter, you say? It's a short piece of rope with an eye spliced into each end. It was passed around the mast about half-height with one eye passing through the other to hold it in place. The spare eye was then used to hold one end of the spinnaker pole. I became adept at splicing through necessity as snotters wore out regularly.)

Kurlamo was a 12foot Trainee that had been built in 1952 by Peter and his older brother Michael. In the photo on the cover of these notes, Michael is at the helm and Peter has the sheet. They both became air-line pilots following their father at Ansett and left the club after selling the boat. Michael told me a few years ago that he wanted a unique name and was inspired by the expressions used in the Emile Mercer cartoons of the time. Hence the name *Kurlamo*

About a week later we went over and picked up the boat. The trailer only had an eye and bolt and our car did not have a tow bar. I don't know to this day how Dad did it but we got it home. We inspected it all over and pulled out the sails. The main had an insignia that I could not decipher: OT21. I subsequently discovered that it meant the 21st boat on the register of Oxley Trainees.

Hence our associations with OSC began, but first some further words about the Trainee.

The Trainee

The Trainee was a solid pine, planked bottom, cat-rigged, open dinghy in the classic Sharpie style. It had only two sails: a main of 95 square feet and a spinnaker of 75 square feet. The main was lashed to two spars: the gaff and the boom. The sail was raised by a wire hoist bolted to the gaff and when in position the luff was lashed to the mast. The spars had jaws to fit around the mast and these were also lashed after hoisting the sail. The rudder and centreboard were pine.

'Nip' Thorpe had designed the Trainee in about 1934 and it became very popular in Southern Queensland. There were significant fleets at Royal Queensland, South Brisbane, the Brisbane 16ft Skiff Club, Humpybong, Sandgate and Wynnum and further North at Maryborough, Bundaberg and Rockhampton.

The boat was very fine in the fore-sections and thus had limited buoyancy forward. With the mast so far forward, raising the spinnaker was always a hazardous affair. We capsized many times at the bottom mark abeam the Tennyson Powerhouse.

The Trainee was not a one-design class by any means and the flexibility within the limited rules allowed for some variations that led to certain designers being very popular at the time. In the late 50's the Trainee design was modernised and became known as the Thorpe 12, a class that survives today.

Oxley Sailing Club

On our first day there the sign out the front stuck in my mind. It said that the club had been founded in 1902. To my 12 year-old view of the world that seemed like ancient history; but paradoxically that response also gave me great respect for the place. I felt nervous and privileged.

There was a small building at the top of the embankment and the front yard was clear for car parking and rigging up. The building had a verandah and a large room inside at which meetings and social functions were held.

In front of the building was a large open area that was not fenced on the Western side, which bounded the Gates' residence. The whole area was used liberally for lashing sails: the neighbours did not seem to mind. In front of this area was, at a lower level, the boatshed. On top of the roof was the Starter's and Judges' platform and this was connected to the upper grassed area by a wooden walkway.

The boatshed was a simple structure with dirt floors and no ceiling. It was filled with boats all sitting on tyres, timber frames fitted to the hull shape or both. The masts and spars were hanging from the rafters by steel hooks. This was a very exciting place. Some of the boats had been there for a long time and were never used. *Naiad* was one of those. She was a 14 foot skiff; one of the other two classes sailed at OSC at the time. The boatshed had a cold water shower in the North-East corner. I never saw it used.

In front of the boatshed was the wharf that was made in two sections separated in the middle by a ramp and trolley railway that went up into the shed. The winch was operated by hand. There was another winch and ramp at the Eastern end. The wharf deck was made of three by two timbers separated by about an inch to let the water through at high tide. Sudden death for dropped shackles. The big tides

always left a layer of river silt on the deck timbers. This silt was almost impossible to get out of sails, ropes and clothes. I imagine that the current batch of Oxley sailors still have to contend with it.

