

Basic Detail Report



John Louis

Vessel number

HV000050

Date

1957

Primary Maker

Male and Co

Description

JOHN LOUIS was built in Broome in 1957 by Male & Company for Louis Placanica, a Broome pearler. It was named after Placanica's son John. The 20 metre long hull was carvel planked in jarrah. The boat was built with an engine as its primary source of power, and the sails were used for manoeuvring on the pearling grounds. 'Verandahs' or outriggers let down from the sides of the vessel were used to separate the divers moving over the pearl beds below. Divers worked in hard-hat suits with heavy metal helmets and boots. The work was very dangerous. In 1962 a Malay diver, Pilus Bin Jamiron, died of the bends while diving off JOHN LOUIS in deep water off Eighty Mile Beach. Initially JOHN LOUIS was used to collect mother-of-pearl for jewellery, button-making, and other applications which were superseded by plastic. This had been the traditional purpose of pearling, with the rare find of a natural pearl as a bonus. As this industry collapsed, the pearl-culture industry developed, where divers collected young pearl shell (pearl oysters) which were taken to farms for 'seeding' and cultivation. This became JOHN LOUIS' use for the rest of its working life. From 1964 it was owned by Pearls Pty Ltd, the biggest cultured-pearl company in Western Australia. It was used to supply the Kuri Bay pearl culture farm north of Broome, and later other farms along the coast as well. It also worked around Thursday Island and Torres Strait from time to time. In 1971 the most significant episode in JOHN LOUIS' career took place when the Marine Superintendent of Pearls Pty Ltd, Captain Peter Cumming, a former naval officer, trialled the use of hookah gear – light breathing apparatus connected to an air supply on the deck. He had seen abalone divers using this method in New South Wales, and had JOHN LOUIS refitted on Thursday Island for the purpose, as no luggers were available in Broome, employing a number of expert abalone divers. The crew included Dale Chapman diver and leader, Bruno Mckenna diver, Alan Badger diver, David Dureau deckhand and cook, Frank Bowie engineer. The story of this trial is told in Hugh Edwards, Port of Pearls: a history of Broome. The result was so successful that by 1974 the industry had converted almost entirely to the hookah method. Prior to the 1970s it was a widespread belief that only non-Europeans were physically suited to deep water diving. After the hookah trials, which were conducted by a hand-picked team of European-Australian spear fishers and divers, the mix of crews and divers in the industry changed. Accordingly, after complaints from the hookah divers, accommodation on JOHN LOUIS was improved. In 1972 the foredeck was raised by Alan Badger to improve crew accommodation below. The flush deck at the bow gave way to the raised bulwark of the present configuration. Peter Cumming replaced the tiller with a wheel at the time of the hookah trial. The

wheelhouse was added and eventually held two radios, radar, echo sounder and auto pilot. The original Lister Blackstone diesel engine was replaced in 1970 with a Gardner engine. In 1973 this was replaced with the 6-cylinder Volvo Penta; this engine is still on JOHN LOUIS. Details of work and life on board in the 1980s have been described by Tom Wiggan, who worked as tender or boat-captain on JOHN LOUIS for more than a year in 1985–86. There were eight crew: six divers, a cook and the tender. A voyage lasted about ten days. Supply tenders came regularly and took some shell back, while a seawater tank kept the rest alive on the voyage home. The sails were no longer used with the changed method of diving. JOHN LOUIS carries the hull number B3, which was on it when the museum acquired it in 1987. However, the number changed at least three times. From the evidence of photographs it carried the number B25 in 1967, A50 in 1971 and B70 in 1975. These appear to be Broome or Western Australian fisheries numbers. JOHN LOUIS' original certificate of registry gives its official number as 196905. This was changed to 196906 on later certificates. The hull colour also appears to have been white or grey before becoming the green it is now finished with. JOHN LOUIS was bought at the end of its final season in pearling operations at Broome. It was brought around to Sydney by skipper David Adams, and has been retained in exactly the same configuration it had when it was in its final years of commercial operation.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 18.3 m x 13 m x 4.65 m x 1.88 m, 58.27 square metres (60 ft x 42.7 ft x 15.25 ft x 6.2 ft, 627.28 square feet) Registered Dimensions: 15.64 m x 4.39 m x 2.19 m, 34.45 tons (51.3 ft x 14.4 ft x 7.2 ft) Engine dimensions: 126 kilowatts, 6 cylinders (170 horsepower) Propeller dimensions: 560 x 762 mm (22.01 x 29.95 in.)