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AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

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THE NEWCASTLE STATE DOCKYARD AND
THE HISTORY OF SHIPBUILDING IN
THE NEWCASTLE REGION

The history of shipbuilding in the Newcastle Region is colourful and varied but has also been fraught with many deviating trends in terms of profitability. Nature itself provided the first incentives for shipbuilding in the Hunter. In the early 1800's, explorer John Oxley reported that timber along the banks of the Hunter River was one of the best hardwoods in the world. The presence of low lying, deep watered sites was also a favourable consideration for the area.

It was found to be less costly to build ships near the source of the timber than to deliver it to Sydney. The first ship built in the region was believed to be the brig "Princess Charlotte" launched in Newcastle in 1819. From the 1830's, shipyards appeared at Newcastle Harbour at Carrington and Stockton with Stockton being the most prevalent. In 1856 two shipwrights, Messrs Ritchie and Cameron, leased a site and constructed a slip capable of handling vessels up to 200 tons. This occurred after difficulties experienced by the Captain of the "Pirate" who had to rest his ships stern on the beach each day at low tide while fitting a propeller(1).

In 1866 local shipbuilders called to consider the formation of the Newcastle Floating Dock Company, as floating docks were considered the safest and most economical means of repairing large vessels. But the money was not forthcoming and the plan failed. The colony's shipbuilding industry expanded during 1870 when the Newcastle yards produced more vessels than ever before and their size increased markedly. Stockton still remained the centre of activity though the products of the yard remained small with no prospect of constructing metal hulled ships. The demand for small ships did not encourage the need for this.

The construction of the Dockyard at Walsh Island commenced in January 1913 at the same time as the B.H.P. Steelworks and unlike the steelworks, it was all in all, considered a failure.

Even though in the 1920's, it was the second largest local employer and an important part of the industrial strategy of the McGowan government, it was very much due to one man, Arthur Griffith who was a minister of Public Works in New South Wales from October 1910 to March 1915. He encouraged the removal of the dock to Walsh Island when it was planned the government would dredge for B.H.P. and the site was directly opposite. He then announced Walsh Island would be the centre of the States shipbuilding industry. Mr Griffiths formulated a clear government policy on the industrialisation of Newcastle.

The dockyard was officially opened on 27/11/14 and two ferries were launched to mark the occasion that were built by the works. As well as shipbuilding, the Dockyard did dredge repairs and railway bridge construction.

Few people could have estimated the considerable growth of the Dockyard and steelworks; in fact it was expected they would employ no more than 1,000 men each(2). Yet by the close of 1919, they employed around 7,300 workers. These five years were the greatest single period of job creation in Newcastle History. This growth was fundamentally due to the demands of World War I. The Dockyard unfortunately was vulnerable to changes in the political climate.

The early 1920's were troubled times at the State Dockyard. With the cessation of the Commonwealth Governments shipbuilding programmes in March 1921, the Dockyard faced high costs and few orders. Between '21-'22 and '22-'23, the Dockyard had losses of £85,665 and in August 1922, the National-Progressive Government put the Dockyard up for sale, but few offers were received and the proposal lapsed.

The Dockyard faced a big struggle in these times and after failure to sell off the Dockyard, it was converted to a general engineering concern. In lieu of ships, contracts were gained for steel railway carriages, bridges, cast iron pipes, cranes, punts and dredges. Notwithstanding this diversification, losses were still incurred and employment dropped to approx 650 men.

In April 1925 the government announced the building of a floating dock and this was commissioned on 2/7/30. This construction increased government work and produced a fleeting period of prosperity. They made a profit and employed 2,000 men but it came to an end in late 1928. Government orders dried up and the Dockyard entered a downward spiral of mounting losses.

At the end of February '33, 337 men were retrenched and the Dockyard closed down. There were no buyers for the Dockyard in the depression so it was dismantled and rebuilt at Carrington in its former 1913 site and functioned as a ship repairer.

