



REFLECTIONS 150 YEARS

Bill Gale OAM

Bill Gale: I think it's a friendly club. In the past years, we've had one or two people who were angry about this and that. That's all gone. It's just such a friendly place. I always felt perfectly at home in the Amateurs, right from the very start. I started to sail in 1937 in *Ranger's* crew, and I gradually learned a bit more about sailing as I went on. Dad was a skipper and so on.

And I've made countless friends, and I used to have...once, parties down there. I'd get a dozen friends in there, not necessarily from the sailing world, but I had permission to go down there and cook fish, and the girls would bring salad, and that was all good. But I did that mostly with girls, because I liked the look of them...(laughs)...had about 12 girls down there, and I didn't suffer much from that. I felt like I could walk into the club, with some people I didn't know, and "g'day, my name is Bill Gale". "I'm Billy Smith". But there were always, almost always people interested in sailing.

I think in some other clubs, there are members... I've got no argument with this, but there are members who are not into sailing. But you could talk about sailing to anybody in the Amateurs when you walk through the door. And the other thing is, there's no pecking order there. It's almost communist. We're all equal. We don't have groups of people who are this type of mate, or this or that, that don't talk to the mob. We talk just as we go. And I think about five or six members of my family have been members. And I've been a member of the Amateurs since '48. It means a great deal to me.

Richard Palfreyman: What do you think the differences are between, say, the Amateurs and the Squadron, or any of the Royal Clubs, or even the CYC?

BG: Well, I don't know much about the CYC, but I know a bit about the Squadron. The Squadron is the most prestigious...and shall we say even the best club in Sydney on the basis (that) it's the best piece of real estate in Sydney. It faces north-east. You can get out of your motor car and walk down a few steps, and you walk into the water. And it's also sheltered from all winds, except a huge sou'easter which comes every several years.

And I've been there a few times, as a guest. And I can't imagine I'd be able to go again because I'm (now) physically handicapped. But I've always been welcome there, and people come in to say "Good day, Bill", and that sort of thing.

They have a wonderful racing fleet and that sort of thing. And there used to be a bit of feeling between the Amateurs and the Squadron. We would say they're stuck-up bastards around the corner. And they would say it's funny there's a little club around the corner. That's all gone. Because there's a great feeling of camaraderie and recognition between the two clubs.

As far as the Cruising Yacht Club is concerned, I've never been interested in ocean racing. And I'll be honest, I would have been frightened to go in the Hobart Race. To be caught in massive seas in Bass Strait is not for me. I was never fit enough to do that anyway. But it is the people who don't know much about it. But I think they've done a great job there in promoting ocean racing. And they're well recognized.

RP: Of course, the Gale name is almost synonymous with *Ranger* and vice versa. You said you started sailing her when you were a small boy.

BG: 1937.

RP: With your father and with...

BG: I was 12.

RP: 12. And with your brothers?

BG: Well, brother Roger started in *Ranger* a bit. Brian, really Brian was an 18-footer bloke. But the elder brother (Roger) was for'ard hand in *Ranger* when I started in 1937 as a 12-year-old. And we had a crew, but the sails were quite small.

Dad used to love to sail by himself. He sailed thousands of miles in boats by himself. He didn't hank on to the forestay. There was no (inaudible). There was no winches. Small sails. And it was very simple. That meant he didn't get in trouble. But because of his skill...he had an unequal skill...he was able to sail quite successfully with all these disadvantages caused by the cruising setup. When I took over, of course, I put in the (inaudible) and hanked on the forestay...and we just had big sails and all that sort of thing.

RP: So *Ranger*, of course, has been enormously successful as a racing boat in its class on the Harbour. What do you think makes *Ranger* stand out from all the other boats that were basically built as copies of her?

BG: I think the big problem has been in the past that we gave the plans to everyone with no charge. But either the builder or the owner in the collaboration, (made them) a bit longer here and a bit fatter there. And one boat, *Careel*, she's a foot shorter, but she's much smaller in the volume. And none of the Rangers, until now, have been a copy of the *Ranger*. There's one launched up in northern New South Wales by a boat named Marcus Cranny; she is an exact copy. And Ian Smith, master boat builder, is building one as we speak. And it should be ready in about a year.

But they are some of the copies, one that's longer and she's flatter aft and she's a bit faster downwind. We'd beat her easily upwind.

But I don't know why they all...for example, Sparkman & Stephens, the great American designers, if you get a plan from them, you sign a form that you will not alter the shape of that boat.

