Docklands News September

Opening up Melbourne Waterways

The Melbourne Maritime Heritage Network focus on maritime matters includes activation of our vastly under-developed and under-utilized public asset – the waterways of Melbourne. And, of course, Docklands is at the very heart of our waterways.

Few people are aware that taken as a whole, Melbourne's navigable waterways system is greater than that of Sydney. In the past, the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers, the Estuary, Victoria Harbour, Port Phillip Bay and along the South West were a much livelier part of the fabric in the life Melbourne and around the coastline than has been the case in the recent decades during which our waterways have languished.

In bygone days, the punts and ferry services were an essential, colourful, bustling 'fixture' and a necessity in the life of Melbourne and beyond. The waterways, the Yarra, the Maribyrnong, were the major 'highways'. How busy our waterways once were with punts and ferries.

"Before the bridges were built, punts facilitated traffic across the Yarra River. The best-known were at the site of the present Princes, Punt Road and Hawthorn Bridges. The first rope-hauled punt, on the site of Princes Bridge, was operated by William Watts from 1838. In 1839 William Lonsdale set the site of a punt servicing the road from Williamstown to Geelong on the Saltwater (Maribyrnong) River, a little above its junction with the Yarra at the site of present-day Footscray. Several other punts operated on the river in the city area from the 1840s. Eventually the demands led to development of steam punts. The first of these, between Spencer and Clarendon Streets, the site of the present Spencer Street (Batman) Bridge, operated from 1884 until the late 1920s. The most recent was from Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, to a point by Newport power station. Three steam-powered punts, each larger than its predecessor, ran here between 1873 and 1974, and were guided across the river on a chain. The last, with a capacity of 32 vehicles, was built in 1931.Steam ferries commenced service from the Yarra to Williamstown before the building of the railway, and another ran upstream from Princes Bridge to Cremorne Gardens (Richmond). The Fire Fly ran the first ferry service on the Yarra on 28 October 1838. Ferries met the Geelong trains at Greenwich Point for two years before the completion of the line to Spencer Street.

A service of greater significance was provided between Port Melbourne and Williamstown, principally by the paddle steamer Gem*, which gave its name to Gem Pier operating from 1868 until 1911. The* Rosny*, the last ferry boat on the service, operated between 1919 and 1931. Other ferries in service on this run were the* Queen *and* Baldrock *(1907-11), and* Planet *and* Williamstown *(1910-19).*

Several smaller cross-river services have also been run in the port area with rowing boats and later with motor boats, the last of which, from Spotswood to Fishermen's Bend, closed in 1979." For more information, see:
https://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01211b.htm

Imagine if Docklands became the Hub of much more ferry activity post-lockdown. Surely an exciting prospect to re-kindle our enthusiasm for waterways transportation?

MMHN is aware that ferry stakeholders are very keen to 'unlock' the potential of our waterways and to expand the options available to the public which clearly enjoys being in, on and around Melbourne's waterways. Already ferry patronage down river and beyond is growing – and the potential for an expansion of the services is obvious. MMHN understands that proposals to expand waterways services require 'navigation' through the red-tape of bureaucratic tangles. How can we change the mind-set of those in charge of our waterways towards <u>enabling</u> activation rather than simply efficient <u>control</u>?

There are essentially two categories of waterways use to consider: commuting and tourism. MMHN takes the view that that given the State government already invests significantly in what is essentially the 'passive' management of our waterways, why not recognize that post-lockdown, we could achieve a much more productive use of Melbourne's waterways? This can easily become an exciting and beneficial element in Melbourne's economic and social recovery. Ferries are a healthy, safer new option for commuter public transport and as a recreational option. Given tram, train and bus services are subsidized by the State government, why not ferries? Few us would deny the 'fun factor' of being out on the water, in the fresh air, whether on our way to work or elsewhere. Melbourne is most certainly a maritime city !