

Basic Detail Report



Kathleen Gillett

Vessel number

HV000042

Date

1939

Primary Maker

Colin Archer

Description

KATHLEEN GILLETT was built by Charles Larson at his Wharf Road boat yard in Gladesville, NSW. Larson was Swedish and had been a ship's carpenter on square riggers, and he appears to have changed his name from Larsen to Larson. Construction proceeded at Larson's shed over the six year period at a pace appropriate to Jack Earl's resources. Larson's team would often work on the yacht when there were no other projects needing immediate attention. KATHLEEN GILLETT is a wooden gaff ketch, just over 13 metres long and the design was based on an unknown set of plans from the famous Norwegian naval architect Colin Archer which Larson possessed. The shape is very representative of Archer's style of seaworthy double-ended commercial vessels such as the sailing rescue boats (redningskoites), pilot vessels and fishing craft, which all have different characteristics and proportions to suit their purpose. Archer also designed cruising yachts along these lines and some of the commercial vessels were converted to cruising yachts. Larson carvel planked KATHLEEN GILLETT in Huon pine, which was supported by thin and closely spaced frames. This appears to be Larson's own method and is not understood to be an arrangement used by Archer. Larson also appears to have interpreted other features of the structure and hull shape in a manner that is different from a typical Archer vessel, but suitable for the purpose. Early in the 1930s Jack Earl and his wife Kath were inspired by stories about long sailing voyages and wanted to build a yacht for themselves to use to circumnavigate the world. According to a piece written by Kath in Seacraft November 1947, they wanted to use a design by Colin Archer, such as the Norwegian Redningskoite or Pilot ketch. They knew from these stories that his designs were extremely seaworthy. A close friend doctor and surgeon Dr Robert Scott Skirving had a smaller modified Archer style yacht called PHALAROPE (HV000191) and he also strongly recommended they have a design by Archer. According to David Harpur, Earl told his father Hal Harpur he had gone to Larson with a genuine set of signed, Archer plans for a 33 foot long boat. These could be a set provided by Scot Skirving. Larson persuaded Earl to build a larger boat for the world trip, meanwhile Larson used the 33 foot plans to build a second yacht on spec which was sold after World War II, and is known as NIGHTFALL. The actual plans Larson is understood to have used to build KATHLEEN GILLETT have never been located. Kath Earl only notes they were signed by Archer, but Larson never let them out of his hands, and guarded them jealously. The yacht was eventually launched in 1939 and towed to Rushcutters Bay. Earl and his family, wife Kath and children Mick and Maris, lived aboard the boat and spent their spare time fitting it out and rigging it.

The masts were eventually stepped at the Rushcutters Bay Sayonara boatshed in 1941. The yacht was known and reported in articles as KATHLEEN and named after his wife Kath -Kathleen (nee Gillett). It was formally registered in 1947 as KATHLEEN GILLETT. Jack Earl always intended to sail around the world with his family but lack of money, and then World War II, intervened. During WWII the Earl used KATHLEEN GILLETT as a coastal patrol boat off the coast of New South Wales, sailing between the far south coast of NSW and Port Stephens on the central coast. When the war finished Earl and some of his friends (all founding members of the Cruising Yacht Club) proposed a celebratory cruise from Sydney to Hobart. English sailor Captain John Illingworth who had served with the Navy in Australia was invited to join the cruise, but he suggested they make it a race and helped organise the details. Nine yachts entered including KATHLEEN GILLETT and the yacht finished fourth in this race, and third on handicap. This became the first Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race, which has been held annually since 1945. In mid-1947 Jack Earl decided to make his longed-for circumnavigation without his young family, however they travelled with him on the first stage up to Thursday Island and then returned to Sydney. In preparation for the circumnavigation the yacht had a shelter around the cockpit built to protect the crew, and the bright work was painted because it was easier and cheaper to maintain than varnish. His crew at departure was Jack Day, Keith Humphries, Lyell (Mick) Morris and Don Angus (navigator). Humphries crewed for a short period, leaving the yacht in northern Queensland due to chronic seasickness. He was only replaced when Will 'Digger' Sinclair joined the yacht in Durban. They were away for exactly 18 months, leaving 7th June 1947 and sailing through the heads again on 7th December 1948. They covered 26,000 nautical miles, in a voyage that went first to the north of Australia, then across the Indian Ocean, then the Atlantic Ocean to Panama. From there they crossed the Pacific including the Galapagos Islands, Marquesas, Tahiti, Tonga and New Zealand. Earl painted pictures during the voyage and at ports of call to help pay for stores along the way. The adventures of KATHLEEN GILLETT and crew were detailed in articles written by first mate Mick Morris that were published each month in Seacraft magazine and followed by an appreciative audience. The articles also featured Jack Earl's drawings and sketches. Earl illustrated a log of the voyage and sent it home from ports of call to his wife Kathleen and children Maris and Mick. In Sydney, the log became as celebrated as the voyage; friends, family, sailors and colleagues anticipated its arrival and pored over the contents. Upon KATHLEEN GILLETT's return to Sydney the Earl family moved back onboard, living in Mosman Bay until the boat was sold. A Sydney stamp dealer named Mervyn Cookson bought KATHLEEN GILLETT in 1950 for 5500 pounds and sailed it around the north coast of Queensland and to the Torres Strait, before returning south. In the summer of 1954-55 Mervyn Cookson sold the ketch to Jack Thurston, who owned three copra plantations in New Britain and used KATHLEEN GILLETT trading in New Guinea. Thurston bought the vessel from a mooring at Rose Bay in the early 1950s. KATHLEEN GILLETT was then prepared to sail north again at Rose Bay marina. Thurston installed a 3-cylinder Gardner engine and coppered the hull. No changes were made to the rig. Michael Thurston remembers that the interior was 'butchered' when his father bought it. Jack Thurston set out to sail north with a crew that included his young sons Michael (eleven), and Jackie (thirteen), his brother Norton Thurston, a Mr Williams - the Vaucluse butcher, and Victor Guifre, a Sicilian fisherman from Rose Bay. The ketch was stranded in Pittwater after Williams, the butcher, abandoned the crew. According to Michael he left after discovering that he couldn't ring his wife every night from the boat. The boys sorely missed their eagerly anticipated chance to sail north. Jack Thurston and Victor Guifre (and others) eventually sailed KATHLEEN GILLETT to