The State Dockyard was re-established under wartime emergency conditions in 1942. Primarily to cater for shipbuilding, ship repairing and associated engineering requirements of Australia, New Zealand and adjacent countries of the Pacific. The works were erected on the Dyke End Peninsula and a suitable site utilized at Carrington to accommodate the floating dock. Since that time the Dockyard has built many ship and repaired thousands of vessels.

The World War II returned to Newcastle the industrial structure it had known at the end of the 1920's.

The second Dockyard was never able to regain the position that the first had attained, but had built a reputation for many firsts, of types of vessels constructed in the country. Included are "Princess of Tasmania", roll on roll off cargo freighter "Bass Trader", container vessels "William Hollyman" and "Kooringa", light house service vessel "Cape Don" and a 19,600 ton tanker "BP Endeavour".

It had in 1953 taken the lead in a new form of shipbuilding using prefabrication. The docks were now only used for assembling and launching and the workshops ^{were used} for preparing the metal pieces of the ships. This was cost efficient and successful. In 1954 the Dockyard would begin to manufacture their own diesel engines for Australian shipping. This meant ships could be made entirely in Australia.

The cessation of large scale shipping and industrial disputes in the mid 1970's, slashed the workforce of the State Dockyard from 2,000 in 1975 to 460 in 1978. The remainder of the employees turned their hands at the construction of smaller vessels and general and specialist engineering work for power stations.

In March 1977 the government announced it would buy a new floating dock and by May 1977, the old dock was being dismantled and towed away. Unlike its predecessor, the new dock would not be built locally, but purchased from Japan. On 4/1/78 the new dock arrived and with it the hopes for a new and uplifting future for the Dockyard. The "Muloobinba" was the largest floating dock in Australia at 195 metres long and had a lifting capacity of 15,000 tonnes. It could dock vessels in under two hours and electronic sensors could detect if the ship became unaligned or off centre.

The government in an effort to assist the State Dockyard's ailing finances wrote off \$4-5 million worth of debt to enable it to have a fresh start, but this was to no avail as with continuing downward trends, the Newcastle State Dockyard closed its doors in March 1987 suffering the full effects of the uncertainty which has haunted its total existence.

(1) Manufacturing in Newcastle: J.W. Turner: Newcastle City Council 1980, p45

(2) J.W. Turner, p 35

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SUMMARY

I began at the Dockyard at age 15 as a junior office boy at the Walsh Island site and worked there a total of 44 years retiring in 1986 at age 60. The Dockyard was transferred to the present Carrington site and was reopened to cater for building of ships for the international war situation. I enlisted in the RAN and had to obtain the ministers permission to leave my job at the Dockyard and there had to be a replacement person for my job as this was a protected industry in war time. During the war there were many casual employees used to bolster the industry for repairing damaged ships and building of new ones. On returning from service I was placed in the purchasing section as a junior clerical assistant and went from there to timekeeping and costing and worked my way up to head time keeper and personnel and industrial officer before my retirement.

The most significant changes noticed throughout the years were the strengthening of the trade unions. During the war, the Dockyard was free of industrial action but after the war there was much communistic and militant action occurring which I think lead to the downfall of the Dockyard as these people gained prominent positions in the unions and really asserted their power.

After the war the Dockyard was employing 2,200 people which was the biggest single industrial employment agency in Newcastle. The Dockyard built many sized and types of ships for use by dredging and tanker companies and the Australian and American military building frigates and corvettes and many other types.

The most interesting event which occurred at the Dockyard was watching a ship grow from a plate of steel to the finished product at the launching stage and families and public were encouraged to witness this event of the ship sliding down the slipway as it was made promotional and tried to bring the community together.

There were not many women working at the dock itself because of the work involved which was quite heavy but there were quite a few in the office staff.

The Dock worked by being lowered into the water to allow the ship to be guided in by tugs and the dock was set by the dockmaster to fit the exact shape of the hull. Then the water was pumped out and thus the dock and ship rise together until it is completely dry and ready for repair or cleaning.

