

An Extract from the Book "*The Tradition Lives On – A Register of the Historic Couta Boats*"

The book is available at www.coutaboat.com.au

THE COUTA BOAT: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

This Historical Overview provides a brief outline of the history and defining characteristics of the Couta Boat from its origins in the mid 1800s as a fishing vessel to its revival in the 1980s and onwards as a sailing and recreational boat. The term 'Couta Boat' has its origins in a style of boat that evolved along the southern coast of Victoria generally, but arguably, principally around Queenscliff, just inside the entrance to Port Phillip, Victoria, to fish for barracouta, (colloquially 'couta) the fish that gave them their appellation: Couta Boat.

Evolution of the Design

In the first years of European settlement, fishing boats were generally small boats to 20 feet of shallow draft launched from the beach, propelled by sail or by oar and generally used for hand lining or netting. The relatively small local population was easily supplied from fishing grounds within close proximity and, generally, in sheltered waters.

A lot of the fishing was with mesh netting in shallow waters. Craft evolved for this purpose: shallow in the draft and also quite low in the sheer so as to ease the strain when hauling a net. Canoe sterns became predominant, so the boat could lie stern on to the waves and without corners on which to snag the net whilst it was hauled in. Centre-plates were common from around 1880, having a marked effect on performance given the otherwise shallow form of the hull.

These craft were common around Melbourne and further afield, on Western Port, Corner Inlet and the Gippsland Lakes. Jesse Merrington was building net boats from the Port Melbourne lagoon from as early as 1860. The Beazley family, representing four generations of Port Melbourne fishermen, has some fine examples of net boats still sailing including *Volunteer*, *Pearl* and *Binny*.

Subtle design differences developed depending on the purpose and function of the boat. Fishermen who began mesh-netting in the more exposed areas, required slightly deeper keels and generally a plumb stem to carve through the waves. Those who seine-netted from the beach, as for example around Geelong, Portsea and Sorrento, ran their boats up onto the beach to haul the net. They sought shallower boats with rounded bows that could be driven onto the beach and re-floated without digging the bow and sinking the boat into the sand.

From around 1860 there was a group of fishermen working from these small craft, fishing inshore from Queenscliff. Names included Thwaites, Todd, Zanoni and others who easily supplied the local population from the plentiful stocks of snapper, whiting and flathead found in the bay. A lack of access to a large market meant fishermen at more remote ports such as Queenscliff, had little incentive to go further off-shore in search of larger catches. The discovery of gold in 1851 was the trigger for a massive and rapid increase in population and development which saw a corresponding increase in the demand for fish. As with so many aspects of society and commerce, it was the expansion of the railway that changed the dynamics of the fish market and the makeup of the fishing fleet.

In 1874, completion of the railway from Melbourne to Queenscliff provided direct access to the large Melbourne market and the fleet and port grew. Rather than fish from dinghies inshore, there was now a reason to chase the barracouta which gathered in huge schools, sometimes in the bay, but mostly in the open sea of Bass Strait.

But the small, shallow drafted dinghies traditionally used in Port Phillip were unsuitable to pass through the notorious waters of The Rip at the entrance to Port Phillip. For these waters a larger more seaworthy boat was required.



Dugga Beazley's net boat *Binny* – with jibboom added for superior sailing performance

A seaworthy boat for the open sea

And so evolved the Couta Boat, ranging from 20 to 30 feet in length, but most commonly it was found that 26 feet was the optimum size that was both seaworthy and capable of being operated by two men, perhaps also with a boy.

The boats developed for The Rip and the open sea had square or near vertical transoms, deeper draft, with slack bilges, a significant dead rise in the floor, and a clean run aft with the stern clear of the water. They were fitted with an iron or steel centre-board on a pivot or king bolt to be lowered when working into the wind. These boats were decked in the forward

sections for seaworthiness, with a large, oval-shaped cockpit surrounded by a raised coaming, leaving narrow side decks. This fishery was based on trolling with a number of lines astern rather than nets so the boats had wide square transoms to enable two men to work side by side without tangling lines and were generally beamier than the net boats.

