

Kathy Brautement

SUMMARY OF TAPED INTERVIEW WITH CAPTAIN KEN HOPPER
HARBOUR MASTER OF THE PORT OF NEWCASTLE 1966 TO 1980

Captain Ken Hopper, who is now retired and living at Port Stephens, was Harbour Master of the Port of Newcastle from 1966 to his retirement in 1980.

He worked as a tugmaster at Newcastle from 1947, then in 1952 became a pilot, first in Sydney and later in Newcastle. Once he became a pilot he was employed by the Maritime Services Board.

During his time working on the Harbour there were a great many changes, both in the type and size of the ships coming into the Harbour and the facilities available in the Port of Newcastle. The depth of the bar was twenty five feet six inches in 1947 and was deepened to thirty six feet by 1966. It was again in the process of being deepened to fifty feet when he retired. The facilities for berthing and loading also changed considerably over these years.

When he started in 1947 the ships which came to Newcastle were charter ships known as "slave traders". They were chartered by B.H.P. to carry iron ore from South Australia to Newcastle and to take coal on the return journey to Melbourne, Adelaide and Whyalla. They were

rather small old British ships called "Tramps", poorly designed and difficult to handle, even though they were much smaller than the modern ships. During this time there was also general cargo going through the Port, such as wheat and wool but mostly the cargo was coal.

The Maritime Services Board took over the administration of the Port in 1961. The Board decided then to deepen the Harbour to thirty six feet and to build the Basin Coal Loader. A contract was let to deepen the Harbour, most of the work was done by a firm called Dillinghams and dredging continued to be done by an "inefficient" team from the Department of Public Works.

When he became Harbour Master in 1966 they were finishing the deepening project and the Steelworks Channel was opened up to a depth of thirty six feet allowing larger ships to service B.H.P. The Basin Coal Loader was opened in 1968 and within twelve months they were loading between five and six million tons per year. Coal and wheat loading was increasing but general cargo was falling off. The advent of containers shipping was a problem as the ships would not come into Newcastle. All container cargo went through Sydney. The Bulk Berth at Kooragang was completed in 1968 and Greenleaf Fertilizers was able to use this facility to discharge their phosphate. Following this, Adelaide Cement moved to the Island bringing further cargo through the Port.

The Harbour dredging was eventually taken over by a contract firm and the the Public Works dredging service became obsolete. The Harbour deepening was again started in 1977. This was a major project to bring the depth to fifty feet. This was completed in 1983 with the depth of

the harbour and channels making it possible for the size of ships coming in to be increased to one thousand feet long with a draft of about fifteen metres.

The new Dyke Coal Loader came into operation in 1976 with a capacity of about fifteen million tons per year.

When Captain Hopper retired in 1980 the deepening project was well under way and plans were being made for the new Kooragang Coal Loader.

October 19, 1988

KATHY BEAUTEMENT

HISTORY

WEDNESDAY EVENING GROUP

Kathy Beautelement

TRANSCRIPT OF TAPED INTERVIEW WITH CAPTAIN KEN HOPPER
TUGMASTER, PILOT, HARBOURMASTER PORT OF NEWCASTLE 1947 - 1980

My coming to Newcastle, my first time I'd been here actually was after I'd gone out of the Navy after the war and I joined the tugboats in Sydney, Waratah Tug Company. I came up here in the old river ship to get three trips up and down as mate to go for my exemptions. Following that, at the end of 1947, the Company transferred me to Newcastle and I came up here as a tugmaster and at that time the port was at a depth on the bar of 25 feet 6 inches. The type of ships that were used in the port, we had a lot of ships in the port then of these charter vessels that they used to call the 'Slave Traders' and were chartered to B.H.P. running between South Australia and Newcastle taking coal South to either Melbourne or Adelaide and Whyalla and then bringing iron ore back.

These ships were British Tramps and they were a very motley type of ship, some of them were better than others. Some of them had all the trouble on earth with drunken crews and this type of thing, trying to dig them out of hotels when they were due to sail and things like that. Also at that time there was a lot of general cargo came through the port, wool and that type of thing.

The ships used to come here for the wool sales and they'd be struggling to vie for berths to get berths so they could get their wool, even in the latter part of the forties. At one stage here we were even importing wheat here from Western Australia because there had been a drought here and there was no local wheat available. But then of course we had the old silo there and later on in the fifties they loaded wheat there for export from there.

