



REFLECTIONS 150 YEARS

Tony Barry

Tony Barry: When I was a student engineer, another student engineer in the same office was into sailing. I built a VJ at Wangi (Wangi), where my father worked. We eventually joined the Toronto VJ Dinghy Club. I was about 22 or 23.

Ian Macintosh: You had several VJs, I think.

TB: We moved from Wangi (Wangi) to Merewether, and I built two more. So I eventually built three. After probably six or seven years at Toronto VJ Dinghy Club, I graduated to a 16ft skiff with a bunch of guys at Belmont Sailing Club, and I was the sheet hand. The boat was *Bebby*.

IM: So you messed around in boats on Lake Macquarie for quite a long time.

TB: Ah, yes, yeah.

IM: When did you come to Sydney, and when and where did you start sailing in Sydney?

TB: I did an engineering degree in Newcastle, and the day I graduated, I emigrated to Canada. And so I spent seven years in Canada then returned to live in Sydney.

IM: Did you sail while you were in Canada?

TB: Not really. We chartered boats occasionally just to go for a weekend, but never really raced. So my Canadian experience wasn't really into sailing.

And when I returned to Sydney, I went to work with Lendlease in Sydney and lived at *The Laurels*, just near the Amateurs for about a year, at Cremorne before I bought a house or a unit at Neutral Bay.

IM: That's when you began your serious sailing?

TB: Yes, I bought a Hood 23, sailed with a fleet of Hood 23s out of the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron. And to be able to do that, I joined the Mosman (Amateur) Sailing Club, which is now the Green Shed. And it wasn't for quite some years after that that I joined the Amateurs.

IM: So you had to belong to a sailing club to sail at the Squadron?

TB: Yes.

IM: That would have been in the early 70's, and you still had another sailing club in you before you came to the Amateurs. What was that?

TB: That's right. I graduated to an offshore yacht called *Wimaway* (1447), which was a Duncanson 35, and sailed with the Middle Harbour Yacht Club for several years. But the boat was moored in Mosman Bay, so we always had to motor around to Middle Harbour to go in our Saturday race.

IM: Now, *Wimaway* took you safely to Hobart several times, and you did quite a bit of cruising as well. Is that correct?

TB: I did Hobart races in '79, was my first one, and the following year, 1980.

IM: As skipper?

TB: As skipper.

IM: And navigator?

TB: First year, I had a navigator. A friend of mine from New Zealand came and navigated for us. The next year, I'd done a course at the CYC and bought an almanac and a sextant and did it myself. I also did, over those years, three trips from Pittwater to Lord Howe Island.

IM: Always navigating?

TB: Always navigating, yeah.

IM: So basically, you're a self-taught navigator.

TB: I learnt one thing about navigation. On one of my trips to Lord Howe Island, I predicted that we'd be able to see the island at sunset, and by about two o'clock in the afternoon, when we still didn't see it, I started to get worried. You just have to be persistent...and it jumped out of a sea mist and it was about five miles away at three o'clock in the afternoon.

IM: All of this is in the pre-GPS days?

TB: Pre-GPS days, yeah.

IM: Did you ever miss landfalls?

TB: No, we actually always arrived at (them). No dramas.

IM: You've got to trust your judgment and your training.

TB: After my prediction of Lord Howe Island being visible at dawn, I learnt that you should just keep your counsel and don't say too much.

IM: Don't build up expectations.

TB: No. Exactly right.

IM: In 1983, you joined the Amateurs. You still had *Wimaway* at that point. First impressions of that little club on Mossman Bay were what?

TB: It was a bit about location because I lived in Neutral Bay. So I really didn't have any expectations, and I always knew about the Amateurs because *Wimaway* was moored in Sirius Cove as was my subsequent boat, *Ben Boyd Road* (3759), in Sirius Cove. When I joined the Amateurs, I still owned *Wimaway*. I think in the first year, I'd sold *Wimaway* and bought *Ben Boyd Road*. It made sense to join the Amateurs and transition from ocean racing to harbour racing.

