

Walter Reeks

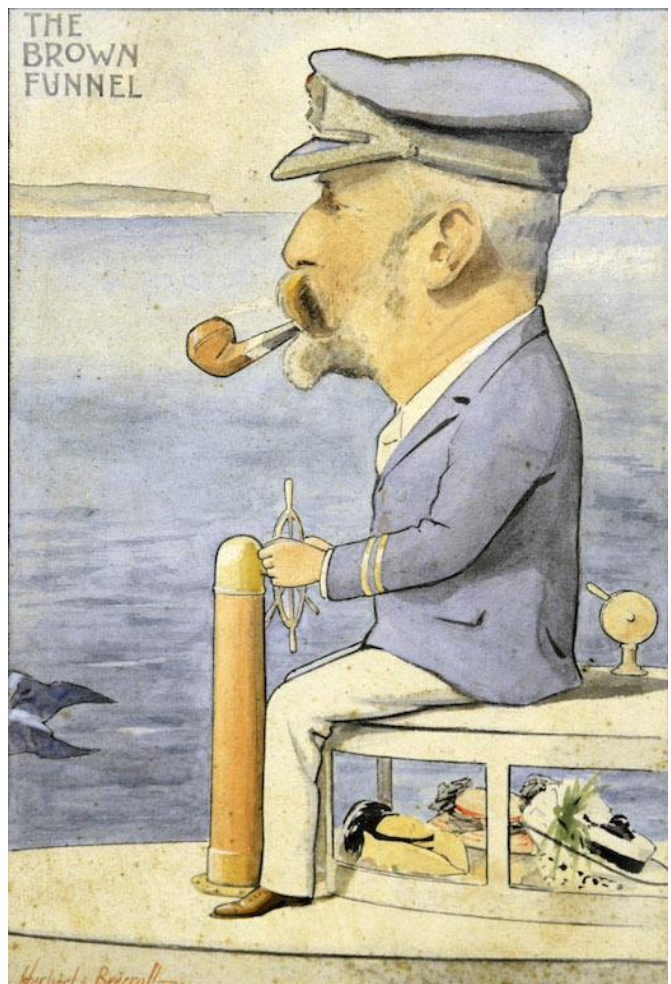
2015 marks 90 years since Sydney naval architect and RSYS life member Walter Reeks passed away. Reeks had an extraordinary career and his legacy lives on. His letterhead was simple – “Practical & Consulting Naval Architect, & Marine Engineer” and he was probably Australia’s first full time practicing naval architect, enough for a permanent niche in the history of the profession. However Reeks added to that with the credits of shipbuilder, surveyor, broker, lecturer, speaker, teacher, yachtsman, mining company director, member of community associations and supporter of the arts. Within that web of activities, he produced over 300 designs.

Born in Christchurch, England, in 1861 to a corn dealer, details of his youth are open to speculation. Perhaps he had an aptitude for maths and drawing, and once this was mixed with the influence of yachts and ships, vessels he would have seen along the coast and in the Solent, his career was set. In the late 1870s he was apprenticed to Liverpool naval architect Alec Richardson, a contemporary of Fife, and he achieved a wide base of initial experience there and later at George Inman’s shipyard on the Solent. Arriving here in mid-1885, he settled into the Sydney scene easily. He married and had two children; however tragically his first wife died while they were very young. His home that he designed himself was on the hillside above Mosman Bay and his friends included the artists Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton. Tragedy struck again when his son and aspiring marine engineer Kent was killed in the UK in 1913.

