REFLECTIONS
150 YEARS

Trevor Cosh

David Salter: Trevor, seafaring goes a fair way back in your family. Can you sketch out a bit of that history for us?

Trevor Cosh: My grandfather owned some of the ketches, and shares in the ketches, in South Australia. And I spent a lot of time with him down on one in particular, a ketch called the *Wellington*, a little 80-foot thing. It used to carry a thousand bags of barley and it was engaged in running across from Adelaide to the ports along the Yorke Peninsula.

I did my first trip away, if you can call it that, on the *Wellington* when I was five years old. My dad had taken the ketch across from Adelaide to Port Vincent with what we would call trailer boats now, the heavyweight Sharpies and the 14-footers and what have you, to a regatta, an Easter regatta in Port Vincent.

I desperately wanted to go but was not allowed to. You can imagine the old man, the last thing he wanted was a five-year-old kid hanging around him (laughs). But my grandfather actually took me over in the car on the Sunday so I did the trip back on the ketch.

DS: Describe the boat to me because you just call them a ketch, but they were quite special.

TC: The ketch is the nearest I can tell you is something like the *One and All* that they built over there a few years ago. She was about 80 feet long. She was built in Devonport in Tasmania in 1878, beautiful lines and she used to sail quite well in actual fact, although she was pretty stripped down when I remember it. She just had a little deckhouse aft, a captain's cabin with a table that you could squeeze four people into.

When I was on it she actually had a wheelhouse built behind the cabin with a bit of shelter for the skipper, but that only came in about 1955 or ‘60 or something.

DS: And did you get your first real seafaring experiences on those boats?

TC: I did trips on them right through my schooling time. School holidays I was always itching to get away and after my grandfather retired he was a boiler inspector. He went as the deckhand on the *Wellington*.

In those days the the trucks were just taking over from the ketches. The road had been sealed over to Yorke Peninsula and the ketch trade was dropping off dramatically. There used to be 150 ketches in Port Adelaide and by the early '60s that was probably down to 30 or 35, something like that.

But to keep the costs down there was just the skipper and my grandfather. They would go away, the old skipper was 60 years old. He used to carry a thousand bags of barley in a day on his back and stow them in the hold, and the last bits on the deck they used to stack them on top of the hatch cover and cover them up with a tarp.

DS: Do you think you got some of your work ethic from that?

TC: Oh yeah, there's no question about that. Particularly from my grandfather, who worked hard all his life. Old marine engineer in his younger days. He did all the maintenance on the boats that they owned. Some of the ones that he only had shares in they were looked after by other people, but certainly the ones that he owned or had majority share in (he) did all the engine maintenance and all that sort of thing on them. And I spent a lot of time with him, watched how he worked and what he did. I mean he never spent a penny that he didn't have to. He scrounged everything from all over the place and I of course picked that up (laughs).

DS: So that was, in a way, your introduction to being on the tools?

TC: Yes it was, and to the sailing I suppose. I loved being on the boats and once I was old enough I started sailing in the Holdfast Trainers in the Port River, and then went on to ultimately to the Flying Dutchman, before I went away to sea when I was 21.

DS: So that was your introduction to sailing as a sport? The Holdfast were little things, weren't they?

TC: Yes, they're very much like a Manly Junior except they didn't have a spinnaker. Eight feet long, pram dinghy.

DS: Big jump from that to the FDs though.

TC: I sailed for a year in a Heron, which was not the most exhilarating sailing. But I did it because the people I'd been sailing with in the Holdfast Trainer went into the Herons in a big way, and to be quite honest I was too scared to tell them I didn't want to sail with them (laughs). But after a year of it I'd certainly had enough. I sailed in the Cadet Dinghies on and off, the old clinker built Cadet Dinghies, at Largs Bay Sailing Club on and off for a little while, but then I got the offer to sail in the Flying Dutchman.

