



Old sailors reminisce about the good old days

*Yachts on Coalmine
Beach - picture
supplied by Helen
Pierce*

At one of our most well-attended "Hours of History" Frank Cooper related the history of the Walpole Yacht Club, of which he was a founder member.

The club began in 1957 when Terry Swarbrick bought a VJ from one of the visitors staying at Rest Point and sailed it across to Coalmine Beach for some of his friends to try.

"It was pretty frightening because we were all landlubbers," Frank recalled.

The Swarbricks bought more VJs and began sailing them in Swan Bay, cutting about a foot off the centre plate to get through the mud. At that stage no-one was game enough to sail out round the Knoll.

Others also bought yachts and soon a strong social club was sailing regularly round the inlet waters.

It was decided to build a club house and the first choice of site was about 200m ^{west} from the Swarbrick Jetty.

Public opinion stopped that plan as residents claimed it would spoil the view.

The club house was built at Coalmine Beach using a building from the old Kent River Mill. VJ sailors from Albany were invited across to celebrate the opening.

"We didn't have a rescue boat or even life jackets in those days," said Frank.

"Jimmy Palmer had an old life jacket made of cork and Terry suggested we should get old bike tubes and wrap those around us.

On one occasion Jack Anning capsized and someone was sent to get a boat to help. The messenger was found sitting with Terry having a cup of tea while the unlucky sailors were still bobbing around in the water. After that a rescue boat was on duty every day there was sailing.

Soon several heavy weight Sharpies joined the fleet and there were six VJs and up to 10 Sharpies.

At the first official regatta in 1959 there were yachts from Bunbury and Busselton competing against the locals.

People from Perth came down regularly to sail at Walpole, among them two famous names in sailing, Rolly Tasker and Syd Corser.

“It was a great social club. Lots of families came in. Lots of people didn’t own their own boats but had the opportunity to sail on one.”

The popularity of the VJs waned and in the 60s the Swarbricks left to move to Perth to build boats.

In the early 80s there was a resurgence when club members turned to the Windrush, a good family boat. This brought lots of new people in and there were social outings to Broke Inlet with the Brass, Bellanger and Thompson families being among the most active members. In 1988 and 1994 the club hosted the State Windrush championships and there were regular trips to sail at Albany and Busselton.

However, as the children in the families grew up and many moved away, the families stopped sailing. Eventually the club was down to four or five boats sailing and although it is still active, it no longer has the membership or the active sailing programme it once enjoyed.

After Frank had given his account of the club’s history, several members of the audience added their own memories.

Tommy Palmer recalled that the main regatta was held in the first week of March and had an important impact on the town. Up to 150 boats were sailing on the inlet, caravan parks and other accommodation were full and the town’s business people had a boom weekend.

Kate O’Brien added that the club’s annual dinner was a big social event and Joe Burton Snr recalled that the men had to wear bow ties and white shirts.

Joe also recalled on local worthy who needed to work on his boat. He sent his wife away for the weekend and installed the boat in the lounge room. When he hadn’t finished before she was due back he told her she could stay away longer. Chris Bellanger remembered how the Ladies Club catered for the annual dinner in the old hall at Rest Point. Forty-four gallon drums were used for the washing up because there was no power and no instant hot water. They tried to supply power with extension cords for the frying pans but it blew the fuses.

When they cooked a Pavlova there was nowhere to store it so it was placed on a pile of horsehair mattresses. A cat soon appeared with cream all over its face but the ladies just spread more cream on top of the Pavlova and served it up. No-one was any the wiser.

Pat Edmunds recalled that few of the people who sailed could swim. “I don’t know how you’d go these days with personal liability insurance,” she grinned. “It was a wonder that we never had a serious accident, even on the regatta days.”

After an hour of memories and a lot of smiles, it was agreed that the heyday of Walpole Yacht Club was one of the highlights of the community’s history. Everyone was agreed it would be wonderful indeed if all those sails could be seen again on the waters of the inlets.

Frank has written a more detailed account of the club’s history which is being typed and prepared with a lot of photographs. When it is completed it will be presented to the Society to be included in our archives. A116

Completed in 2002 and a copy given to the Society. Links on this website.