Once in Australia he quickly became Australian in outlook. His America’s Cup challenge was to be an Australian venture, and writing in the Sydney Illustrated News May 1888 he notes “*We are already abreast the times in yachting and sailing....surely we shall soon lead the world, cease to speak of the American type and the English type, and have a type of our own, which other countries will look at with envious eyes, and call Australian.*”



WALTER REEKS
who wished to challenge in 1889
for the *America's Cup*

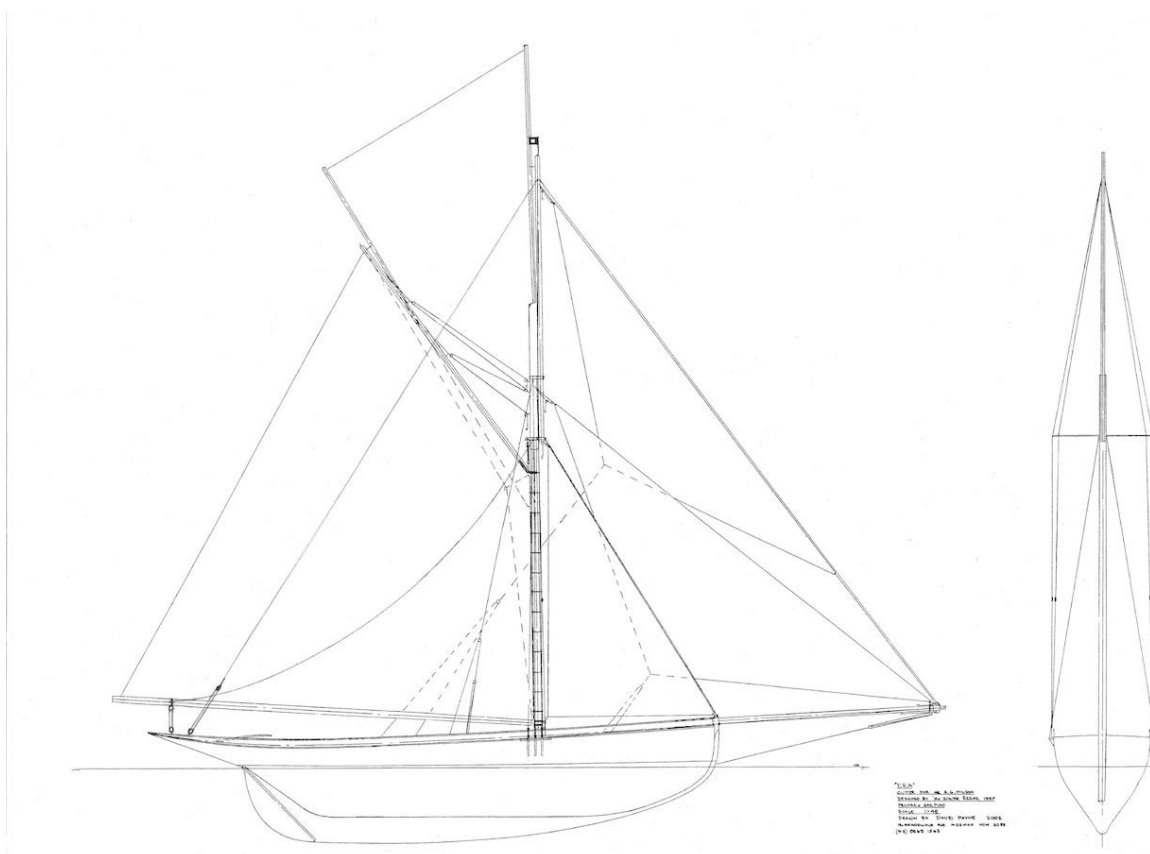


Reeks joined the RSYs in 1886. He rose to be Vice Commodore in 1906-1910 and was Honorary Measurer throughout his time as an active member. He was also a member and measurer for many other Sydney Clubs and was widely respected in the yachting community. The Herbert Beecroft portrait in the RSYs Collection is a classic pose. He is onboard his launch *Wahine* (1902), steering with an arrangement he used on a number of launches, a pedestal and helm on the cabin top, engine telegraph to starboard. His vice commodore's flag is captured as well. *THE BROWN FUNNEL* – now that must be his pipe.

Reeks designed a series of stunning yachts, and the Squadron was lucky enough to have all five of his biggest in its fleet, along with one or two other classic vessels from his board. The yachts *Era*, *Miranda*, *Iduna*, *Volunteer* and *Thelma* graced the harbour from 1887 through to the early 1900s, a sight captured in images, and a scene to rival anything elsewhere in the world; *Era* and *Volunteer* sparring - two 70 footers under full sail downwind; *Thelma* - a 56 footer that nearly brought the Sayonara cup to Sydney for the first time in 1909; *Miranda* - a large centreboard yawl on American lines. His versatility and development of ideas was on show with these craft.

