

The story of the Folkboat *Karrawingi*

By Dr Reg Hession



Genesis

In the mid-1950s, a number of Jubilee Class 18 foot centre-board yachts of the pre-WW2 era competed on Sydney Harbour and Port Phillip Bay, to provide a relatively inexpensive form of competitive racing on those respective waters. At the culmination of each summer, crews from the most successful three yachts from Victoria and NSW competed annually in alternate venues for a trophy donated by a former Governor of Victoria, Lord Huntingfield, the eponymous “Huntingfield Cup”. At this time, “The Squadron” Jubilee fleet had attracted a number of ex-WW2 servicemen who had sailed as young boys, as well as those who were schoolboys during that period. For each of these groups, the attraction to “the Jubes” (as they were known) was surely enhanced by the economic factor, as these small yachts provided a relatively inexpensive entry into the world of competitive yachting.

RSYS 1956, Jubilee Fleet

For competition Jubilees were crewed by 3 or 4 persons, in most cases the crew members being partners in ownership, thus being able to share in the general boat maintenance as well as other costs such as slipping, yardage, repairs etc. When not in the water, Jubilees were stored on individual iron-wheeled trolleys on The Squadron “hard”. On race days, each boat and trolley

needed to be moved manually to a launching ramp for entry into (and later, exit from) the water. To facilitate this, tram rails mounted on a sloping ramp were used to launch and retrieve each boat and trolley, via a stout rope and shackle attached to an electric powered “driving station” from an old Sydney tram. This, provided a measure of control for each Jubilee and trolley to enter or exit the water by gravity or power respectively. The former was always exciting, as there was little downhill braking due to the simplicity of the mechanism, as well as the various learner-drivers (crew members) being required to gain experience “on the job”.

By the mid-1960s, lifestyle changes (marriage, family commitments etc.) caused many of the sailors to seek a means to include family members within the yachting spectrum. This led to a drift by the Jubilee owners and crews toward a more “comfortable” yacht, which could be used for pleasure as well as for competition. The advent of the “Folkboat” design (Sweden), as well as the “Stella” (GB), seemed to fit the bill for extended forms of activity and eventually, a new combined class was formed for racing on Sydney Harbour, the “Stella/Folkboat Class”.



Transition of Jubilee Fleet members to Stellas and Folkboats

At this time, there were a number of newly designed plans for small and medium sized racing yachts available to members of competing clubs, embracing a variety of hull designs from carvel, to clinker to hard chine. Within this mix, the variety of new materials which had been developed for hulls included marine ply and aluminium, with some reductions in cost and ease of construction being to the fore. For the three partners in the Jubilee “Sea Sprite” who contemplated the move to a bigger craft for family reasons, cost, speed through the water and beauty, were also predominant factors in deciding upon the design of the replacement craft. These and other factors were amongst those which caused the leading crews amongst the Jubilee fleet to decide upon either the Stella or Folkboat, as their clinker lined hulls readily accommodated sawn lengths of solid planks or marine ply.

It was at this point that the three members of the “Sea Sprite” partnership, (Graeme Anderson, Richard Newman and Reg Hession) decided to invite two other members of the RSYS (The Squadron), the Cox brothers (Neville and Clive), to form a syndicate of five to investigate the building

of a Folkboat. Five partners would provide a racing crew of four, with an occasional “free” weekend for a fifth. Following much investigation and sound advice, the well-established expertise of boat builders, Hald and Johansen of Collaroy NSW were chosen and commissioned to build a Folkboat, fitted out to our special requirements.

Basic differences between Stellas and Folkboats.

Despite the hull of each yacht being of similar length and of clinker construction, that of the Stella contained one more plank than the Folkboat and thus stood slightly taller in the water, which appeared to give Stellas a marginal advantage over Folkboats in light airs. On the other hand, Folkboats generally handled heavier conditions somewhat more comfortably. In short, it emerged that in wind speeds of up to 15 knots, Stellas were dominant whereas, when it exceeded 20 knots the situation appeared to reverse, giving a slight advantage to Folkboats.

On the water, Folkboats had sleeker lines than Stellas, possibly due to their lower decks and the curvature of the clinker planks simulating the graceful but functional style of the Viking boats of old. Why did an engineer (Graeme Anderson), wool broker (Richard Newman) and three dentists, the Cox brothers (Neville and Clive) and Reginald Hession, choose the Folkboat design?

