

Basic Detail Report



May-Belle

Vessel number

HV000534

Date

1895

Primary Maker

Sutton and Gay

Description

MAY-BELLE was designed and built c1895 to ferry passengers and small amounts of cargo such as mail and supplies across the Palmer River at Maytown (north Queensland) in times when the river was in flood and could not be crossed by any other means. The passage was about 200 metres over water up to six metres or so depth, and relatively fast flowing. This required an open boat fitted with thwarts for seating and rowing as the logical choice for the period, and similar boats were used in many locations for this purpose all around Australia. MAY-BELLE has a conventional dinghy or waterman's skiff style and proportions to its 4.66m length, giving it a nice sheered hull profile, rounded stem and angled transom. There is a hollow toward the keel in the bottom sections aft that forms a keel toward the transom for steering control. It has been identified as a close sister ship to another flood boat in Coen (HV000546) on the Archer River, north of the Palmer River because it shares virtually identical dimensions, the same shape and same construction method. MAY-BELLE has been built in thin gauge iron or steel plating on angle bar frames. This choice of a heavy material is slightly unconventional, because typical craft of this type would have been made in wood, either carvel or lapstrake planked. However, the dry inland environment for much of each year, where the craft would have remained out of the water for long periods would have been unsuitable for a wooden craft, which would have opened up at the seams whilst out of the water. It would not have been usable immediately when required as the seams take some days to swell and close up again. It is also possible that the extreme nature of the dryness could have caused the wood to split making the craft unusable. Therefore the choice of a metal plated hull seems quite suitable, with the only major issue being corrosion or rust. However, the likely service life expected was measured in years or a decade or so at best, in which time any corrosion leading to holes could be plated over if needed. A metal hull would also be more resistant to damage, and the many dimples and deformed areas on the existing hull show how it could absorb the damage but remain intact, even though the surface became somewhat misshapen. A metal hull could also be more easily repaired, as the skills required were within a blacksmith's trade, a common occupation throughout inland locations. MAY-BELLE has a very simple layout. It is an open boat with no decking. The bilge is completely open, and there may have been floorboards across the frames to keep cargo clear of any bilge water and act as a sole to step on. Four thwarts are fitted, and the forward two have rowlock holes. No oars or rowlocks exist that relate to the craft. Whilst it is clear MAY-BELLE could have been rowed which is the natural form of propulsion for this type of craft, the strong

current raises the question as to whether there was a cable or flying fox between the shores, which some how attached to the hull to keep it from being taken downstream from where it was to land on each shore. According to one source it used a set up below a bend, which had a steel/iron stake hammered well into the ground. This stake, or a suitable tree, was used to secure a rope or wire to hold the boat's bow upstream while it was pulled across by line, which allowed a greater load and fewer crew to be aboard. MAY-BELLE's early details are still being researched, and the first reference to it comes in the North Queensland Register 8 May 1895. Reporting on a flood on the river and accident to a mail coach, the story notes that the existing 'Divisional Board Ferry boat' was lost in the torrential river flow, and then went on to state that a new one was already available. "Fortunately the Board has a new boat ready at the LAURA, only awaiting transport. Our indefatigable Chairman took prompt action to have the boat brought up. The boat comes from the well-known firm of Sutton and Gay, Brisbane, and cost 39 pounds delivered on board the Steamer.' This was the Palmer River Goldfield Divisional Board, and they were the original owners of the vessel. Mary Callaghan was a resident in Maytown and recalled having rides in the boat as a child and that it was stored in a shed and had a winch and a trolley to launch it into the river. Her mother stated that in 1911 when another flood occurred, it washed the vessel downstream a couple of miles before it could be recovered. At this time it may well have belonged to a subsequent regional authority. Maytown was finally abandoned in the late 1940s after the last person living there departed, but it had been virtually deserted and no longer active for many years beforehand. How and when it was named is not yet known, but when MAY-BELLE was recovered and brought to Cooktown Doug Keeble who had knowledge of Maytown understood that it was called MAY-BELLE and that name has remained with it. MAY-BELLE was discovered in 1973 by a group of teachers who had remained in Maytown for a short period after a safari party had returned to Cooktown. They had been looking through the deserted township. Walking through the dry river bed of the Palmer River they came across the upturned hull largely covered by bushes. They reported their find to Darcy Gallop who had led the safari tour, and he was also both the Cooktown administrator and board member of the James Cook Museum. Understanding the significance this vessel had as an artefact of the Maytown gold mining period, Darcy Gallop returned to Maytown with a couple of council workers, and using a 3 tonne truck and winches they removed the vessel from the scrub and brought it back to Cooktown. He then replaced the thwarts with new ones, and painted the outside. It was then stored at the James Cook Museum. In 2012 the May-Belle remains stored at the James Cook Museum and is an object in the collection registered as JC.99.735. It has been cleaned and remains in good condition with the structure intact. The museum intends to document the craft further and build a new cradle to give it better support. Maytown is now deserted and only remains of some of the structures including the boat-house are visible on the site. .

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 4.66 m x 1.55 m (15.3 ft x 5.1 ft)