And I am certain none of the others, all them, have been as good as *Ranger* all round.

RP: But it must also have something to do with the man whose hand's on the tiller, which is you.

BG: Oh, well, I think I wasn't bad. I wasn't bad at sailing a boat...I'll come to that with a photo on the wall later on. But I'm certain that none of the boats were as good as *Ranger* all round. Father's concept was the ultimate of it. And the next two (new) boats, once they come, they will be as good to sail, or equally as good as possible. They'll be as good as *Ranger*. But none of the others are good around the whole cycle of winds, stronger than what I like.

RP: Right. Well, I've heard other members down at the Amateurs say that when in doubt, follow Bill Gale. So how important is all that local knowledge of the winds and tides in the harbour that you must have built up over 70 years?

BG: Extremely important. My father, he was a dedicated sailor. Even when he went up the coast sailing around Broken Bay by himself. He used to take the family away for two weeks and (then) send us home on the bus from Palm Beach. And he'd wake up in the morning, when he was by himself for a week, he'd have his breakfast and sail all day. A definite joy of sailing. But he didn't just sail along. He couldn't help himself. The best was got out of the boat all the time.

When he was young, he used to sail around Sydney Harbour in a 8-foot boat, dinghy, that his father bought him. On light days, he'd drop objects in the water and see where they floated. So he'd learn the tides by just watching it, by observation. And he would observe the winds. He just had a knowledge of where to go. And I wasn't very interested until after the War. I went sailing because I thought I ought to. I'd have sooner gone fishing (laughs).

RP: I'm glad you didn't.

BG: He had an enormous knowledge of tides in his mind...it wasn't written down...of tides and where you go. And I could still remember when I was sailing the boat, I followed his pattern largely. It contributed greatly to what I was doing.

RP: So, did he encourage you to learn all this? Or did you just get it by osmosis?

BG: Oh, no, I just went down. He'd encourage me. He'd encourage me, and he bought a dinghy for me to sail, a 9-foot dinghy with a cat rig. And back and back we'd go for holidays. And he'd take me. I didn't want to do it. I wanted to get back to fishing. And in the end, he gave up.

I wish I could have gone back later and picked up his thing. But even so, he taught me a lot. When I was crewing, I ended up being for'ard hand for him for many years. I would watch him all the time. And I would say back to myself, without really thinking about it, subconsciously, "What would Dad do here?". And I'd do that. It was there. It was down in my head. If you are young enough, and you sail all the time, you learn all these things. But you don't know that you learn it.

RP: And this is the way you learned from your father?

BG: It's the way I learned from my father. Although I wasn't really interested. Except that when I sailed with him after the War, I went back sailing with him, I became very interested. And in sailing the boat for years and years, I would sail in a place where Dad had gone, in that circumstance of wind and tide, without thinking that's what Dad would have done. I just knew what he did.

RP: So getting back to the Amateurs, what was sailing like out of the Amateurs, say 70 years ago, as compared to today?

BG: Oh, look, 70 years ago, I don't think we had a clubhouse...we were close to it. But I think 70 years ago, the atmosphere was good. We had cotton sails, which was a menace because if they got wet, they didn't dry them properly. They had mildew all over them, that sort of thing. And I think the attitude, among the people, was very good 70 years ago. We had a very good atmosphere, and it continued right to the present day.

I must say that about, say, 50 years ago, 45 years ago, we often had a difficult person or persons, no more than two, who were impossible. And it was so much so that you'd look in the clubhouse and you wouldn't want to go in. But that's gone.

RP: And that's a good thing.

BG: It's a very good thing. I haven't been down there for some five years, but in the last 20 years there's been a very good atmosphere in the club. No difficult people. That's good.

RP: So you're saying that really the camaraderie and the atmosphere at the club today is probably better than it was 50 years ago?

BG: It's better than it was 50 years ago. We had one or two people who were complaining all the time and telling lies. For example, one bloke who would discuss boats including mine. Rather than say that I beat him, they just couldn't beat the people they were talking about. But they were convinced in their own minds that they did. And that caused lots of ruckus. I haven't been down there for some years now. But for 30 years, I didn't see an argument in the club. That must have happened, but I was not witness to an argument. And that's unusual.

RP: So who were some, being positive, who were some of the great characters from the club that you recall?

BG: The great characters were the Merrington family. There was Ernest and Bill and John Merrington. And they all sailed boats every Saturday for years and years. And they were great members of the club. They sailed the boats beautifully. They were all very good old men. And they'd never caused any problems...they'd go out of their way to help. They were great characters.

