

Basic Detail Report



Water Baby

Vessel number

HV000768

Date

1878

Primary Maker

FA Gore & JP Purcell

Description

The story and significance of WATER BABY has been compiled in detail by Grant Uebergang for the Millmerran & District Historical Society, and the following is summarized from his very detailed text. The Gore family were Anglo-Irish whose lineage stretched back to Elizabethan times. They came to Queensland and settled at Yandilla Station in the Darling Downs in 1841, but the purchase of the adjacent Tummaville station in 1846 provided a more reliable water supply and also reduced a potential flood problem. Subsequently their large land drainage projects undertaken to further reduce the flood problem also facilitated the development of such a craft as Water Baby. Without a reliable supply of water from The Broadwater to Grasstree Creek, which flowed in front of Yandilla homestead, WATER BABY would not have been launched. Flood waters posed problems for sheep throughout the occupation of Yandilla. In 1863, 6,000 sheep were swept away in the floods on Yandilla, representing 9% of the total flock. They affected the people significantly too, In 1862 the residents were compelled to find refuge in the trees and in 1864 the floods at Yandilla were described as fearful. Homes and huts were inundated and the people took refuge in the church. Flooding was clearly known as a regular occurrence, and the first documented case of the Gore family using boats during floods was in 1873. However, it was during 1876-1878 and one of the longest drought periods on record at Yandilla that also killed a significant percentage of the sheep that WATER BABY was built, to be ready for the next flood. It was actually launched during the drought, because the races, drain cutting, weir building and other associated work that had been done previously allowed what water was flowing to give ample depth of water for WATER BABY to float on. The Darling Downs Gazette newspaper gave a description of the vessel soon after it was launched on Monday 4 March 1878 at Yandilla. The correspondent wrote that he saw a fine little iron steamer floating on the placid waters of Grasstree Creek It was 28 feet (8.53 metres) long, weighed 5 tons (5.09 tonnes), although when the boiler was full of water it weighed 7 tons (7.13 tonnes). The boiler, which was tested to a pressure of 150 p.s.i. (1034 kPa), was manufactured by R Smellie & Co. Brisbane. It was a screw steamer powered by a 1.5 h.p. (1.12kW) single cylinder double acting reversible steam engine of unknown origin which propelled the launch up to 9 knots (16.6 kilometres/hour) at 28-30 r.p.m. WATER

BABY was capable of carrying 12 passengers and was 'as docile in her movements as a child'. With the exception of the engine and boiler everything else connected with the steamer was actually manufactured at Francis Gore's blacksmith at Yandilla, only feet away from the water's edge of Grasstree Creek. Francis Gore designed the vessel and the engine while blacksmith John Patrick Purcell was the "shipwright". WATERBABY's sheet metal panels were lapped and tank riveted together and the laps then soldered to make the wrought iron hull watertight. The anchor for WATERBABY was found some years in 1950 along the Condamine River at Tummaville, and it bears the stamped initials of John Purcell - JPP. John had worked in the forge, at Yandilla Station and was of Irish descent, coming from Kilkenny to Victoria (Australia) in 1842. Further descriptions from the period show that Francis Gore could not have achieved the building of WATERBAY without a 'a most complete and well-arranged workshop.' It was equipped with: " a grand turning-lathe, with a bed some 12 feet long and fitted with every appliance for working metal...The little private workshop of Mr. F.A. Gore was a model of neatness, and is replete with every possible tool from the most complicated of lathes to the latest shape of gimlet or bradawl." Versatility was needed too. During the longer periods between floods the steam engine from WATER BABY had to be of some other use to the management of the property. Francis used it on a machine for boring post holes for stock fences. Meanwhile In this same workshop other numerous water craft were built - canoes, punts and scaled model boats. It can be said that the construction of WATER BABY was as much a reflection on the Gore's ingenuity as it was of their management practices by adopting the latest in nineteenth century steam technology to alleviate local environmental problems. At Yandilla a boat house complex was built and consisted of two buildings on the lagoon - a raised building as well as a long low shed to house WATER BABY and the three additional 22 feet boats they had built which WATER BABY towed. It was used along the river and streams flowing into the main river, the Broadwater lagoon and when the water levels were high enough in floods WATER BABY could pass directly over the flooded paddocks and low-lying land, disregarding the main channel of the Condamine River. According to local knowledge it would have been possible to navigate from Yandilla to Tummaville into the North Branch to the lower reaches of The Hermitage. Legend has it that WATER BABY went direct from Yandilla homestead to Cecil Plains homestead, a distance of about 51 kilometres over the flooded plains. WATER BABY's flat bottom and shallow draft would have enabled it to be navigated on this route during the 1890 or 1893 floods, the highest floods recorded at Yandilla in the nineteenth century. Anna Kate Hume's diaries from her time in the region further supports the fact WATER BABY was used well upstream of Yandilla. Mention is made that during the January 1898 floods at Yandilla all the Gore family went out in WATER BABY and went some miles up the Condamine fighting against a fearful current. Francis Gore could not speak highly enough of WATER BABY in its work during this flood. He wrote: "the steam launch saved an immense amount of labour, towing the boats full of sheep and bedding etc. when required. No men could have pulled the load of sheep she towed for over half-a-mile dead against the current... our three boats and steam launch were invaluable. Had we not had such a good fleet or had they been out of repair, we would have lost nearly all our stud rams and a lot of the sheep... No station on the Condamine should be without them" . Unfortunately, by the turn of the century WATER BABY's use for sheep rescue was coming to a close. After the 1893 floods there appears to be no more documented evidence of it being used as a craft to rescue marooned sheep during flood. This probably came about when a flood warning system was developed along the Upper Condamine River Valley after 1890. Adequate warning was now being given of any

