

A life never far from water

By **Tim Kannegieter**

As a young child scrambling along the foreshores around Bay Street in the 1930s, checking his fishing lines and traps, Keith Tierney would have had little notion that one day he would become the Patron of Greenwich Flying Squadron nearly 90 years later. During the winter, the club unanimously voted to invite Keith to that honour, succeeding the late Hans Kannegieter.

Growing up in Greenwich

Back then Greenwich Road was a dirt track with dairy farms dotted on either side. Some of his earliest memories are of Oscar Ffrench shooting rats in his chook run, with his two eccentric sisters Carlotta and Evelyn peering at him from behind curtains. Four Greenwich streets are named after the family, including Keith's earliest home in Carlotta St.

Despite the rural nature of Greenwich, Keith was drawn mostly to the water.

"If anything floated, in those days we were on it, propelled by paddles, makeshift sails, and bailing tins. The underlying interest was always in fishing which then progressed to sailing."

This early love of water based activities was to shape Keith's life. Before he ever set foot on a boat, Keith was industrious in fishing, crabbing, prawning, squid jiggling or collecting mussels and oysters for a range of customers, including "old Doc Shelton" at 86 Greenwich Rd.

"Doc Shelton was good for two or three notes a year to our gullible headmaster Mr McIlraith, confirming tonsillitis that prevented school attendance for a day". That these certificates coincided with big runs of mullet in the river was pure coincidence.

However, Mr McIlraith helped inspire Keith's fascination with the sea through his detailed knowledge of Lord Nelson and the Battle of Trafalgar. After several years at the school, then the only one in Greenwich, "we felt very close to his nibs, Lord Nelson".

Keith notes that after an absence of 30 years or more, mussels and oysters are again growing in the upper harbour which he puts down to the removal of copper from antifouling. However, he mourns the permanent loss of the deep water holes up among the mangroves at the top of Gore Creek, when "an army of men on pre-war depression relief work were detailed to blast the Northwood cliff face to create today's playing field and so accelerated the silting of Betsy's bay to the extent it is today".

His first boat, a rowing dinghy, was given to him by Mr Flipo, the French Consul who lived at 10 Robertson St, also a fish customer. It was an 8ft snubnosed painted dinghy, clinker built. This was moved



Figure 1: Keith's love of fishing persisted throughout his life, shown here on Broughton Island

to the back yard of George Beencke at 39 Carlotta St, who was a foundation member of the club and a renowned boat builder. Working under an old apricot tree, the boat was stripped back to the original cedar wood, re-nailed and re-caulked.

“When it was relaunched, it was the neatest craft a boy could ever dream of owning in those Depression years.”

Early experiences at the club

Keith’s earliest recollection of the club was in 1937 at the age of 9 when his father Reginald took him to meet the club president and mayor George Holloway who was canvassing for youths to support their large 12ft sailing fleet, which at that time were all rigged along the beach by the park.



Figure 2: Keith's father Reginald (centre), shown here in 1914 on Narrabeen Lake, was a keen sailor himself.

“I’ll never forget the night that I went down to the front door of the club. I had my feet buried in the ground, I was scared and just didn’t want to be part of this.”

“Attempts at training, whilst well intentioned, were not up to today’s standards. If you could swim, wield a bailing dish and absorb rough language, then you were selected from the queue and thrown aboard a 12 at the last minute if the Nor-Easter appeared to be building into a black one. If you were any good you were kept on and if you weren't you were tipped over the side,

metaphorically. At any rate you were not wanted back.”

Keith quickly overcame his early fears.

“We'd fight and scabble and get terribly upset if we missed out on a job as a Bailer Boy on the 12s.”

In those days the Saturday 12ft races were a big drawcard in the district with local S.P. bookies taking bets and a spectator fleet following the fleet. If a 12ft capsized they would often be towed to the nearest shore and were occasionally abused by punters who had “done their dough”.

At the age of 10 or 11, children would graduate into a “newfangled design” known as a VJ. Over time the fleet of VJs increased quite steadily to about 10 or 12 boats.