Further West from the boatshed and in the direction of the Toll Bridge, were two other jetties, one of which may have been on the Gates' property. A notable boat moored there at the time was "Vagabond", a yacht owned by Arthur Berg.

The boats

There were three classes at Oxley: the Trainees (OT), the 14's (O14) and the Sprogs (OS).

14 foot skiffs

The 14's were definitely the senior class at the club and were the forerunner of the current highly developed class. Different to the 16's they were the smaller cousins of the unlimited 18 foot skiffs. That is, they could carry whatever canvas the skipper was game to put up. In 1955, they were very much in the classic heavy planked and ply form, with long bowsprits (the "bumpkin") but even then development in veneer moulding was under-way. Notable performers at the club at that time were:

- *Patricia* owned by Frank Spry, one of nature's gentlemen and a resident of Graceville
- *Pinochio* a most unusual boat for the time in that it was painted white, whereas all of the other classic designs were varnished hulls
- *Valencia* owned by Frank Moorhead, a much older member of the club and sponsor of the "Rae Moorhead Trophy", named I think after his daughter.
- *Crest* owned by Don Craig, who lived in Graceville Avenue, I think.

By 1956, the new lighter-weight moulded boats were coming in to the club and these included:

- *Crest*- a new boat that continued the name. Don Craig came third in one heat of the national titles on Port Phillip Bay in this boat.
- *Joy*- a flyer built by Bernie Wallis, who had won the South Queensland titles for Trainees in 1950 in a boat called *Tip Top*. *Joy* had an exaggerated sheer line, a light varnish finish, a fully moulded mast, and perfectly clean white sails made of some new exotic material. I think it may have been Dacron. She went like a rocket and won everything, although *Patricia* was never far behind.
- *Spitfire* - a very pretty boat moulded in two halves and joined in the middle. She had been made for Fred Hoe in Sydney. To my recollection, her best feature was her appearance and she was not around for long.
- *Rage II* - Bill Lovelock bought this boat from WA after the 1956 titles but I am not sure that she was ever raced at the club. Her main sail was distinctive for its two parallel red stripes as an insignia.
- *Donella* - owned by the Mathie family
- *Possum* - owned by vic Pledge but sailed by another crew

In 1957, Bernie Wallis unveiled his new boat, *Anne*, and she was a show-stopper. A big round-hulled boat with quite high sides (*Joy* had had difficulty in the seas in Port Phillip for the national titles), exceptional buoyancy (she looked like she was sailing **on** the water), a highly polished and sharpened Duralumin centre-board and outstanding speed. She continued the Wallis tradition of winning everything and when she was around life was exciting. Bernie was a gregarious, boisterous man, but very soft and generous at heart. I sailed with him in 16's for many years and remember him with the greatest affection. (More of him later.) *Anne* had a monstrous peak head spinnaker of 400 square feet that was like a turbocharger. I sailed with her only once (as bailer boy) when the big green kite was cracked and I will never forget the mixed feelings of fear and euphoria that I felt on that wonderful ride. The boat was alive as she bounced and sheered her way up river at Hamilton with water flying from the bow, two men on the wire and more than one on board shouting expletive-laden expressions of rapture. *Anne* was without doubt one of the greatest dinghies of any class built in Australia in the 1950's. She came second in the national title held in Sydney Harbour, won by Sid Corser from Perth sailing "Darkie". This result was pretty good in the circumstances since she missed one race completely whilst Bernie rebuilt it after smashing it in the previous (unfinished) race. She had hit the beach at Balmoral under full sail at about 40 knots whilst leading. They missed the buoy because the kite sheet was jammed in the block and were desperately trying to avoid the moored dinghies when the bottom came up.

Sprogs

The Sprog was a one-design class from South Africa with a high degree of buoyancy built in. It only had a very small cockpit. With three standard but quite small sails, this little boat (about 13 feet six inches long) was suited to lake and river sailing. The only two names that I can remember are *Sapphire*, owned by Jim Bickley, and *Spitfire*, owned by Jim's brother-in-law Fred Hoe.

