

## *The 'Alice Rawson' and the Port Jackson lifeboat service*

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From the time of her launching in August 1907, until her decommissioning in mid-1946, the lifeboat *Alice Rawson* was stationed at Gibson's Beach, Watsons Bay, where she became part of the local maritime culture. The *Alice Rawson* was to be the last in a series of lifeboats which served Port Jackson from the mid-1850s. Her immediate predecessor was the *Lady Carrington* which had done duty for 25 years by the time the matter of a new lifeboat was under consideration in 1905.

In contrast the *Alice Rawson* remained the port lifeboat for all but forty years, and despite being the subject of a destruction order in 1947, survived to see out her first century, passing through a variety of ownerships and uses in the sixty years following her retirement from government service. In 2008 the *Alice Rawson* is undergoing repairs prior to restoration, and there is local support for seeing her returned to the Watsons Bay foreshore as a permanent reminder of an era when the high activity levels of the port of Sydney, coupled with the inherently risky nature of shipping and sea travel, made the provision of a rescue craft and crew an essential feature of harbour life.

### *History of the Sydney lifeboat service*

The Sydney lifeboat service followed in the British tradition, being both a humanitarian effort and an acknowledgment of the value of shipping trade to the colonial economy. In Britain, the *National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck* (now the *Royal National Lifeboat Institution*, or RNLI), had been founded in 1824. By 1851 the sponsorship of the Duke of Northumberland, who threw out a design challenge substantiated by the offer of a 100 guinea prize, had led to the development of a self-righting and self-draining lifeboat – a major technological innovation and an advance that was critical to the effective functioning of a sea-going rescue craft.

The official lifeboat service in Sydney began in 1858, presumably in response to the disasters of the previous year when the *Dunbar* was wrecked off the Sydney Heads with the loss of all but one of the 122 on board, and the *Catherine Adamson* sank inside the Heads with the loss of a further 21 lives<sup>1</sup>. However, colonial government archives have provided evidence of earlier initiatives – an unsuccessful craft built at the government dockyards in 1838, and an order for a lifeboat from England in 1855, to be installed in a shed built during the same year at Camp Cove.<sup>2</sup> It is believed that the lifeboats brought out to Australia in the 1850s did not have the benefit of James Beechworth's self-righting, self-emptying design, but little is known of these early lifeboats which first served the Sydney port.

The South Head district was the obvious base for a lifeboat service, given the area's long association with pilotage, both government regulated and entrepreneurial, and since the local population collectively held the requisite nautical skills to man a craft in heavy conditions. Regulations laid down in 1859 defined the chain of command to be followed, which put the lifeboat in the charge of a coxswain, but the overall rescue operation under the authority and direction of the pilot on duty, while any member of the pilot boat crew could be called to serve in the lifeboat. The 1859 regulations also required that the crew were to exercise the

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<sup>1</sup> Historical information gathered by researcher Mori Flapan provides evidence of the public pressure put on local authorities to provide a lifeboat service following these events.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, Vaughan "Lifeboats and rocket brigades in New South Wales", supplement to the *Newsletter of the Australian Association for Maritime History* . No 43 (July 1990) p. 1.

boat at least once a fortnight.<sup>3</sup> The practice of paying a regular retainer to those prepared to make themselves available for rescue missions was not introduced until 1901.<sup>4</sup> Prior to this, the coxswain alone received remuneration - 10/- per month being the sum stipulated in 1859<sup>5</sup>.

The 6-pounder field gun placed near the Signal Station in 1854 as part of the response to the Crimean War became the means of summoning the lifeboat crew to emergency duty from the earliest days, and appears to have remained the system until the lifeboat service was suspended, a matter for some wry comment at that time<sup>6</sup>.

In 1879, a newly imported British lifeboat destined for Port Jackson was firstly, on arrival, exhibited in the Garden Palace at the Domain as part of the Sydney International Exhibition (17 September 1879 to 20 April 1880), a showcase of advanced technology from around the world. The new lifeboat, of RNLI design, had been built in London by the firm of *Forrestt & Co. Ltd*, and clearly was considered to be at the forefront of lifeboat design to have been included. Following her exhibition at the Garden Palace she was installed at Watsons Bay and launched as the port lifeboat in 1880.