George Beencke, the boat builder, had “taken a shine” to Keith. One time when Keith was competing in the VJ state championships, he was beaten through Humbug by a boat from Balmain.

“I was coming up toward the finish and I thought I had the line covered. But on the final tack I went a bit too

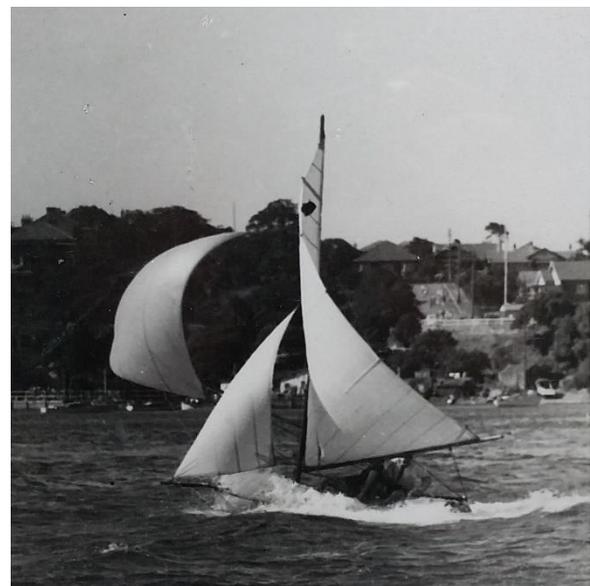


Figure 3: Keith sailing his VJ called Dolphin

far. He cut underneath me when I made the cardinal mistake of not sticking to the western shore. When I got ashore George Beencke tore into me, 'idiot, you couldn't sail a cork down a gutter'." This experience was never forgotten, or how to negotiate Humbug with an ebb tide in Easterly weather.

At the start of the war a new 16 foot skiff club had been established on Greenwich Point near the end of the park leading into the river.

"We VJ sailors were approached to help boost their junior numbers. As they were offering prize money, from memory it was two and six pence for a win and nine pence or so for a place, we all departed en-masse and sailed there for several years."

Keith eventually bought a 16 footer, *Mohawk*. His crew included some stalwarts of the club over the past few decades including Hans Kannegieter, who married Keith's sister Beth, as well as Alan Grundy who he jokingly refers to "as the worst Bailer Boy ever produced by the club". Another crew member was Arthur Foster who won the 12ft state championship for Greenwich Flying Squadron with Norman Brown in the famous *Ariki*.



Figure 4: The Mowhawk in the 1946 Australian Anniversary Regatta of the 16ft skiffs

This crew remained together for many years, moving to Drummoyne, again for better prize money, and later to the top club of the day, which was the Middle Harbour 16ft Skiff Club.

During the 1960s, as the Greenwich 16ft club was declining, Keith played an important role in securing land for a new clubhouse for the juniors, the site of the present day Greenwich Sailing Club on the point. He went on to become the new club's foundation president and taught all of his four children to sail there.

After the 16s, Keith spent three years skippering David Molesworth's 18ft *Brack Slacks* and then *Speedo Boy* at the Sydney Flying Squadron.

The shipping business

"Off the water", Keith still managed to find a way to be "on the water". His early career was with P&O as a cadet officer.

"My father had decided it was time for me to leave home and do something constructive, and my first job was as an apprentice on an 8000t

coastal cargo ship called the *Corinda* operating between Cairns and Adelaide.”

For several years he worked in coastal shipping where he gained his fourth mate’s certificate. However, after the Second World War there was a surplus of naval officers coming into the merchant fleet and promotion was at a standstill. Rather than losing him, Keith was offered a position by P&O as assistant purser on one of their cargo/passenger ships. He found it hard to accept initially but at the age of 21 he became the youngest purser ever employed by the P&O.

“That became my university education, because the purser of a ship has a finger on every department – with the captain, chief officer, chief engineer and chief steward. You’re the middle man for everything that went on aboard and it was the most amazing time of my early working life.”

One quirky connection with Greenwich throughout this period was that every time Keith returned from a voyage, with some cash, “old man” Oscar French would persuade him to buy a block of land from him. This launched Keith into a lifetime of property investing.