The coal at that stage was all loaded from the old wooden wagons where it was lifted up by either hydraulic or electric cranes. They loaded at the Dyke by hydraulic cranes, the Eastern side of the Basin was all hydraulics and the electric cranes which had been put in in 1915 were on the Western side of the Basin. That was the normal coal thing and these ships, these charter ships in particular, they'd come in quite often. This meant that the tugs used to move these things up to five or six times. They'd come into the port often, tie up in one of the town berths, then be moved up to the Steel Works, discharge their iron ore and be brought back then again to a tie up berth and then over to load coal and then of course to sea.

There was a lot of work done, a lot of ship movement in the harbour then although the tonnages then compared with today were very small, but other than that I think that they were the main cargo things. This type of operation then carried on through the 1950's.

In 1952 I left the tugs and joined the Maritime Services Board as a pilot. I started off in Sydney in the Captain Cook then I was in the Birubi in Newcastle. These were steam pilot boats and we used to go and meet the ships and there was not much change really except that in the fifties they built the first coal loader which was known as the Dyke Coal Loader. This was built by Newstan Colliery up along the Dyke and this was able to load coal at the rate of about 400 tons per hour which was considered quite a lot in those days. There wasn't any real change then until the early sixties. By this time I had become a pilot and we still were getting the old war time ships, the Australian river ships, the liberty ships and this type of thing. The old liberty ships I mention there, these ships were difficult ships to handle because of their design compared with the modern ships these days.

Consequently, the handling of these ships in and out of the harbour was not exactly easy because they didn't have the manoeuvrability of the modern vessels. They had small rudders and all this type of thing and particularly when they were a light ship they had practically nothing in the water and the blew around all over the place .

It was in the sixties then that the Maritime Services board took over complete control of the port and it was decided then to deepen the harbour and build a new coal loader. At this stage the Dyke coal loader was operating and they decided then to build a new one in the Basin and also to deepen the Port to 36 feet. This meant letting a contract to deepen the harbour and this happened during the early sixties and the rock dredging was mainly done by Dillinghams who had a lot of trouble with the rock because of the nature of the rock in the harbour particularly down in the entrance, down near Nobbys was very hard and the type of dredging they proposed doing was with the cutter suction. This just didn't work so they had to use drilling and blasting and recovering the rocks by grabs and dumping them at sea.

So this was done during this period and the rest of the harbour the mud removal was done mainly by the Public Works with their bucket type dredges. I became Harbourmaster in 1966 and a lot of that work was in progress at that stage. The Board also at that time were finishing off building Number 1 Throsby Berth which had been started by the Public Works prior to 1960 and they went ahead and finished this lot. About this time they brought out a programme then for improvements to the port on what they call a ten year programme. So in 1966 when I became Harbour Master it was not long after that, that the Steelworks Channel was opened to the 36 feet so the B.H.P. was able to use bigger ships up to their works.

In 1968 the Basin Coal Loader was completed and it was opened. This loader was designed in the early sixties for about a million and one half tons a year but by the time it was opened then and operating when the harbour then had gone to 36 feet within twelve months or so they were loading between five and six million tons through the loader, this particular loader. So this was a big improvement and the size of the ships jumped from about 20 thousand tons to about 60 thousand tons in the capacity these ships could lift which made a big difference and the size of the ships gradually increased. We experimented with different sizes until we got up to nearly 800 feet long, getting ships into the basin or 750 I think it was; so we got these bigger ships in there and were able to load much larger tonnages.

Following this development in the port then there was a change also in general cargo handling following the introduction of container shipping. This made a big difference to the type of port operations in Newcastle, because the general cargo then things like wool and that type of thing the container ships wouldn't come to Newcastle so all these things to go into boxes had to be sent through Sydney. So we had a sort of dramatic change in the general cargo handling, but our coal loading and that sort of thing was increasing. During this period too, the Board redeveloped the Western Basin and built the new berth along there and the new wheat silos and wheat loaders went in there. This made once again made a difference with being able to handle bigger ships in to load wheat and the wheat exports here grew quite considerably. They also put a small container crane over on that side and also a roll-on roll-off facility but these facilities were practically never used.