I was too light, and I probably wasn't strong enough or anything else, but I had a very good old mate who lived across the road, Norm Butcher, who just said "Well you know you've got to go and sail in a proper boat, so come and learn how to sail with me". Which I did.

DS: Most of your working life has been as a marine engineer. How did you get into that?

TC: It's in the family. My grandfather was a marine engineer in the First World War, he was torpedoed in the North Atlantic, and my father was a marine engineer who went away to sea in 1942 and came ashore in 1952. So it was in the blood, I suppose. The looking after the engines and other bits and pieces on the ketches, it was all part of that engineering background.

I served my apprenticeship as a fitter and turner in a very, very good workshop in Port Adelaide. There was about 400 people in it and we did a fair bit of marine maintenance, so I got a little bit of experience with working on big engines and things like that. But I'd wanted to go to sea since I was...well, since I can remember.

DS: So you would have had to leave school to take up the trade?

TC: Yeah I left school at 16.

DS: Didn't enjoy school?

TC: Hated it, and was absolutely terrible at it. My father had skimped and saved to send me to King's College and it was a complete and utter waste of money. I was out of my depth with kids that had plenty of family money and we had none. I just couldn't see the point of what I was doing at school.

Once I started my apprenticeship and went to trade school, much of the the stuff we were doing at trade school and the theory side of it was what I'd been doing at school. When I couldn't have any idea what hell it was all about at school, suddenly (it) all made sense and it was totally different kettle of fish.

DS: It's extraordinary, it's like the difference between mathematics and applied mathematics. Now you committed yourself to going to sea just at the time in in most people's lives when they're putting together a family, trying to make a home for themselves, etc. It's a pretty tough life on the rest of the family.

TC: I got very short notice to go to sea. In fact, I hadn't quite finished my apprenticeship. I was on holidays about a month before I came out of my time, but I'd been writing to all the shipping companies particularly in England. I didn't want to sail on the Australian coast for a number of reasons. I wanted to go overseas.

I got a telegram saying 'We want you to join a ship in Port Pirie tomorrow'. Now, I'm a month from the end of my apprenticeship. I can't go until I've got my indentures signed off, and all the rest of it.

It was the busiest 12 hours I've ever been through in my life. I was actually in the pub with a whole lot of other mates at lunchtime when my mother rang the hotel and said that this telegram had arrived. That afternoon I went to the boss at work, explained the situation, and they looked back and said "Oh yes, well you've done more than your five years because you've done all these weekends, and you've been away all these other times and

all the overtime. You've done more than your five-year apprenticeship anyhow. So we'll sign it off". Which they did. But we then had to have the Apprenticeship Commission sign off on it, and this is where my dad came into it. He was the Chief Inspector for the Department of Labour & Industry at that stage, and the Apprenticeship Commission had an office in their building. Somehow or another he managed to get four members - which is what you needed - of the Apprenticeship Commission together to sign my indentures off that afternoon.

So by two o'clock in the afternoon I'm in town, still in my jeans and t-shirt, getting my indentures signed off. I then had to get all my injections and fortunately the Largs (Bay) Sailing Club commodore was also the British Merchant Navy doctor. So it was arranged that he would give me my whole series of injections in one afternoon which he did - smallpox and cholera and yellow fever and everything under the sun bunged all in one hit. And six o'clock the next morning I was on the train to Port Pirie. I came home three years later (laughs).

DS: So, first of all that's a story about it's not what you know it's who you know.

TC: Oh, absolutely.

DS: But what strikes me more is you're a young bloke, and the separation...suddenly you were separated from your family.

TC: It was the biggest adventure you've ever seen in your life. Everything on being on the ship, as a watchkeeper on the ship and all the rest of it, that was exciting engineering. Although having looked back at it now, with far more knowledge of engineering, how the ship ever got anywhere I'm damned if I know because it was in terrible condition, run by a group of people who didn't know what the hell they were doing. But nonetheless we managed to struggle around the world for 12 months on that ship.