Side industries undertaken by the Dockyard included heavy engineering as in the making of large boilers and apparatus for all the power stations in the State. Also demountable buildings for school and office purposes and bridge building as in the Hexham and Batemans Bay bridges.

When asked of the possibility of reopening the Dockyard Mr Neat stated he thought this could be so only if it was a private industry because being controlled by Governments means it would be controlled by unions, claiming too many advantages and taking away profitability.

21 mins

- 11) Natalie Sanderson: My name is Natalie Sanderson and I am doing the Open Foundation Australian History Project for 1988. I am interviewing Mr Frank Neat who worked at the State Dockyard.
- Mr Neat, at what age did you begin to work at the Dockyard?
- 31) Frank Neat: Approximately 15 years of age. When I began duties at the old floating dock which was then berthed at the old Walsh Island Dockyard, I began my duties then as the junior office boy or telephone boy as the case may be and it was there when the old dock was still sited at the Walsh Island Dockyard, which had been closed down some years previously because of the economic situation and the New South Wales Government engineering and shipbuilding undertaking was to take place because of the international war situation and where the State Dockyard was being re-programmed or rebuilt to cater for the naval ship building programme.
- 106) N.S.: And how long did you actually work at the Dockyard?
- 112) F.N.: I was at the Dockyard all together when I retired in about '86 I was there for 44 years. That included war service because I enlisted from the Dockyard in 1943 and I served in the Navy until that time until I returned in '46.
- 158) N.S.: What were your positions of work while you were making your way up the ranks?
- 167) F.N.: At the Dockyard I was the junior clerical assistant at the old Walsh Island Dockyard and we transferred down to the what we call the Dyke end site which was the actual beginnings of the State Dockyard and I stayed as a junior clerk for some time in the stores section mainly before I enlisted in the RAN. On returning from the RAN after the war I went to the purchasing section as a clerical assistant. Then to the time keeping and costing section as an ordinary time keeper. I eventually moved up to assistant head time keeper and then head time keeper and through the years I eventually finished up as personnel officer and industrial officer before I retired.
- 262) N.S.: Did you notice any major significant changes throughout the years from when you began to when you finished?
- 276) F.N.: I would suggest probably the most major significant areas of the Dockyard what are probably alienated to a lot of other industries throughout the country and that is the strengthening of the trade union movements. During the war the Dockyard was free of all types of major industrial disruption but of course after the war when the unions were starting to find their feet. The Dockyard fell foul to a great deal of communistic or militant union action

- 345) N.S.: How did the employment situation change say pre war as opposed to post war?
- 354) F.N.: Well I am actually not sure as to what the figures were actually pre war, there was no such thing because we were formed as a major development area in the early parts of the war but up to the war and just after my return to the Dockyard and we started building big ships, we had reached the figure of 22,000 people which was the biggest single industrial employment agency in the whole of the Newcastle area.
- 418) N.S.: Was there much industrial action and work stoppages in your experiences?
- 429) F.N.: I beg you pardon?
- 432) N.S.: Industrial action and work stoppages was there alot of that in your experience?
- 440) F.N.: Militant action?
- 442) N.S.: Yes.
- 444) F.N.: Yes unfortunately and I just made the mistake to I did say 22,000 just a while ago but it was 2,200. The industrial action certainly seemed to take place in accordance with what was happening all over the world with the formation of militant groups and so forth and there is no question of the fact that certain people started at the Dockyard who were placed there by communistic or militant groups and with those fellows being settled there and becomming job delegates, it was not long before the dockyard fell foul to many many useless and unnecessary industrial actions, which of course in my personal and humble opinion lead to the destruction of the Dockyard.
- 704) N.S.: Do you think that caused alot of like costing problems and that sort of thing?
- 714) F.N.: I would suggest that that action was 80%ⁱⁿ due to cause of the Dockyard closing.
- 731) N.S.: Can you just sort of give me a general run down of things that the Dockyard used to produce and did they used to have an aerodrome there and things on Walsh Island, do you recall that?
- 750) F.N.: An areodrome?
- 751) N.S.: Yes.
- 753) F.N.: On Walsh Island
- 759) N.S.: Yes I saw itⁱⁿ a 1929 brochure
- 763) F.N.: I am sorry I cant recall that area, I'm not that old. No all I know about Walsh Island of course is when I first went there on the floating dock as I suggested earlier, before that dock itself was transferred from the Walsh Island area down to the Carrington site where the floating dock is today.