They carried a surprisingly large sail area, with the mast stepped about one third back from the bow and reaching as high above the deck as the boat was long, a boom that extended over the stern, and jibs hauled out seven to eight feet from the bow on a jibboom. Initially they were lug rigged, that is, the yard extended approximately one third of its length past the mast and had to be dipped in order to tack or gybe.



Queenscliff Lug Rigged Couta Boat

Around the turn of the century, the gaff rig became increasingly popular and by the 1920s it had substantially replaced the lug rig, thereby giving a better upwind performance. The yard or gaff as it was also known, swung from a collar or 'tub' on the mast and was peaked quite high for better upwind performance, so there was no scope for a topsail - it was perhaps better described as a gunter rig. The boats were ballasted with one to two tons of iron or lead, although sometimes less, with sandbags or stones used until their weight could be replaced by fish in the hold. The sandbags and stones were then emptied overboard before the homebound journey.

Prior to 1900, most boats were clinker or lapstrake, built with overlapping planks. Whilst these were quicker and easier to build because the planks did not have to be so meticulously shaped to fit tightly, edge to edge against one another, such planked boats were liable to become 'nail sick'; they would 'work' in the bigger seas and leak. Over time most came to be carvel built, with smooth edge jointed planking. Some builders experimented with a combination of carvel below the waterline but with the top few planks overlapping to deflect the wash and 'grip' the water when heeled.

Until the 1920s, these craft were very rarely fitted with engines. Boats were built with two sets of rowlocks and carried oars, or 'paddles' as they called them, up to 17 feet in length. In the absence of wind they would be rowed, the men standing facing forward behind the oars and pushing on them.

Barracouta: The Fish



The barracouta (*Thyrsites atun*) is a long slender fish up to four feet (1.2m) in length or nine pounds (4 kg) weight, although more commonly about three feet and weighing six pounds, armed with a jaw full of sharp needle-like teeth. It has a coarse white to pink flesh with long bones, and is a rapid swimmer known for its voracious appetite and aggressive feeding habit. Whilst today it has lost popularity, it was for many decades the mainstay of the Melbourne fish and chip market.

Barracouta ('couta) were found in large schools, usually at dawn and dusk. When a boat came on a school, she would sail back and forth over the fish, trailing lines with barbless hooks and lures made of white rawhide or similar.

Couta Boat Builders

Throughout this Register, reference can be found to the many builders who have been responsible for the development and the construction of Couta Boats across the decades.

C Blunt Boatbuilders were based in Geelong from as early as 1858. Clement Blunt junior opened a boat building business in 1887 in Williamstown at the northern or Melbourne city end of Port Phillip. The Savage brothers were also at Williamstown. The Peel brothers and Jesse Merrington were in Port and South Melbourne respectively. JR Jones was based in Melbourne from the turn of the century before passing the business on to his son JB Jones who operated from premises on the Maribyrnong River.

The earliest full-time builder of Couta Boats at Queenscliff was probably Andrew (Anders) Peter Hansen who settled there in 1890, having learned the trade in his native Denmark. He worked firstly on the front beach and later obtained premises behind the Vue Grand Hotel. Walter Todd ordered the 26 foot *Merri-Wee* from him in 1899.

Mitch Lacco, became Hansen's apprentice in the early 1900s before moving to Rosebud. In 1916, he established his own boat building business in Queenscliff, behind 31 Beach Street on Fisherman's Flat. This land backed directly onto the bay, allowing boats to be launched from the shed, across the beach into Port Phillip.

In 1926, Peter Locke, from St Leonards, who had been working for Mitch Lacco for a couple of years, took over the Lacco shed at Beach Street. He remained there until 1936, when he moved to premises with direct access to the newly constructed Queenscliff cut – a man-made permanent channel to Port Phillip.

The Laccos continued in their premises in the centre of town before moving back to Rosebud in 1928. Mitch's sons Ken, George, Harold and Alec all became involved and, later, Ken's son Neil joined the business.