The other things were all the different ports we went to. It was with Bank Line, a ship called the *Forest Bank* the first part of the trip anyhow was Port Pirie to Newcastle to Townsville to Samurai in New Guinea, to Kieta, Kimbe, Rabaul, Lae then across to Suva, Tonga and then San Francisco. So, that wasn't a bad first introduction to the world. It was a pretty exciting trip I've got to say.

DS: We'll get back to your career a bit later but if I can skip forward to sailing as a sport, you know you were at sea for many many years, but you returned and you got into ocean racing.

TC: Yes, I'd been back ashore for some time before that happened. I was very fortunate to be appointed as superintendent engineer for the British Shipping Company as an expat back into Australia, which was pretty good going.

I'd only been here a very short time in Sydney and one of my old mates that I'd sailed with in Adelaide in the Flying Dutchman rang up one day and said "Look, I'm coming to Sydney for the Australian Championships but my forward hand has had to drop out. What's the

chances of getting down to sail in the series". So, I had to go into the boss in at work and say "Look, you know I know I've only been here for a month, but I actually need some time off". In point of fact I'd had about six months sea time leave due to me but, of course, you never got to take that once you got into the office.

But anyway we managed to work something out so that I would go into work at six o'clock, work in there until ten o'clock, then go down to Rose Bay to sail in the Flying Dutchman and then race back to work at five o'clock in the afternoon, and work till eight o'clock at night to get everything done. We did that for two weeks, and we were just lucky at that stage that I didn't have to go away anywhere. Because, as it turned out, (in) that superintendent's job I was away an awful lot. But that was really the only yacht racing I did for probably five years. Then it was through Jim Lawler that I started the ocean racing.

DS: Yeah if we could start there, if you could explain to me that connection.

TC: Well Jim was in Singapore in those days and I was working as a surveyor for American Bureau of Shipping in Sydney. Jim came back to sail on *Firetel* for the first Southport race, which I think from memory was 1984 or '85, and we got talking in the office and Jim said "*Firetel*'s got nobody to bring the boat back", and he had to fly back to Singapore as soon as they finished the race. So he said "Why don't you drive up to Southport? I'll take the car and bring it back to Sydney, and you sail back on *Firetel*". Which is what I did. And from there on I sailed a bit on *Firetel*, and then shortly after Jim came back from Singapore and bought *Morning Tide*. And I started sailing with him as soon as he came back, and I've been here ever since (laughs).

DS: You didn't officially join the club until '95 but you'd been active around the place for a while before that. How did you become associated with the club?

TC: Well again through Jim. I would have joined earlier but quite frankly I couldn't afford the joining fee for a long time, so it was much delayed. But I certainly had been involved down here to some extent through that 10-year period.

DS: You raced a lot on some of the club's most celebrated offshore boats - *Morning Tide*, *Charisma*, *Azzurro*, *EZ Street*. Do you have a favourite?

TC: Got to say that *Morning Tide* was pretty special. We had a terrific crew - old Jim, young Jim, Pete Robbo was navigator for most of the long races, and so on. But we pushed the boat very hard and we used to drive that thing to the point where, well, why something didn't break I'm never quite sure. And we had great tussles with *Firetel*, and then on the long races there were a number of other boats that were a very similar type and we had an ongoing battle with a lot of them. We drove the boat hard, we drove ourselves hard, and we had a lot of fun.

DS: What do you reckon has been your most memorable moment offshore?

TC: I think probably *Morning Tide*...we'd been through a gale in Bass Strait, and then flat calm by the time we got down to Eddystone. We went round in circles there for a while in

the very early morning and then slowly the wind came in. We started off, I remember, with a half-ounce kite, and then went to three quarters, and then went to the triple stitched bulletproof but damn near full size spinnaker…one and a half-ounce kite. By that stage it was probably blowing well over 30 and we went down past Mariah Island just absolutely flying, pushing the boat to the limit. The furthest forward bloke was the bloke on the tiller, everybody else was trying to sit on the transom to try and keep the bow out of the water. Every wave the bow would actually go under the under the water and the water would run along the deck, and then it would surf off and for a lot of time we averaged over 11 knots. So we we were certainly traveling for an old S&S 34.

