



## ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

### Art Treasures of the Squadron

*Norske, Saskia and Erica*  
Oil on canvas 60.5cm x 70cm  
By Ian Hansen, 1992  
Hangs in the Members Bar



This is the story of 8-Metre yachts - always considered as elite - very fast, very beautiful and very expensive. It is also a story that involves yacht racing at the highest levels including the Olympics and international regattas across Europe, America and Australia. The yachts depicted also had strong connections to the Squadron and Sydney Harbour.

*Norske* was owned by former RSYs Commodore Richard Dickson (known as 'Dicko') and *Saskia* was a rather special 8-Metre that was owned by several RSYs Members including Bill (later Sir William) Northam and brothers John and Michael Stephen. *Saskia* and *Erica* also featured prominently in the story of the Sayonara Cup competition and the Squadron's challenge for that trophy in 1955 which ended 34 years of dominance by the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria.

'*Norske, Saskia and Erica*' is painted from a point of view near Clark Island in Sydney Harbour. *Saskia* is the central yacht with the sail number KA1. She is sailing to windward on port tack in a moderate nor'easterly breeze. *Norske* is to her left, and *Erica*, on starboard tack, is positioned sailing toward



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Bradley's Head in the distance in a race on Sydney Harbour. The Manly Ferry on the far right is heading in the opposite direction. The western shore of the main harbour including Bradley's Head and Taylors Bay is in the background.

The atmosphere is light and airy with the light focused the top of the mainsail and jib of each of *Norske* and *Saskia*. The cotton sails reflect delicate shades of yellows and pinks in the shadows. The light also beautifully floats down to the reflections on the water in front of them. *Erica's* mainsail is also highlighted in the distance. The relative positions of the three boats suggest they are in a close race with *Saskia* leading. The Manly Ferry is making its way through the fleet adding to the challenges of racing on Sydney Harbour where yachts must give way to the ferry. The wakes of the boats emphasise the elegant lines of the 8-Metre yachts.

The colours on the waters are many, with the deep, vibrant blue typical of Sydney Harbour. There are also purples, pinks, greens and yellows, and the light dances on the peaks of the waves. The background fades into yellows, greens and purples. The clouds are a beautiful combination of light greens, oranges and reds developing into clear blues at the top of the painting with highlights at the top of the clouds. A typical summer's day in Sydney!

*Saskia* was built and designed by William Fife in 1931 on the Clyde in Scotland. *Norske* and *Erica J* were both Tasmanian built 8-Metres. They were all constructed to the International 8-Metre class rule for racing yachts. Often called 'Eights', the boats are not identical but they are designed to comply with a specific formula - in this case the International Rule of 1907. The '8-Metre' in this case does not refer to the length but the product of the formula. 8-Metre boats are, on average, about 15 metres long. Between 1907 and 2008 approximately 500 8-Metre boats were built, and about 175 of them survive today. 25 to 35 boats participate in the annual 8-Metre World Championship.

The International Rule was established to harmonise the rules of yacht racing and standardise the yachts. The 8-Metre class became the local class of the Solent, England and the bigger classes such as the J-class travelled from regatta to regatta on the continent. The popularity of the 8-Metre class led to it eclipsing the smaller 6-Metre class. They attracted a wide range of keen owners: priests, soldiers and Peers of the Realm regularly raced side-by-side, and women owners were not unknown.

*Saskia* was built to be the Royal Northern Yacht Club's challenger for the Seawanhaka Cup which was hotly contested at the time. She was shipped to Oyster Bay in New York in 1931 and won this famous trophy. *Saskia* returned to the Solent where she raced so successfully that a sterling silver model of her is now presented as a trophy by the Royal Yacht Squadron at Cowes. She was also selected to represent Britain at the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936, sailed at Kiel in Germany.

Brothers Kenneth and Francis Preston crewed aboard *Saskia* in the 1936 Olympics. Kenneth co-owned the boat with Robert Steele. After showing early promise, finishing fourth in races one and two, they never managed higher places in the remaining races and finished sixth overall. Preston was involved in sailing most of his life. He competed in the Olympics again in 1952 and was a non-competing captain of the British team in 1960. He was a member of the Royal Yacht Squadron for 72 years and Commodore from 1965-71.



## ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON



Eight Metre Class racing in the Solent Pre-WW1 – Photo: BEKEN of Cowes

*Saskia* was purchased by RSYS Member Bill Northam in 1954 and shipped to Australia with the specific objective of winning the Sayonara Cup back from the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria. This trophy has been a symbol of pre-eminence in the big-boat round-the-buoys racing in Australia since 1904. It is still sailed using International Dragon one design class yachts.

Bill Northam took up sailing late in life (at the age of 46) following a successful career in business. He quickly became an enthusiastic sailor, comparing his first experience of helming a neighbour's boat on Pittwater to driving a racing car!

