

# *The Beginning of the Bunbury & Return*

*(extract taken from the RFBYC History Book)*

Offshore racing at Royal Freshwater Bay Yacht Club began in 1948. It was a logical development of cruiser racing on the river. From at least 1930 the Club had organised an annual "billy run" across to Rottneest with a barbecue and overnight stay at Parker Point or Thomson Bay after the 11 mile sail. The Alison May race over to this island, begun in 1933, was revived after the war. To this was added, immediately after the war, the Shepherdess Cup, run by the CYC from Fremantle to Fairway Buoy, then to Penguin Buoy in Thomson Bay. The Winterbottom Cup on New Years Day was organised by RPYC over a triangular course, from Thomson Bay around Kingston and Roe Reefs and the Transits. The winners at Rottneest that followed these ocean events were fairly raucous affairs, despite the absence of an island pub. However, hardly a yacht in those days had an engine and seeking a tow under the Fremantle bridges with mast lowered was a deterrent to many. To consider then, an overnight race of 100 ocean miles down a featureless unlit coast to Bunbury was a bold venture.

In August of 1947, following a suggestion by Keith Stevenson who had taken delivery of his beautiful 'Maid Marion', and largely due to the enthusiasm of Cyril Sampson (Commodore 1944-47) and Roland Smith, both spurred by the 195 inauguration of the Sydney-Hobart, the Club resolved that an ocean race to Bunbury be organised. An open invitation was extended to all other clubs; a feature thereafter of what became a developing offshore program, which over the next few years included the Gordon Craig (around both Rottneest and Garden Islands). The Dolphin Trophy (donated by Geoffrey Cohen) and the P & O Company's Arcadia Trophy were two shorter races.

For the Bunbury race a special ration of petrol was requested from the Liquid Fuel Board to enable launches to patrol the coast. This was refused. War time shortages still prevailed. Yachts would sail alone. A list of compulsory equipment was issued. Two gallons of water for each crew member, together with a life jacket. This despite the objection of George Townsend, acting chairman of the Committee, who said "The Club could not possibly but yacht owners to the expense of buying life jackets.". He was overruled. An anchor, fire extinguisher, lanterns (or navigation lights), some flares (or material capable of being made into flares), a compass and, sufficient rope that could be rigged as a life line from bow to stern should conditions warrant it. The Skipper was advised to have a life buoy near him, in case of man overboard.

For the first Bunbury on 24 February 1948 the start line was inside Fremantle harbour, opposite 'B' shed on Victoria Quay; the race to begin anytime after sunset when officials had decided weather conditions were favourable (that is, when the land based easterly wind had begun). Crews would be notified by very lights and hails from the official start boat. A number of well wishers on the wharf cheered as the race started at 1.00am on the 25th. The course was around Bell and Fairway Buoys, then the west end of Rottneest with its two lighthouses, one manned, then south to Bunbury. Here moorings, tenders and a mayoral reception at the golf club awaited them.

Fifteen yachts entered for this initial overnight offshore race. They include the pre-war "Southern Cross", a 28 foot plumb stem and stern cruiser built in the thirties from the finest jarrah by George Townsend and Bob Saunier, helped by Keith Stevenson who later bought her from Saunier. She was a beautifully maintained thereafter until the RAAF took her to Darwin. Here Don Watson chanced across her at war's end, a sorry sight. He had admired her pre-war when as a boy he had seen her sail into Parker Point with her glistening white hull and impeccable varnished coamings and trim. He purchased her, brought her in an epic journey back to Freshwater Bay and restored her to her earlier glory. The previous month he had won the combined Clubs Australia Day Regatta on Melville Water, a feature of

## *Continued.....*

From 1949 onwards the race became Bunbury and return, along with a mid-morning start. The 200 nautical mile race grew steadily in popularity. By the 1960's this major offshore event was attracting considerable media coverage. Progress Reports were sought. The Club too was concerned at its lack of contact once the race had begun. It approached Tally Hobbs who in 1964 had acquired a pilot's licence. He voluntarily undertook an aerial surveillance of the scattered fleet, flying out of the newly opened Jandakot airport. This he continued each year, covering the boats on their way south, then again as they returned, until ship-to-shore radios became obligatory in the early 1980's.

While he piloted a small single engine aircraft seeking yachts often far out of sight of land, a volunteer spotter next to him would endeavour to identify the sail number. It was essential he account for every boat; and often there were forty or so. He took many risks to ensure this was done. Circling yachts at masthead height could be an unnerving experience for the spotter. It is often alleged that John Plunkett's Life Membership was bestowed on him at least partly because he was the only member game enough to undertake this task on a regular basis.

All offshore competitors in W.A., and not merely the Bunbury adventurers benefited from the initiative of John Watson (Commodore 1964-66). He had brought together the CYC, RPYC and SoPYC to transform the offshore scene. The overlapping race program was rationalised, a YA ocean handicapping committee was formed (on which Colin Burnell served for many years) which replaced the early irrationality of Club assessments with a very accurate YA performance handicap for all boats, and internationally recognised safety standards were gradually introduced.

From 1965 onwards the yachts without or unable to install a self draining cockpit were restricted to short races in the general Cockburn Sound—Rottneest area. This along with the introduction of other safety rules as a new breed of boat evolved, fibreglassed with standing rigging, metal spars, radio and much else, eliminated the pioneers and minimised the risk; to a regrettable degree thought many. Bill Jacobs for example, Commodore 1966-67, bemoaned the fact when he could no longer sail south his H28, 'Thora Helen', high seas or not; and there were many others. Nevertheless wind, weather and the human element still made a challenge out of the Bunbury.

A storm hit the fleet of sixty two in 1982. Winds in excess of 50 knots were logged. After an 0800 hour Saturday start the fastest Division 1 yachts had turned at Bunbury before the storm came out of the blackness of 0100 next morning. A few of the bravest flew their spinnakers as far as Mandurah. The majority were still beating south when the gale hit them. Only the most foolhardy raised a kite for the run home. Local sail makers did a good business from the havoc of the weekend not least Rolly Tasker, himself a competitor in 'Siska'.

Extreme wave conditions occur regularly between Rottneest and Bunbury. The long ocean swells that have moved uninterrupted across from Africa are pushed into notorious short steep sided seas by a confluence of strong sou-westerly winds angled into the coast and a northerly current. Pounding into them, or running with them, in either case can be quite an experience.

***In its 63rd year, the Bunbury & Return race is the oldest race on the WA offshore calendar and remains one of the premier races. This is a very prestigious, rewarding and challenging race and is a highlight of our offshore season.***

***We wish all our competitors all the best in this race!***