One experience that is seared in Keith’s memory from this time was when he found he was to be sent to the UK to crew a new ship called *Arafura* in about 1952. He had a good friend also working for P&O called Keith Wells and he was also assigned to the *Arafura*. The two of them had developed a “bit of a reputation for carrying on”, and so a partner announced at the last moment that since they were “bad news for each other”, they were to travel to England on separate ships.

“Wells was allocated to a new vessel called the *Tressillian* while I had been relegated to an older vessel, the *Trelawney* under captain Henry Care. Wells boasted a bit about getting the best vessel, with me coming second.

“So we set out at about the same time for the UK. I was flown to New Zealand on a Sunderland flying boat and joined the *Trelawney* where we loaded a cargo of wool for Antwerp via the Panama Canal. Wells went via Montreal in Canada where they took on a load of wheat. There was a new system in the early 1950s whereby the wheat was blasted into the hull of the ships with huge feeder bins of wheat in the tween decks to compensate for movement at sea.

“Wells last leg of his journey on the *Tresillian* was to Avenmouth and Swansea in Wales. At approximately the position of the FastNet Rock famous in racing today, the feeder bins emptied and this ship of 10,000 tonnes capsized and sank. Wells was last seen next to the upturned ship trying to rescue distressed members of the crew dragging them onto the upturned hull, but finally he was himself lost.

“So with one flick of a coin my mate Wells drowned and I lived on.”

Fishing business

Keith stayed with P&O for about 12 years in total but wanted to do something on his own.

“One of the passengers for a couple of trips to Japan and the East was Mabel Fitzgerald, daughter of Sir Henry Jones, whose family owned the IXL jam company. The Fitzgeralds were one of the notable families of Tasmania. She was the matriarch and she tried to persuade me to join the company but I realised after a short time that the other family members had different ideas about me crowding the nest. It became very obvious so I declined, but remained very close.

“Through this association I developed a strong feeling about Tasmania and I wanted to do something there. A company called the Eastern Tasmania Fisherman’s Cooperative had gone into liquidation. It bought lobsters off the fishermen and transported them to Sydney. I had a good look at this and reckoned I could make it work.”

So with money he had saved from the shipping days and with a bank guarantee from Mabel Fitzgerald he bought the company.

“I used to buy whole lobsters off the fishing boats and bring them to the Sydney Fish Markets on a vessel of the New Zealand Shipping Company. I was selling lobsters to the toughest men ever in the fish game – George Rochester, Arthur Murrell, Rocky Cam and others. They were all owners of steam operated fishing trawlers and virtually controlled the Sydney fish markets.

“After a couple of years of battling away at this game I was contacted by a young wholesaler, Nick Larcos. He said, ‘do you realise I’m buying your lobsters, and this is what I’m paying these other fellas? It turns out that I was being absolutely ripped off by these old buggers. Within 12 months I’d gone into business with Larcos.”

For the next 25 years, they were partners in the seafood industry, expanded into prawns in the gulf of Carpentaria, abalone, trout in the Snow Mountains, and many other seafoods sourced from all over Australia, New Zealand, Japan and as far afield as Europe. Keith eventually went it alone and among his achievements was the establishment of a lobster industry in Papua New Guinea.

“There’s an annual migrating march of lobsters between the Island of Daru, which is at the mouth of the Fly River, and Yuill Island in the southeast. After their march, the lobsters throw their eggs and disappear into the Coral Sea – into oblivion. No one had ever attempted to harvest them, so I secured a number of contract prawning trawlers out of the Gulf of Carpentaria that were prawning, and used their huge nets to pull in these lobsters in quantities that you could only imagine. The only problem was the decimation of the catch by sharks that used to rip the nets to shreds. Keith worked with the prime minister of PNG Michael Somare to export the lobsters from PNG to the US.”

In time Keith’s business expanded and became large enough to attract the attention of global players and eventually was sold to Amatil, a subsidiary of British American Tobacco.