New Guinea where Thurston used the vessel for trading. Victor also offered short sailing trips around the islands to tourists. Thurston's crew in New Guinea included Guifre and two Papua New Guineans, Kina and Leo Touvla. The ketch eventually proved too small for Thurston's needs and he sold the vessel. KATHLEEN GILLETT spent much of the next 30-40 years in the tropical waters north of Australia, acting variously as a Pacific Island trader, copra and trochus shell carrier, tourist charter boat, crocodile hunter and private yacht. Lloyd's Yacht Register shows the owners in 1957 as TPG Bladen, CT Shee, Mrs Mary Chee and Mrs Jane Leo; however, none of these owners have been identified. Fred Fawcett Kay, a plantation owner in Papua New Guinea, bought the ketch in the late 1950s and again used it for island trading. He replaced the main mast with a heavy piece of oregon converting the gaff rig to a Bermudan rig. In 1960 crocodile hunter Declan O'Donnell bought Kathleen Gillett from Fawcett Kay for £6,000. O'Donnell used the ketch to hunt crocodiles around Bougainville and the Solomon Islands with a crew of two New Guineans. As a workboat Kathleen Gillett had a large doghouse forward (to ventilate the crew's quarters) and carried two canoes on board. Declan O'Donnell sold KATHLEEN GILLETT in 1964 to Reg Stephenson who ran a Battery Services business in Rabaul. Stephenson dreamed of sailing around the world and set about converting the ketch from a commercial trader to a cruising yacht. At this time KATHLEEN GILLETT was in need of a total refit, showing extensive rot and degradation. Journalsit Graeme Andrews was in Rabaul at the time and came across KATHLEEN tied up to a sunken Japanese freighter. he recognised the yachy from those early days in Sydney, ans was excited to see it was still afloat, even if the condition was not very good. He wrote about his discovery and the plans for the boat in the August 1967 edition of Power Boat and Yachting. In Rabaul, Peter Hood (brother of naval architect Warwick Hood) was invited to direct the restoration work. Hood prepared the boat and fitted a modern cruising rig of aluminium spars. The hull planking remained intact. The boat was re-decked with double-planked Oregon and covered with fibreglass. Other additions included Barlow winches, rigging by Peter Cole and English sails by Bruce Banks. The bowsprit was reduced from 11'6" (3.6 m) to 7'6" (2.3 m) and the sail plan was converted to a mast head rig. A New Zealand Lees Ford 6 diesel engine was installed because parts were available worldwide. Reg Stephenson brought KATHLEEN GILLETT to Sydney in 1967 to race in the Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race but was disqualified in an incident at the start. Stephenson then enjoyed KATHLEEN GILLETT as a private yacht, and in 1975 was invited by Tony Heaney from the Marianas Yacht Club to come to Guam to be a regatta official for events planned for August 1975. From an account by Tony Heaney, provided in June 2010, the following took place. Stephenson sailed across well in advance of the August regatta, and once in Guam formed a close relationship with a schoolteacher called Marianne who was planning to retire. Together they planned to do the world circumnavigation on KATHLEEN GILLETT when Marianne retired and was the able to leave the island. In late May 1976 super-typhoon Pamela formed in the lower part of the North Pacific Ocean and bore down directly on Apra Harbour during the afternoon of May 21. In preparation for the storm Stephenson had secured the yacht in the lee of three storage tanks on the windward shoreline, and Tony Heaney offered to come aboard with a colleague Warren McGillvray and help him ride out the storm. As typhoon Pamela crossed the island KATHLEEN GILLETT rode out the initial ferocious winds that were estimated at sustained periods of 225 kph, with gusts of just over 300kph. As the eye of the storm passed over and the winds dropped away for a brief period, Heaney recommended they move across the harbour to the other shore to be in the lee when the winds returned from the opposite direction, bringing heavy sea conditions as well because they would then be on a lee shore. Stephenson decided to stay where they