At some time – presumably after 1885 - the lifeboat was given the name the *Lady Carrington*, a tribute to Cecilia Margaret, wife of Charles Robert Carrington, Marquess of Lincolnshire who was governor of New South Wales from 1885 to 1890. Lord and Lady Carrington were to prove among the most popular vice-regal appointees to the colony, winning the respect and affection of the people of New South Wales with their natural warmth, ease and diplomacy<sup>7</sup>. After the decommissioning of the lifeboat named in her honour, a Sydney Harbour ferry was named for Lady Carrington in 1908. The ferry remained in service until 1934.

The *Lady Carrington* lifeboat was called out a number of times but effected few rescues. In January 1887 she came to the aid of the Scottish barque *Centurion*, which broke up on the rocks off North Head when under towing. All crew were successfully rescued. By 1901 the *Lady Carrington* was showing signs of deterioration, and in 1905 it was decided to replace her with a new lifeboat.

The following year, the government dockyard was given instructions to measure up the Newcastle lifeboat with a view to building a replica at Cockatoo Island. Thus it came about that the boat to replace the *Lady Carrington* was locally built to a design based on that of the *Victoria II*, the lifeboat stationed at Port Hunter (Newcastle harbour) from 1897. The English firm of *Forrestt & Son* had been responsible for the construction of the *Victoria II*, during 1896, in London. The *Alice Rawson*, however, was built as planned in Sydney at the government dockyards at Cockatoo Island, and at a cost (£606) below that of the earlier imported boat (£625) – a matter of some satisfaction to the New South Wales government of the day.

Built entirely of Australian timbers, the *Alice Rawson*'s dimensions were : overall length – 37 feet; breadth – 9 ft. 3 inches; depth amidships – 3 ft 6 in., and she was of a self-righting design. This property was demonstrated on the day of her launching when the new lifeboat, loaded with young cadets from the naval training ship *Sobraon*, was deliberately overturned

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<sup>3</sup> Flapan, Mori [unpublished research supplied to Woollahra Library], 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, Vaughan *op.cit* pp. 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Flapan, Mori *op.cit*.

<sup>6</sup> *Sunday Sun* 9.6.1946 p.?.

<sup>7</sup> A. W. Martin, 'Carrington, Charles Robert [Marquess of Lincolnshire] (1843 - 1928)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 3, Melbourne University Press, 1969, pp 358-359.

using a crane. According to reports of the day, the lifeboat took only seconds to right herself, allowing her young crew to scramble aboard.

Full details of the new lifeboats specifications have been assembled from the official report of the government dockyard :

*She was diagonally planked with two thicknesses of 3/8 inch best selected cedar, and strengthened inside with eight spotted gum stringers, the keel and keelsons also being of this timber, and the stem and sternposts of swamp mahogany. She had two swingdrop centreboards "ingeniously designed" so that in case of injury, by simply removing a toggle on the lifting chain, the whole board can be dropped through the centerboard case, clear of the boat.*

*She had the ordinary watertight bulkheads fore and aft, packed with light wooden floats filled with cork shavings, as was the space under the main floor, to give her buoyancy equal to 17 tons displacement. She had eight 4-inch relieving valves and two 4-inch pumps to discharge the water from two ballast tanks constructed on the centre line of the vessel. She was self righting and if capsized could come back on an even keel after only thirty-five seconds. The keel was of cast iron and weighed 16 cwt.*

*The actual cost of £606 included all necessary fittings for immediate service – anchors, two sea-anchors, oil bags, water beaker, lifebelts, lifebuoys, lamps, speaking trumpets, grappling irons, rocket lines, spirit compass, tomahawks, a special keg for brandy and a special case for sea biscuits.<sup>8</sup>*

The boat was named for the late Lady Rawson, born Florence Alice Stewart Shaw, the wife of Sir Harry Holdsworth Rawson, governor of New South Wales from January 1902 to May 1909. The existence of a ferry already named for her as the *Lady Rawson* prevented the naming of the new lifeboat in an identical form, hence the name of *Alice Rawson* was adopted.

Lady Rawson had died in 1905 at sea on a return voyage to Australia during her husband's term as governor, the circumstances of her death making the naming of a craft in her honour a fitting tribute. She is remembered as a 'kind, gentle-voiced motherly grey-haired woman, who never spared herself.'<sup>9</sup> After Lady Rawson's death, her daughter Alice took over her mother's duties. Both the Governor and his daughter were present at the official launching of the lifeboat on 9<sup>th</sup> August, 1907, Miss Rawson performing the ceremony of naming the craft for her mother and setting her afloat.