F.N.: But of course that floating dock was brought down from Walsh Island did work up to many years through the war and after the war until it fell into disrepair because of old age and the New South Wales State Government replaced that with a new dock which they brought from Japan which is in current use at the present moment.

850) N.S.: Is there any sort of interesting events which you have noticed over the years?

864) F.N.: Well probably the only interesting things I could think about as it is very difficult to say off hand because there were so many things did happen at any major industrial organisation but the very many varied aspects of the dockyard which they entered into. Shipbuilding of course was there major setup and they built many large, small and varied types of ship building, such as mud dredges and small types of light house shipping, the declass fighters that the ANL used to use around the Australian coast up to large oil tankers which are still employed around the state and coast today. I would suggest that the most interesting thing was seeing a ship being laid down with a plate of steel on the slipways and from that plate of steel the ship being gradually built up to a final area where it is launched as a ship which of course was it was always wonderful to see a ship going down the slipways to join the maritime fleet.

1014) N.S.: Mr Neat, what was the dockyard first set up for and reset up for when it was established?

1030) F.N.: Well obviously the State Government in cooperation with the Federal Government set up to recreate a new Dockyard which could cater for the naval ship building programme. The Dockyard in itself did build for the Australian Navy, Corvettes and Frigates were the first ships built for the Australian NAVY was the HMAS Straun, followed by the HMAS Condermine. In cooperation also with the American Navy and the Dockyard did build many small ships for the American merchant service which operated around the South Pacific Islands. They were all launched from the dockyard.

1114) N.S.: Did you have much to do with the actual internal doings or did you keep much to the pay side of it?

1128) F.N.: Well my position was of course only in those days for costing purposes and pay purposes.

1142) N.S.: Was that a very big job, like did the staff fluctuate much?

1149) F.N.: Oh yes well of course with our dockings with the floating dock operating during the war up to the time I enlisted in early '43 we had quite a few dockings because ships were coming into the port that had been damaged in some sort of warfare action and our dock was

F.N.: Cont.: kept quite busy. We did employ a great deal of and I'm sorry I can't give the actual figures at that time, but our permanent workforce was complemented by many casual workers, so when a ship did come onto dock we would pick up casual workers to cater for the work required for that actual ship.

1228) N.S.: Did they have any shortfall in staff in the war, like did a lot of people go off to war?

1237) F.N.: Well actually the Dockyard was known as a protected industry and the people such as myself for instance when I had a desire to join the armed services and I enlisted in the RAN, I had to get special permission from the minister to enlist in the services.

1283) N.S.: Because it was sort of a necessary service.

1287) F.N.: Well it was a protected industry and before I was allowed to leave to join the Navy there had to be a replacement come in to take my place before I could leave the Dockyard. So it was a protected industry.

1314) N.S.: Did they have many women working there or not?

1323) F.N.: Ah no, I think I know what you are getting at as far as the bigger forces are concerned, but there weren't many women working in the actual workforce because as you can appreciate, ship building and rivetting and so forth as it was it was in those days wasn't really in the ladies department. But of course ladies did work in the main office section, there was quite a few of them there.

1370) N.S.: Could you just explain to me just how the floating dock worked?