From 1901 the graceful SY *Ena* for (Sir) Thomas Dibbs cruised the harbour, and after the war *Bona* was brought back to Sydney by Sir Charles Lloyd Jones, then sold to the Alberts becoming *Boomerang*. Meanwhile the Alberts had been active in racing, and both *Rawhiti* and *Rawhiti II* were modified by Reeks to improve their performance. When the national Restricted 21 Foot Class was set up, Reeks was heavily involved in the establishment, its administration and the management of the Forster Cup.

The America's Cup - just how close he came to putting a syndicate together is unknown, but reports indicate he had designed a yacht before the challenge was abandoned. Soon after he was organising *Volunteer* to represent Australia in a match on San Francisco harbour against *Lurline*, a schooner, but that too fell short of funds. In both instances it is now just as frustrating as then not to have seen them realised; could we have won?

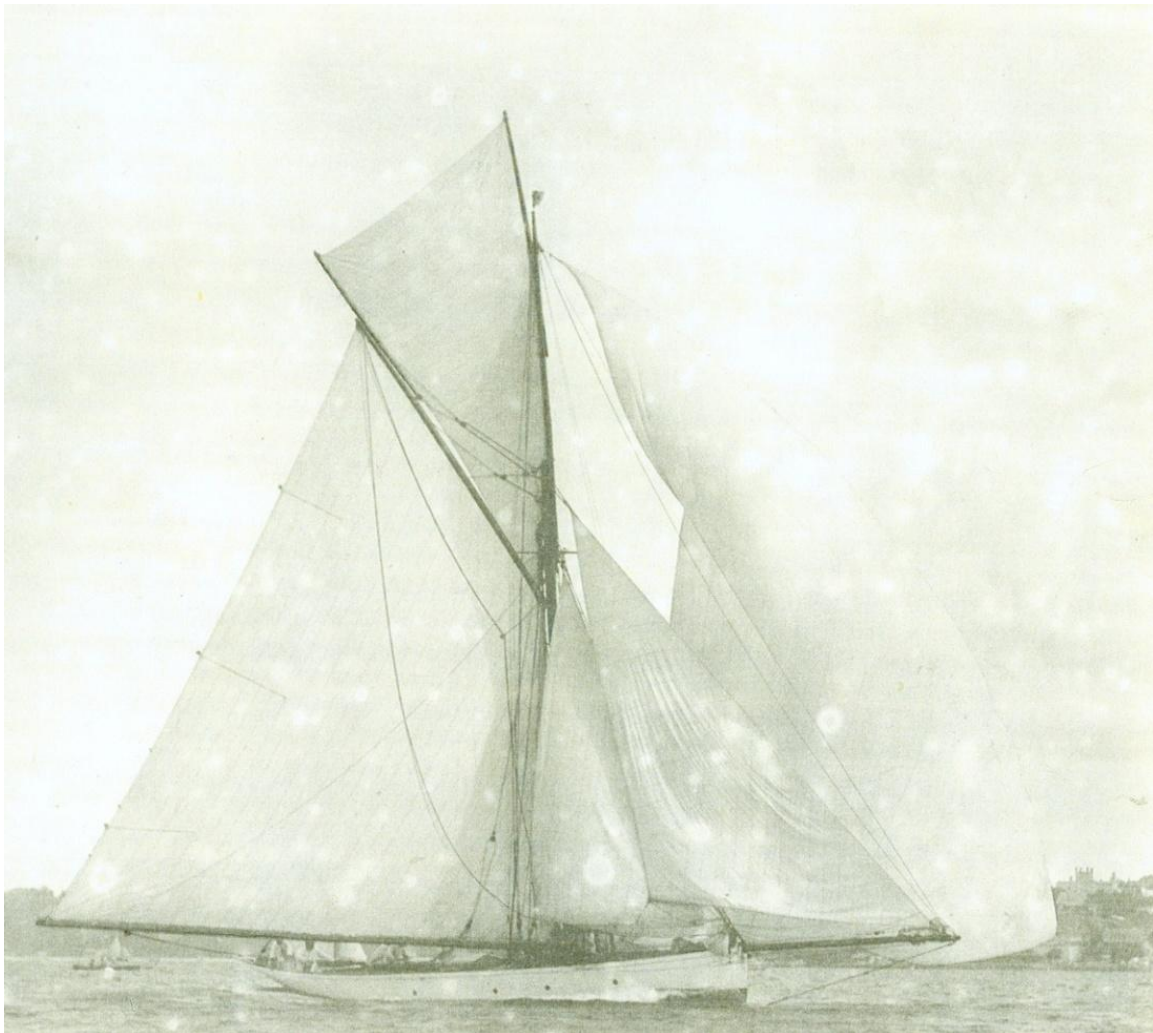


***Era* Sail plan 1887 Drawn D. Payne 2002**

Beyond yachts, Reeks roamed widely in vessel design. The ferries stand out. He designed many of the early double-ended ferries used widely