When Ken took over the business, he studied some of his father's old books, taught himself to draw plans and became the first of the builders to draft and keep drawings of his designs. This made the evolution of form more scientific and easier to record, as different performance characteristics could be related back to specific design innovations and could be faithfully replicated. Examples of his designs include the clinker-built *Helen* and *Victoria*, and the *Amanda*, *Hero*, *Makama* and *Mermerus*.

Builders had their own ideas as to how best to balance the requirements of sea-kindliness, speed and carrying capacity and accordingly, their boats have identifiable idiosyncrasies.

For example, JR Jones' boats *Thistle* and *Valda* have distinctive straight stems, are deep forward, with a hollow in the waterline. His son JB Jones, who built *Patsy*, and *Ariel*, maintained the plumb stem, but straightened out the entry and cut away the forefoot. Some of Mitch Lacco's boats, such as *Muriel*, *Royal*, and *Wattle*, built before the advent of auxiliary engines, have pronounced wineglass stern sections. He was the first to introduce spring (a curve) into the keel. Mitch was also a sailmaker and probably a driving force in the conversion from lug to the more efficient gunter rigs.

In the 1920s, engines were becoming affordable and available. Peter Locke was of the opinion that too much hollow in the bilge near the plate-case caused the boat to work a bit harder, that is, to move and loosen the fastenings and become leaky, as a result of the load applied by the ballast in the narrow section beside the case. He also needed to fit the engine, then a lot larger than those now available, low in the boat. So he straightened out the rise, making his boats such as *Huia*, *Lonsdale*, *Ripple* and *Rita* fuller in the mid and aft sections, and a little more buoyant in the stern to counter the effect of the propeller dragging the stern down. As a consequence his boats tended to roll a bit more and required more ballast.

In about 1934, Peter Locke was joined in turn by twin brothers Bob and John Cayzer. When Peter returned to full time fishing around 1947, he transferred the boat building business to the Cayzer brothers who continued from the same shed for many years. They were joined by Bob's son Aston and, later, Robert junior.

Owners also had their particular ideas about design. In 1936 Charlie MacKinnon wanted a boat a foot wider in the beam as he was to use the *Mermerus* for taking tourists on fishing excursions. The end result was that although there were specific characteristics that defined a Couta Boat, no two were exactly the same.

Fishing Ports

Queenscliff

The heyday of the traditional Couta Boat fleet operating from Queenscliff was from 1890 to 1940 when up to 60 boats were engaged in the fishery, sailing out on the ebb tide, fishing for their quota, set by the fishermen's co-operative after which 60 sets of sails would return through The Rip at the entrance to Port Phillip, on the flood tide.

For a period in the 1930s the annual haul of 'couta from Queenscliff alone exceeded two million pounds (nine hundred tonnes).



Queenscliff Pier



The American Fleet greeted by Couta boats off Queenscliff 1908



Queenscliff Pier 1914

Note: Cousta Boat on rear middle berth

San Remo & Newhaven

Fishermen followed the 'cousa east to San Remo and Newhaven at the entrance to Western Port from spring through to summer, when fishing became viable following the extension of the railway to Wonthaggi in 1909, providing ready access to the Melbourne market. The port gained further impetus with the formation of the San Remo Fisherman's Cooperative in the late 1940s at which time 50 to 60 Cousta Boats were engaged in fishing for 'cousa, crays or netting in the bay.

Port Fairy

The arrival of the railway at Port Fairy in the 1890s provided ready access to the Melbourne market. This allowed fishermen to take advantage of the seasonal movement of fish to the west in winter and became the catalyst for an influx of Queenscliff fishermen for the winter months often transporting their boats down the coast by steamer. By 1906, there was a regular fleet of 30 to 40 Cousta Boats operating from the Moyne River at Port Fairy, on the southern coast of Victoria fronting Bass Strait.



Portland

As the site of the first permanent European settlement in Victoria, Portland has a long fishing tradition, and throughout the second half of the nineteenth century was home to a thriving boat building industry. Commencement of a railway service in 1876 facilitated access to markets in Melbourne and inland towns.