Oh, look, there's all sorts of good guys. They'd sail the boats, and go and sail for the fun. And they'd obey the rules. And there weren't any problems. But the one that strikes me is the Merringtons. And there are others for sure.

And one of the great ones was, he didn't sail the Amateurs in my time, (was) Dr. Hamilton Kirkland. And he eventually sailed a boat that was more suitable to sail at the Squadron. He sailed against Dad many times. And when I was about 10, at The Basin on the beach, he said, "Come here, I want to talk to you". "Yes, Doctor". He said, "I want you to know that your father is far and away the best skipper in Sydney Harbour. And nobody else can get near him". And Dad always said, "Nobody's better than Kirkland".

RP: A mutual admiration?

BG: Yeah, mutual admiration. And they were both very good. Kirkland was that good. He sailed a cruising 35-footer, a cruising boat in the 2nd Division of the Squadron, and his competitors were 6 Metres and 30 Square Metres. He wasn't the limit boat. He was just marvellous.

RP: Now, you sailed a 5.5 Metre boat at one stage, I think. Everybody associates you with the gaff rig. But you were a Bermudian rig sailor as well. There's obviously a difference between the two, but do you have a preference?

BG: That's a very good question. The word is Bermudian, it's not Bermudan. Bermudan is wrong. My authority for that is William Fife III, Charles Nicholson, and a great cruising boat designer. But it doesn't matter. They all said Bermudian. If you come from Bermuda, and people say, "Where are you from?", you say "I am a Bermudian". The Bermudians (inaudible) in the language.

RP: Mind you, of course, Fife was a Scotsman, so maybe he was mixed up with his accents.

BG: Yes, he was a Scotsman. People would say to me and my brothers and my father, "You only worry about the gaff rig". It's absolutely wrong. Because Father enjoyed sailing the *Josephine* 9 Metre Bermudian rig more than any other boat. I had enormous pleasure out of sailing *Southern Cross II*, and my brother Roger sailed the Finn class...and she was Bermudian rig, the Finn.

But at the same time, we could see virtue in both rigs. The average Bermudian bloke says that we are one-eyed about the gaff rig. But they are one-eyed about the Bermudian. I see virtues in both rigs.

RP: Right, right. Going back to the club again, in recent years we've seen working bees of club members, and they've been taking on really big maintenance projects like recladding the boat shed and all those really heavy duty type things. How essential do you think that volunteering to that extent has been part of the reason for the success of the club?

BG: Oh, look, it's very essential because it promotes the good feeling of the club. You get down there and have a barbecue and that sort of thing. In my younger days, particularly the year we took the club over, we spent every weekend at work there, and there was always a barbecue...and I think they might have given us a beer, I can't remember.

But the fact that you met all sorts of people, we did it ourselves, and that promoted a feeling within the club which is different to any other club. I think we're the only club where that's been done. I might be wrong, I think all (other) clubs have it done professionally. Because we stand there in the barbecue and work alongside each other, and are proud of what we did, that puts that special feeling you have within that club.

RP: And that's been happening since the club moved to the present site.

BG: Yeah, we worked every Sunday for months when we first took over the club. If anything needed to be done, they could call on the volunteers and they'd do it. I suppose (at) other clubs, it's all done professionally, and that's fine, but I think the working bees give a special feeling of camaraderie within the club.

RP: It seems that in earlier times, the Amateurs was very much a family club, and yet today we see an ageing membership, and perhaps the need for some younger, fresher faces. Are you optimistic about the future of the Amateurs?

BG: Yes, I think there's junior members there, and very importantly, since the War we've had female members. Lady members. Lady members is the right word. Now, when you have lady members...they tend to keep the place neat, they'll do things. Also behaviour is better there. If there's ladies there. If there's a man's club only, there's bad language, that sort of thing, and I think people tend to get into arguments. Having girls around the place improves the behaviour, and they look a lot better than blokes anyway!

RP: And not only that, they're sometimes better sailors, because when you look at today's Olympic sailors, half of them are women, and they are some of the best in the world.

BG: Oh, Nicky Bethwaite...the famous Bethwaite family. Nicky sailed *Ranger* at one time alright. And she sailed the boat...she'd never been in such a boat, she'd sailed in yachts, but *Ranger's* very different than the average (yacht). She sailed it perfectly. There's just no better. Another advantage I see, particularly in a lot of yachts, is that women tend to weigh less than blokes. And a light person right in the stern is better for the boat than a heavy person.