It appears to be true that in the main, sailors are aesthetes. In this sense, the five young men who had “cut their teeth” on racing the rather tubby and slow “Jubilees” or faster but skittish lighter mono-hulls, were keen to enter the next phase, with a sleek but comfortable craft for racing. Despite this, there was also a need for the new vessel to provide a measure of comfort for family members when cruising and above all, for safety when carrying children. In effect, we had all entered marriage and had by then (mid-1960s) accepted the demands of young families. Thus beauty, safety, comfort, cost, durability, played a part in the final decision. Whereas the hull and sloop rig for Karrawingi were true to the Folkboat design, modifications to the coach-house and interior, cockpit and rigging were incorporated as the hull took shape.

OSTAR 1960: The first Single-handed Trans-Atlantic yacht race

It is significant that the first “Single-Handed Trans-Atlantic Yacht Race” fleet contained the Folkboat “Jester” GBR (Blondie Hasler), which took out 2nd place (48 days, 12 hours, 02 minutes), almost 8 days behind “Gypsy Moth 111 (3)” (Sir Frank Chichester). The programme listings were basic, describing “Jester” as merely “mono 26” and “Gypsy Moth 111 (3)” as “mono 40”. The numerals which follow the hull description as “mono”, refers to their respective lengths in feet. When the race took place (1960), it appeared that entrants were able to rig their yachts and choose their own respective courses. For the race, Hasler dispensed with the usual “sloop rig” and replaced it with what appears to be a much smaller “junk rig” sail, braced by a number of transverse battens. He also chose a northerly route, some 300 nautical miles longer than the shortest one, but with less possibility of encountering headwinds. However, it also presented more chance of encountering sea ice and icebergs! One must conclude that his choice of yacht, sail and route were heavily influenced by safety, following winds and the early travels of Viking sailors in open longships. Whatever it may have been, for a small modern yacht sailed single handed over a vast ocean, it worked!

There is no doubt that the five “weekend amateurs” who comprised the future Karrawingi syndicate, were heavily influenced by the fact that a Folkboat had completed the Atlantic crossing successfully and had achieved second place in the race. This, combined with the beautiful lines of the hull, its

relatively low cost and internal design possibilities, provided sufficient trigger for it to be selected as the craft which may fulfil their needs.

Huon Pine

At that time, the hulls for Stellas and Folkboats which had been built in Sydney, were clad with sawn lengths of marine plywood to provide the clinker lines of the hull, as this material was readily available, relatively inexpensive, light and easy to use, thus reducing construction costs. For the potential partners in "Karrawingi", the subliminal dream of obtaining "perfection" in (probably) their only entry into the folly of building a timber yacht, was to review the possibility of obtaining the best "traditional" timber available, Huon Pine. The timing was less than perfect, as at that time (and since), there was an embargo imposed upon any future logging of the timber, due to over harvesting in the Huon Valley. Undaunted by this, one member of the syndicate (Graeme Anderson) contacted a source in Tasmania, who arranged for a search of the Huon, to scour its banks for any stray and disused logs which may have been trapped on the mud banks of the river during the logging process. Sufficient were found and rescued from their watery graves, to be shipped to Adelaide for milling into planks of the correct dimensions and subsequently transported to Sydney. This was how the ban on the logging of Huon Pine was subverted, by "Ando's" clever "recovery" of enough (forgotten) logs to clad the hull, with a few spare lengths for repairs. Next, was to negotiate with and formally commission, Hald and Johansen as boat builders.



Hald and Johansen.

Anders Johansen arrived in Sydney from Denmark in 1960 and commenced work as a boat builder in the Firm "Lars Halvorsen and Son", working on the first of a number of Folkboats which were to be produced by that Company. After a time he was joined in Sydney by his uncle (John Hald), to form a partnership known as "Hald and Johansen", with premises located in the Collaroy area. Their

reputation was sufficient for the members of the syndicate to have no reservations in commissioning them to undertake construction of a Folkboat, with their agreement to using Huon Pine planking for the hull, machined from logs which had been reclaimed from the Huon River, as outlined above.

In recalling the events of the time, it was clear to the members of the syndicate that we had chosen well. Both John Hald and Anders Johansen were gentlemen who were of the finest calibre in their craftsmanship and in particular, each showed exceptional diplomatic ability in handling any “fanciful” thoughts of the partners. In short, they knew their craft extremely well and in the ensuing months we began to realise our good fortune in choosing them to build the boat. So, from the full length and heavy lead-weighted keel to the spotted gum ribs, the hull began to develop. Of singular significance, was the dexterity of John Hald in using an adze to fashion the contours of the solid portion of the keel. His use of the tool was fast, but deft and it was a joy to watch him in action. Suffice to say, as the hull took shape we were each confirmed that our choice of Hald and Johansen as boat builders, was very sound. Further to this, it became evident that they were extremely innovative in accommodating a number of our requirements into the internal design and cockpit fit-out.