By the mid 1880s, the 'couta fishery was significant and profitable, assisted by the fact the fish remained abundant all through the winter. Couta Boats as we define them did not become common in the Port until after construction of the breakwater in 1890. Until then it was home to smaller boats that could be lifted onto the pier if a blow was forecast, and to boats sufficiently large to ride out the storm on their moorings, but centreboard boats of 26 ft. with open cockpits were not common.

By the early 1900s, Portland had become home to a large number of Couta Boats. Prominent early builders of the Couta Boat type of fishing craft in this port included Malcolm Nicholson and Dan Beams. Jack Arkell who worked from the *Ariel* for 40 years from Portland until retiring in 1973 was most probably the last fisherman to operate a working Couta Boat using the traditional techniques.

The railway to Portland went via Ballarat and Hamilton, rather than direct to Melbourne. While this provided access to inland markets, lack of refrigeration meant fish would often spoil before reaching the Melbourne markets. As a result Portland fishermen turned their attention more towards cray fishing.

Lorne



Couta Boats at the Lorne Pier – photo Lorne Historical Society

In the 1930s, road transport became more efficient and reliable, so ports which had no direct rail link to the market also became viable. This allowed the Queenscliff fishermen to follow the 'couta to smaller ports along the Victorian coast, such as Apollo Bay and Lorne to the West in the winter months and via Flinders to Western Port in the spring.

With a pier, but a harbour that was directly exposed to the wild weather of the Southern Ocean, the lack of port facilities at Lorne had an impact on the Couta Boat design in the early 1930s. Without a safe anchorage, boats had to be hoisted out onto the pier if a storm was forecast. As a result, when Lorne was opened to fishing, a number of shorter boats commonly to 22 or 23 feet, were ordered but built fuller so as not to lose too much carrying capacity.

The pier could hold around 24 boats, limiting the size of the fleet to that number, which remained active until the 1960s. Nevertheless, in the late 1940s Lorne and nearby Apollo Bay were the highest performing 'couta ports along the coast. This Register includes a number of boats fitted with 'lifting eyes', and the presence of these gives a good indication of the boat's heritage as including a period of fishing from Lorne.

Efficient road transport facilitated the growth of fishing at a number of further minor ports, including Barwon Heads, Flinders and Sorrento, but from the perspective of the evolution of the Couta Boat, none challenged Queenscliff, Portland, Port Fairy or San Remo in terms of numbers or significance.

Fishermen's Regattas

There was always a rivalry among the 'couta fishermen to be first back to port – to secure the best spot to unload, to obtain the best prices, or simply not suffer the indignity of being passed on the way back in. This rivalry to be first back to port with the 'catch', took on a life of its own and ignited serious competition. What emerged were regattas held periodically as a contest of the crews' sailing skills.



Couta Boats: First Home wins the 'White Jumper'

Regattas were held at all the major ports. Some regattas were mainly for yachts, but others were for fishing boats. Regattas that included fishermen were held in Port Fairy from the

1850s, from Queenscliff as early as the 1860s and Cowes from the mid 1880s. An annual regatta was held at Portland as early as the mid 1850s and by the 1880s attracted up to 5,000 visitors to the town.

Fishing boat regattas acquired a culture all their own, and holiday regattas at the major ports became legendary. Competitors would clean their hulls and bend their best sails to the spars for the occasion. Not only was a great deal of honour attached to winning these events, prize money was often on offer. It was said there could be as much money in a first prize as a man could make in a year of fishing. Fishermen were keen to compete and to own a fast boat. It was reported that Walter Todd of Queenscliff fished his home waters with Joe Wells in the morning, caught 45 boxes of 'couta, sailed to San Remo, got into the docks in time, won the New Year Race and then sailed back to Queenscliff.

Boats that participated in some of those early fishermen's regattas and are still sailing, include the *Muriel*, *Surprise* and *Wattle*.

The idea of holding a regatta at Sorrento was a popular discussion amongst yachtsmen and local fisherman alike over five years from 1887 to 1891, culminating in the first documented race held in 1892.

