

A Boat side chat with Jeff and Lyn Walton at Houseboat Bay 8th June 2025 and the history of the surrounding waterways.

We gathered on Jeff and Lyn Walton's boat in Houseboat Bay, to catch up and Jeff was asked a question about the history of the area and so began a fascinating tale of the area around Bobbin Head.

Jeff's story –

So I started hanging around here in about 1954, I was 10 years old, and I lived up the top of the hill at Mount Colah. Initially we had to get on a bus during the school holidays and came down to fish. The road to Apple Tree Bay was just dirt and we would fish off the wharf all day long and just perve on the boats. There was a magnificent Halvorsen 50 feet, just parked in the bay called Siklinda and just opposite were two big 60-foot and 65-foot yachts. One was Loriana and the other was Lady Ellen.

Bobbin Head existed then and was run by the Halvorsen's, who bought their land during the war. I think they paid something like 300 Pounds for the lease and they set about making a good business. After the war there was so much stock. The Halvorsen's were big boat builders for the American Navy and the American Government stocked up Halvorsen engines and timber, then after the war they didn't want it back, so the business got a terrific head start. They built a hire fleet with at one point numbered 65 with many of the hire boats being built in Ryde. They built that factory at Ryde just before the war started and they just fell on their feet, building about

1200 boats. The father died in 1939, left the company to five brothers and two sisters. Harold was the oldest and smartest and set up a company called Lars Halverson Sons Proprietary Limited and setup contracts with local firms. A lot of boats were built by Williams based in Balmain and the younger generation were then based in Newport, name of Bill Bridges.

Mr Halvorson asked the question after the war, 'What do we do, now?'. We do hire boats, 25 footers and 21-foot Honeymooners with very basic construction. The 25's were very good boats; my dad had one. They also had 30 footers and during 1945 to early 1950 they built their fleet of 30 footers and few 36's and Miramar was the last one, James and Elizabeth Hunters old boat at KMYC.

Then they built a corporate entertaining boat, called Endeavour, which was at KMYC owned by Peter Burmeister. They got rid of all the 25's in early 1960's. Their idea was that people wanted hot water in the shower, that had a dinette and could sleep five people where the 25's slept only slept 4.

I used to sit on the Wharf and think the only job I really wanted was to work at Halvorsen and as

it transpired towards the end of the 1950's, I got a job as a 'Kicker Boy", when I was 15-16 at school. My Dad had a boat there, so I put my hand up. They had 50 odd putt putts, half cabins and open launches and my job was to be there from 7a.m. on Saturday morning, make sure the boats were pumped out, filled with fuel, seats wiped down so that when crowds turned up, we got on, showed them how to start and off they would go putt, putt, puttering up the creek. At 3 p.m. they all started to putt, putt back. This took place on Saturdays and Sundays. They used to pay me 3 Pounds for a Saturday. Then you could get a job on Friday night, so as soon as I got home from school, I jumped on the bus down to Bobbin Head. What we had to do was teach them how to use the toilets, how to start the boats and where the lights were and how the radios worked. We had to take all their clothes and grog to the boats on the wharf. A call could go out - "Attendant to Motor Cruiser – Patonga" then we would carry it all down. Jeff indicated that he would receive tips, more cash in hand and got another 3 - 9 pounds for the weekend.

After the war, a lot of soldiers, including my uncle were vey shell shocked. The Ku ring gai Chase Trust in those days gave them work and they had a house at the top of Turramurra, and another house just at the entrance to the Chase up at Mt Colah and these people would live in them. There were boatsheds at Waratah Bay, at Jerusalem Bay and Woodnutts was just near Houseboat Bay.

Before I started work at Halvorsen's I had a canoe, which I used to keep at their boatyard. I would turn up at Halvorsen's, pull up to the wharf and off I went, they never said anything to me and never charged me anything. But eventually I took it around to Apple Tree Bay where we would row with all my mates and we would then come across to Houseboat Bay and play around on the houseboat. The houseboat had been abandoned by then; it was still in good order and locked up. It was owned by Ku ring gai Chase Trust.

So, there were houses, houseboats and a dam at Houseboat Bay. My Uncle was a stone mason, and he would have done a far bit of the stonework at Bobbin Head. The houses in Houseboat Bay would have been built during the depression around the 1930's for the rangers and employees who worked for the Ku ring gai Chase Trust. There were four cottages in Bobbin Head itself, there is still one up above the public wharf on top of the hill, about 100 feet up. There was one at Apple Tree Bay where the walkway goes up the creek

A lot of the sandstone for the wharf used to be quarried around here. The wharf at Houseboat Bay used to be in very good condition but is now covered by rocks that have rolled down the hill. There is still a path that was built from the house around to the dam above the creek which has been destroyed but remnants of the wall can still be seen. It was a well-engineered dam. It was a man-made dam beautifully built at the end of Houseboat Bay with blocks and holes drilled

into it for steel bars to hold it in place. It was about 6 to 8 feet tall to service the people in the cottages. The house at Houseboat Bay on the northern point, had a septic tank that was built out of brick (still visible) but has now fallen down.