RP: Right, right.

BG: The other thing, I used to have girls on the crew a lot, a lot of girls, and if I said pull the jib on, they would do that. If I had some expert, he'd protest. I'd say, "Would you pull the jib on a bit", and he'd say "You don't need it". And you get experts that (would) sit and argue with me. I wouldn't ask them again, because I just...I wouldn't abuse them on the day, but I wouldn't ask them again.

I knew from my father how the boat behaved, how it should behave, or what the trim should be. Blokes would come on board the boat, they'd never raced in gaff rigs or (on) such a boat, and they just didn't understand. And they thought what I was doing was wrong. But my father set it up, and I followed his opinion, and that was that.

RP: Now, your father took your mother on their honeymoon, sailing, *in Vagabond*, I think?

BG: Correct.

RP: All the way up the Hawkesbury, which caused a bit of a stir.

BG: It caused a bit of a stir, not so much at The Basin, but around at Refuge Bay (where) the men would walk around the beach naked when they were swimming. Well, if they were swimming, they'd just take their clothes off and swim out, and they couldn't do that when Mum was there. They were quite hostile about it.

One funny little story, it was raining one day on the honeymoon, and he had an awning, and side curtains, and a floor curtain, so the boat was closed off.

RP: It was an open boat, wasn't it?

BG: An open boat, yes...well, yes, she had what they call a half deck. It wasn't a half deck, she decked about a quarter or a fifth of the way. And they'd put up, on the boom, he'd put curtains all around, so they couldn't be seen.

But Dad was ashore, and Mum was washing herself out of a basin in the cockpit and a set line went off, and she grabbed that. All the mates around, they could see it was a big fish. "Pardon, Mrs. Gale!" But she was terrified, she was, and she literally got a flounder in her foot. Of course, what are we talking about, 1913, I think. And that's...were very happy circumstances like that (laughter).

RP: I can imagine. I wonder sometimes, well, you might have wondered too, what your father Cliff would have made of today's boat design and construction, you know, canting keels, and computers, and GPS, and stuff. Would he have been interested in it, do you think?

BG: No, he would have, he said, that's rubbish, because canting keels are dangerous. No matter what they say, it's dangerous. And a lot of the boats, *Ranger*, for example, and many boats of the era, they would do exactly what you wanted them to do. I sailed the boat for years, and she never let me down. If there was a problem, it was me. The boat never misbehaved. But some of the modern yachts, I've seen them sailing around, they

don't behave themselves in some circumstances. They just decide they'll go to windward and do something ridiculous. Dad wouldn't have approved of it, no. He would have liked to have seen the ability of the boat and the speed of it, but he wouldn't have liked it at all, in no way.

RP: I read again somewhere that your father Cliff notched up, I think it was 69 years of competitive racing.

BG: Yeah.

RP: And I've also been told that you, at some time ago, reached 60 consecutive years of racing. I think so. I think you would have passed that now. What I'm going to ask you is, have you beaten the old man?

BG: Have I beaten him?

RP: Yeah.

BG: I don't think so. I can't remember sailing boats in a different...if we did. He and I would have been (on) different sorts of boats. I don't feel to comment on that one. I am certain that in his time, that nobody approached his skill. And him and my cousin have said that, and other blokes. For example, Lex Buckle had Charlie Hayes build the cruising 9 Metre (*Josephine*) in 1933. And he said to Dad, would you like to sail it? Of course he did! And she was a Bermudian rig. Dad said that was the best boat he ever sailed. Now, (s)he was scratch boat in the Royal clubs, Saturday afternoon and Sunday. But she wasn't the fastest boat. The 8 Metres were faster than the cruising 9, (as were) other boats, other big boats. Well, she (*Josephine*) was a beautiful, a magnificent Fife boat. As a cruising 9 she was a heavier boat, but she was still scratch (boat).

And he, he also, one time in The Basin, in his '80s, the kids were sailing Moths off the beach, the kids at the camp. And they'd sail around a buoy out near the end of Soldiers Point. They'd take off the ropes, all getting in the boats, and they'd sail up and down. They'd do that four or five (times) a day. And once when he was in his '80s, they said, "Would you like to sail one, Mr Gale?" He said, "Yes". He beat them hands down.

