



Leviathan

Mr Stirling Tuckey tells of the era of “Leviathan”, a cargo vessel that worked between Fremantle and Mandurah.

Black Bess

There would be only a handful of people in the township of Mandurah today who would remember the *Leviathan*. Most of them would remember her as “Black Bess” or just plain Wilson’s boat, but she and her builder deserve to take a place in the early history of Mandurah for it was the venture of an old man, helped by his two sons, who worked hard for many long hours, days, months and even years, barely existing at times for lack of money or even food, to accomplish a purpose. This was to provide for Mandurah a seagoing vessel to carry cargo to and from Fremantle and help put Mandurah on the map.

Well do I remember the day when she was launched!

The chocks were knocked from beneath her hull and with quite some persuasion she slid down into the creek barely deep enough for her to float. From the “big bridge” she looked immense. She must have been the biggest ship ever to be within the Mandurah bar.



Leviathan Continued

Fremantle to Mandurah

Before the Great War the only means of transport between Fremantle and Mandurah was by sea (cargo only) or rail to Pinjarra and then by horse and coach or some other form of horse transport to the township.

The road to Fremantle was for the greater part a track through the sand, except for patches of stony outcrop for miles north of Mandurah. Old timers, and those not so old, will remember travelling over this section and the bone shaking experience they had to endure for an hour, if they were lucky enough to accomplish the stretch in that time, as very few vehicles covered this notorious piece of road without several punctures and broken springs.

While horse-drawn transport from Pinjarra could only bring a limited amount of goods (and this necessitated double handling at the station), there were small sailing ships (with one or two crewmen) plying between Mandurah and Fremantle, bringing much needed supplies and taking back the local produce of canned fish, tinned honey and banksia firewood (possibly for bakeries).

The craft were owned and manned by the locals - old salts in most cases - used to the sea. Nevertheless, it was a hazardous voyage and at least three lives were lost before 1920. The bar was treacherous and many boats were lost, in some cases never to be seen again.

Making of Leviathan

Charles Olaf Wilson was inspired by the need of a bigger and better cargo boat than was being operated at the time, and in early 1915 laid the keel of a 40-ton carrying capacity jarrah vessel, right alongside the present fisheries inspector's home at Soldier's Cove (commonly known at the time as "the Creek" and later as "Mill Creek"). *Leviathan* as she was to be named was to be 50ft long with a 14ft beam and 7ft deep.

The keel was 16" wide and 9" deep and she was designed as a very shallow draft and all but 1" of keel was inside the hull. She had two masts, main and mizzen, and two centre boards. The plan for lofting (correcting her fore and aft lines) was set out in the old Mandurah hall adjacent to the old school (now the police station).

The head master of the school, the late Mr W.R. Dalrymple, who was also in charge of the hall, allowed Wilson's son, Menzies (named after the town of Menzies where he was born), one week to do the job of setting out.

Wilson Senior was 80 years old when he started his boat and although it was launched in 1920, it was never really finished, because of financial reasons and the need to get the vessel into the water to earn some money. The ribs were left bare and hatch covers were done without, with tarpaulins to help keep out the rain or the sea.

It was about this time that Bolton's of Fremantle, acquired a timber mill almost at the head of the "creek" which then became Mill Creek. After virtually rebuilding the mill and installing quite a deal of equipment, the company began to turn out cart wheel fellies, axle boxes, spokes and other equipment for the manufacture of horse-drawn vehicles. It was still the day of the horse, and Bolton lost no time in helping to finance and commission Wilson's ship to bring the timber products by sea to Fremantle.

The timber, which was felled almost at mill site, was of tuart which abounded along the coastal plain and lent itself well to cart, dray or wagon manufacture, being extremely tough and dense of grain. As the mill was situated only a short distance from the water's edge, a jetty was built and a trolley line run out from the heart of the mill to the jetty, where the ship was to load.



Leviathan continued

It took Wilson more than four years to build his craft and he was almost 85 when he completed it to the stage of launching. It was painted black and from then on it was tagged "Black Bess." He died at the age of 88 but lived to see his pride and joy wrecked on the Mandurah Bar in full view of spectators on the beach who flocked from the town and countryside to watch her breaking up. It was said this hastened his end and it could have been so.

Charles Olaf Wilson

Old Mr. Wilson was an unforgettable character as I remember him. He was a small man, very spritely for his age, bare-headed and sported a huge yellow beard. He was born in Scotland, brought up in Stockholm and spent half his time as a shipwright, but apparently had a flare for photography to which he devoted the other half.

His parents had been lost in the North Sea when he was a baby and, having no family ties or responsibility like so many young men of his day, ran away to sea. He was 21 and found his way to New Zealand, but did not care much for this country. His often repeated remark was "*It was raining when I arrived and raining when I left.*" Wilson then made for Victoria and set up a studio in Burke, a terrific contrast to the sea, ships and shipbuilding.

Then in the 1890s, he went to Western Australia, to the Goldfields and Menzies, eventually settling with his family at Mandurah in 1911. Ironically he was supposed to have travelled to Mandurah by sea with his boys on one of the small cargo vessels owned by Halliday, a local Mandurah resident. However, Halliday never reached Fremantle to make the voyage back; he was lost at sea. So Wilson took the train to Pinjarra and the coach to Mandurah.

Last days of Cargo Trips

Leviathan made eight trips to Fremantle (seven with cargo) and used to tie up at the old Brewery Jetty at Fremantle just down from East Street, east of the traffic bridge.

It was early morning on a cargo trip when she ran into difficulties with skipper Billy Roberts at the helm. The weather was not bad, but the state of the bar was notorious in those days, shifting from place to place (and still is to a lesser degree). This plus the wind and the tide sealed her doom. She was deeply loaded on this occasion and, in spite of her size, was low in the water.

She had grounded on the bar on previous occasions and had been freed with the help of Wilson's launch, kedging and the tide so there was no particular alarm at the time. It has been recorded that on one occasion, when she became stuck Captain Joe Cox, a well-known local identity at the time, took Wilson's launch out, put down kedges and tried to winch her off, only to find himself aground.

Both vessels were securely anchored and left till the following day and were then found to be swinging freely in plenty of water. However, on the last occasion of *Leviathan* grounding, nothing could shift her and she remained fast for a week, after which a blow set in sending the seas crashing over her stern into the unprotected holds and filling her up with water and sand.

Gradually she broke up and her bottom drifted ashore. Her cargo spilled into the treacherous sands of the bar and sank.



Leviathan continued

A smaller vessel, the *Eclipse*, owned by the late Hobart Tuckey, MLA, took over the run for a while and, skippered by Captain Cox and later Billy Roberts, did not encounter any mishap. She was equipped with a reliable engine as well as sails.

Then, Sumptons, of Fremantle, took over with huge, solid, tyred Daimler trucks. The plains were still rough, but the road had been improved and built in places. So far as Mandurah was concerned, the era of the Cargo Vessel was over.

References: Harry Jackson folder: Mandurah Local Studies Collection