The Sydney to Hobart

Throughout his working life, Keith kept up a keen interest in sailing. After VJ, 16 footers and 18s he progressed to yachts.

His first Hobart race aboard *Jasnar* in 1950 was a baptism of fire being



Figure 5: Keith Tierney on the bow of the *Jasnar* at the start of the 1950 Hobart race with Keith Wells amidships

“one of the toughest races ever recorded”.

“The beaches had been closed for about three days and there were horrific winds. In fact at dusk of the first day we could still see the light of south head behind us. We'd made no progress through the southeastern gale.”

Jasnar was a 28ft double ended sloop, skippered by Gordon Ingate and including the ill-fated Keith Wells as navigator, whose chart consisted of a school atlas. Prior to the race she sank below her lines so to make her lighter they took the engine out, leaving it on the Mosman wharf for the duration.

The southerly abated eventually but quickly built into a 30-40 knots north-easterly as they crossed Bass Strait. At 12:15 on 29 December the boat broached, breaking the spinnaker pole and carrying away the port runner. Repairs were made and they continued on, surfing down waves at around 15 knots.

Keith Wells eventually instructed the crew to gybe when he thought they would lay Tasman Island and as they drew close found they had the 250ft wide gap between the island and Cape Pillar dead ahead. With a small spinnaker still flying they shot the gulch with water surging from side to side against the 1000ft walls towering above them. When they heard of this feat, race organizers amended the rules to make Tasman Island a rounding mark of the course, prohibiting this short cut. So Keith claims this as another first for the Sydney to Hobart, which again will never be repeated.

Keith ultimately went on to compete in 15 Sydney to Hobarts. His Tasmanian mentor Mabel Fitzgerald was a fixture on the docks in Hobart, ready with a bottle of champagne as the crew came ashore and once with a chauffeur driven car at 2am.



Figure 6: Keith sailed the 1951 Hobart on Fortuna, pictured here at Constitution Dock third from bottom

His Yachts

Around 1970, Keith decided to buy his first yacht, a Sparkman and Stephens 40-footer called *Kintama*.

“She was built in Hong Kong and I bought her from the original owner and we raced the *Kintama* very successfully in several Hobarts. We had a second and third in our division. The boat never won the Hobart, although I missed out on the blue water point score because of broken gear.”

When asked if I ever won the Hobart, the answer is no, but I have two records that that will never be broken. First down and back without an engine, first to run the gulch behind Tasman Island.



Figure 7: The *Hullabaloo* rounding Tasman Island and passing Freycinet Peninsular (left) in the 1990 Hobart race

Keith next commissioned another Sparkman and Stephens yacht, a 37 foot sloop named the *Hullabaloo*, which he raced for the next 12, 15 years. He competed in the Mooloolaba to Coffs Harbour race many times, winning it once and ventured twice to Lord Howe Island. Over this time

he sailed regularly in Cruising Yacht Club and Middle Harbour offshore races.

Keith became Commodore at Middle Harbour Yacht club in 1989 and was later made a life member.

He returned to Greenwich Flying Squadron in 1995, purchasing his most recent boat *Arawa* a Cavalier 28, which he sailed until recently. With age restricting his mobility, Keith has handed over the tiller of *Arawa* to co-owner Graeme McDowell and daughter Susan. He now peruses the twilight starts from his house directly above the club.

Keith is still an active member of the club. He and Harvey Porter have been setting the twilight courses for the club for several years, which he says is a great but tricky job.

“You're watching most of the afternoon, tracking any thunderstorms, determining upcoming wind shifts and trying to select the best courses to get some decent works in both the north and south easters.

“GFS is a unique club and one of the best operating in Sydney,” Keith said. “In comparison to many of the larger clubs, none of them have captured the esprit de corps that we have in Greenwich. In other clubs, people often jump off their boats and disappear after races. But there is a mystic about Bay Street, the wharf and BBQs on the deck over the water. Despite the difficulties of ingress and egress, there is no other club that has the same wonderful atmosphere post-race.”

One of the things that Keith is passionate about is youth sailing which he says is still the hidden backbone of any club, providing future generations of sailors.