Once in commission, the lifeboat was housed in a boat-shed built in 1907 on the Gibsons Beach foreshore at the foot of Salisbury Street – the site of the present pilot station. She was manned by a crew of 12 oarsmen, plus a coxswain and assistant coxswain, generally drawn from the Watsons Bay community. In an Oral History recorded with Woollahra Library in 1993, Mr Robert Hilliar, who had lived in Parsley Bay in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recalled a Mr Leyton of the lifeboat crew as a regular visitor to Watsons Bay school, where he gave lessons on lifesaving and nautical skills.

Unlike the *Victoria II*, which was involved in many rescue efforts off the Newcastle coast, the *Alice Rawson* was retired after forty years service, during which she had not been

<sup>8</sup> Evans, Vaughan *op.cit* p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Martha Rutledge, 'Rawson, Sir Harry Holdsworth (1843 - 1910)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 11, Melbourne University Press, 1988, pp 337-338.

required to save one life. Accounts differ as to whether or not she ever put to sea in the course of a rescue. A *Sunday Sun* article published in 1946 told that she had once been sent out to aid the crew of a French barque [*Vincennes*], grounded at Manly<sup>10</sup>. However, information in the files of the Department of Navigation (a copy of correspondence sent to the *Royal National Lifeboat Institution* in London, in October, 1935) put this incident at 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1906 – the year before the *Alice Rawson* came into service.

In 1909 the *Alice Rawson* was sent to Newcastle temporarily to replace the badly damaged *Victoria II* following the Newcastle lifeboat's involvement with the rescue of crew from the American schooner *Alpena*.

At the time of her decommissioning, the role of the crew had been reduced to a monthly row around Watsons Bay, for which service each member was paid £1 monthly. As the *Sunday Sun* commented at the time, gathering the crew of the *Alice Rawson* together in an emergency would have proved difficult, given that their everyday occupations scattered them widely - whereas the pilot boat *Captain Cook*, stationed nearby and with a crew always at the ready, was more than capable of performing any rescue that might be needed by the port<sup>11</sup>.

It would seem that the *Sunday Sun* was echoing the official view. When rot was found in the keel of the *Alice Rawson*, the acquisition of a new lifeboat was recommended, but the state government decided that a lifeboat for the port of Sydney was no longer warranted, and the Port Jackson lifeboat service was terminated on the 30<sup>th</sup> June 1946. The following year, the *Maritime Services Board* having approved her destruction, she was towed to Goat Island for this purpose.<sup>12</sup> However, in an abrupt change of circumstances, a succession of varied uses was found for the *Alice Rawson* which assured her preservation.

She was initially leased for seven years by a Captain Lockett before transfer to the Sea Scout association in 1954. She was used for a time on the upper Parramatta River by the Meadowbank Company of Sea Scouts, and in the early 1960s was in use by the Manly Seaforth group. Eventually she passed into private ownership as a pleasure craft.

The lifeboat shed built for the *Alice Rawson* on the Gibson's Beach foreshore, a weatherboard structure with an iron roof, was demolished in 1958 to make way for a new pilot station. The destruction of the lifeboat shed coincided with the centenary of the introduction of the official lifeboat service for Port Jackson, a milestone which presumably went unremarked given the circumstances. The masonry foundations of the former shed are still visible on the waterfront beneath the pilot's headquarters.

The Port Jackson lifeboat service was ultimately the victim of a positive trend – the increasing rarity, over time, of maritime accidents in or near the port of Sydney. A number of factors played a part in this : the decline in the volume of sea traffic, the improved design of vessels and enhanced safety measures generally, and the fact that Sydney Harbour is an inherently less treacherous port to negotiate when compared with others along the Australian coastline, with the exception of the Port of Eden. All played a part in convincing the authorities that statistically the service could not be justified.

The *Alice Rawson* has, against all odds, survived, and it is believed that only four craft on Sydney Harbour exceed her in age. There is a growing movement to see her returned to her historical roots - the Watsons Bay waterfront. For now, the foundations of the demolished

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<sup>10</sup> *Sunday Sun* 9.6.1946 p.?.

<sup>11</sup> *Loc cit*

<sup>12</sup> Evans, Vaughan *op.cit* p. 4.

lifeboat shed remain the only tangible local reminder of an important aspect of the maritime history of Watsons Bay.

*Information compiled from resources held in the Woollahra Local History Collection.*