



REFLECTIONS 150 YEARS

John Jeremy AM

Richard Palfreyman: John, what was your first introduction to sailing?

John Jeremy AM: It was in the 1950s. I have always been mad about boats and ships. I don't know why, it's a curiosity, but I have been. And that was just not in the family.

But I got introduced to sailing by the father of an old school friend. So I got to sailing in his boat back in the 1960s. It was Mac Shannon who was a member of this club and he had a boat called *Faerie* which did exist on the Australian Register of Historic Vessels. And so I started to sail with Mac and that was my introduction.

RP: And where was that? Where were you sailing from?

JJ: He kept the boat in Vaucluse Bay originally, which was close to home, so I could walk down there. Later on, he replaced *Faerie* with an Ampopetta, poor man's Tasman Seabird we used to call them, an Alan Payne designed hard chine sloop, which was kept in Vaucluse Bay for a while, but later on in Rose Bay at Hal Venables Marina down there. So I sailed a lot out of Rose Bay for many years.

RP: And when did you take that first step to own your own boat?

JJ: Well, it was really when Mac gave up sailing. My first boat was a little motorboat that I got in about 1961 called *Tarrina*, which enabled me to explore Sydney Harbour and take photos of ships and things like that. But I used to sail with Mac and he then sold *Chione* and he then bought *Chionetta*, which was a Thunderbird he kept down in Rose Bay, but then he retired from that.

And so I was without, apart from casual sailing with a number of other people, I was without a sailing boat. So I decided to see if I could afford a little sailing boat. I sold *Tarrina* and bought *Tiarri* (A116), which was a Hood 20.

And when I turned up at Rose Bay with the Hood 20, Hal Venables stood there with his hands on his hips, looking over the side and saying, "What did you buy that thing for?"

However, we had a lot of fun. Mac sailed with me and my two nephews and we won a gold medal in the five years that I had the boat.

RP: So you've had a succession of boats while you've been a member of the Amateurs. Perhaps, first of all, I should ask you, though, how you first joined the Amateurs.

JJ: Well, it was Mac. Mac said to me one day, "John, you should be a member of the club. I'm going to propose you." And I said, "Yes, Mac." It was as simple as that. So he proposed me in 1971 and I joined over 50 years ago.

RP: And as far as I can see on the (SASC yacht) register, you've had three boats here.

JJ: *Tiarri, Tantani* and *Tingari*.

RP: *Tingari* (2131), your current boat.

JJ: That's right.

RP: Tell me a bit about them.

JJ: Well, *Tiarri* was the Hood 20. We had a lot of fun in that boat. I had two of my nephews sail with me, Robert and Mathew (Jeremy), and they sailed with me for about 10 years from the age of 14, which was terrific.

But *Tiarri* was not a brilliant little sailor. And I decided to get something a little bigger. So I bought James Dibble's *Cavatina*, which I renamed *Tantani* (A59).

RP: Now, that's James Dibble, the ABC former newsreader.

JJ: Absolutely.

RP: The late James Dibble?

JJ: The late James Dibble.

RP: Fantastic. He was a good mate of mine.

JJ: Really? Yes. Well, he had *Cavatina* and I bought her in 1977, I think.

And she was a great little boat, little Quarter Tonner. I did learn, however, a few characteristics of those quarter tonners, particularly when you're going downwind. And she was fairly lightly built.

But I rather hankered after something which was more of a proper yacht. And I always liked the look of the East Coast 31. It had the beautiful clear deck that I had enjoyed in the Hood 20.

They were a lovely looking boat. They were a nice seaboat. So, one day I noticed that two were on sale down in Rushcutters Bay.

One of them was for, I think, \$45,000 and the other was \$40,000. And then the \$45,000 one was reduced to \$40,000. So I went down to see Bob Holmes.

And he said, "I'm not going to show you that one. That was the earlier \$40,000 one, but this is the one." And it was *Miko*, painted dark green, which I don't like in a boat, but absolutely equipped for anything at all.

She was built for offshore sailing and had done two Sydney Hobarts in '77 and '79. And so I said, "Well, look, let me think about it over the weekend." He said, "Well, don't think too long. She's going to sell quickly."

So on Monday morning, I went down with a cheque for \$4,000 and I gave him it, and then went to see my bank manager and asked him, "Would you like to own a boat with me?" (laughs)

RP: Tell me a little bit about your racing career here over 50 years with the club.

JJ: Well, of course, it started with Mac in *Chione* and *Chionetta*. So, we did Lion Island races. We did all those sorts of things.

I don't remember much about the sort of regular sailing as to what we sailed in or the division structure in those days. I do remember an incident, though, which was memorable. Shall I say it was memorable?