Around this time also they built the bulk berth up at Kooragang for the Greenleaf Fertilizers went up there with their phosphate works and this was designed primarily to discharging phosphate up there. Following that also

during the seventies Adelaide Cement built up there and this once again brought further cargoes through that berth.

The actual maintenance dredging in the port changed considerably over that period too. Back in the sixties it was all done by the Public Works. They had a big fleet of dredges, they had the bucket dredges, they had a couple of very outdated drag suction dredges and then a couple of grab dredges for doing berth dredging. But the way they operated their methods and their accuracy in dredging was very backward in the operation, consequently it cost millions of dollars a year for dredging and at the end of each year you saw very little return for that money that was spent, so during the late sixties was the first time I was able to get the Board to help out to make the port operate because I'd had eight ships ashore in my first year largely because we couldn't get the silt removed in time. They sent a contract dredge here and the way they were able to move the spoil in very short time really sort of surprised us all because it was such a change from what had been going on in the past, so over the next ten years the Board gradually reduced the number of dredges that they allowed the Public Works to operate, and this made quite a big difference and then they used with the harbour deepening then, part of the harbour deepening contract was that they had to get the port to a certain depth and this happened again in the seventies when they decided then to plan and deepen the harbour to 50 feet.

It was during the seventies also with the coal loading capacity of the Basin Loader being more or less up to maximum that the Dyke coal loader was built with a business consortium with the actual loader being operated by the Maritime Services Board, so this was built with a capacity of about 15 million tons a year. This plus the Basin coal loader really increased the capacity of the port considerably.

It was then decided to deepen the port to the 50 feet as I said so we had to plan and design all the channels for this with our State Navigation Committee on which I was the Newcastle member. We had to study overseas modern techniques and design of these channels and the bends in these channels to make sure we could get big ships in. Our concept was that we'd be able to handle ships with a draft of about 50 feet or 15 metres and up to 1000 feet long which has proved now to have become a practical operation, although we started off originally with about 900 feet ships on this one, or that was the original plan. So with the maintenance dredging the last contract was given to Westham Dredging to deepen the port to the 50 odd feet. During the time they were doing the deepening they also had to maintain the port against siltation so at this stage the dredging plant of the Public Works more or less went out of existence apart from just one grab dredge and this was the only one operating by then. This particular dredge was later taken over by the Board themselves, so the Public Works dredging service completely packed up altogether. So that was the development then.

By 1980 when I retired the port was in the process of being deepened to this 50 feet up to the Steel Works area but of course there were plans coming up to build the coal loader up on Kooragang which has been developed since the 1980 period that I've been talking about. So that more or less covers I think most of what I can tell you about the port up until 1980.

KATHY BEAUTEMENT

OPEN FOUNDATION HISTORY

TERM 3

REGIONAL HISTORY ESSAY

SEPTEMBER, 1988

" A HISTORY OF THE PORT OF NEWCASTLE
FROM DISCOVERY TO MODERN TIMES. "

Lieutenant John Shortland found a deep channel behind Cook's "clump of an island" (now Nobbys) in 1797 and entered the estuary of the Hunter River, a broad waterway twice as wide as it is now and dotted with small islands and tidal mud flats. The present site of Stockton was a narrow peninsular. The main channel was bounded on the North West by the Oyster Bank. Before leaving he named the waterway Coal River; this was the discovery of the place which was to become the Port of Newcastle. The settlement was finally made in 1801 but was abandoned in 1802. It was reestablished as a convict settlement for some of the worst convicts in New South Wales, under the authority of Lieutenant Charles Menzies. It was officially named Newcastle on 24th March, 1804, but Menzies changed it to Kings Town after the Governor.

It was renowned as a dangerous place for ships to enter from the earliest days. The Oyster Bank ran north from the point of the entrance for a considerable distance, it consisted of a series of sandbanks and was very dangerous in heavy weather. At least fifty ships were wrecked here before the Stockton Breakwater was built. After the introduction of tugboats to Newcastle a warning was issued to sailing masters "not to enter the harbour until a steam tug was in sight. "When the tugs cannot get out it is not safe for sailing ships to enter." they were told." 1