“I am thrilled when I look down from our house each weekend and watch our own determined young sabot and laser sailors venturing forth. At such times I confidently feel that the future of sailing is in excellent hand. However, he says that with today’s society we need to work on it constantly.

“A few years ago, I was down in my shed by the water and spotted some kids in a clapped out dinghy that had been put together with a couple of clasps holding the thing together. They had fishing lines and were drifting past. It took me back to the generosity of old Mr Flipo and working away under that old Apricot tree refurbishing my first boat.

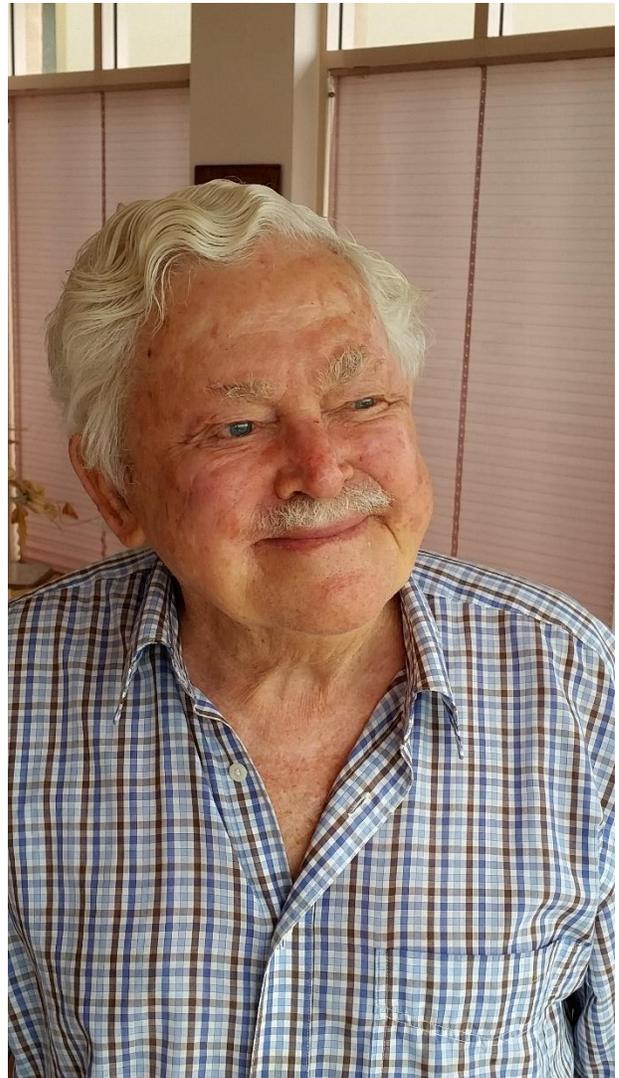


Figure 8: Keith Tierney in 1950 (left) and 2017

“I had a couple of old dinghies so I beckoned them over and asked them if they could fish better if they had a decent boat? I showed them the dinghy and said they could have it. They stared at me with a ‘what’s the catch’ kind of attitude. Then they had a look at it. The dinghy had a loose spot in it under one of the seats and a few little things that needed fixing. So they went into a huddle and then came back and said ‘Thanks mate but there’s too much work to be done on it’. I stood there gobsmacked.”

Youth sailing needs to be constantly encouraged, Keith says.

“There have been five or six generations of the Ridley family sailing in or around Greenwich and Don Ridley is currently organising the juniors. It gives me encouragement that the club spirit is alive and well, continuing into future generations.

“Over the years, youth sailing has waxed or waned, depending on the enthusiasm of one or two individuals who get into it and bring everyone along with them. That’s the way it has always been and probably always will. We just need anyone in the club with kids, or who know young people, to bring them along and encourage them into a boat, just like my father did.”

Tim Kannegieter is skipper of Force Four, Humbug Editor and nephew of Keith Tierney. A fuller account of Keith’s early years are published in GFS: The first 75 years by Rosemary Lucas, from which parts of this account were drawn.