



The Canopus

The *Canopus* is the most well known and oldest of the wooden boats of Mandurah. Like the *Seagull* and the *Fairy Queen*, the *Canopus* was built to the Montague whaler model; double-ended, clinker-built, cutter rigged and fitted with a centreboard by Bob Smart.

Bob Smart emigrated from Aberdeen, Scotland in 1870 and spent ten years as a superintendent in the Bengal Railways before moving to New South Wales in 1880. While here he started a preserving works, and the skills developed running this he brought with him, along with his family, to Mandurah in about 1892.

He established himself in the cannery which had been founded by Charles Broadhurst in present day Smart Street in 1878. His enterprises also extended to a fish curing works in Safety Bay. Unfortunately, with the general decline in fish stocks around the turn of the century and the added pressure of fresh fish being sent to Perth via the railway at Pinjarra, the Smart family had closed their cannery by 1904/05.



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In 1910 Bob Smart, looking for a new livelihood for his wife and two sons Harry and Campbell, ordered the Canopus from builders in Fremantle. The boat took two years to be delivered as Smart had specified that New Zealand Kauri be used for fabricating the hull, one of the strongest and most long lasting timbers used in ship construction. In 1912 delivery was taken of the boat and she went into service taking produce and canned fish from Mandurah to Fremantle, returning with stores for the town. Canopus had her own jetty under the Fremantle traffic bridge; however her life as a cargo carrying vessel was to be short lived. After the First World War the railway line at Pinjarra and the improving quality of roads made sea transport increasingly uneconomic. The final straw was the completion of the new Rockingham-Mandurah road in the early 1920s.

A number of years after the ship was launched, Mr Smart had an engine installed. Capable of being run on petrol and kerosene this auxiliary was used when crossing the Mandurah estuary bar. The engine was a modified Model-T Ford four cylinder and this engine still exists in good condition along with the ship's anchor. The propeller, however, was stolen years later when the vessel was on the slipway at the Peninsula Hotel.

Bob Smart soon turned Canopus into a charter fishing boat, moving his livelihood to servicing the needs of the growing tourist trade in Mandurah. Canopus gained a reputation as a 'Smart boat' and played host to many noted Western Australian identities such as Governor Sir James Mitchell and a number of State Premiers. Operating from the boatshed at Stingray Point a 6 hour fishing trip cost each passenger 1 Crown and lasted from 6am to 12pm. The Smart family subsisted on what could be made from these voyages, lodgers staying at the family home and fish caught from the boat.

Mr Smart's wife died before he did and his eldest son Campbell had left Mandurah to become a schoolteacher. The younger son Harry, with assistance from his father, had set up a hire boat business in the boatshed which the family owned at Stingray point.

As Mr Smart reached retirement age he looked for someone to take on Canopus, and in fact threatened to have it burnt unless someone he trusted agreed to take her on. Harold Blakeley Snr., owner of the Peninsula Hotel where Mr Smart was a regular, agreed. It is said that he paid £100 for Canopus in the mid 1930s. Mr Blakeley kept the Canopus operating as Mr Smart had in the charter fishing role with Sam Renfrey, a well known Mandurah fisherman, as skipper.

After Harry Smart's hire boat business collapsed it was bought by Harold Blakeley Snr., Harry was kept on by Mr Blakeley as yard man and he remained in the role for 42 years. As we can see, Harold Blakeley had now added a valuable tourist business with 13 boats including Canopus, available for hire or charter all of which were pioneered by the Smart family.

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Eventually the Canopus had to be laid up as Mr Renfrey could not obtain a Coxswain's ticket, a newly introduced requirement to carry paying passengers. Mr Blakeley then had Canopus hauled up the slips at the boatshed on Stingray point, where it rested for many years, and after a short stay in the Mandurah Marina it was moved after Mr Blakeley's retirement to his back yard on Mandurah Terrace. Mr. Blakeley felt that he owed it to his old friend and customer Bob Smart to always look after Canopus just as he had promised to do in the mid 1930s. As of today, Canopus still lays in the heart of Mandurah within a few hundred metres of where it was delivered when new in 1912.

The significance of Canopus lies in that it is the only object which can be said to span the three great eras of the economic and social history of Mandurah. It was the last cargo carrying boat that took farm produce to metropolitan markets and returned with stores for the townspeople as boats had done from 1830. It took part in fishing and the fish canning industry when cargo carrying became unviable. When, in turn, fish canning became uneconomic Canopus was employed in the tourist trade as part of one of the first tourist oriented businesses in the Peel region. This reflects the three great economic leaps that Mandurah and the people who made up its community had to make to enter the 20th Century. The repercussions of these leaps are something we are all still living with today.