The first export from here is claimed to have been coal loaded in the Barque Hunter to India in 1799. The first wharf was built at the foot of Watt Street, with a small lagoon providing a harbour for small boats used for transporting convict workers to the lime pits, which

were up river on the Stockton shore. The Governor's brig "Lady Nelson" tried to enter Coal River in 1812 but failed due to adverse tidal currents. Captain Wallis, who was in charge of the settlement, imagined a breakwater between Nobbys and the mainland to restrict tidal currents. The work commenced in 1818 with stone quarried from Beacon Hill, with convict labour being used, but the job was abandoned in 1822 due to slow progress and frequent washaways. Work began again ten years later when the government realised the need, with the arrival of larger ships and continuing wrecks. Work was slow and in 1836 they began to work from Nobbys using rock from the top. It was finally joined in 1846, although washouts still occurred. It was known as Macquarie's Pier. This apparently stabilized the depth over the entrance channel but serious problems were being experienced with mud banks in the harbour and after constant representation to Sydney, in 1854 a civil engineer, J. Woolston Ellis had produced a plan including the Dyke Wall and a Basin behind it. Edward Moriarty was appointed in 1855 as Engineer Surveyor responsible for Hunter River improvements. He observed and developed the Moriarty Plan over the next three years. This plan included extended breakwaters to control the sea and stone training walls to control the river channels. The plan was carried out over the next fifty years and produced the port basically as we know it today. Extensive work was carried out, Macquarie's Pier was finally secure in 1872, the breakwater extended to Big Ben Reef by 1883, the Northern Breakwater was completed by 1907.

Work inside the harbour was more rewarding with Queen's Wharf

being completed in 1861, this was fifteen hundred feet long and equipped with rail tracks and light steam cranes for coal loading. Expanding coal trade increased the need for staithes or shoots for coal tipping. By 1865 there were nine in the port, a further four at Port Waratah and three at Hexham. Wharves and coal loading facilities built on the Dyke Wall in 1875 included four hydraulic cranes for lifting coal hoppers at the wharves. Larger ones installed later were still in use in 1964. All coal loading was transferred to the Dyke by 1890 except for the Australian Agricultural Company's coal staithes below Merewether Street, which remained until 1915.

During this era the main ships to visit the port from overseas were sailing ships, although the coastal trade was being catered for by steam packets as well. The era of sailing ships was a very busy one for the Port of Newcastle, a time of a harbour crowded with ships waiting to unload their ballast and load again with coal or other cargoes.

" In the days of sail, on a bright clear morning Nobbys looming in the distance was a picturesque and ever welcome sight to the crews of the old windjammers, but in bad weather it was a different story. With a howling gale from the sou'-east, and mountainous seas sweeping over the breakwater, the narrow entrance was a menace and a dread to all sailing masters. Many a fine vessel has ended her career 'wrecked off Newcastle.'" 2

At the turn of the century sailing ships were still the main type of ship used throughout the world. Here is a first hand account of the arrival in Newcastle from Philadelphia via Brisbane, the first

impression of a nineteen year old apprentice on the sailing ship the "Criccieth Castle". He was Harold Beaument, whose naval career was to be quite an illustrious one, and to whom Newcastle was later to become home.

"On October 10th, 1902, at sunset we sighted Port Stephens Light House and we commenced to shorten sail for soon after this we sighted the famous Nobbys Light. At 10 pm we were in tow with a pilot aboard and at midnight dropped both anchors in Newcastle Harbour having made passage in 5 days.

We were very interested in the competitive racing of the trade boats as we approached the port, they came miles out to sea, butchers, ship chandlers, greengrocers, laundry representatives etc all seeking the ship's business, and each offering the captain different rates of commission. They threw bundles of newspapers aboard, and shouted the latest of news of interest to us.

From the Horseshoe, that part of the Harbour reserved for ships arriving and departing, the Town didn't look much, but the Harbour wharves and jetties were lined with sailing ships, double banked, and in places three and four abreast, waiting their turn to discharge ballast, or to load coal or perhaps waiting for orders.

Here we saw the full use of the paddle propelling, for there were paddle tugs, and also cargo and passenger ships trading between Newcastle and Sydney, and pleasure trips to the Hawkesbury River. There were also some small stern wheelers.

Ferries running passengers across the harbour from Stockton to Newcastle, the only means of connection between the two towns; they

came close under our stern and gave us some little relief from ship monotony, at least we were able to see some of the local girls, and were we interested.