IM: *Ben Boyd Road* was a quarter-tonner, a 25-footer?

TB: It was a quarter-tonner. It was a Holland 25. At that time, the Amateurs had a division of quarter-tonners, and that's where I did most of my early sailing with that division, until the division fractured and I think I then joined Division 2 or 3.

IM: The Amateurs has a history of fleets being formed and disbanding according to the times and the tastes. The quarter-tonner fleet at that stage was a sizeable fleet, was it not?

TB: Probably we had a maximum of 10 boats.

IM: It was pretty competitive too?

TB: It was pretty competitive.

IM: And you won a number of Gold Medals, I believe.

TB: I did, I think. Actually won four Gold Medals because I remember giving one to each of my crew, and keeping one for myself, of course. So we did win four, I think.

IM: What was the Amateurs like compared with Middle Harbour?

TB: A much more friendly place, and there's a spirit of volunteerism in the Amateurs that you don't find in any other club, I don't think.

IM: I think everybody we've spoken to in this series has mentioned the volunteerism. It is a real strength of the Amateurs, isn't it?

TB: Absolutely. Well, a club like ours doesn't work without volunteers.

IM: So you were racing *Ben Boyd Road* inshore, but you didn't entirely give up the offshore activities because you went to Hobart three more times with Bob Lawler on *Firetel* as navigator. You came with us to Southport on *Morning Tide* and *Charisma*. You really did stay offshore as well.

TB: Yeah, I quite enjoyed the offshore racing. Although I was quite happy to do inshore Saturdays around the buoys with *Ben Boyd Road*.

IM: Just let's go back to *Wimaway* again because I overlooked your cruising background. You did a race to Suva and cruised through the Southwest Pacific Islands. Tell me about that.

TB: In 1982, I think it was, we did a race from the Middle Harbour Yacht Club to the (Royal) Suva Yacht Club. I think it was 17 days at sea. To accommodate that, I'd taken six months long service leave from the office.

We spent the first month in the race and cruising around Fiji. We took the other five months to come back to Australia through Vanuatu across to the eastern tip of Papua New Guinea. We never entered Papua New Guinea formally, although I don't think we ever got off the boat onto the land in Papua New Guinea, and then to Cairns and then sailed down the coast from Cairns, took us a month.

IM: And they say that when you do a long ocean passage, whether it's a race or a cruise, preparation is everything. On that voyage to Suva, you had a rigging, a major rigging problem, didn't you?

TB: We did. I'd prepared for the race by changing all the rigging. Somewhere between here and Suva, we noticed that the rigging started to fray just outside the swage at the deck. And fortunately, I'd kept one of each length of the old rigging as a spare. We actually changed that rigging at sea, which was a bit of an exercise. We were on the wind for the whole trip and we didn't have any extraordinarily rough weather, but it was manageable.

IM: You put the boat, I presume, onto the other tack and worked on the lazy side.

TB: That's right, worked on the lazy side. It really wasn't that difficult a job, took an hour or so.

IM: And the rest of that prolonged cruise...other problems with the boat or was it pretty straightforward?

TB: No, that was the only problem, apart from running aground once. But we didn't do any damage. We had to kedge it off, heel it over and kedge it off. But it really just scraped at the bottom of the keel and the bottom of the rudder. And we were motoring at the time. Didn't really cause too much drama.

IM: Well, it's a pretty stout little craft, the Duncanson, the 35.

TB: Absolutely, yeah, really good cruising boat.

IM: Good sea boat.

TB: Yeah, absolutely good sea boat, yeah.

IM: What were the highlights of that cruise in your memory?

TB: I just enjoyed being in a different place every day.

IM: But a lot of those places weren't routinely visited by small yachts, were they?

TB: Around Fiji, there were quite a lot of cruising boats. But when we got to Vanuatu, there were quite a number of fairly rarely visited places we went to. Lots of Japanese shipping wrecks, which were pretty interesting places to visit.

IM: World War II?

TB: Yes, yeah.

IM: So you're back in Sydney Harbour, you race *Ben Boyd Road* in the '80s and '90s?

