

01 March 2021

Response to Williamstown Maritime Precinct Framework – Draft Report

Williamstown is irrefutably a most significant element in the early heritage of Victoria and much of that heritage has a Maritime flavour. Given the importance of the Williamstown Precinct and the plethora of maritime heritage infrastructure assets in this precinct, MMHN eagerly awaited the GHD Draft Report investigating options for the future of the Williamstown Maritime Precinct.

The stated WMPF vision is:

The iconic Williamstown maritime precinct will be a premier and interactive cultural, maritime and boating destination, centred on the working port as an integral component of the Victorian Ports system. The precinct will enhance the economic and social values of Williamstown for visitors and community to engage and learn about the area's living maritime and cultural heritage, in a safe, connected and flexible environment.

This Vision is generally agreed and supported by MMHN. However, the vision, and subsequently the report, fails to acknowledge the importance and preservation of our maritime heritage nor does the report actually explain how the vision will be achieved.

From a maritime heritage perspective, the long and confusing Draft Report is totally underwhelming. Despite its wonderful photographs and diagrams, its purpose, content and outcomes are not aligned and it lacks a coherent strategy for the long-term optimisation across this important precinct. The piecemeal framework proposed and the lack of a coherent strategy across the broader precinct will inevitably lead to the destruction (either deliberate or, by neglect) and subsequent loss of some of Victoria's, and for that matter Australia's, most important maritime heritage.

On the one hand, there are plenty of references in the text to history, maritime heritage, cultural tourism, maritime movement, maritime infrastructure etc., but given what we all know about the marvellous maritime heritage, and importantly, Naval history of Williamstown, it is alarming to read in the report lukewarm references such as “*The preliminary desktop assessment indicates that historic (non-Aboriginal) heritage is present within the Precinct. (!) Approvals are likely required under the Heritage Act 2017 and the Planning and Environment Act 1987 if the historic heritage places are impacted by the proposed works.*”

The Draft Report ignores the extensive maritime influence Williamstown has had on Melbourne and pays no heed to the preservation of this substantial element of

Melbourne's history. Not the least, the report, almost totally disregards and fails to adequately address the importance of the historic links between Williamstown and the Victorian Colonial Navy and the infancy of the Royal Australian Navy. While the current ownership of the Alfred Graving Dock and surrounding buildings is with BAE the long history and heritage is not addressed.

This dock took its first ship, the Victorian battleship, *Nelson*, in 1874, and became part of a significant industrial-naval complex at Williamstown. In 1913 it became part of the State Shipbuilding Yard and was purchased by the Commonwealth in 1918. In 1924, it passed to the Melbourne Harbor Trust and became His Majesties Naval Dockyard in 1942. The Alfred Graving Dock is now listed on the Victorian Heritage Register.

At its peak the Victorian Navy could boast some 15 vessels, all using the Alfred Graving Dock and the nearby Naval Depot. Because of these factors Williamstown was an attractive proposition to be the first Fleet base for the new RAN. Although this never eventuated because the land area was too small for a fleet base, the traditions of the fledgling Royal Australian Navy were established in the Victorian Navy, at Williamstown, and remained within the dockyard precincts through the 20th century. The first two ships of the young Service, HMA Ships *Parramatta* and *Yarra*, had their first home docking in 1910 in the Alfred Graving Dock. Throughout its history, the Williamstown Dockyard site has constructed some 40 odd ships for RAN use and have refitted and maintained many more. The last RAN ships outfitted at Williamstown were the new amphibious ships HMAS *Adelaide* and *Canberra* only a few short years ago.

The Williamstown Naval Dockyard also had deep connections with Antarctic exploration going back to 1912, when the steamer MV *Aurora*, on its way to the Southern Continent, was brought into the graving dock for a refit. Sir Douglas Mawson fitted out his ship, *Discovery*, on his outward journey in 1930 and on his return in 1931. HMAS *Wyatt Earp* was damaged by the extremes of sub-Antarctic weather off Heard Island, and she entered the dock for repairs in 1948. Following a second trip to Antarctica she returned to the yard in the same year, where she was laid up until her disposal four years later. LST 3501 (later HMAS *Labuan*) replaced *Wyatt Earp*, and was also refitted at Williamstown in 1948 after her first trip to the ice. She made three more trips in 1948, 1949 and 1950, each trip beginning and ending at Williamstown Naval Dockyard. The French Antarctic Research Ship, *Commandant Charcot*, refitted at the yard in 1949 and 1977 saw the dockyard's final contact with Polar exploration. In that year, MV *Thala Dan*, a supply ship chartered by Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) was holed and rushed back to Williamstown for emergency repairs.

The Report lists the extraordinary number of relevant documents impacting the precinct from a multitude of responsible authorities and organisations, i.e. the perennial bureaucratic tangle which constitutes to entrap, inhibit, possibly impede, the progress of maritime planning in this State – let alone in this most significant Williamstown precinct. The Draft Report should propose a management structure which will seek to optimise the preservation of maritime heritage balance with the access and operation of the Precinct.

The MMHN believes Williamstown deserves better. There is a fabulous opportunity to really make something of Williamstown and get it converted into a “Mystic Williamstown Seaport” by making use of the Albert Graving Dock, wharves and buildings and by “helping” the government and industry with an area “too hard to handle”. MMHN could assist to get groups together to support this and really build a true maritime heritage town by linking into the heritage buildings and the community of Williamstown.