Chione was a little difficult to handle sometimes. And if you got a gust of wind, she tended to round up, you see. On one occasion, this happened out there in Athol Bay and we rounded up and a little boat called *Sparkle* was heading across on starboard deck in front of us.

And one of our crew didn't help by screaming to *Sparkle's* skipper, "Are you racing?" Who replied most vociferously? "Yes, I am! What do you think I'm doing out here?" And we then collided with *Sparkle* and rode up, our bow rode up over his cockpit. I was telling Bill Gale about this one day and he said, "Yes, I remember it well. I was the skipper of *Sparkle*." (laughter)

But once I got to *Tingari*, though, the racing became more serious because, of course, we had the Half Ton division in those days, in its early days, and it was a combined Half Ton division from almost the very beginning with Squadron boats and Amateurs boats. It was an early time of combining the divisions. There were times in 1981 and 1982 we had 22 boats on the starting line every Saturday afternoon. Only three of those boats are left now.

RP: Over quite a long period, you've been a very consistent and successful skipper. I think from, again, the club records, you won the season gold medals in 1976, 1990, '92 and then 2018. That's a huge spread of years.

JJ: It is. It is a long while. It's gone awfully quickly, but it's been a lot of fun. And that's the main thing.

RP: What were the highlights of some of those seasons?

JJ: It's difficult to pick highlights of the seasons. I mean, the sailing is enjoyable and was always good fun. We had our share of little incidents. We ran into somebody and somebody ran into us a couple of times. We've had a few of those sort of little things happen. But that's neither here nor there. That's part of life on a crowded harbour and with crowded sailing.

It's very hard to describe any particular season or any particular event as outstanding. It was interesting in the early days in the Half Ton division, because being a combined division, we very early decided that we would have one season with the Sydney Amateurs and the next one with the Squadron, and then vice versa and swap it around.

And the Cavalier 28s did the same thing. When the Cavaliers decided that they would stay with the Amateurs, the Half Tonners decided that they would stay with the Squadron. And what's left of that division is now Division 3 around at the Squadron.

RP: As a club member, I think it took you 10 years of membership before you became both a Board member, which I think you've been for the last 50 years.

JJ: Not quite. No, I was on the Board for 42 years. I decided that 42 years was enough. I mean, it is after all the meaning of life and everything in the universe, the number 42. So it was a good time to retire.

RP: What, again, were the greatest achievements, do you think, that you saw the Board attain during that period over that 40 years?

JJ: Well, it did a lot of work in the early days, of course. *Captain Amora* was one of the acquisitions in the time that I was on the Board. I was involved in writing the spec for *Captain Amora*.

We got *Captain Amora*. We got the pontoon, the big pontoon. That was an important part of the work in those early days. But I think one of the most important things, and it's something for every director of the Sydney Amateurs to remember, is to retain the spirit and the nature of this club.

Don't get overambitious about changing it, and creating restaurants and dining rooms, and all this sort of thing. We kept it very much going the usual way and the same way. And I think that's always been the secret of success for this club.

RP: And the future?

JJ: Oh, yes. I think it still will lie to the future to be the same as well.

Look, sailing is changing enormously because back in those days in the 1970s, we had over 100 boats starting on Saturday afternoons. But we didn't have Friday twilights. We didn't have Tuesday twilights. We didn't have Sunday sailing. And I think things have changed.

People are less devoted now to sailing around the buoys every Saturday afternoon. And that's evident from the numbers. But we get people out on very successful twilights. We get people out very successfully on Sundays in non-spinnaker sailing. And we offer more today to the sailors in terms of different kinds of events than we did back then.

But overall, the numbers are not rapidly increasing. I suppose there are a lot of factors involved in that. One is that boats are expensive and people's lives are different now. They've got kids and it's more difficult now, I think, for people to commit regularly to sailing on Saturday afternoons.

RP: And we've also got an ageing membership.

JJ: We do.

RP: Do you see that as a problem for the future?

JJ: Yes, it is a problem, but it's always been ageing. And that is just the nature of the club. And as the new members come in, the new members tend to be more of a mature age.

We're not the only club that faces this kind of problem. Take the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron. They've got very active junior sailing and intermediate sailing. And then there's a gap until people are more settled in their careers. And they've got the money to buy a bigger boat and come back to sailing.

RP: As your time as Commodore, what were some of the more satisfying moments in that period?

JJ: I got onto the Board quite quickly and rose up to the rank of Commodore. At the time, I was Managing Director up at Cockatoo Dockyard. And so I was a pretty busy boy in those days. I regarded this (the SASC) as my other dockyard because of the slipways down here.

RP: Well, I've been on a visit to Cockatoo Island with you from the club. And I was absolutely amazed at the number of alumni from Cockatoo Island who seem to have been involved in sailing here.

JJ: Yes.

RP: Can you explain how that came about and who some of those people are?