TB: Yes.

IM: Same crew most of the time?

TB: My trip to Fiji was a bit of a fly-in fly-out arrangement where lots of people had three weeks holidays and they'd come and visit for a couple of weeks, then fly home again and another group would come. But during my time in the Harbour with *Ben Boyd Road*, the crew was fairly consistent for 20-odd years.

IM: What motivated your decision to bail out of *Ben Boyd Road*? Well, I know you syndicated at first, did you not?

TB: Yes.

IM: And then at what point and why did you decide to sell it?

TB: As I say, it was over a 20-year period, pretty much the same crew. They eventually all got married except me. There were children, of course, and competing interests, and it was difficult to keep that crew together. I had to recruit people and sometimes they'd only stay one or two years, and it was just time to go. It was quite difficult to keep a consistent crew in the end. So I joined Vic Dibben and the sailing team.

I still had *Ben Boyd Road* for casual sailing but I didn't race it for those three years. Prior to that, we were having crew troubles and one of the things I did was to syndicate *Ben Boyd Road*. So for an eight-year period, there were four owners. I kept one share myself and sold three shares.

IM: To your regular crew?

TB: For the regular crew, yes.

IM: And that worked?

TB: Worked fantastic. Great way to keep a bunch of guys together.

IM: Must have been tough to farewell *Ben Boyd Road*.

TB: It was, but it was the right time and it just worked for everybody.

IM: So you transitioned to the *Captain Amora*?

TB: I did.

IM: And you've been doing that for about 22 years now and you've seen some very interesting characters in that time. Tell me about some of the starters that you've worked with?

TB: Everybody at the Amateurs would know of Vic Dibben, and Vic Dibben had been there for many years before I joined the starting team on the *Amora*. He had with him Russ Chapman. Both those guys were on the *Amora* well into their nineties.

Vic didn't die till 103, I think. And Russ lasted until about 92. But we had many interesting characters. One of them was Geoff Ruggles. He used to drive from Kiama every Saturday to join us on the *Amora*. And he was there for many years.

We also had one young person as a deckhand. And so we went through probably four or five young people that were usually doing university or, in Cameron Edwards' time, went on to study naval architecture.

IM: And they were there every Saturday, every week, month in, month out.

TB: My duty on the *Amora* was always in the spring and summer series.

IM: You were in Bali in the winter, weren't you?

TB: I was in Bali very consistently for the winters for 20 years. Gave me an opportunity to do that too.

IM: But those youngsters...there was a succession of them, usually students. Is it true they do most of the legwork on the boat?

TB: Yes, absolutely. In fact, Cameron Edwards, I think, could do any job on the *Amora*.

IM: So those youngsters actually make you old fellows look good.

TB: (Laughs) There's probably a bit in that too.

IM: I think those of us who race at the Amateurs see the starters boat as a place where a bunch of 'old farts' has a really good time, you know, sitting back, having a whiskey, this and that and the other. But that's not really the case, is it?

TB: I don't believe we've ever had a whiskey on the *Amora*. Although...

IM: You mean during starter duties?

TB: During starting duties, yeah. I'm sure there was whiskey there before because there was always a bottle in the whiskey cabinet left by Bob Lawler.

IM: For medicinal purposes?

TB: For medicinal purposes. But we certainly enjoy a communal coffee, and we have an hour and a half to solve the world's problems every Saturday. It's very congenial.

IM: Do you have many dramas?

TB: Not really. Starting is very routine...until something goes wrong.

IM: But laying marks and all of the preparation, and afterwards the collection of marks and so on, that's not as straightforward as it might sound.

TB: Not for 80-year-olds, but fortunately we have one young person. The current young person is Geraldine (Wilkes), who's not a youngster anymore, but certainly manages to help with the grunt work on the *Amora*.

IM: And she takes photographs as well, I've noticed.

TB: She does. She's the photographer for the Amateurs, I think, as far as...

IM: Well, I think John Jeremy might take some issue (with that).

TB: Well, she would never take over John Jeremy's job, but certainly contributes.

