

Mark Perriman.

REGIONAL HISTORY.

Title: The Newcastle State Dockyard from 1942 to 1962.

### SYNOPSIS.

Following the election in May 1941, the New South Wales State Government decided to revive ship building as a state enterprise. There were difficulties but these were overcome by utilizing Walsh Island facilities. Extra land was also purchased for expansion and the Dockyard received its first order to build a 180 ft. Corvette for the Department of Navy. The Dockyard proved a profitable asset to the State and a request was made for rolling stock to be built at the Dockyard for continuity of work, but this request was denied. In July 1948, the 40 hour week commenced and this proved a trying time for the Dockyard, but these difficulties were overcome and in the following years the Dockyard profits were high. By 1962, the Dockyard was manufacturing diesel engines for the Australian ship building industry.

The opening of the Newcastle State Dockyard was an ambitious task. This was due to the manufacture of structural steel, cranes, mechanical tools and other equipment necessary for the construction of vessels already being fully committed. The employment of overseas services was also out of the question. The Government realised that success lay in maintaining the facilities once used at Walsh Island (which had ceased activity in 1933). After much investigation of the sites in question and facilities available on Walsh Island, consideration was given to establishing an engineering works on Dyke Peninsula. The advantage of uniting engineering and ship building works became readily understood and the Dockyard Director's advice received immediate approval.

After the first approval, extra land was purchased from the Department of Railways and construction of the Dockyard was commenced in January, 1942. Although definite approval was not given by the Commonwealth Government until January 1943, ship construction had been commenced 6 months earlier. Despite the Commonwealth Government advancement of £94,000 to further develop the ship building and engineering works there were difficulties in obtaining materials and equipment and also in recruiting trained personnel. Although faced with these difficulties, the Dockyard completed 21 vessels and 6 triple expansion engines in 4 years.

A major feature in its record of progress was the small capital outlay and as far as the State finances were concerned the Dockyard was a good investment. This was achieved by using a wasting State asset, Walsh Island. Even after contributing to the war demands the State Dockyard remained a splendid asset for peace time. There was some fear on the part of the workers that the Dockyard might close down but the Executive Committee met with a Director of the Dockyard and reassured them that they had no intention of closing the Dockyard down.

(2)

There was also a suggestion put forward by the Carrington Branch of the A.L.P. that trams and railway rolling stock could be built and thereby create more employment, but the acting Director, Mr. A.C. Campbell stated, " The establishment is essentially a ship building yard and its concentration is on construction and repair of ships." (1) Around this time the Dockyard received an order from the Australian ship building Board for 2 'd' class vessels (small tonnage vessels) which kept it going for a while.

In July 1948 the 40 hour week was introduced and this causes problems for the Dockyard. Due to strikes, 40 men were retrenched and management threatened further retrenchments if strikes didn't stop. However, the union and the management came to an agreement and the Dockyard became active again. Up to this time the Dockyard had repaired 1,4000 ships and launched 29 ships, 28 of which were still in service. They also manufactured steam engines, water tube boilers, a battery of 10 brick presses and 5 grinding pans for the State brickworks. They also manufactured and built a 19 span steel bridge near the Hunter River at Hexham.

Australia's first cargo vessel, the "Donagra" was built at the Dockyard. It was 4,600 tons loaded displacement, 290 ft. long and was to be used on the Pacific Island service. Prefabrication which was introduced in the early 1950's revolutionised ship building in Australia.

The idea of building a ship in a workshop would not have been considered some years ago but to-day, prefabrication has entered the field, and ship building is no longer carried out mainly on the building berth. (2)

Instead of ships being built in the ships' berths, the panels were

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(1) Newcastle Morning Herald.- The State Dockyard could build Railway Stock. June, 13, 1946.

(2) ibid., February 2, 1953.

(3)

assembled in the workshop and then welded together on the ships' berth. The State Dockyard was to become the leader in this form of construction.