JJ: No, I have absolutely no idea. Of course, the Lawlers, Bob Lawler and his son, were up at Cockatoo Island. And there are others that I would not even know about who trained and spent time at Cockatoo. But that, in a way, is not entirely surprising because Cockatoo

employed and trained an enormous number of people over the years. Thousands, thousands of people.

It was a big operation. And a lot of those people, shipwrights, all trades and all kinds of people, had an affinity with boats and the sea. And so perhaps it was natural.

They turn up everywhere. You know, I get quite surprised when I run into people who say, "Hello, John." And I think, "Who on earth are you?" And he said, "Oh, I was an apprentice."

RP: Well, as a man who's been involved with two dockyards, one a major one and one a small one at a yacht club, how important do you think is the continuation of the facilities here, the slipway facilities here, to the future of the club?

JJ: Oh, for the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club, I think it's absolutely vital. It's part of our sustenance and income, and it's something which we can uniquely provide at a very reasonable price to our members.

We've had great concerns over the years about how do we comply with modern environmental legislation. That's been a major challenge. And we've managed that. And hopefully we will continue to be able to operate successfully as a boatyard, a little shipyard, here on the shores of Mosman Bay.

I think it's extremely important because people like the opportunity to work on their own boats. And that's becoming very difficult around Sydney Harbour now.

RP: And one of your other contributions to the club, of course, has been as editor of the club newsletter. And that's been going on for quite a long time, I think.

JJ: Yes, it is. It was the late 1990s. Vic Dibben had been doing it for a long while. It turned into a little tiny magazine, but it didn't really have a great deal of stuff in it. It was coming events, and what's going on, and all this sort of thing.

When my paid employment ran out in 1997, people tended to look at me and say, "John, now that you've got lots of time on your hands, why don't you take (them) on?"

And one of them was producing 'The Australian Naval Architect' for the Royal Institution of Naval Architects, which I'm still doing. And the other was the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club newsletter. And I turned it into a little magazine, and I quite enjoy doing it.

It's an outlet for my hobby of photography. People seem to like it. So I guess I don't have people knocking, tapping me on the shoulder and saying, "John, I'm going to take over from you." That hasn't happened yet.

RP: And yet there are a lot of journalists in the club who wouldn't dare to put their hand up because you do such a great job.

JJ: Well, thank you for that. But look, I think it's quite good fun to do and I enjoy it.

RP: And you mentioned photography, and you've only got to pick up the the magazine and almost every photograph and the great photos of sailing are by you. How did you get into that?

JJ: My father was into photography, and in the home at Vaucluse we had a darkroom in the garage. I started taking photos, I think, about 1952, while I was 10 in 1952.

Would you believe that quite a lot of them were ships and things like that? I still have all those photographs. I started then, of course, with a Box Brownie and then into rather better end 35-millimeter. And when digital came, I got into digital.

I've taken thousands and thousands and thousands of photographs. The collection that's actually indexed by frame is about 47000, and a very large number of them (are) boats and ships.

Some of my collection, the ones of naval vessels, for example, are now in the possession of the Sea Power Centre in Canberra, as well as me. Because, as they say, I tended to take photographs that they never took. I've always enjoyed photography and I've always enjoyed taking photographs of maritime subjects.

RP: Has digital photography made taking marine photos much easier?

JJ: I think so, because you can take so many more. I mean, it doesn't cost anything.

RP: And you can delete every one that's no good.

JJ: Well, you can, although I'm not really keen on deleting things because every photo is an instant in time which can never be repeated. And so I think as long as it's in focus and it's decent, keep it. One day you'll say, "Look, what's in the background of that photograph? That tells us something we wanted to know."

RP: There speaks a true photographer (laughs).

JJ: And a bit of a historian as well.

RP: One of the other services, I guess, that you've provided to the club, over this long association, has been on the starting boat.

JJ: Yes, that, I think, dates back to the 1970s when we got *Captain Amora*. (I) began to get involved in those days and it gradually increased. I spent a bit of time on starting boats with the Squadron as well. So it's certainly well over 40 years I've been involved in that.

RP: It must be a very different view of yacht racing from the starters boat as opposed to being on the helm.

JJ: Yes, it is. It's a different view. I think it's enjoyable. You spend a day on a boat that someone else is paying for, with nice people. You're providing a service to the members of the club. You're helping other people have a lovely day on the Harbour. When you do it well, it can be very satisfying.

RP: It must be technically challenging, though, as well.

JJ: Well, that's right. And as everybody knows, the starter is always wrong. But there are three rules associated with race management.

One is that the starter is right. Secondly, he's still right. And regardless of everything and all the mistakes he make, he is still right because he's the starter!

So they're the three important ones.

RP: You must have some good in-house stories, or on-boat stories, from the starters boat.