on the harbour - in particular the last five of the wooden Lady class around 1910. He also designed ferries for Hobart, Brisbane and Perth, steamers for New Zealand, and was the pioneer of the concept and shape for the iconic Manly ferries with *Manly* (1896) and *Kuring Gai* (1900). The pearling luggers he designed from 1891 onwards put in place a yacht-like vessel for the Thursday Island and Torres Strait region, a style quite different from the type used in the northwest pearl fields around Broome, WA. He also designed schooner mother ships that worked with the fleet.

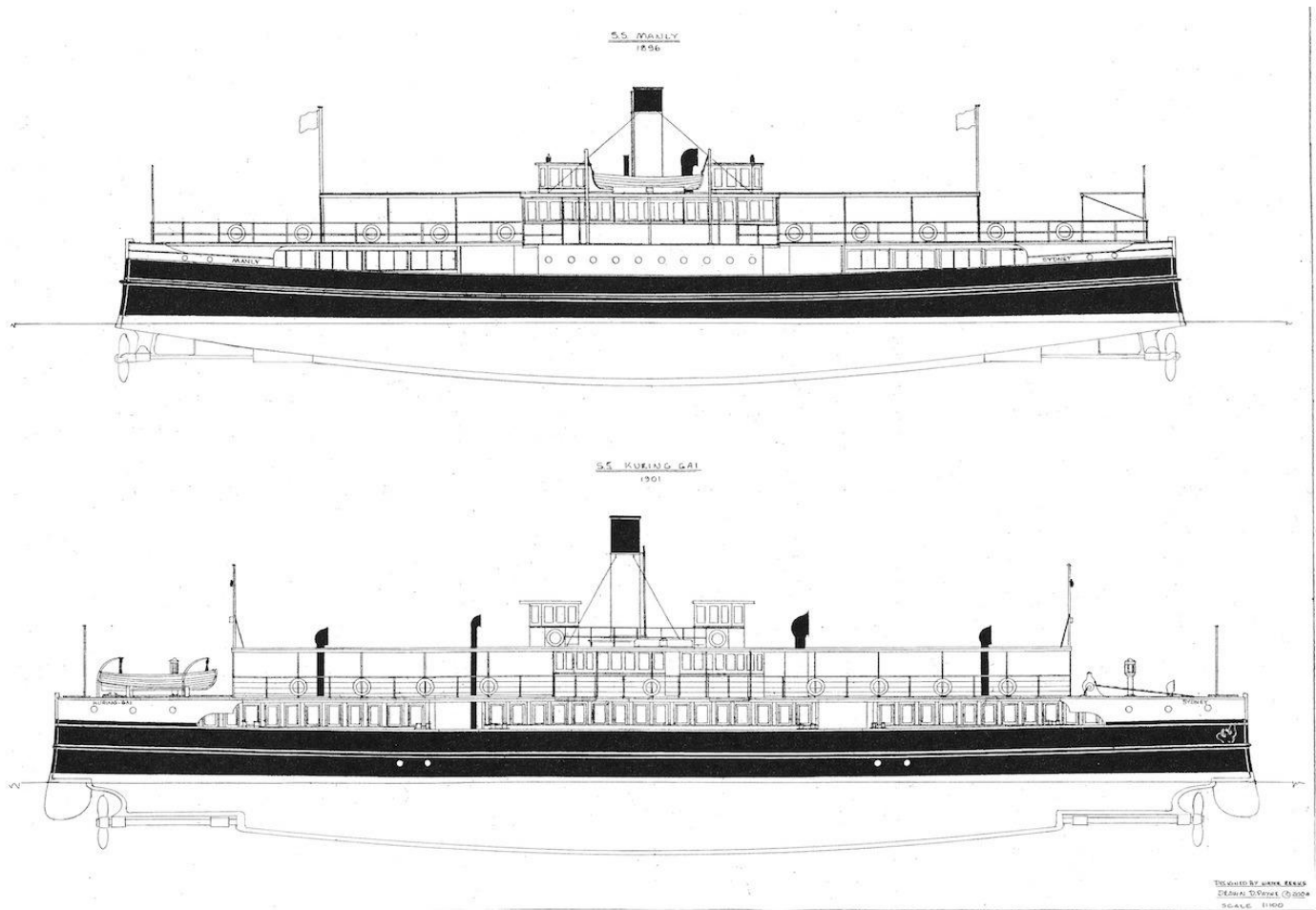
Motor launches became popular from the early 1900s and Reeks produced many of the early Australian designs. There were excursions into NSW river traders, a drogher for the same waterways, an explorer's launch for the Fly River in Papua New Guinea and a federal steamer then motor yacht for their administrator, a prototype fishing trawler for the federal government, tugs, lighters, large steamers, vessel modifications and adaptations, even a model racing skiff. His nephew was given plans for a model boat that taught him lessons in boat design.