The advancement is due to foresight by the management in realising years ago the trend of construction methods. To-day's work is the result of plans initiated at least four years ago. (3)

Prefabrication also meant that ships built under these conditions were "most conducive to high efficiency and economy." (4) The Directors of the Dockyard realised that in order to obtain contracts they needed to overcome a number of problems. These problems included the higher Australian wage level and the competition of long established ship building centres. Prefabrication methods had gone a long way in overcoming these problems.

Also at this stage the Dockyard received a much sought after licence to manufacture diesel engines. This allowed for ships to be solely Australian made.

Early in the 1960's when the Dockyard was forging ahead rapidly, a request was made to the Maritime Services Board for the purchase of 12 acres on the eastern side of Carrington Basin. The request was denied at first but after further negotiations, the Maritime Services Board sold the Dockyard the land. This move proved profitable for the Dockyard with the setting of a new record in turnover profit of £3.9 million.

Income from Sales and Services during 1961-62 was almost £3.9 million. This included £1½ million in ship repairs. 76 ships were docked and repaired and a further 462 merchant vessels were repaired alongside the harbour. (5)

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- (3) Newcastle Morning Herald.-Dock Leading in Prefab Shipbuilding. February 2, 1953.  
(4) ibid.  
(5) Australian Coal, Shipping, Steel and the Harbour. September 1, 1962.

(4)

Also at this time there was an increase in the number of overseas vessels undergoing repair which resulted in increased overseas capital being bought into the country.

The Dockyard also shared its profits with its employees in a scheme introduced in 1951. Since then the Dockyard employees had shared more than £1 million in dividends.

A record profit-sharing dividend of £164,905 will be paid out to the 1500 employees of the State Dockyard at Newcastle. This is the men's share of a record net profit of £280,968 made by the dockyard during the year ended March 31. (6)

Also during this time the number of employees increased to 1,785.

Since the inception in 1942, the Dockyard had become a major force in the ship building industry not only in Australia but also in the world, not only during the war period but also the post war period. It became a versatile industry and its future seemed assured. This was to change in the years to come.

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(6) Australian Coal, Shipping, Steel and the Harbour. September 1, 1962.

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Summary of Transcript from Interview on the State Dockyard.

Interviewer - Mr. Mark Perriman.

Interviewee - Mr. John Aubin.

Mark Perriman.

Summary of Transcript from Interview on the State Dockyard.

This transcript is from an interview with Mr. John Aubin, who worked at the Dockyard for 40 years. He started work at the Dockyard but was retrenched on the 31st March, 1987.

John was employed as an apprentice joiner, but had to postpone his apprenticeship for 12 months because he was too young. He started another position at the blacksmith's shop. From there he went on to become a steam hammer driver. After the 12 month period had elapsed the apprentice joiner position became available and he was able to begin his apprenticeship.

Conditions at the Dockyard were difficult. This was due partly to the lack of materials and partly to the low wages. While working in the blacksmith's shop the wage was only 19/6d per week. When John transferred to the joiner's shop as lunch boy his wage increased to 21/6d per week, but when he became an apprentice his wage dropped to 18/6d per week.

Travelling to and from work was also difficult. John left home at 5am. riding a bike to Cardiff Station and from there catching a train to Civic Station. From Civic Station he had to walk down to the wharf and catch a launch across to the Dockyard. The fare for the train was 2/6d per day and the launch was supplied by the Dockyard.

There were a variety of vessels built at the Dockyard, from "D" class, ( a small tonnage vessel) to passenger-cargo vessels (The Princess of Tasmania). Dredges were also built there and used to mainly service Newcastle Harbour. Also built there were boats to service the light houses up and down the coast. There were problems of overweight with talard on the ways it wouldn't help the ship to slide, especially in winter time. In cases like there 50 ton jacks were placed at the front of the slipway to lift the vessel and thus help it to slide down the ways into the harbour. The ships launched at the Dockyard were amongst the best in the world.

Prefabrication was introduced at the Dockyard, but at first the workers were hesitant about its introduction. They were afraid of retrenchments but this wasn't to be the case. Prefabrication created more employments for a number of the trades.