The rules of the Sayonara Cup at the time required challenging yachts to be sailed to Melbourne on their own bottom - rather than being shipped. Bruce Dickson, RSYS Commodore 1986-1990, whose father 'Dicko' owned the 8-Metre *Norske*, recalls in an oral history recorded for the Squadron archives in Nov 2011 that:

*'Saskia* was an open deck boat not suited to offshore sailing. She almost sank on the way to Melbourne for the Sayonara Cup - like a submarine with water coming in and flowing into the bow as she was going down waves. They had no modern communications and the boat took 4-5 days longer to get to Melbourne than expected. When she finally arrived it was a big relief to Bill Northam. Once there, *Saskia* won the Sayonara Cup pretty easily.'

The Sayonara Cup in 1955 was actually a three-way contest. *Saskia* scored four wins and a third in the three-boat series, *Erica J* (later *Erica*) had four second places and *Frances* (the victorious yacht in 1954 from the RYCV) one win and three thirds. As a result, the Sayonara Cup went to Sydney for the first time since 1931. In the subsequent series held in Sydney in 1956, *Saskia* retained the trophy defeating *Erica J* and *Frances* again.



## ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

Later, Bill Northam also sailed *Barranjoey* in the 5.5-Metre class at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and won Australia's first ever gold medal for sailing, at the age of 59. He remains the oldest Australian to win an Olympic gold medal.

*Saskia* remained at the Squadron for many years, owned initially by the Palmer family and later by the Stephen brothers: John an orthopaedic surgeon and Michael a vascular surgeon, from a family of three generations of medical practitioners. *Saskia* was a regular competitor in our Club's summer pointscores and the Wednesday races, conducted in summer by the Royal Prince Edward Yacht club and in winter by the Royal Australian Naval Sailing Association. John and Michael shared the helm from 1997, initially under charter from the Palmer family and subsequently after purchasing her. She was still winning in 2007, a few weeks before she was shipped to Britain to take part in the celebration of 100 years of sailing Metre Rule yachts. This unique celebration saw many of the finest classic racing yachts travel from all over the world to participate in the Centenary Regatta conducted by the Royal Yacht Squadron at Cowes.

Prior to the Centenary Regatta, *Saskia* also competed in the 8-Metre World Cup at Largs on the Clyde in Scotland - her original birthplace. Some 35 to 40 boats competed in this event in various classes of gaff-rigged 8-Metres, classic 8-Metres (with wooden hulls and spars) and modern 8-Metres (with aluminium masts, carbon fibre working sails and modern gear.) Joining John and Michael Stephen in sailing *Saskia* in this World Championship were Doug Sturrock, the well-known ship chandler, sail maker Ian Short, ocean racing navigator Lindsay May, who skippered *Love and War* to victory in the 2006 Sydney to Hobart, Glen 'Hedgy' Cooper, the sail design developer with Ian Short Sails and New Zealander Stuart Milburn. *Saskia* was fast as always and won the Classic division.



*Saskia* and her crew at the World 8 Metre Championship at the Royal Northern & Clyde Yacht Club, Scotland. L to R: Glen 'Hedgy' Cooper, Ian Short (partly obscured), John Stephen, Michael Stephen, Lindsay May OAM, Doug Sturrock and Stuart Milburn.





## ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

After these events, *Saskia* was sold to Michael York who had managed the UK campaign team. She was later restored by subsequent owners and is now based in the UK.

*Norske's* background is outlined in an oral history in the Squadron Archives recorded by Commodore Bruce Dickson in November 2011. She was purchased by his father 'Dicko' in 1956 and raced in the RSYS No. 1 Division competing regularly against *Saskia*. Saturdays were race days and Sundays were picnic days usually at Quarantine or Store beach. Bruce's father had re-married in 1955 and honeymooned in Sandy Bay, Tasmania. While there, he saw *Norske* for sale - a beautiful 8-Metre cruising boat built in Huon pine. Her owner had died prematurely aged 35. She had no motor and was heavy for an 8-Metre, so she was not very competitive against *Saskia*. There was a strong association with the Gordon Rugby Club amongst her crew. The crew, including Peter Bradford, Rod Northam and Malcom Levy, remained stable for 30 to 40 years even after Bruce's father died in 1981 and the original *Norske* was sold before Bruce subsequently purchased another *Norske* - a Nantucket 43 designed by Peter Cole.



*Norske* Half Model donated by Richard Dickson, Commodore 1968-71

*Erica J*, (named after the original owner's daughter) or *Erica* as she is now known, was built in Tasmania in 1949. She is famous for her win in the 1953 Sayonara Cup - Tasmania's first victory in racing for that trophy. However, she lost the series in 1954 to *Frances* from the RYCV.