The Sorrento Regatta was raced in the waters off the Sorrento Pier during Easter for 22 years from 1892 to 1914. The regatta grew in popularity with many city yacht club members entering with the first race of the regatta starting often at 8:00 am from Breakwater Pier, Williamstown on Easter Friday to race down to finish at the Sorrento Pier, with some of the fleet not finishing until after nightfall. A day or two later, the fleet would move on to Geelong to race in the waters off Geelong, Corio and Avalon.

Decline of Fishing Under Sail

Although boats were fitted with auxiliary engines from the 1920s, during the depression years of 1929 to 1931, fuel costs increased and then, during World War II, rationing ensued. So sail remained the main method of propulsion for some years to come. However, this balance changed after World War II, when efficient diesel powered engines became available. Whilst boats generally still carried sails, the roles were reversed; engines became the primary propulsion and sails became the auxiliary back-up. As engines had become prevalent, boats had become fuller in the aft sections, both to accommodate the engine and to provide buoyancy to counter the effect of the propeller.

Over the same period, the 'couta fishery along the Victorian coast declined, and larger boats without centre-plates or jibbooms were built for heading further out to sea in the emerging shark fishery. The last of the traditional working Couta Boats were commissioned in the mid 1940s. Boats then gradually passed from professional fishermen to recreational users, who often removed their rigs and centre-cases and added cabins for comfort. Eventually, most fell into disrepair.

Writing in *Australian and New Zealand Sail Traders* in 1974, Garry Kerr commented:

Probably not more than three or four boats on the Victorian coast are in their original condition... they would be lost unless there is a revival of interest among the younger generation to reorganise races on an amateur basis – while hulls can still be bought, and there are men alive who know how to rig them. (p120)

Revival of the Couta Boat

And that is exactly what happened. Indeed, professional fisherman and enthusiast Garry Kerr of Portland was the first. In 1973 he purchased and began restoring *Ariel*, built by JB Jones for the Keiller brothers of Portland in 1927.



Ariel, Used by the Kieller Brothers as an excursion boat in Portland Bay.

From the mid 1970s, a small group of enthusiasts based around Sorrento and led by Tim Phillips, inspired by the surprising speed of the Lacco-built *Mermerus* compared to a modern yacht, sought out old Couta Boats from their resting places all along the Victorian coast and began restoring them for use as pleasure craft. This Register contains many of their stories. Marcus Burke suggested they have a race for gaff rigged boats and the Portsea Fishing Boat Regatta was conceived.

Restoration was one thing. Building a new boat to a traditional design and using traditional methods was another. It was Will Baillieu who convinced Ken Lacco to design him a new boat and then supervise Will during her construction. *Hero* was the first of what has become dozens of new boats to be built using traditional methods. Meanwhile, various leads and excursions to all parts of the coast resulted in the recovery of *Wattle*, *Rita*, *Royal* and more. The revival was well and truly underway.

As a result of this revival and interest in the traditional Couta Boat, the Portsea Fishing Boat Regatta became an annual event.

The restored boats in particular drew great interest and before long Peter Graham had commissioned *Minerva* to be built by Chris Young to a Ken Lacco design and Clive Beckingsale the *Victory*, built by him with Will Baillieu. During the same period Brett Almond began restoring boats at Queenscliff commencing with the *Lyndal Lea* believed to be dated from the 1890s, and also went on to build new boats. Renowned shipwright Harry

Clark from Newport, who had built several Couta Boats in the 1950's, was active in restoring a number of boats including the *Rita*, *Cooma* and *Royal* and assisted Will Baillieu during construction of the *Ajax*.

Soon, Tim Phillips took premises in the Sorrento industrial estate and became a full time Couta Boat builder. He now rivals the Laccos as the most prolific builder of these boats. Tim was deservedly recognised for his service to sailing and to wooden boat restoration being appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (OAM) in the 2021 Australia Day honours list.



Andy Johansson, the original owner, and Tim Phillips aboard *Muriel*, Melbourne Boat Show.

A number of other commercial boat builders are involved in the construction or restoration of Couta Boats, including Garry Stewart in Port Fairy, Mark Abbott in Rosebud, Daniel Cayzer in Queenscliff, Greg Blunt in Williamstown and more.