This was Coal Town known the world over, and we were now looking forward to getting ashore and investigating the layout, and what was to be found in the way of amusement and attraction. We had already heard some of Newcastle's reputation, but only from a Shellback's point of view, and, of course that wasn't very flattering to the respectables."

Sailing ships were to continue to visit Newcastle for many years to come, but the last British sailing ship to carry coal to South America, the "Monkbarns", left Newcastle on 14th July, 1925, with 3108 tons for Callao, Peru.

Development of the Basin continued, coal wharves with rail tracks and hydraulic cranes were built on the Eastern side and the Northern end. By 1908 the city was again angry about the lack of facilities and held a meeting with the NSW Premier, Mr Wade. Forty five ships had left partly loaded in the previous year because of the depth at the entrance, there were no cargo sheds at Kings Wharf (ex Queens Wharf). A new plan was announced for deepening and Mr. Percy Allen was appointed as Engineer for Public Works in Newcastle. His major task was the deepening of the harbour, the proposed depth of twenty five feet six inches was not reached until about 1950. During his term the Northern Breakwater and Lee Wharf were completed and the Western side of the Basin had new wharves installed by using long precast concrete slabs to retain the fill behind the wharves. Electric travelling

cranes were installed by 1918 and two of these modified for general cargo are still in use. He also recommended the extension of the southern breakwater which was not successful and it was stabilised at about its original length in 1950.

The western end of the harbour gained its shape with the development of Throsby Basin, by the removal of Honeysuckle Point and part of Bullock Island. Rail access moved to Port Waratah in 1908, the Inflammable Liquids Wharf was built in Wickham, and Lee Wharf was extended. State Dockyard was accommodated at the Dyke with appropriate wharves during World War 2. The floating dock was placed in Throsby Basin and Slipways were built. The Wheat Silos were built on the south-western corner of the Basin in 1936. The main development since 1945 has been the harbour deepening and the modernisation of all facilities. The demand for better coal loading facilities was met by the erection of the Dyke coal loader by Newstan Colliery in 1958. The Basin coal loader was built in 1967 by the Maritime Services Board, this replaced the cranes on the east of the Basin. Overseas trade, mainly with Japan grew rapidly and a coal industry consortium, Port Waratah Coal Services Limited, built a new coal loader upstream of the Dyke which began operations in 1977.

When the Maritime Services Board took over control of the port in 1961 it was at last under the control of one authority. There have been many improvements since then. The completion of the island reclamation works and the development of Kooragang Island for industry has been achieved with the opening of the bulk berth in 1968 to accommodate the discharging of phosphates and other cargoes. The

new coal loader at Kooragang came into operation in 1984.

The deepening of the port reached a depth of 11 metres by 1966, but within ten years the size of ships wanting to load coal in the port was increasing and the deepening to the present depth of 15.2 metres, including the Steel Works channel, was commenced in 1977. This work also included improved approaches to the coal and grain berths in the Basin. This was carefully planned by the Maritime Services Board along with the State Navigation Committee which included the harbour master, Captain Ken Hopper. Overseas modern techniques were studied and the best possible plans adopted. This development allowed ships with a draft of about fifty feet and length of one thousand feet.

Along with the development of the port which has taken place since the Maritime Services Board began management of the Port there has been a growth in total cargo tonnage from 8.6 million tonnes in 1960/61 to 33 million tonnes in 1984/85 and 35 million tonnes in 1985/86. Coal export trade has grown from 815,000 tonnes in 1960/61 to approximately 26.3 million tonnes in 1985/86.³ The steel industry is still prominent and wheat exports have grown considerably.

The Port of Newcastle is one of the busiest ports in Australia and with plans by the Maritime Services Board should remain this way. The port has been developed significantly since the Maritime Services Board took over control. Newcastle now offers a water depth which is more than sufficient for the majority of ships using the port. Not only has Newcastle Harbour been made a viable port in respect of shipping activities, recent work along the Newcastle foreshore has now

made the harbour a beautiful asset to the tourist industry and to the people of Newcastle.

Footnotes;

1. Terry Callen, Bar Dangerous, Runciman Press, Manly. 1886. P 101
2. W.J. Goold, FRAHS. Port of Newcastle, Newcastle and Hunter District
Historical Society Journal Vol VIII, 1954, P 121/2.
3. Maritime Services Board of New South Wales, Strategic Development Needs
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Date 19.9.88

Interviewer K. Beutement