

# Basic Detail Report

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## Thistle

**Vessel number**

HV000023

**Date**

c 1903

**Primary Maker**

J R Jones

### Description

THISTLE was designed and built by J R Jones for a client in Port Fairy, and the available reference material strongly suggests this was in 1903. A well-known builder, Jones was located in Melbourne, either at Williamstown or Footscray. From research conducted by Tim Phillips in 1989 he appears to have been apprenticed to the trade in England before coming to Australia, around 1850. From that time Jones built launches, yachts and other boats, first on the Yarra River and then by Albert Park Lake. Thistle would have been one of an unknown number of couta boats built by the J R Jones, and his son JB Jones continued the trade, also building couta boats. THISTLE is carvel planked, has a centreboard and the oval cockpit that is typical for these craft, but has the original lug rig that was used for the mainsail. It is one of the few surviving vessels from what had been a very large fleet of working craft. The Couta Boats were amongst the last fishing boats in Australia to still work their grounds under sail. It is a locally developed design suitable for the rough waters off the Victorian south-west coast and in Bass Strait, and is unique to Australia. They were usually crewed by only two men, and the Queenscliff fleet had to pass through the Rip at Port Phillip Heads, a very dangerous stretch of water. The gaff sailing rig only gradually gave way to the motor. The strong traditions held by The Couta Boat sailors meant they were relatively slow to adopt new innovations. By 1903 the couta boat had become an established type for fishing the Bass Strait waters and THISTLE was initially used for this purpose. The boat's history is incomplete but it is known that it had a succession of different uses. The original use was for barracouta or cray fishing, depending on the season; however this eventually proved an unreliable source of work and by the late 1920s THISTLE was engaged in emerging edible shark longline fishing. THISTLE's first recorded owner was George Darley of Port Fairy; it is not known whether he was the original owner, though he had the boat for many years. Around 1930 he sold it to Bert Perry for shark and couta fishing. In March 1936 Perry sold it to Reuben Kelly who fished mostly for shark and crayfish, taking couta mainly for bait. In June 1946 Kelly sold it to Donald (Scotty) McDonald to replace the sister ship ESCORT lost in floods. Scotty and his brother John used THISTLE for fishing for a number of years, but by the 1960s Scotty was using it to tow the Ports and Harbours dredge up and down the Moyne River at Port Fairy. In 1970 McDonald sold it to Bob Johansson, who fitted a cabin and lived on board THISTLE on the river until 1987. THISTLE was probably first fitted with an engine between 1915 and the early 1920s. This would have been a low-horsepower petrol motor, for use only in calm conditions. By 1930 it had a 2-cylinder Gardner engine, later replaced with a 4-cylinder

Red Seal Ruby motor. Both were petrol engines. The Ruby was replaced by an 8-hp diesel Yanmar engine in 1971. Bob Johansson passed away in October of 2007, a well-known character on the river, sought after for a yarn by the locals and tourists. Carmen Bell wrote the following for The Couta Boat Association. 'In 1970 he purchased an old couta boat named THISTLE. He built a cabin and moved into his new home - much to the annoyance of his mother Grace who was living in Port Fairy with her third husband Scotty. He lived in the THISTLE until 1987. Bob's early days in Port Fairy were spent tinkering with the THISTLE helping out at the Port Fairy Aquarium, taking himself out fishing and also going out on some of the other fishing boats. In his later years, his main occupation was talking to passers-by.' THISTLE was purchased from Bob by Tim Phillips, (a boat builder and specialising in restoring and building couta boats) for the Australian National Maritime Museum in 1987, and Bob sailed another boat back from Sydney to be his final home on the river. The restoration philosophy and conservation guidelines were determined by a museum working party. The restoration was to return the vessel to its appearance in the role for which it was constructed, as a sturdy workboat. Materials and methods used were to be consistent with those in use at the time of the vessel's building and early working life. The restoration by Tim Phillips at the Wooden Boat Shop in Sorrento, Victoria, was monitored by ANMM conservator Michael Staples and completed by October 1990. THISTLE arrived in Sydney just in time to compete in the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club's annual Gaffers Day regatta, winning line honours. THISTLE has been maintained in good condition and has competed in the Balmain Regatta and the Gaffers' Day Regatta a number of times.

### **Dimensions**

Vessel Dimensions: 8.61 m x 8.61 m x 3.07 m x 2.44 m, 5.78 tonnes, 55.5 sq m (28.25 ft x 28.25 ft x 10.07 ft x 8.01 ft, 5.87 tons, 597.46 sq ft)