were, and to use the engine to take the load off the cables that had been laid out. In hindsight, this was the only possible course of action, as there was not sufficient time to haul in the cables, move across the harbour and then resecure the yacht. The winds returned and the seas built up quite quickly, but with the engine running Stephenson was able to relieve some of the tension on the cables without the yacht moving forward over their anchorage points. Meanwhile for a short period Heaney tried to fend the stern away from a large steel buoy that was adjacent to the stern. Heaney succumbed to sea sickness quite quickly, followed by McGillvray, and they both retreated to the saloon, leaving Stephenson manning the throttle. After a period of time the engine began to splutter, then died, and could not be re-started. Stephenson then joined them below in the saloon, everyone realising they were at the mercy of the lines and the weather. The yacht pitched dramatically, stretching the lines then crashing forward as they contracted. This kept up for about 30 minutes until they rode up on one wave, but did not come crashing down, instead they felt suspended, 'floating like a cloud', yet they knew what had occurred, and worse, knew what was about to happen. The lines had broken and KATHLEEN GILLETT was driven directly onto the coral offshore of the clubhouse. Waves continued to lift and drive the yacht further ashore until it came to rest on its port side amongst the breakers, battered but not destroyed. The three crew members remained on the boat, moving into the cockpit to avoid escaping poisonous battery gasses, and sheltered under a sail Heaney had located from the forepeak. As dawn broke the storm died away and they were eventually able to walk ashore from the stranded yacht to survey a shattered township and harbour. KATHLEEN GILLETT was severely damaged along the port side and keel, but was salvaged by Stephenson, who moved the yacht from a slip to a yard owned by Leland Campbell. Stephenson and Heaney were promised it would be repaired with grant money that had been given by the government for storm damage in the aftermath. Heaney tried to facilitate this happening, but in October 1975 he had to return home to the USA without any progress on the repairs being made. Their trust in the yard owner securing a shipwright was not returned, and Stephenson was unable to get the yacht repaired and lost the grant money which he had previously signed over to Campbell. Stephenson later tried to raise funds for its restoration. His attempt (supported by the Rabaul Yacht Club) to mount a public appeal for money failed, and KATHLEEN GILLETT remained derelict in Guam for several years. Stephenson then fell ill and spent time in Sydney in hospital. Leland Campbell, the owner of the Guam yard in which KATHLEEN GILLETT was sitting, needed to offload the abandoned and wrecked boat - with Stephenson out of contact and owing money. Campbell approached Vaughan Tyndzik (a captain of a research vessel) and persuaded him to buy 'rights' to the KATHLEEN GILLETT. Letters advising Stephenson of the sale, in lieu of funds owing, were sent back to Sydney signed by Leland Campbell. Vaughan and Jane Tyndzik worked on the yacht in a piecemeal way as their funds allowed, living on board for some years and eventually restoring KATHLEEN GILLETT to sailing condition. The Norwegian Government bought the boat from the Tyndziks in 1987. The ketch was shipped back to Australia for restoration by Halvorsen Boats Pty Ltd (in consultation with Jack Earl) in preparation for its handover to the museum as the Norwegian bicentennial gift to Australia in 1988. KATHLEEN GILLETT was accepted into the National Maritime Collection in 1991 where it has been maintained in sailing condition at the museum wharves.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 13.18 m x 11.55 m x 4.56 m x 2.09 m, 23.44 tonnes x 8 tonnes x 2.2 tonnes, 98.25 square metres (43.25 ft x 38 ft x 15 ft x 6.85 ft, 23.85 tons x 8.13 tons x 2.24 tons, 1057.66 square feet)