

tasweekend

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PLAIN SAILING

RIVER DERWENT COMES ALIVE
TO THE HISTORY AND CHARM
OF WOODEN BOATS

FOOD SAVED BY THE BELLES TRAVEL BOUNCE IN TO BYRON BAY ART MEET THE STIRRER

High on the breeze

The River Derwent is about to be the scene of one of the world's greatest wooden boat extravaganzas and some of the old vessels will go to battle for the highly prized gilded rooster



WORDS TRACY RENKIN

It is not a race, just a friendly yet competitive display of seamanship and old-style boat handling techniques called a review. But when five of Tasmania's oldest working sailing boats battle it out on the River Derwent as part of the 13th Australian Wooden Boat Festival's Wrest Point Cup in a few days they will be emulating a century-old spectacular tradition of racing Tasmanian working boats.

Festival general manager Paul Cullen says from around 1830 it was normal to see Tasmanian fishing and cargo boats and ferries racing each other up the Derwent as part of the annual Hobart Regatta for the privilege of winning a tin rooster that was then nailed to the top of their mast. "It was common to see working boats racing each other," Cullen says. It was a prestigious title that often came with winnings equivalent to an annual wage.

Created by the-then Hobart Governor Sir John Franklin to encourage these types of boats to become more efficient and quicker at carrying cargo, the ketch race was the highlight of the year and a core part of Tasmania up until 1954. These ketches were linked to certain towns so the race created statewide rivalry. Everyone would come to Hobart to watch the big race.

"They would go hard for the privilege of winning the Cock of the Derwent Race and being able to fly a gilded rooster – the golden cock – from their mast for the following year. These

races gave the owners and crews bragging rights which often helped sailors to secure new transport contracts."

The waterways in and around the island were once the lifeblood of the transport industry and boats such as ketches – two-masted sailing boats with one taller mast – were the trucks and trains of Tasmania carrying cargo such as timber and apples. Everything was delivered by sea. The boats competing are historic vessels that once worked for their living as fishing boats or general cargo carriers. Most of these sturdy, fast, ketch-rigged boats once carried Tasmania's domestic trade and sailed wide into the Bass Strait and East Coast fishing grounds.

Skipper of the Julie Burgess, Graham Kent, 85, who took home the first Wrest Point Cup and in a few days will sadly skipper his last review, says historically ketches have always enjoyed a little competition. "Let me put it this way... if there were two ketches leaving the Huon for Hobart back in the day and they were sailing in close company they would try and out-do each other because that's just what sailors do," Kent said. "They would be cranking up the sails to see if they could outsail the fellow next to them."

The Julie Burgess, now owned by Devonport City Council was chartered during World War II to repair a communication cable between Tasmania and the mainland. It was built to har-

vest the rich crayfish fields of Bass Strait and Tasmania.

Kent says the cup is trying to replicate the majesty of the early ketches. "There's no doubt about it, those old skippers were brilliant seamen," Kent says. "They were much better than we are today. It's an era that is unfortunately gone and will never be repeated and that's why showcasing what these vessels are capable of is so exciting and important."

Two years ago at the end of the Wrest Point Cup a passenger on board the Julie Burgess told Kent he had just experienced the best sailing of his life. He introduced himself just as he was stepping off the boat as the chief administrator of the Australian Yachting Federation. "He was enthralled by the experience of being on the vessel," Kent remembers. "He was in raptures about two ketches racing side-by-side and it took him back in time and he was able to appreciate what it was like being on board a boat like this back in the day."

Kent says it is great fun: "We sail around the river to show off. Some of the ketches weigh up to 65 tonne and they are not travelling like Wild Oats 11 but it's quite spectacular when they are together and doing 7 knots. It's brilliant. It is not a race. It is a demonstration but gee it gets very close sometimes. In one re-

Mallana (rear) and Yukon flying on the breeze.

Picture: Robert Oates/Ballantyne Photography



Skipper Graham Kent on-board the Julie Burgess at Devonport.

Picture: CHRIS KIDD



The wooden boat festival features everything from sleek power boats (left), tall ships, (top) and ketches, such as Mallana (above), a 13m 112-year-old ketch owned by Toby Greenlees.



view a ketch missed the other by 300mm."

A ketch is reliant on the direction of the wind. So the skipper has to judge where the wind is coming from to determine what angle he needs to sail at to get the best performance.

"We are out and we are sailing and we are in company with other vessels," Kent says. "The skipper has to work out the appropriate time to turn the vessel through the wind and all the sails have to be switched over. That's when all the activity happens. Everyone is in. And this is going on in the ketch right next to you as well. The ropes are going everywhere. The sails are flapping. It's organised chaos and it's great fun. Particularly when it all goes right."

Cullen says this year's Wrest Point Cup is one of the Australian Wooden Boat Festival's premier events. He's expecting at least 20,000 people standing on shore watching the spectacle. "It's great because it showcases what these old boats were able to do in their day," he says. "We will have drones in the air to capture it all and bounce back the footage to our festival village ... they will be going like the clappers. They will be going fast, really fast and their sails will all be up and it will be spectacular. You don't normally get to see these old boats race like they used to do."