IM: Is it difficult to get starters? Do they have to be tapped on the shoulder; or do you have volunteers who come and want to do it?

TB: It's pretty difficult to find a starter. We would like to have somebody that's sailed and knows how to sail. Although we've had some young people come that have never been sailors.

As far as the starter's concerned, I think it's pretty important that you have somebody that has been a sailor and has some experience at sailing. The last one is Mike Warner. Mike only joined us maybe four years ago, and prior to that it was me for 15 years or so.

I took the opportunity to step down and hand it over to Mike, more in a sense of generational change, because both myself and Tony Clarkson are 82 now and it's time we had some younger people.

IM: But you still go out.

TB: We still go out. But I think when it comes to 85, you'll find us looking for other things to do.

IM: What is it, eyesight, balance?

TB: Well, it's certainly eyesight. I can recall Victor Dibben, when he was mid-90s, asking me to stand alongside him while he was driving the *Amora*, because of his eyesight. Both Russ Chapman and Vic Dibben had cataract surgery during their time on the *Amora*.

IM: Does everything that happens on the *Amora* stay on the *Amora*? I presume you also rate the ability, or otherwise, of various boats and their skippers?

TB: Yes, absolutely. Yep, that would stay on the *Amora*. We wouldn't discuss that anywhere.

IM: Watching the *Amora* from near and far whilst on the race course it strikes me you've got to have good sea legs. She rolls.

TB: She does roll, and I think if you were at all prone to seasickness you wouldn't come. We did have one young man come to take over a job on the *Amora*. He lasted just one hour, really. In that time, we had to change the number boards on the roof of the *Captain (Amora)*. Of course, that accentuates the rolling. And Oliver, I think his name was, was a son of one of our club members, didn't last the day. We had to get *Nancy K* to come and take him off.

IM: Do you ever have situations where somebody in the starter's crew has to go over the side?

TB: Yes, quite a number of times. We would sometimes get the anchor tackle from one of the buoys around the propeller, or some situation like that, and somebody would have to volunteer to go over. Usually Cameron or one of the deckhands. But it's fairly rare.

IM: Seems to me that compatibility and athletic ability are pretty important in those youngsters.

TB: We've sometimes had to cut the mooring tackle from, and leave tackle, on the bottom of the Harbour if we can't get it back. It's a pretty rare occurrence.

IM: Tony, the club has adapted to the times over 150 years. Today's people have less time, vacation or leisure time than their predecessors perhaps, and they're more 'time poor'. The fleets have changed. For example, who'd have thought 50 years ago there would be a fleet of Super 30s or sports boats. The club's always adapted. How do you see the club today? How's it doing, and what are its prospects?

TB: The Amateurs will be there for the foreseeable future. I think there'll always be change. When the fleets get smaller, it's amazing how something comes up...and you mentioned the Super 30 fleet that really came from a small number of boats at the Squadron and has grown into quite a large fleet that we couldn't do without today. And if we did lose them, we'd be the poorer for it and we'd be looking for some way to encourage the rejuvenation of other fleets or make a new fleet to keep our numbers sustainable.

IM: At the same time, the Amateurs is known around the country for its nurturing of classic boats, wooden boats, Rangers and so on. Can you see that continuing?

TB: It will always continue. The Amateurs is the only place that really fosters those kinds of boats. They don't seem to be in any of the other clubs on the Harbour. Or if they are, they're not in great numbers. So I think it'll always be a place for those kinds of boats. And while ever the club exists, I think they'll make a place for them.

IM: You've been a member for close on 40 years now. What has the Amateurs meant to you personally?

TB: It's been a great part of my life, in fact. It's a very friendly club. I've enjoyed my association with the people and I've certainly enjoyed the company of many other starters and crew that sail with me and been volunteers with me on the *Captain Amora*.

IM: The fact that you're still doing it says a lot about your love of the place. Thank you for your recollections and thank you particularly for the 20-plus years manning *Captain Amora* and making sure that we get started and finished in good order.

TB: I'll be there for a few years yet, Ian.