Reeks had firm design ideas and in the present era we might question some aspects. He was an advocate of Archer's Wave Form theory at a time when the early scientific tank test and engineering approach of Froude and others was building the foundations of classical and technical naval architecture. He worked toward cost effectiveness with supervised trials; and he was working at the leading edge of the period, using the latest materials, keeping aware of many developments, and showing an evolution of shape that seems to keep up with changing trends. He was also prepared to take an unorthodox approach to meet the requirements for many of his designs.



***Thelma-* Alec McCormick Collection.**

The evidence we have from plans and specifications such as those for yachts prepared to Lloyds' scantlings of the period shows he represented the highest standards of engineering and it was the same with his styling. He could be classic with such vessels as *Bona* or *Ena*, but at the same time he was trying new things. Look at the bold lines of *Kuring Gai* and *Manly*, ram bowed with a straight deck over a curved sheer. There's a balance in these contrasting ideas.



His drawings are meticulous. Every item has been thought out by calculation or proportion and styled with an instinctive eye for a pleasing line. Although often attracted to unorthodox ideas, they were based on a reasoned approach. The cambered keel seen on *Manly* and *Kuring Gai* featured on other ferries was there to reduce wetted surface. It was an idea he arrived at quite early in his career after cutting away deadwood on his first design *Lady Mary*. He staggered the propellers on one shallow draft, tunnel-hull stern ferry, cut away forefoot on a river steamer then reproduced this on *Musa*, the Fly River exploring craft. It probably helped if they got caught aground on sand banks and it would enable them to turn more easily in narrow rivers.

Unorthodox to the end, or perhaps ahead of his time? His final design was his own, very unconventional Restricted 21 Footer called *San Pan*. It had its mast set aft of amidships, a big fore triangle and a chine hull shape, all features seen on the latest super-maxi *Comanche*.