impending floods which gave enough time to those would be affected pastoralists to move their stock from any potential danger area. Before its final demise WATER BABY was also used for wider community purposes such as delivering the mail across the flooded Condamine and ferrying workers across Grasstree Creek to the shearing complex. John Jacob Reichle (1875-1931) of Tummaville remembered how the steamer was used to take the mails and mailman across the flooded Condamine River at Yandilla where the mailman received a fresh horse to continue his journey to Back Creek (Millmerran). During the March /April 1890 floods, Gore & Co. offered to the public to put anyone across the Condamine via their steamer and swim their horses if necessary. The Gore family had completely disposed of their interests in Yandilla and Tummaville Stations by 1911 after selling to the Lomax and Fysh families respectively. During the next 25 years Yandilla had several owners - Lomax, Naughton & Co., Dynevor Downs Pastoral Co., and Adrian Slade. In 1936 Slade sold Yandilla to Sam Cowlshaw whose family are in possession today. Les Pattle of Toowoomba was interviewed in 1987 and related the information that the Yandilla steam launch was still in operation in the early 1920's. Sheila Cowlshaw, wife of Sam, indicated that the hull of WATER BABY was at Yandilla in 1936 minus the engine and boiler. Their son, James, present owner of Yandilla, remembers when as a young man in- the 1950's, the hull was used to store gravel outside the Yandilla homestead garden. Commenting on WATER BABY's demise before the 1950's he said its use could have become more limited after the time the Gores left due to Yandilla lagoon filling with silt from the increase in cultivation along Grasstree Creek. In 1955 a group of Young Anglicans from Millmerran went to Yandilla to pick up the hull and steering apparatus to display in the "Back to Millmerran" celebrations. It was a little worse for wear, but they cleaned it out and put it on the back of a truck for the anniversary procession. When the parade was over the hull was taken to "Leisilican" on Back Creek (property of Trevor and Val Lindenmayer) near the outskirts of Millmerran where it was left virtually unnoticed for almost 30 years. In June/July 1983 when Back Creek was in flood, two Millmerran canoeists, Greg Bowdler and Andy Plunkett, "rediscovered" the hull of WATER BABY lying on the banks of the creek at the spot where it had been laid to rest in 1955. Several Historical Society members went to investigate the remains to consider having it transported to the Society's grounds in Charlotte Street. In August of 1983 the Millmerran & District Historical Society began planning to submit an application to the Queensland Council of the Australian Bicentennial Authority for the restoration of the hull as the Society's Bicentenary Project for 1988. In 1986 the Bicentennial Authority approved a grant of \$1,700 and this, together with the much appreciated financial support from Kevin and Jacki McGrath, brought renovation of the hull to fruition. Restoration work commenced on the hull in January 1987 only after it had been moved to Ron Houston's shed in Millmerran which allowed work to be carried on during inclement weather. For their assistance, Ron and Gwen Houston were presented with a Bicentennial Certificate of Appreciation by the Historical Society. After 15 months of voluntary labour restoration of the hull was completed in July 1988. Principal participants in Water Baby's new lease of life were Historical Society members Tom Lawler, Lloyd Weedon and John Twidale while valuable assistance was rendered by Ron Twidale, Ron Houston, Ron and Kelvin Scragg, Andy Plunkett and Grant Uebergang. The hull was made of wrought iron and iron bark timber originally, and the metal frame showed very little corrosion at the time of being retrieved. All timber for the frame and seats was renewed as was most of the galvanized iron skin except on the extreme stern where the only piece of original skin was reused. Before restoration commenced the hull was marked inside and out into sections and then the respective sections photographed. This was then followed by the removal of the

old galvanized skin to allow the wrought iron frame to be sandblasted to remove any corrosion and rust. Repairs were carried out to the frame, rudder and propeller shaft after which the frame received a coat of rust proof paint. This then enabled the new galvanized skin to be fitted by rivetting and soldering together the overlapping joins. To ensure water tightness sealant was placed between the joining sections. New timber was then steamed and fitted before the completed hull was painted and removed to the Historical Society grounds for permanent storage in a shed. Cr. Macqueen of the Millmerran Shire as well as being chairman of the local Bicentennial Committee dedicated the restored historic steam launch at a function hosted by the Historical Society on 20 November 1988 - 110 years after it was initially launched in 1878. Members of the Gore family were in attendance, while Kevin McGrath gave an outline of his great grandfather's (John Patrick Purcell) involvement with the building of WATER BABY and his employment at Yandilla. Since the flood boat's restoration in 1987 it has been displayed at the National Bicentennial Travelling Exhibition in Toowoomba and then at the Jondaryan Woolshed Heritage Festival in August-September 1988. On Australia Day, 26 January 1988 in Millmerran, the boat was used by a "convict" to ferry "Arthur Phillip" and other dignitaries around the Bicentennial Project Dam behind the Millmerran Dairy Co-op. It is also hoped that with further efforts to find a suitable engine and boiler, WATER BABY may yet steam on the Condamine again, reminiscent of those nostalgic days of over a century ago.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 8.53 m × 1.62 m, 5.08 tonnes (28 ft × 5.33 ft, 5 tons)