The workforce at the Dockyard was conscientious. Lives were dependant on the ships being built properly and the general feeling was that if the job couldn't be done right then it was better left alone. The conscientiousness was mainly bought about by strict working conditions.

The workers were required to attend safety lectures and the Dockyard started a system called the " 5 star safety system" and when the Dockyard closed they were on a 3 star rating. The system was introduced by the management who also introduced a bonus incentive system. The bonus incentive system worked on the Dockyard making a profit and sharing it with its employees by way of a bonus, the higher the profit, the better bonus.

(2)

English and Italian migrants were employed by the Dockyard. The Dockyard built houses for them until they became settled in Australia. Aborigines were also employed by the Dockyard, some were locals and there was one from out west and the Dockyard also found accommodation for him. The migrants and Aborigines were accepted by their fellow workers because they were all working towards the same goals and they all had a similar interest in their work. The Dockyard also employed women, but mainly in the office and canteen, but there was one girl employed as an apprentice painter. She is now finishing her apprenticeship at Stockton Hospital.

When men were employed at the Dockyard they had to join a Union. They had a choice of 17 unions, depending at whether they were labourers or tradesmen. The unions were no more militant than the management. Strikes didn't help anybody. The worker had less to take home to his family and the management couldn't guarantee that orders would be finished on time. Strikes were entirely to blame for the closure of the Dockyard, the management board had made many mistakes as well.

There were 7 managers in 8 years and these managers didn't know what was happening in ship building and weren't aware of the workers' general feeling of discontent. It is also possible that the State Government wanted the Dockyard closed. The workers were blamed for it and it came as a big shock especially after 40 years service and working in a section that was making a profit. Also being at 55-56 years of age and the state of the Australian economy added fuel to the fire. Despite all of this there were no regrets, working at the Dockyard for so long. John declares that he did his job to the best of his ability and enjoyed his work and the satisfaction it gave him.

Transcript of Interview on the State Dockyard with Mr. John Aubin.

(1)

Transcript of Interview.

Question.

When did you start at the Dockyard?

Answer.

From 1947-1987, retrenched on 31st January, 1987. I served 40 yrs.

Question.

Why did you start at the Dockyard?

Answer.

To be an apprentice Joiner, 1st year applications were called. I was too young to be an apprentice. I had to wait 12 months, we got pro-rata and another job in another department which was the blacksmiths' shop. I finished up lunch boy in the blacksmiths' shop for a period of time. I later became in the blacksmiths' shop when a position became vacant, a steam hammer driver, and that was my job right up to about 3 mths before Christmas. I was transferred into the joiners' shop when a position became vacant there as a lunch boy in the joiners shop, and to help gentlemen in the joiners' shop to keep the shop clean. In January I was informed that I was fortunate enough to have an apprenticeship.

Question.

What were conditions and wages like at the time?

Answer.

Well, I will give you my conditions. I was not what you would call tough, but it was nothing because it was after the war and materials were very scarce. My wages in the blacksmiths' shop started off at 19/6d. a week and when my birthday fell in May this went up to 21/6d. per week. I was transferred to the joiners' shop as a lunch boy and went back to 19/6d. I was then put in as an apprentice and went back to 18/6d. for 12 mths. During the two years I was there my highest wage was 21/6d. per week and the lowest was 18/6d. per week.

Question.

How did you travel to and from work?

Answer.

Well, I lived at what they call Edgeworth now, but then it was known as Young Wallsend. I used to ride. I'd get up and leave at 6am and ride a push bike from there to Cardiff Station and leave the bike at a friend's place near the Cardiff Station. I'd catch the train to work and get off at the Civic Station, which cost 2/6d to travel on the train. I walked down then to the wharf to catch the Taree Maria on the Apolo. We stood out on the deck in the rain, hail or shine and went across to the Dockyard. You completed the shift and I used to get home at approximately 5.25pm.

Question.

What type of vessels did you build at the Dockyards?

Answer.

