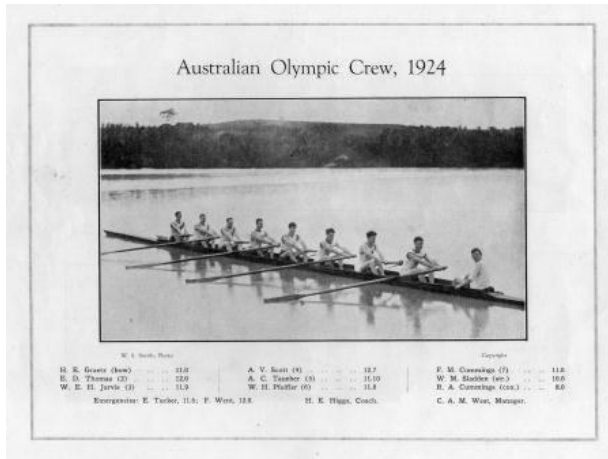


Basic Detail Report



Murray Bridge Olympic Rowing Shell

Vessel number

HV000347

Date

1921

Primary Maker

Messrs Jerrams and Sons

Description

The shell is made of steamed Australian red cedar, a typical wood used by local builders for many types of boat construction. The decking is linen. The builders were Messrs Jerrams and Sons from Melbourne, Victoria. a South Australian Rowing Association annual report for 1920-21 notes that the order was placed earlier in the year with an anticipated cost of 80 pounds. The following years report notes the vessel was commissioned and cost 95 pounds 10 shillings and 1 pence. It goes on to state: "Your Committee was well pleased with the boat built for them by Messrs Jerrams and Sons, and it has already achieved an enviable record. The craft was purchased for use in the Interstate Contest, and its excellent win in Sydney was an auspicious beginning. The Murray Bridge members who comprised the crew speak in the highest terms of the boat's remarkable qualities. When brought back to South Australia, the vessel was placed at the disposal of the Brisbane University crew - it is a matter of history now how the Queenslanders rowed to victory in that boat. It was christened " South Australia" by the committee." The crew all came from the Murray Bridge Rowing Club in South Australia. Murray Bridge is on the lower reaches of the Murray River and is a short distance north of Lake Alexandrina. The club was founded in 1909 and became the dominant force in South Australian rowing. Its members were labourers and tradesmen, in contrast with other clubs whose membership had a more elite background. The crew from Murray Bridge won their first national championship in 1913 when two of the opposition craft were swamped. Credit for the win was given to the Murray Bridge cox who showed foresight by taking a billy can with him to bail the boat. In 1920, 1922 and 1923 the Murray Bridge crew again represented South Australia and won the Kings Cup for the Eight-Oared Championship of Australia. In 1922 and 1923 the shell used was SOUTH AUSTRALIA. In 1924, as reigning national champions the Murray Bridge crew was chosen to represent Australia at the Olympics to be held in Paris, France. An initial hurdle was overcoming the charge that the crew was professional because of alleged prize money won at the local Mannum sports day. They then had to withstand a challenge from the Victorian, Tasmanian and West Australian crews which claimed the South Australian crew's slow stroke rate was unsuited to the shorter race length in Olympic competition. To settle this argument an Olympic trial race was held between these teams on the Port Adelaide River in March 1924. With a local crowd on the shoreline supporting them, calling 'Paris or the Bush', the South Australians increased their stroke rate mid-race to take the lead from the Western Australian crew and score a narrow win. The Murray Bridge crew had an average age of 36 and most worked on the railways, although one was a postal assistant and

another skippered a trading boat on the Murray River. They were known as the 'The Cods' because of their stuffed Murray Cod mascot and were South Australia's first Olympians. The crew's passage to Paris was still not guaranteed until South Australians came to their support, raising enough funds to send the boat and team to France. Before leaving Australia they were treated to a Lord Mayor's reception and a huge crowd saw them off from Port Adelaide. The crew, coach, manager and rowing shell went by sea to Europe on the SS ORMONDE. The News, March 13, 1924 carries the following report. "At the next meeting the committee of the South Australian Rowing Association will consider the advisability of sending the racing boat with the crew. The boat has become almost as famous as the Murray Bridge crew. It has been used in only four races, and each time has passed the judge first. The events it has figured in are the Australian eight-oared championships in 1922 and 1923, the Olympic test race on Sunday, and the Intervarsity race 1922, when the Brisbane University used the vessel and won. The boat suits the members of the Murray Bridge crew, who would be delighted if they could take the boat overseas." A subsequent report in the Daily News WA, notes that the crew were entertained by the Western Australian Rowing Association when the SS ORMONDE stopped in Fremantle on the way to Europe, and states that - " They are carrying their own boat and oars. This boat was built by Messrs Jerrams and Co, Melbourne, and in it four races have been won." During the month-long voyage they trained on a home-made rowing-machine. The ship was running behind schedule and the entire team was landed at Toulon in the south of France. They were short of money and eventually rowed the craft about 60km along the French canals to finally get to the Olympic venue, carrying it around each of the canal locks. To get to the opening ceremony, they borrowed a horse and cart, which became bogged on three occasions. The gritty determination showed by the crew to overcome all manner of adversities included forming a band and trying other means of raising money to help support them while in France. It was not enough, however, to bring success on the Olympic regatta course. A week after the opening ceremony of the Games, they finished second in their heat and then third in the repechage, or qualifying heat, which was won by the eventual silver medalists, Canada. They missed out on the finals, a major disappointment as they had expected to do much better. Stroke W M Sladden attributed their poor form to over zealous training in the lead up to the event. In fact they had to row 26 miles to the course on the day of their first heat. In addition, their equipment was out of date compared to other crews, in particular the riggers and slides were inferior. After the Olympics, the crew raced in the Irish National Games, but did not perform well there either, however crew member Wally Pfeiffer won the sculling championship, restoring some pride to the team. The crew returned home on the P&O MOOLTANA to a low key reception and three of them retired from the sport. Meanwhile the shell gradually moved up the Murray River going first to the Renmark Rowing Club until 1959 then to the Wentworth Rowing Club, across the border in New South Wales. Once the club no longer had a use for the shell it was donated to the Wentworth Rotary Museum where in 2009 it remained on display in largely original condition. During its use as a training craft it has had new riggers and seating added, but the hull remains original apart from repairs where required. Text compiled with assistance from Tim Simpson, Hugh Orr, and Chris McRae.