Friday, 20th February, 1925 - Brisbane Daily Standard

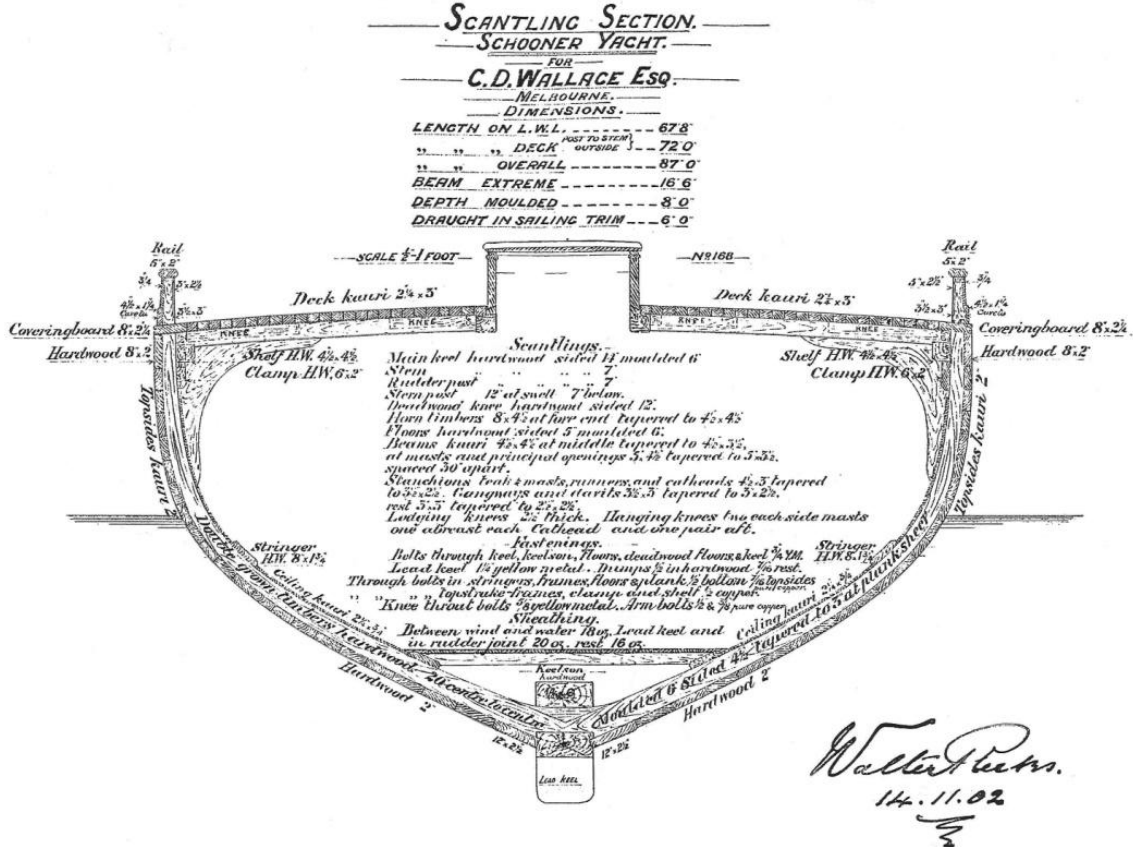
RESTRICTED YACHTS EXPERIMENT.

WILL IT BE SUCCESSFUL?

Mr. Walter Reeks has designed a new type of racing 21ft class of yacht to be known as the San Pan. (says a Sydney paper). The craft was afloat on Saturday, with Mr. Reeks at the helm, and Mr. Pros. Milson on the sheet. San Pan was not built with an eye to beauty, and her design is entirely new to Australia. Her mast, instead of being carrying well for'ard, is in the centre, giving her a unique appearance. San Pan, in a light air,

is not likely to trouble the present fleet, but in a stiff breeze she appears likely to take a lot of beating when properly tuned up.

Mr. Reeks does not believe in following the conventions of others. He regards San Pan as an experiment and a type of boat that will lend itself to improvements. Probably the quaint one will have her first race next Saturday under the R.P.A.Y.C. flag.



Midships section of Bona/Boomerang

The Squadron can be proud of its close association with Walter Reeks.

David Payne
May, 2015