There was just nobody could get near him. Then he went on an 18-footer race here one time. In 1938, they invited all the prominent yacht skippers in Sydney to sail an 18-footer in a Sunday race. And he went out, and out of the hat he drew *Lightning*. *Lightning* had never won a race. He went down, and not one of the crew had ever sailed with him. They said, "We don't know how to rig it". He said, "I'll show you". He knew how to do it. And they said, (it was) because "We weren't doing any good today". He said, "No, we'll win today". "What do you mean?" He said, "We will win today. I'm sure. Get to the bookies, mate, we'll get some money on it". But they couldn't get there in time.

During the race, they wouldn't put a spinnaker up. (So) he made them put a ballooner up. And they kept letting the sheet go, because they'd put all their money on the *Collaroy*. This is the crew of *Lightning*. And he said, "Pull it on and fasten it". "No, if we fasten it around a

cleat, she'll capsize". He said, "That's MY worry. You do it, or I'll report you to the League committee...that you disobeyed the skipper's orders. I think you could be in trouble". So they fastened it!

RP: He won the race.

BG: He'd won now. But Jack Backhouse, a very good helmsman, he was in *Collaroy*, also owned by the owner of *Lightning*, who'd never won a race. The *Collaroy* was a champion boat. And they set spinnakers, ringtails, the whole lot. But Dad still beat them in.

And interestingly enough, Dad was a dental mechanic, and he was at work (when) three blokes knocked on the door, the following Monday. He said, "What are you talking about?" They said, "It's (about) racing". He said, "OK, what do you want to know?" "We want you to sail an 18-footer every Sunday. And you can go to any sailmaker, any builder you like, any designer". And he says, "That's very nice of you, fellas". (But) he said, "There's a problem". "What's that?" He said, "I will be (going) flat out to win every Sunday". And they said, "Well, we're bookmakers, you know, and we wouldn't want (that)". He said, "That's what I thought". And they said, "We'll see you later". They walked out the door" (laughter).

RP: I was going to end up, Bill, with asking you about *Ranger* again. Because it's now permanently part of the club, isn't it?

BG: Yeah.

RP: How did the Ranger Trust come into being?

BG: Well, Dad designed (inaudible) fast boat. He had no mathematical ability. He left school at 11, I think. And he could do sort of simple arithmetic, but no mathematics. He designed all these boats. He would make a layer cake of cedar and pine, and cut it by eye, all by the seat of his arse. And he'd put dowel sticks to hold that all together. When he designed the shape, he would pull the dowel sticks out, (leaving) just the timbers, the timbers. And from that, he would draw the plans. And he would draw the mast there, and draw the rig. Just freehand. He would just (say) that's the way it ought to be.

And people were interested in it. Gradually, people said, let's have a *Ranger* and he gave them the plan. And they altered it a bit, as I say. Some of them were very close. Lou d'Alpuget, he built the *Cherub*, which is quite similar. And she's now owned by two marvellous members in the club. One is Vice Commodore, the other an historian...they're two marvellous blokes.

RP: And she's moored next to me.

BG: Moored next to you?

RP: Yeah, I've got the mooring next to *Cherub*.

BG: They're marvellous blokes. They're marvellous members. And they're sailing it very well. She is quite similar (to *Ranger*). *Kilkie*, another one, was built for Dr. Deck. I think, by Holmes. They're all a bit different, except the two being launched now. And Ian Smith's will be exactly the same (as *Ranger*). But I would never give the plan to anybody who didn't guarantee to me that they would not alter it.

RP: And so the future of the boat now is assured, isn't it, *Ranger*...at the Amateurs?

BG: Yes. A bloke has bought it, who was working for Langman's boatyard...he's changed his job now...but he is an expert, even from engines to looking after the whole lot. He's a very good helmsman and he has retained my old crew - my two older blokes in their 'seventies - and he's got a couple of young, very young blokes with him, (including) a for'ard hand. And he is maintaining the boat better than I could, because that's his job. I was not a trained boat maintainer or engine maintainer. And his wife is a very good, very, very good helmsman. In fact, he claims she sails the boat better than he does. And the kids love it. It's being used a family boat. And they've gone for holidays to Broken Bay, and the kids say all the time, when are you taking us back to Broken Bay, Dad?

So he came and took over the boat, and I gave him the key. He sailed (it) out of Mosman Bay. I didn't feel a pain, (by) which I mean I didn't feel a loss of any sort. Whereas if another person had bought it, I would fear that they wouldn't use it or leave it on the morning. So I'm more than happy that he's got it, because he's sailing at the Amateurs, sailing it beautifully, and that sort of thing.