In 1976 when the National Park took over, their first job was to send a bloke I knew, Ronny Bartlett and another bloke up into the bush to blow the dam up as they said it was an occupational hazard, even though it was full of sand. They were going to chop down all the Coral Trees and get rid of all the rotundas in Bobbin Head. They were also going to ban cruisers in Smith Creeks, so that it could be for Kayakers. However all we ended up with is an 8 knot limits on the waterways.

Jeff talked about the Aboriginal cave opposite Waratah Bay on the eastern shore which is now covered in Lantana as Parks didn't encourage sightseers. A long time ago some mates and Jeff took a Halvorson half cabin out for some fishing along with some cheese and beer. A big rainstorm came up, we decided there was no fish so we would go putt putt putting back. As we were coming back, we could hear this rrr rrr rrr sound like a fishing line unravelling as we putted along. Someone said, hey there is a fire in that cave so it was deemed a good idea to have a look. We got closer and closer and closer, when we really close to the cave we could see about 12 people in there. One man and the rest were women all dancing around naked and making weird noises. The blokes in the boat are shouting 'Look, Look, they've got not clothes on, got no clothes" and with all eyes on the naked bodies' they crashed into a rock. When Jeff nosed the boat into the wharf at Bobbin Head, one of the blokes onboard Ron Haggett stood up, picked up his fishing bag and rod and stepped into 12 feet of water clearly overawed by the naked dancers!

The boatshed at Apple Tree Bay, was part of Woodnutts Boatshed built 1910. Woodnutts was quite a big show as they had hire boats, putt putts and row boats. Apple Tree Bay had cabins that you could stay in, set into the bush. We used to go and fish there and if you continued walking past those cottages you could walk straight up the hill to Mt Ku-ring-gai station.

Next to Houseboat Bay is Cotton Tree Bay but there is nothing in Cotton Tree Bay except a big rock with some iron spikes driven into it. I think they ran boats in, tied it to the peg and anti-fouled it etc at low tide.

Windybanks were in Waratah Bay and had a boat called Gloria which was a 40-foot ferry, it finished its life on the Church Point, Scotland Island, Lovett Bay ferry route. They couldn't sell it, so they gifted it to the Aboriginals. Windybanks built his own skiffs and that sort of thing. They had a boat ramp for fixing boats. They would take the Gloria around to the next bay on the left on the way back to Cottage Point, slip it on a row of logs. They did this by driving her on at high tide, wait for the tide to go down and anti-foul. If you went up there with a metal detector you would find all sorts of things. Edward Windybank's original business was the Bobbin Head Bus

company, they weren't big buses, and it became a bait and fishing tackle business. A pair of the Windybanks houseboats were the remains off the General Gordon. They used to buy old steamers and use their hulls. There was one in Chain and Anchor Bay past Smiths Creek on the way to Waratah Bay on the left.

Another popular area was at Jerusalem Bay. The walkway still there is from the old boatshed platform to the old house base where you can see where the cabins were. In the days before outboards, very few people owned their own boat, people would catch the train on Friday up to Brooklyn where Les Smith he had a very fast boat in its day. She could hold 15 – 16 knots so he would collect these people and his supplies, ferry them to their cabins. His wife would clean them up and put fresh blankets on the beds and the customers looked after their own food and

they would hire a rowboat and go fishing, using Windy Banks bait, no doubt.

Before the lease was taken by Halvorsen at Bobbin Head, it was owned by E.H. Weatley who was trying to sell it. When Halvorsen heard that Sadie's Boat Shed was for sale and Weatley was being messed around by a buyer, he rushed around and bought it. The building was built by Ku-ring-gai National Trust, and the same building was built at Illawong Bay, which used to be owned by Russel Tylers father who also built the new Akuna Bay Marina. Ku ring gai National Trust would not renew Halvorsen's lease until they put the Marina in and Halvorsen wouldn't put the Marina in until they got a lease, a Catch 22. As by now they were all elderly, they had no idea of how to build a modern marina. When Doug Fenwick arrived in Brooklyn with his houseboats in 1960's /70's it was based out of Kangaroo Point and they did well. Halvorsen's boats in the 70s were getting very tired. They were going to put a fleet of Island Gypsy in to become hire boats but they lost interest. Then Holidays Afloat started up.

When Empire Marina took it over, the place was chock a block with boats. Halvorsen had said they built the hire business in the wrong place at the end of Cowan Creek as the boats and engines had too many hours put on them going all the way up to Winsor. If had they been based at Brooklyn, it would have been in the middle of the Hawkesbury.