Trainees

The other trainees at the club at the time included:

- *Seal* – owned by Robert Taylor and sheeted by Bruce Vidgen. (OT 19 I think.)
- Name forgotten – owned and sailed by Mr Speare and his daughter, whose name I think was Judy. They lived in Goldieslie Road, Indooroopilly, to my recollection.
- *Ngairie*-owner's name forgotten
- *Flipper* – owned by Peter Eldred
- *Duce*- a revolutionary design that was the centre of great controversy amongst the opposing crews, because of her dropped bow. Graham McDonald designed and built her in 1956 and put in the dropped bow to specifically counter the buoyancy problem forward. One of the benefits that he had not expected was that the dropped bow was like another keel. As a consequence, *Duce* went to windward better than *Australia II*. She was rarely beaten to the top mark in any company, and Graham won the 1957-58 Queensland titles by half a spinnaker pole from Murray Norris in *Latona* in the deciding third heat on the Hamilton Reach. Ron MacLachlan, who lived in Leybourne Street near the Oxley Road corner, was his sheet hand that day. Graham was a skipper with high expectations and two other sheet hands had been in the boat that season: John Diery and this author.

Rigging up and launching

Rigging up was labour-intensive. It took about 30-45 minutes for a Trainee and longer for a 14 foot skiff.

First the sails. The main would be laid out on the grass and the spars attached by a bolt through an eye at the mast end. Then the outer end of the sail would be lashed through a hole in the spar and an eye in the sail. The lashings were permanently fixed to the sail. The correct tension was everything and we soon learnt that one had to take account of the wind pressure on the day. At the age of twelve and thirteen, one felt very important making this decision.

Next the mast. First, the boat had to be taken out of the shed and put onto tyres on the wharf. Several hands were needed for this and the willingness of other people to help when needed is one of my enduring memories of the culture of OSC. The mast was positively located with a notched block of timber on the keel and a slotted opening in the forward thwart. The tricky bit was getting it upright and then down through the thwart. The rigging was clothes' line wire finished at the lower end with a stainless steel eye. There were three fixed stays, and two running side stays. The fixed stays were lashed via eye-bolts fixed to the hull. Tension was not as important this time, but the correct angle of the mast was critical: both fore-and-aft and sideways. To get the latter right, the jockey pole was lined up beside the gudgeon pins for the rudder and the mast eyed off. More feelings of expertise with this exercise as well.

The main was put aboard, the hoist attached to the luff and the spars lashed around the mast. Spinnaker poles went on the floor to one side of the case with the jockey pole and the spinnaker, which had been woolled like a string of sausages. The board and rudder were put in and ropes passed through the running side stays. The bailer was checked. With a quick drink of water, we were then in the queue for launching either via the trolley and winch or straight over the side of the wharf if the tide was up. Another group effort needed.

Depending on the breeze, which was usually fluky, the main was hoisted before pushing out into the river. If the tide was right down, the last person aboard had to get the mud off the feet. We wore old footy gear usually, occasionally a hat but never sun-screen, sun glasses or life-jackets.

Oxley Creek

Not all boats rigged up at the club on race days. Several used the landing at Oxley Creek off the end of Graceville Avenue and then sailed up for the start. Amongst those I can remember that did this regularly were *Crest* and *Duce*.

The courses

There are three that I can remember. The Start was always between the flags on the starters platform and a post on Indooroopilly Island.

The usual North-East Course went via a buoy at Oxley Creek to a rounding mark at Tennyson Powerhouse. Then a kite run back to Oxley Creek, back to Tennyson and then home again rounding the Oxley Creek mark.

A longer version of this course had the rounding mark for the kite mark at The Cove only a few hundred yards from the clubhouse.

The South Easter course ran from the first mark at Oxley Creek back up the Reach to the Toll Bridge and then back to the Creek and home.