JJ: Oh, yes, we've had all kinds of fun on the starters boat. But I think some of the most interesting and absolutely rewarding time on starters boats was during the 2000 Olympics. I got involved in 1997 when Charles Maclurcan had been tasked by the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron to put forward a race management team.

And he said to me, "John, now that you've got plenty of time on your hands", it's that old expression again, "Why don't you join our race management team?" He said, "We've got three years of practice and training."

And I said, "Oh, Charles, I'm going to be much too busy. It's just not going to happen." He said, "Well, you know, they're saying that we can't do it in Australia and they're going to have to import race management teams."

And I said, "What a load of rubbish! That's that's ridiculous! Of course we can do it!"

And he said, "So you'll join the team?" I said, "Oh, yes, all right."

That turned into the most marvellous experience...the mobilisation of a team of volunteers. In fact, the whole event was. And doing it to the highest international standards. I took on the role of being the timer on course area Bravo, which is just out past, out visible here from the club.

We did all kinds of classes on Sydney Harbour, but with great precision and accuracy in terms of the course setting and the management of the whole event. There was only one occasion where I lost the plot as timer. I had to call out AP (race postponed), which was immediately executed by flags and the gunner.

And the race officer looked over and said, "What's the matter, John?" I said, "I'm just sorry, I forgot where we were" (laughter).

RP: I seem to recall that at one stage, the International Yachting Federation described Sydney Harbour as sailing in a washing machine. And yet it turned out to be very, very successful.

JJ: Oh, it was absolutely successful. Well, it wasn't a washing machine because, of course, most of the Harbour was closed. Ferries were diverted out of the way.

The whole thing was extremely successful. We had the Harbour to ourselves. I mean, we had all sorts of things which were curious.

We had a whale management plan, for example. You know, this caused great amusement. "What have we got a whale management plan for?" "Well, you know, they might come into the Harbour, in which case we've got to keep clear of them", and all this sort of thing.

We also had the challenge of the press because we had press representatives on the starter's boat who were constantly on the radio talking about helicopters and all this sort of blessed thing. And during the Paralympics, we were the only race management team (for) course area Bravo.

The Paralympics, in many ways, were exceptionally rewarding because we were allowed to mix with the competitors. We had morning tea with them, and they weren't there for aggrandisement. They were there to have fun, and to be there and to compete. And that was enormously rewarding.

But the total staffing of the Paralympics was much lower. So there wasn't a press man on the boat. And I was given the task of media communications, in addition to timing. And it's the first and only time I've had to ask the race officer to AP the next start, would you believe, because the helicopter has to refuel.

RP: Well, I'll add a personal note to that as well, because while you were out during the Paralympics, I was the media manager for sailing and being head of press operations for the whole of the Olympic Games. And after the Olympic Games, we changed over and we each took a different role. I opted to go to sailing, and it was one of the most satisfying things I've ever done. The Paralympic sailors were just terrific.

JJ: Oh, they were charming, wonderful people. And I think it was the Albanian team who came without a boat and the local community bought them a Sonar. And there were three young men, two of whom were missing a leg, I think. But one of them had no arms. In fact, he had no shoulders. He was sort of tapered from the neck down. And I seem to recall he was the main sheet hand on one race.

They either came second or they came first, I can't remember which, but they did extremely well. And the exuberance of those three on that boat was so remarkable. And the main sheet hand did a perfect high five with his skipper with his foot up in the air. High five!

RP: Amazing! I recall some of them being actually lowered in their chairs into a boat with a crane.

JJ: Yes.

RP: And I also recall with fondness the medal ceremonies at the end of them. Yes. Yeah.

JJ: How could you forget that evening, that last evening in Rushcutters Bay with the sun setting?

RP: Well, we were both there.

JJ: Yes, we were both there. And I don't think there was a dry eye in the house.

RP: No, no. I think I presented one of the medals, and it was just a terrific highlight.

JJ: Yeah. Because we hadn't had the medal ceremonies for the Olympics down in Rushcutters Bay. They were all done somewhere else, so we never saw that, really. We were so involved and so close to the Paras.

And that was the end, you know, and what did we do the following day? We took the timing gear off the boat and we started dismantling, and everything was coming apart.

And of course, then there was the proposal for the march through the city. We were all shuffling our feet and saying, "I don't want to get involved in that sort of nonsense. You know, it's ridiculous."

And it was the girls in the crew who said, "No, we've got to. We've got to have sailing represented. We've got to be there."

So we all mustered in Hyde Park, waited for two hours or something for our turn to get going. And then we had that extraordinary experience of walking down George Street with people on the side of the road cheering you and paper fluttering down all over you. If you've not done it, you don't understand what it feels like.

RP: It was a great, great highlight. John, that's been a really, really interesting half hour. And thank you very, very much for your time.

JJ: Richard, it's my pleasure.