Formation of the Couta Boat Club

One race a year was never going to be enough. Couta boats started 'joining in' other races. But what were they? They were not off-the-beach boats, nor keel boats. Having open cockpits and moveable ballast they didn't fit the established racing categories. They came to the attention of the authorities who required some rules, safety regulations and a representative body to speak to.

A number of meetings were held between the Victorian Yachting Council (now Australian Sailing) led by Barry Scott and the inaugural steering committee comprising Messrs.

Graham, Baillieu, Phillips, Ryan, Davis, and Marcus and Peter Burke, John Ross and Denis Wilkins.

It was resolved to form a club for Cousta Boat owners and in November 1982, with the particular assistance of Tim Ryan and Bill Davis, the Cousta Boat Club was formally incorporated under the Presidency of Marcus Burke.



The race program grew to about eight races per year sailed out of various ports, including Port Melbourne, Hobson's Bay, Queenscliff, Mornington and Portsea-Sorrento. As a result of the enthusiasm of a growing number of club members, the Victorian race calendar now spans nine months of the year, and boats compete in various locations throughout Australia. The Portsea Fishing Boat Regatta, or Portsea Cup as it is known as today, remains the premier racing event, attracting more than 60 boats.



Raft-up at the Portsea Pier before the annual Portsea fishing Boat regatta, 1980's

Activities were not confined to racing. When the world championships for Olympic Classes came to Melbourne in 1999, the organising committee was keen to showcase Port Phillip to the international visitors and approached the CBC regarding a day sailing on the iconic Couta Boats. KPMG was a keen supporter of a Victorian Olympic sailor and through chairman Brian Jamieson it was agreed to conduct a 'KPMG Celebrity Race", where international sailors would be invited to sail alongside forty of KPMG's significant clients and CBC crews, and then share in a convivial post-sailing lunch. This was the genesis for the KPMG Couta Boat Classic which grew to cater for 500 guests and has become a fixture in Melbourne's corporate calendar. The event is now mirrored in the West Australian Couta Boat fleet too.

Australia Wide

The stories in this Register reveal boats that have sailed across Bass Strait, others that have participated in wooden boat festivals around Australia, been transported to the Gaffers Regatta on Sydney Harbour, and in the case of *Jessie* and *Whisper* as far as Brest, on the Atlantic coast of France. Just as boats spread out along the coast from Queenscliff, Couta Boat Associations now operate in New South Wales, conducting events both on Sydney Harbour and on Pittwater; and in Perth, Western Australia with an active fleet on the Swan River.

Couta Boats from all these locations and many more around the Australian coast can be found in this Register.



Pittwater Racing – photo Judy Knott

Rules

As race fever took hold it was important that the boats remain true to the tradition and rules were required. The first set of rules drafted principally by Peter Graham, embody the spirit of the Couta Boat type, and remain the criteria for inclusion on the Register and in this book. Further evolution of the Couta Boat form is not permitted. In order to be included in the Register, new boats are required to adhere to the principles that drove design and construction from the late 1880s.

Maintaining the Heritage

Whilst getting together for regattas maintains a rich tradition and is the most public manifestation of the Club's activities, the primary purpose of the Couta Boat Club (now the Couta Boat Association) was, and remains, to protect the integrity, preserve the heritage and promote the sailing of these unique boats as evolved from some time before 1890 and up to 1930.

Racing is the primary focus for a number of Couta Boat owners but, by far, the majority of boats still sailing are in the hands of wooden boat enthusiasts drawn to the heritage, the sea-kindly design and graceful yet functional lines of the Couta Boat. For some, the main attraction is the woodworking and craftsmanship involved in the construction or restoration of a classic boat using traditional methods. For others it is fishing, recreational sailing and time with family. All are promoting the preservation of an important aspect of Australia's maritime heritage.

This volume includes original Couta Boats, and new boats built within the rules which were drafted to capture the essential defining characteristics of the Queenscliff type Couta Boat.

Written by Peter Hannah.