Design modifications for Karrawingi.

As recorded above, some modifications were incorporated into the interior “fit-out” of the yacht, for the comfort and visibility of crew members and passengers. The low coach-house was extended forward of the mast, where a hatch was fitted. It was also raised at the aft end, to provide additional head room (i.e. a “dog-house”), with a sliding hatch (above) and three sliding panels to provide access from the cockpit. In heavy weather, one or more of the latter could be replaced to prevent any sea water from entering the cabin space from the self-draining cockpit.

To enhance the open cockpit design, it was extended in length, the teak seating lifted and the coaming of the cockpit was slanted laterally for crew comfort when the boat heeled. Further, these small variations provided for the crew additional cockpit space, better vision, comfort and efficiency when racing and equally, when cruising or moored with guests aboard. As a corollary, by raising the cockpit seating marginally, it allowed space for two quarter berths beneath, for additional storage or for occasional sleeping. Each berth was fitted with a comfortable padded mattress which extended into the cabin, to provide occupants with a clear air space above heads and shoulders for their comfort. Between and below the quarter berths, a two cylinder Blaxland Ray two stroke engine (electric start) was fitted, access being from the cabin.

In the original Folkboat design, the mast was stepped directly from the keel to emerge through the forward deck, for the boom and various rigging components to be fitted. Due to the plan to extend the cabin forward, an alternative means for stepping the mast needed to be addressed. The problem was solved by Graeme Anderson, who designed a double piped and buttressed metal frame, with a very solid central plate as the seat for the mast welded to each. The plan was for the base of the mast to rest on the plate, within a small but defined welded surround to protrude through the top of the coach house. The frame followed the contour of the under surface of the coach house, extending laterally to each side of the hull, to which it was fixed. By this mechanism, the mast was able to be stepped externally (with simple canvas weather-proofing) onto the solid metal plate of the “seat”. Its weight was thus carried by the frame and transmitted by it to both sides of the hull. Not only did this open the internal cabin space, but it allowed freedom of movement when preparing different sails for action during races and for their general stowage. After

much pressure from various family members “of the fairer sex”, it also allowed space for the installation of a “heads”. A small folding table between two lateral padded bunks, a small gas stove, bench top and cupboard, recessed sink, storage for cooking utensils, table ware and drinking vessels (racks etc.), completed the picture for the small racing/cruising yacht.

In closing

In the winter of 1965, the hull of the yacht was completed, and arrangements were made for it to be transported by road from the Hald and Johansen yard at Collaroy to Rose Bay, where it was launched and towed to The Squadron. On its arrival, it was met by the owners and their ladies who gathered informally, prior to a celebratory lunch in the Squadron Dining Room. This was later followed by the mast being stepped and sloop-rigged, according to the design of Peter Cole. The sail gear included a mainsail, jib, storm jib, Genoa jib and spinnaker, to be supported by the usual forward and side stays and twin backstays. Following a short time for “working up” and fine tuning, Karrawingi was then able to commence its dual life as a racing and pleasure yacht. This included Saturday and mid-week racing, twilight racing and special events such as The Dental Sailing Day (later to become The Australian Council of Professions Sailing Day). Pleasure sailing included harbour outings with family and friends, as well as occasional festive events such as the Bicentennial of the Landing of the First Fleet (1988) and the visits of famous ships to Sydney Harbour etc.

It is notable that the original partners were together for at least fifteen years, until Reg Hession (due to a multiplicity of commitments) was unable to continue as a full-time racing partner. His place in the group was then taken by John Ellis (a Squadron member and friend, who had often “filled in” when needed) and the new syndicate carried on together for the remainder of its racing days from The Squadron, until age and other commitments within the group caused it to disband and for the yacht to be sold. During the second partnership, Reg Hession often replaced one of the partners as the “occasional crew member”, when needed. We were great friends, had all manner of experiences together over the two partnerships and there are now only two of us left – Ando and Hesh!

It was a happy boat, aided and abetted by the many experiences of the half dozen young tearaways who set out to build a dream and to live it with no regrets, at no great expense and with the fondest of memories.

Reg Hession, 2022

Photos by XXX