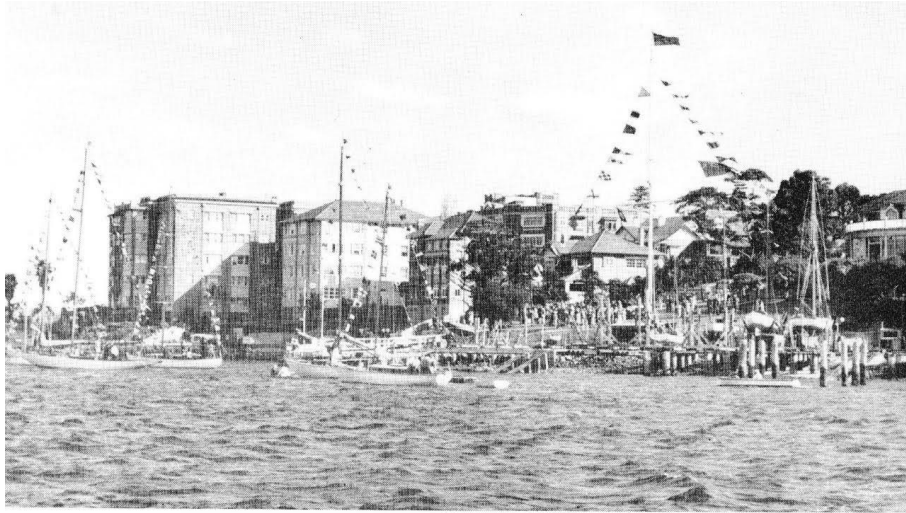
*Erica J* was built in Hobart by Max Creese to a design by Bjame Aas of Norway, one of the chief internationally recognised Metre boat designers of the period. From 1961, she was mostly based in Melbourne. She made an appearance at the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia in 1971 when she was acquired by Warren Evans and returned to Hobart in the 1980s. She was well known and actively raced throughout the majority of her life and has been sailed by many well-known helmsmen including 'Boy' Messenger (given names Engelbert Charles).

*Erica* relocated to the UK in 2011 for restoration and competed in the 8-Metre World Championships in 2012 and 2014. She still races regularly on the Solent and in classic yacht regattas around the UK.

The three 8-Metres *Norske*, *Saskia* and *Erica* were raced every Saturday in the RSYS No. 1 Division on Sydney Harbour for much of the late 1950s, '60s and '70s. There was no anti-fouling so they were slipped with their enamelled bottoms after every Saturday race and cleaned on a complicated set of rails cradle system at the Squadron. There were plenty of grunts and groans and crowbars required for this process, as reported by Bruce Dixon in his oral history. The slipways used to do this are visible on the right of the picture below of the clubhouse from the 1950s.



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AN "OPENING OF THE SEASON" GARDEN PARTY IN THE 1950s  
Squadron's mast, and yachts in the offing, dressed for the occasion

(Photo: N. H. McMally)

Ian Hansen had a strong feel for 8-Metre yachts when he was commissioned to paint '*Norske, Saskia and Erica*'. To quote him:

'As a young Naval Shipwright Apprentice in the mid-sixties, we were taken out to Halvorsen's yard at Ryde and the old 12-Metre *Vim* was there for a refit. While everyone else was looking at motorboats under construction, I spent the whole time on *Vim* falling in love with a classic yacht. 20 years later I purchased *Karalee*, a cruising 8-Metre, and spent two years restoring her. I occasionally crewed on *G II* in harbour races with Mick Morris who was skippering for Gordon Ingate, so yes, I seem to have a yen for Metre style yachts.'

Ian Hansen was born in 1948 in Bordertown South Australia and spent his childhood on the foreshore of Harvey Bay in Queensland where he gained a deep love of the sea and painting. He joined the Navy aged 15 as an apprentice shipwright and continued to paint in his off-duty hours before becoming a full-time artist in 1975. He saw active service in Vietnam from 1967-68 and was appointed an artist to the Navy in 2000 in East Timor. In 2002 Ian joined the ice expedition ship *Sir Hubert Wilkins* for a five week voyage to Antarctica. His studio is a converted stable in the rear garden of his home in Hunters Hill, Sydney.

Ian is nationally and internationally recognised as an outstanding marine artist. He is a Fellow of the Royal Art Society and Australian Society Marine Artists. He exhibits with the Maritime Art Gallery at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut, USA. The gallery considers him one of their Premier artists, only 20 are appointed worldwide. Ian is a member of 'Kevin Hills top 10 Australian artists' who exhibit their work several times a year.

Ian regularly sails his two classic yachts *Karalee* and *Smoky Cape* on Sydney Harbour. He has also sailed both boats numerous times to Lord Howe Island and to the Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart.



## ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

Ian does his own shipwright work. He crews aboard the barque *James Craig* and his illustrated logbooks from his various travels are always read with great interest by visitors to his studio and can be viewed on his website.



Ian Hansen in his Hunters Hill Studio

The 8-Metres are beautifully and efficiently designed racing and cruising yachts which have continued to appeal to sailors both in their classic and modern forms since the creation of the International Rule in 1907. They inspire loyalty in their crews, outstanding results and great art.

### **Robyn Coleman**

Exhibiting Member Royal Art Society and RSY Member

I would like to thank Peter Bradford, Bruce Dickson, John Stephen and Ian Hansen for sharing their recollections with me for this article.

### Acknowledgements:

Elena Cavallero for the image of '*Norske, Saskia and Erica*'

'Eight Metre Class Racing in the Solent' photo credit BEKEN of Cowes

'An 'Opening of the Season' Garden Party in the 1950s' photo credit N. H. McEnally

'Ian Hansen in his Hunters Hill Studio' photo credit Ian Hansen

Photo of *Saskia* and her crew courtesy of Lindsay May.