



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

“Read all about it!”

The origins and early history of the Squadron – as reported in the Press of the day

Part 8: Mr. George Thornton Reminiscent.

Saturday, 30th January, 1897 – The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser



Next in chronological order to Mr. Milson comes the veteran Mr. George Thornton. Everyone knows the old joke as to Mr. Thornton having watched Captain Cook from the South Head, and the reply that if that were so the navigator would not have missed Port Jackson. Mr. Thornton's connection with yachting has been long and intimate, and it has been, too, valuable.

The knowledge it gave him enabled him to take charge of the boat which saved the woman and children at the wreck of the Duncan Dunbar at Las Rocas, and to save nine boys capsized off Chowder in a southerly, after he had scudded right across the harbour to their rescue, let go everything in the gale, and picked them up in a dingy. There was a tenth boy, but he was eaten by a shark before the rescuer could reach the scene. Mr. Thornton's good health and clear head at his advanced age are another object lesson of the value of yachting.

The first great aquatic notability Mr. Thornton recollects was Captain Daniels, H.E.I.C.S., of the clipper ship, Rubicon. He was a second Admiral Rous. When his ship came to port on her various voyages from England the whole community was stirred. He brought thoroughbred racehorses. He organised races, man fights, dog fights, cock fights — anything of sporting tendency. But, above all, he was an aquatic enthusiast, and his enthusiasm produced the first regatta — 1834. A fine handsome, hearty, extremely popular man is Mr. Thornton's recollection of the Rubicon's skipper. Ships' boats were rowed and sailed with keen rivalry in these past regattas, and they led to boats being built — four-oared gigs, fast whaleboats, watermen's boats, and sailing boats. The fastest of them all was the North Star, owned by Mr. Harry Sawyer, who died at Balmain but a few year's ago. The old-time four



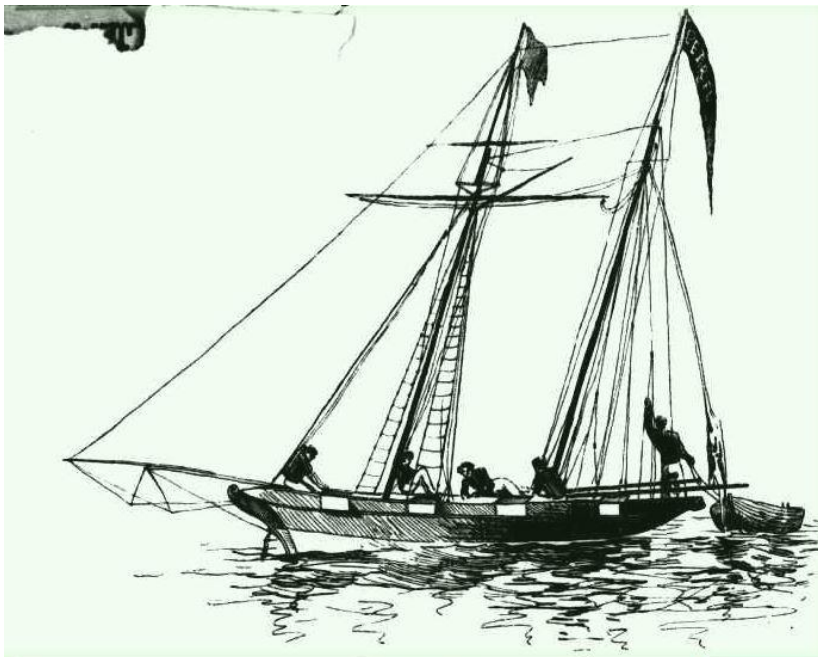
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our prize gigs had some fine crews in those days, but the great rowing event was the whaleboat race, for the colony owned a splendid whaling fleet. There was great rivalry between the whalers, but the champion crew was a famous one, consisting of the Melvilles and Mulhall. The aggregate height of the six was nearly 40ft., and one Mr. Thomas Mulhall is still living in Sydney.

A Tragic Incident.

Of Mr. Milson's Friendship and her rival the Petrel Mr. Thornton speaks glowingly. After them the boats grew steadily in size and speed. The Haidee, which Mr. Thornton had built, and which won at the regatta of 1839, in which 17 yachts started for the first-class prize, was a notable example. The fate of the Haidee was tragic. She sank in a southerly buster off Shark Point, and five out of six of her crew — including Mr. Thornton's brother — were drowned. Afterwards she was found in 16 to 17 fathoms of water, and while Mr. Thornton and others were hauling up a body the head was bitten off by a shark, and they ceased to drag. One of the drowned was Mr. Charles Rogers, a fine young Englishman standing about 6ft. 4in. Six weeks later a huge shark was killed by Mr. John Blue, who found in it a tattered shirt, and a leg still bearing Roger's cossack boot and the shirt marked 'C. Rogers.' The leg was coffined, and there was a funeral. This was, perhaps, the most tragic incident in the yachting history of Port Jackson, though another tragedy was the fatal accident to Mr. Cavendish, his wife, and friends off Bradley's Head on Anniversary Day, 1839.