The capsizes

The breeze was invariably light and fluky, and with an ebb tide, it was difficult to hold the start line until the flag was dropped. We'd then tack down river to the Power-House and round for the kite run. With a tide running and a wobbly kite raising, a capsize was a statistical probability.

When that happened, there was no quick recovery as the Trainee and the 14 were both open boats without any buoyancy (before the new 14's came on the scene. We had no rescue boats in those days but usually there was an enthusiastic supporter around to get you to shore. Without such support the boat had to be 'swum' to shore and we'd find a temporary place among the mangroves and the mud.

After getting the gear down we'd bail it dry and set off again, half an hour after those more fortunate. If the breeze died, we paddled home. Arriving back in the half dark, we'd be helped out of the water by the others already home.

Capsizing seemed to be a big part of the experience of the Oxley sailor at that time, particularly if you were a novice.

The gear

The change in materials for sailing has been remarkable over this period.

Boats were made of timber and nailed together with copper nails and glue. The timber was mostly prime sections, but a lot of marine ply was also used. One of the popular glues was EV9; it required heating before application. As an example, the rules for the Trainee required the sides to be made from two lengths of 16 by half inch pine thirteen feet long. Try getting that from your timber merchant nowadays!

The ropes and lashings were made from hemp rope; that's Indian Hemp or marijuana. Of course, it is now unavailable. It was the most luxurious looking and wonderful to the feel. Woven in three strands, it was available in sizes up to about 5 inches in circumference, and when done well, the splicing looked wonderful. The passing into history of hemp rope is one of the great losses I feel from those days.

The sails on *Kurlamo* were japara silk, that was a standard woven cloth with very little diagonal strength. It tore easily and got dirty quickly. A lot of development in sails was going on at the time and Dacron became the norm for those who could afford it.

Fittings such as eye bolts and the like were usually chrome plated brass castings, but the blocks all used stainless cheeks and bakelite wheels. Can you believe that ratchet blocks for the sheet had not introduced at that time. Life for the sheet hand in a blow was hard work.

The people

In no particular order, here are some of the names I can recall:

- Bill Lovelock Commodore
- Mr Sid Goldsmith, MBE Senior member
- The Bickley family Jim, wife Isa, son Graham and daughter Helen
- The Hoe family Fred, wife Lorraine and daughter Christine
- Bernie Wallis
- Brian Wallis
- Robert Taylor
- Martin Taylor
- Bruce Vidgen
- Frank Moorhead
- Frank Spry
- John Diery

The social life

The social life at the Club was modest by today's standards. After racing, people just went home. I do not, for example, remember seeing any of the senior crews having a beer after the race. There were the usual parties after the annual trophy night and the club was used by members for private functions.

However, a social activity of sorts, was associated with a major fund-raising effort in 1956, when the club decided to build and raffle a 14 foot skiff. This was built in the boatshed, using veneer moulding on a wooden plug. I watched with fascination, this labour-intensive process undertaken by volunteers from the club membership. There were a lot of sad people when the winner took his prize away from the club.

The neighbours

The neighbours I remember are:

- The Gates
- The Creeveys still there as recently as 1987
- Vic Pledge lived on the river bank about two doors east of the club
- The Vallances lived about two doors further along from Vic Pledge
- The Flugges
- The Spronks

The Spronks had left Europe after the war to start a new life in Australia and settled in Leybourne Street immediately across the road from the Club. They redecorated their two-storey house with a Dutch-style interior. I think that the house is no longer there now.

They had four children and it was the tragic loss of two of them that caused the family to return to Europe.

Peter, the eldest, was taken by a shark at Surfer's Paradise beach in late November, 1958 and this event caused the introduction of shark nets into Queensland. In about April, 1962, Leo, who had been in my class at school and my sheet hand on board *Kurlamo*, was killed when crossing the road in Indooroopilly. It would be wonderful to hear any news about the surviving children Dick and Babette.