But the the big thing was how to get this spinnaker down. We couldn't go forward. If anybody had gone forward we would have broached for sure. So we just hung on and hung on and hung on. There was all sorts of discussions about whether we should fire a flare through it and blow it up, and all sorts of stupid things like that. But in the end we hung on to it until we said "Well we're nearly at Tasman Island we'll we'll be in the lee when we get to Tasman Island. We'll get it down when we get around the corner". Which is precisely what we did.

But we then decided that "Oh yeah, we're in the calmer conditions in here". So I think we started off with a number two. We got that about a quarter of the way up, (then) went to a number three, decided that was too much, and in the end put the storm headsail up (laughter).

DS: Makes a change from normally sailing into a dead hole when you get around.

TC: Absolutely, yeah.
DS: Now, meanwhile, you're still going to sea a fair bit, but mainly now in the salvage business, and you were married and you had a family. How did you cope, or how did they cope, with all these absences?

TC: I'm just very fortunate with Viv. I met Viv on my first trip to sea. Had about six weeks with her in the UK while we were in dry dock, and then went off back to sea and didn't see her for a year, and then ultimately ended up living together at the end of that period while I was up at school doing my second's ticket. And in fact got married. But then I went back off to sea for months and months, so she was used to the fact that I was there for short periods and away for long periods.

I remember I went with my boiler suit in my briefcase from Sydney to Melbourne to have a look at some containers one day. Was supposed to be down there for about four hours. I came back from New Guinea three months later. Just running from one ship disaster to another to another to another, and then eventually got home. She managed. I don't know, she brought the kids up really, and…

DS: It's an extraordinarily strong relationship that can endure that.

TC: It sure is, yeah, and (for) a lot of people in the marine game it didn't work out. But I've been lucky.

DS: If we can switch now back to the club. Later on, with building up this reputation as the person around the club who could build or fix anything...you might not be comfortable with that, but that's how most of us see you. Is it part of your character?

TC: Oh, I think so, and a lot of that comes from the days with my grandfather. He could fix anything, and from a very early age I was taught if it's broken you've got to fix it. Just get on with it.

DS: Is there any job that's defeated you?

TC: Oh plenty (laughs).

DS: I can't think of anything.

TC: Anything to do with electronics and computers, and anything like that, defeats me all the time.

DS: Trevor, we've known each other for more than 20 years and I cannot remember a time when you've ever declined to help someone. Do you ever think you're being used in that way?

TC: Oh, occasionally you think that somebody's having a bit of a lend of you but, oh God, that's very rare and it's all to do with the people's character. The only ones that ever use you are the ones that you don't really want to be friends with anyhow. But all the other people that come along and ask you to do this, or can you have a look at that, and all the rest of it, well they're good friends, and they're good people, and you just get on and do it.

DS: Which of the major projects around the club that you've been involved with are you most proud of?

TC: There's a lot of big projects that we've done. Probably the Green Shed, putting the new deck on the Green Shed, which effectively rescued the Green Shed because up to that stage the best thing to have done with it was to knock it down get rid of it. But by rebuilding the deck and strengthening up the piling systems we've turned that into a pretty useful annex to the club, and I think although that's not the biggest job we've done I think it's probably one of the more important ones. Things like the slipway, and putting the new rails in on the slipway, and the new winches and the cradle, and those sort of things they're important. But they were just upgrading the stuff that was there. So the Green Shed...I think we saved the Green Shed, and that was pretty important.

DS: I've got to say for my own point of view the cradle was a tremendous project. I certainly learned a lot working with you on it, about working in metal. You designed the whole thing didn't you?