We built all types of vessels. When I first went there they were building a "D" class which was a small tonnage boat. Then we built the Princess of Tasmania which was the pride of Australia, Tasmania and Melbourne. We built the Lysaghts boats. The Lysaghts Endeavour, the Lysaghts Enterprise were the two. In "D" class we built the Dorrigo, the Denman and the Delargha. We built different types of tankers. We built light house boats to service the light houses around the coast. We built dredges which worked in the Newcastle harbour. We built tugs and we built the Sydney Harbour ferries. There was quite a lot of variation of work.

Question.

Did you have any problems when launching ships, sinking or not being able to launch them?

Answer.

No Mark, we had no sinkings, thank heaven, but we did have a few different problems. Some times a vessel would take a period of time it might be a little what they call overweight for launching and this might be in the winter time. The talard was on the slipways and the only they could start these vessels going if it was to be an accurate launching was to put (dig) 50 ton jacks up the front and the activity of the built on carries it into the the harbour.

Question.

Did the Dockyard achieve any firsts in ship building within its work force?

Answer.

The Dockyard was noted for building the best ships in the world.

Question.

What was the feeling on the floor about pre-fabricating the ship building?

Answer.

When prefabricating first came in the men were a little hesitant, because, I'll give it to you this way- it's the same at the present time if you try to put something new into a work force then people are a little hesitant about whether it's going to put the fella's out of work. After it was explained at four union meetings by their representatives from the Trades Hall and the management had different meetings with delegates, they addressed the whole work force at different times and it was this way. I'll give you an example of the present day. I am a joiner and carpenter but if I was to go outside and build a home the way I built my home 20-30 years ago with a hammer and a hand saw I would not be in business. This is the same with pre\*fabrication. It came in 40 ton lots and the workforce instead of going backwards, increased.

Question.

Were there any retrenchments due to this pre-fabrication?

Answer.

No, there were more men employed.

Question.

Was there an attitude of "she'll be right mate" or was it a conscientious workforce?

Answer.

It was a conscientious workforce. You knew when you built the vessel there would be other lives at your mercy if you didn't do the job right. That was the top management to the men on the floor, and even to the junior labourers. It was thrust into you, do the job right or leave it alone.

Question.

Were working conditions strict safety wise from the workforce to the management?

Answer.

Well, in my working life safety was always enforced into ya' always got a safety lecturer who told what the danger was. But it was nothing elaborate to what it is to-day. The law has a 5 star safety system going - in the management side of that and workforce side when it was started - and then when they closed the dockyard we was on a 3 star rating which is quite high.

Question.

Were there any incentive bonuses for the workers?

Answer.

Yes, there was an incentive bonus put into practice over there. The men that were employed when D.L. McLarry was the managing director of the dockyard and Mr. Mitchell was the works manager and we did a lot of work for the public works, and we did a lot of small ship building, compensation to the time before the job closed. We started off with a % of our wages, we started off with so much %. They didn't cut it across the board either, they made it that your wages went up in accordance with the % over the period of 4 yrs. Our wages went up to 10.5% of your wages was paid to get a bonus over 3 mths it rather look forward ~~bonus~~ when the times became tougher and the way that bonuses worked, when you done a job correctly for the company you could put your marginal profit on top of your bit so you always had a bonus, you always had a win.

Question.

Were there any migrant and/or ~~Aboriginals~~ employed at the dockyard?

Answer.

Well, the migrants came after the war. The workforce skills of my part of the world were always short, so the dockyard went over to England and they bought out English migrants, boilermakers, joiners, fitters, plumbers and they all got started because the dockyard, before they went over promised them a flat to live in, which there was quite a lot of flats up over in Carrington, next door to the floating dock, which was only for the English migrants. They were allowed to live in these flats till they could find

accommodation of their own and they got settled in Australia. The Italians came after the war and all the other different nationalities that came into it and then there was aborigines worked over at the dockyard. The Sands Brothers was one example, there's quite a few other one's, but that's one you might know because their brother was Dave Sands the Australian champion boxer, and at the latter stages we started to do demountable schools and that time we had an aborigine apprentice who came from out west. He came into the dockyard and they found him accommodation there also. There was a girl painter was put on, she done 12 mths. working on the demountable buildings and now she is finishing her time off over at Stockton Hospital.