Cullen says the winner of the cup is not necessarily first across the line, but the ship that shows the best performance overall. It's all about how they handle the triangular course, how they set the sails to get the best speed, which sails they set and how they adjust them so they can manoeuvre through the course without damaging their precious cargo — a wooden crate of Tasmanian cider. Each ketch will be carrying a cider produced close to where it moors.

"Unlike the old days where speed and first-across-the-line was the only criteria, the modern equivalent is judged on the boat's presentation, seamanship and the spirit of the River Derwent races of old," he says. "If the wind gets stronger they start taking the sails down, so it's not just about putting up all the sails and going as fast as you can. It's about judging the right amount of sails for the conditions. The boat with the biggest sails isn't the automatic winner."

Peter Manthorpe has judged the review a couple of times and says there is no secret algorithm used to decide the overall winner. "I just sit back with my fellow judges and we watch this incredible spectacle. It's magnificent to see these old boats sailing together," Manthorpe says. "We watch these people who have kept these old-time sailing skills alive and we judge it on a

vague criteria of seamanship and the spectacle of it all."

The ketches have to sail around the course in proximity to each other, going around at least four set marks that require a lot of manoeuvring. The course is determined on the day and is subject to wind conditions. It involves the boats sailing between Sullivan's Cove and Wrest Point on Sunday starting at 2.30pm at the Elizabeth Street Pier and finishing back there around 5pm.

"They have a lot of sails and there are no winches on these old tall boats so the sails are all worked by hand," Manthorpe

says. "Each time they go around the mark they have to manoeuvre a quite complicated ship using all these sails and they have to avoid each other so there's quite a lot of seamanship involved. They are big vessels and they don't manoeuvre easily."

Current cup holder is the Yukon, a Danish ketch rescued from the bottom of the Copenhagen harbour by David Nash and his partner Ea Lassen, who now call Franklin home. The pair fully restored the ketch after paying for it with a case of beer. The Yukon runs daily cruises along the Huon River and further afield and according to Manthorpe its skipper pulled some "very slick, slightly unconventional manoeuvres" to sneak past the Julie Burgess in the last review to win. "Dave's excellent experience racing his vessel in Europe became evident with some of those impressive moves," Manthorpe says. "He's pretty good."

The man who dreamt up the Wrest Point Cup and pitched it to festival organisers back in 2014 is West Hobart's Toby Greenlees. His Huon pine double-planked cruising ketch Mallana built in 1907 is the oldest boat competing for the glory of winning this year's review. But Greenlees says he is really just making up the numbers because his class B beauty is a more delicate creation than the other more robust competitors. "She's a very picturesque boat," he says. "She's admired for being the prettiest and she has more delicate features."

Greenlees says the cup provides action on the water in an otherwise static festival. "It's a wonderful opportunity for these special boats to get out on the water together with a fair amount of canvas up and in proximity together so everyone can enjoy the sails being up," Greenlees says. "We are emulating an old tradition without being too competitive about it. It's a social event rather than a serious event. It's about who sailed around with the most flair in the spirit of ketch races of old. It's not a hard core race but you are sailing together and you are sailing quite fast, you look out and see the other vessels and they are going quite fast and that gives you a great sense of excitement. It's about bringing back that historical sight that's been captured in old photos of the Derwent filled with tall ships with impressive sails and hard-core action."

Hobart's oldest and smallest working tall ship, the Rhona H, used to compete in the ketch races in the 1940s. This year will be the third time the fishing boat competes for this cup and owners Julie Porter and husband Charles Burns are hopeful they might take it home. "Last time we were all working really madly with all the sails to get the boat in the right place at the right time," Porter says. "We were just so busy moving the sails, adjusting them, trimming them and sailing as hard as we possibly could. This year we will have one of our six sails up before we even get out of the docks."

Porter says it takes them close to three hours to finish the sail around the four designated marks. "It is not a race," Porter says. "It's a demonstration of seamanship at appropriate speed." Rhona H can get up to 9.2 knots which Porter says is pretty good for a boat built in 1942. "We are quite chuffed about that," Porter says. "But we wouldn't go that fast for the Wrest Point Cup."

SAIL HEAD FIRST INTO THE FESTIVAL SPIRIT

The Australian Wooden Boat Festival is celebrating its 25th year and will deliver its 13th biennial festival on the Hobart waterfront from February 8-11. Organisers expect 200,000 people over the four days. The free event is the largest wooden boat festival in the southern hemisphere.

■ **Parade of Sails:** The festival will open with the Parade of Sails at 12.30pm on Friday, February 8. The Parade of Sails is made up of a fleet of hundreds of local and visiting yachts and 10 impressive tall ships.

■ **All Aboard:** Visitors can board some of these beautiful ships on the wharf, including James Craig, Young Endeavour, Bark Endeavour, Soren Larsen, One and All and Julie Burgess.

■ **Harbour Sails:** Local boats Yukon, Rhona H, Lady Nelson and Windeward Bound will be offering harbour sails. The classic steam yacht Preana and the 150-year-old rowing ferry Admiral will also offer water adventures.

■ **New attractions:** There will be a maritime film festival at Elizabeth Street Pier and photography exhibition at Brooke Street Pier. The Australian National Maritime Museum will present the International Wooden Boat Symposium at the Dechaineux Theatre in Hunter St. It is free to the public.

There is a full program and boat directory available on the festival website at australianwoodenboatfestival.com.au.