TC: Yes I did, yeah. I spent a lot of time looking at things in other slipways all over the country. Anywhere I went I'd go and have a look at how their cradles worked, and there

were a couple of good ones that had terrific operating systems and all the rest of it. But we simply didn't have room. We didn't have the width of the slipway available to us to build operating platforms alongside the actual slipway so that you could stand on a platform and adjust the arms, and what have you. So we had to come up with something that we could do (work) from while you were standing on the deck of the boat. And pages and pages of old sheets of paper, and all sorts of ideas kicked around, and eventually we came up with that one that's there. And I've got to say it's it's worked very well. We've made one or two mistakes with it, a couple of things I would do a little bit differently if I did it again. Mainly, I think some of the engineering was probably a little bit too precision for something that should have been a little bit more agricultural. We've had a bit of trouble with things that were just too close a tolerance, but nonetheless it seems to have worked extremely well.

DS: It's been a tremendous asset to the club, not just in terms of the facility, but financially it's made a contribution to the club. Speaking of which, we were on the Board together for many years. You often made your views known pretty forcefully. What do you think are the essential duties of the Board?

TC: Well obviously they've got to run the club and decide on the direction that the club's going to go, how you're going to finance everything. And they're the management team. That's what it is, and I guess that's the role of it it's a board of directors the same as any company I guess.

DS: Yeah. In the later part of your working life, and you're still working, you sort of swallowed the anchor when you got more into the salvage business. Which I always find really fascinating, your stories of the salvaging. But also some construction work. Are there some projects that stand out for you there?

TC: On the construction side? Well that was ship construction, of course. I was very lucky when Howard Smith's was sold I decided to go out on my own. Initially I thought I was just going to be a marine surveyor working for insurance companies and that sort of thing. But it turned out to be much more consultancy work, and I did a lot of owner supervision of new tugs being built around Australia and particularly in China, New Zealand, Indonesia and what have you. And they were good jobs. I had pretty free reign. The experience of all the years as technical manager at Howard Smith Towage certainly played a big part in the consultancy side of things because I'd just seen so many mistakes made over the years with some of the vessels and had some pretty strong ideas about how to get around those things, and we did in most cases. Had a few arguments with the Dutch shipbuilding people - Damen Shipyards. But in the end it's pleasing to see that some of the things that they argued very strongly against are just standard procedure in their tug construction these days so, you know, I had some influence on it.

DS: Trevor, you obviously still enjoy going out for a sail. Were you never tempted to have a boat of your own?

TC: We had *Azzurro* and that was a tremendous 10-year period. I just simply couldn't afford to do it on my own and, quite frankly, I just like the idea of being with a very strong

group of mates...blokes that i've sailed with for many many years, and who have always been there when we've had a working bee. You've only ever got to put the word out and there's a group of people that put their hands up. I was very fortunate to be able to to get together with three or four of those people to buy and own a *Azzurro* for 10 years. So that's as far as it's gone.

Other than that I've never had any thoughts of owning one myself. Well, that's probably not right. I thought about plenty of times, oh wouldn't it be nice to have one of your own. But then you always turn around and say "Oh yeah, but it's better to do it this way" (laughter).

DS: Well, I know that you're always more than welcome in any crew. Finally, I don't think there's anyone who would dispute that you are a fundamental part of the character of this club. But what does the club mean to you?

TC: Camaraderie. It's such a tremendous place to be with a great group of mates, both from the sailing side and also from the the way that we've maintained the club. I didn't start that by any means. I inherited a bit of the mantle, I suppose, from Bob Lawler.

The thing that worries me is there doesn't seem to be anybody for me to hand it on to. Which is a pity because the old club, it's an old infrastructure and whatnot. If you don't keep on top of it it'll very quickly fall to bits. You need somebody you can look at things around you and not see that it's all right. You've got to be able to look at it and see well you know if we don't do something about that pretty quickly it's going to be a real problem. I worry about that a bit.

But as far as the club is concerned, hell, you know you come down here and everybody's friendly, you say g'day. You can have a conversation with every person down here and (on) wide ranging topics. It's just a lovely place to come to.

DS: Thanks very much, Trevor. That's terrific, thank you.