Question.

How were the migrants received by their fellow workers?

Answer.

They were received very well because they fitted in. We all had the same interests. It was all about building that's what they were especially hand picked for, some was picked out because they served special skills in doing over there, because over in England you did not get the same training you got in Australia. In England you'd find out if a boilermaker and welder, if he's a burner, he's a burner. you serve 5 yrs. at that and also there's another thing, I had a boilermaker come out and all he done was drill holes, every type, size, shape you wanted, but that's what he served his time at. From England he was supposed to be a ships joiner and when he saw what we done he couldn't believe it. All he done was refrigeration packing slag woll for 5 yrs.

Question.

Were there any women employed at the dockyard, possibly in the office, but were there any on the floor?

Answer.

Mark, there were women employed in the office. There were women employed in the canteen and at the stage when the workforce was around 1500, Mark there were 9 women employed in the canteen. At the time I was talking about, meals you could get a 3 course meal for 1/6d. You could get a bowl of soup which was quite big, a baked dinner, you got a sweet, you got a bread roll and you also got a cup of tea.

Question.

Did workers have to be in a union to work at the dockyard?

Answer.

There was a strict thing, that all members that were employed for anything had to be in a union to be employed by the State dockyard.

Question.

Which unions were at the dockyard?

Answer.

Well Mark, that's a bit hard to tell ya, there were 17 unions at the dockyard.

Question.

Were the workers militant unionists?

Answer.

Well, let's put it this way, you could call it militant or call management the same, it doesn't matter. Try to introduce to ya' a new thing the workers' is against it, if the union wants something the management was against it so it became. They all got along together, both parties either got their backs to the wall and they had to fight to get what they want.

Question.

How did the strikes effect the dockyard?

Answer.

Well, let's put it this way. I give to ya' the way how I see it Mark. A strike never helps anybody, not the workforce, management. The workforce loses money out of it's pocket. Their got wives and family at home, then it also effects the management cause they can't give gaurantee when jobs can be delivered so it effected everybody and nobody receives anything out of a strike.

Question.

Do you feel all the strikes were necessary?

Answer.

No, all strikes was not necessary. A lot could have been settled because I know for a fact I was union delegate in our shop for 7 yrs. I only lost 4 days work in 7 yrs. in our shop. I think they thought over there was a pretty good record. We lost time because we supported the other unions where safety issues were concerned and if they had a fight we would back them.

Question.

When the dockyard closed was it due to union. I say management or union ways or something else.

Answer.

I could not give you an answer to that, but my own personal opinion on this, it was a bit of both. Mainly dockyard put managers in. We had about 7 managers in about 8 yrs., didn't last their terms out. Couldn't come to grasps at what was being done, and some didn't have a clue at what ship building was about.

Question.

Why do you think the dockyard closes, any idea, a personal idea?

Answer.

No, I haven't Mark. I'd say the government wanted it closed and workers wanted it open. I think you could have read that in the paper for yourself, but it didn't matter. The workers seemed to have got blamed for it so that was it. They wouldn't go out without seniority and that would leave the dockyard with a lot of men with a lot of service.

Question.

What were your feelings about the dockyard closing?

Answer.

Well, it did come rather as a shock. I was with the yard for 40 years but the shock hurts the most when you can have the latter part of your working life you give the whole of your working life to a firm. It could have been left open because the section I was in was making a profit for the dockyard and ours was still flourishing and going on a very good parallel line, but when you sit down and your age is 55-56 years at the present state, the way Australia is in Mark, it wasn't a good sign for anybody. I was fortunate I had a job rang through to me. I left on Friday 27th March and started on the 31st March. I was fortunate, I have other workmates who are still looking for work because their age was beating them.

Question.

Do you have any regrets with the dockyard or in a job for so long?

Answer.

Mark, I've never regretted staying at the dockyard. I enjoyed going to work at the dockyard.

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Date 3.8.88

Interviewer Perriman