1387) F.N.: Well the floating dock of course is different to what is known as an engraving dock. The Floating Dock system is such, that when a ship is to enter the floating dock, the side tanks of the floating dock are filled with water and it is lowered into the depths to the required depth to take the actual ship coming on, be it large or small. The keel blocks in the centre of the dock and the side keel blocks are set by the shipwrights first of all to accept the hull of the incoming ship, of course all ships have different type hulls. And the incoming ship of course comes into the dock and 99% OF CASES the ship is light ship, which means it has no cargo in it, in its hulls unless of course for emergency purposes. The ship comes on in what we call a lightened ship and with the assistance of tugs she is sent into the dock proper and the dockmaster who is a shipwright of course, he is in charge of the ship coming into the dock so far distance where it stops where when the tanks are pumped up, the dock starts to rise

F.N.: Cont.: AND IT PICKS UP THE SHIP, ^{that} IT IS TO ACCOM^Modate, and then in this way the dock is continually pumped out until the dock is free of the water and the ship is dry, completely in the floating dock ready to be cleaned down ready for painting or any repair work that may be necessary.

1604) N.S.: Could you tell me what other sorts of side industries that the Dockyard did through the years?

1617) F.N.: Besides ship building which of course was the major segment of the dockyard, the ship repair section in the floating dock was also most important and also very financial. I would suggest that the ship repair side of things offset the losses for ship building, because ship building of course as you would realise is not very economically viable and the ship repair work was such that we could make money on ship repair work and any ship that struck any sort of trouble, losing a propeller or wanting urgent treatment for striking a reef, or rock or wharf or any sort of repair necessary to a ships hull or other types of equipment such as direction rigging and so forth, well she would enter the floating dock for repair work. Apart from the ship repair work there was heavy engineering equipment at the dockyard which catered a great deal for all types of components for heavy industries and particularly for power house work and that was heavy engineering. The dockyard also entered into a field of what we call demountable buildings and a great deal of the mobile school rooms that you see around the state were built at the state dockyard and they were very successfully done. Besides school rooms they also branched off into all types of mobile accommodation for various offices and that type of thing. Also the heavy engineering side of it lent itself to the construction of boilers and major fabrication work for the major part of the power stations built throughout the New South Wales electricity commission segment. Big power stations such as Liddell, Baystone, Wirrawang, WAngi etc etc all were built at the State Dockyard.

1867) N.S.: And they made bridges as well.

1874) F.N.: Yes the original Hexham bridge was built at the state dockyard and also . was the bridge built across the river at Batemans Bay which of course did away with the ferry system and the bridge is now still operating at Batemans Bay, so that was one of the many varied types of the work the dockyard undertook.

1924) N.S.: What was the most enjoyable part of your job would you think over the years?

1936) F.N.: Thats a very difficult question to answer. I would think honestly the being present at a launching of a ship. It always seemed to be a major thing or a very highlighted thing where you were

FN.:Cont.: PREsent at the launching of a ship. Which as I stated earlier started off from a sheet of steel and finished up as a living thing, and when it was launched in the river to become part of the merchant service, that to me seemed to be an accomplishment which most people, most workers got most enjoyment from.

- 2027) N.S.: With the launching, did they just let staff all watch or that public were allowed to watch or was it a private thing?
- 2044) F.N.: They tried very hard to bring the local community into the launching programme, for obvious reasons I think it was to advertise the dockyard and to show them what kind of work they do and also make the people aware of the fact what could be done at the dockyard. Naturally employees families were^{of} a major consequence there and they were always allowed to be present at launchings and as many of the public as possible were^{always} allowed to come into the yard and I think I would honestly always say that the launching of any ship be it large or small was always something which made the emotions run quite high.
- 2137) N.S.: A Morale boster.
- 2140) F.N.: Of course
- 2147) N.S.: Do you think in the future there would be any possibility of reopening the Dockyard, would it be a viable situation?
- 2162) F.N.: I think I would have to say the dockyard certainly could be made as an economic concern, but it would have to be without the strings attached by a State Government concern. It would have to be private enterprise which I think has taken hold in this port and they are doing everything in their endeavour to recreate a shipbuilding or ship repair section in the port of Newcastle. But not with a government concern. The unions take too much, or claim too many advantages with a government concern.
- 2233) N.S.: Well thanks very much for your time Mr Neat.
- 2236) F.N.: My pleasure.

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Date 26/7/88

Interviewer Natalie Sanders