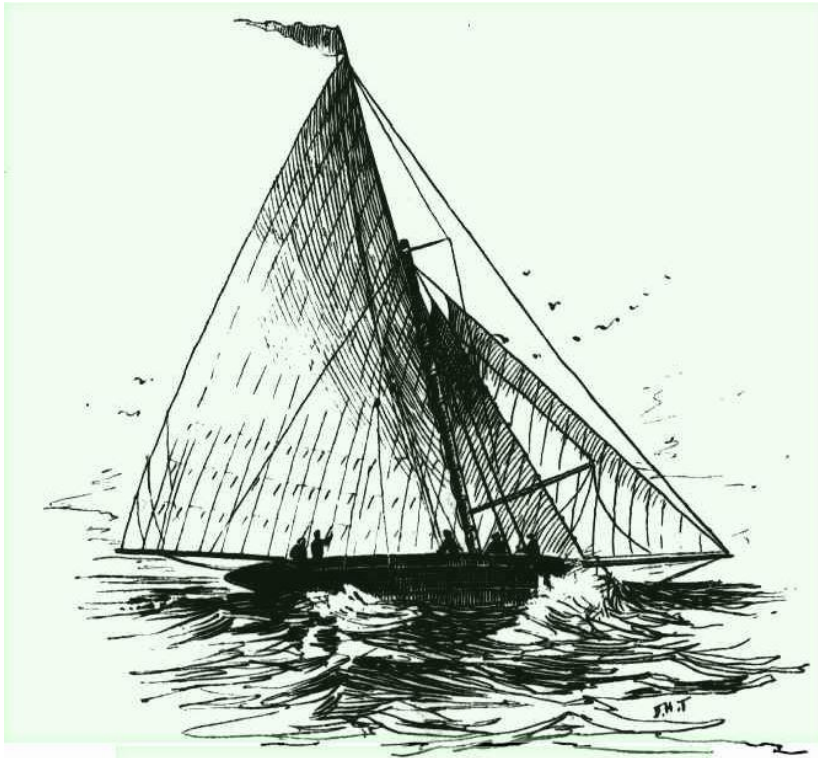
Some Famous Yachts.



THE PETREL,
(FROM AN OLD PICTURE, IN THE POSSESSION OF MR. GEORGE THORNTON.)



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MR. JAMES MILSON'S OLD YACHT, FRIENDSHIP.

Famous yachts were Mr. Want's Pearl, Mr. Ross Donnelly's 40-ton schooner Boomerang, and Mr. Wieland's English cutter Ariel, Mr. Robert Owen's beautiful 25-tonner Sylph, Mr. Milson's Mischief Mr. Andrew Reynolds' Annie Ogle, and Mr. G. Pike's 25-ton Phantom, all completely equipped yachts. "No such yachts nowadays," is Mr. Thornton's regretful comment. Another noted boat was the Enchantress, 20 tons, of Mr. Cuthbert, built expressly for speed. The Surprise, 30 tons; Vivid about 40; and Why Not, 15 tons, were all handsome English yachts. The first Bronzewing was a very beautiful schooner built for Mr. Malcolm and called after a racehorse belonging to Mr. Thornton. Then there was the 28-ton schooner Avenger, built by Underwood at Brisbane for Mr. Thornton, and sailed down.

In those days Manly was a wild, untenanted bush, full of wallaby, bronze wing pigeon, ducks, and quail, and there Messrs. Want, Challis, Donnelly, Thornton, and other yachtsmen were wont to rendezvous and hold high carnival, indulging in unlimited shooting and fishing from Saturday to Monday. The outbreak of the goldfields put an end to these halcyon times of yachting. The pastime was conducted in great style in those days, and the members of the Royal Yacht Squadron of Sydney were, Mr. Thornton says, most gorgeous and imposing objects, brass-bound from head to heel; but had anyone told those ancient yachtsmen that they might live to see gas in their wild rendezvous and 18,000 people going there in one day, they would, Mr. Thornton says, have regarded him as a lunatic. What is now the Quarantine Ground and the Cardinal's residence was then an island, divided from the rest by a creek. Dr. Burncastle, ex-member of a leading English club, was the founder of the S.Y.C., with Mr. R. J. Want father of the present Attorney-General — as commodore.

Notes:

Mr Thornton was one of the founding members of the RSYS and his signature can be found on the document on the wall in the main lounge.



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- Sydney Harbour became shark infested when whaling took off.
- The description of Manly is enlightening. Who would know that the northern end was in fact an island though it makes sense when one thinks of the topography today.
- Reference is made to the Sydney Yacht Club which, of course, was the predecessor of the RSYS.