

Charles Olaf Wilson and the *Leviathan*

Charles Olaf Wilson

(1838 – 1926) played a significant part in the maritime history of Mandurah. “Old Mr. Wilson was an unforgettable character as I remember him”, (as described by a past resident). “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.*”



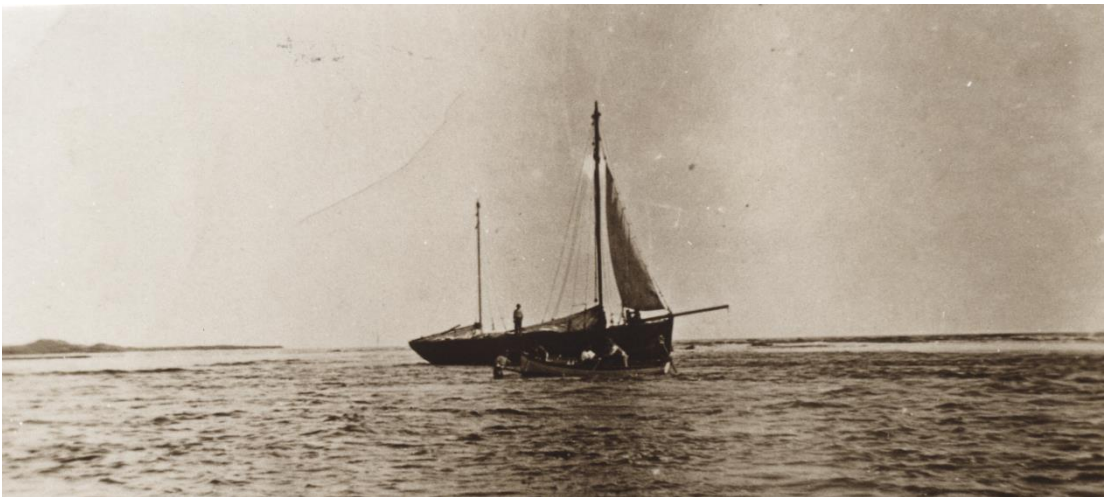
Wilson then made for Victoria and set up a photography studio in Burke, a terrific contrast to the sea, ships, and shipbuilding. Then in the 1890s, he came to Western Australia and the goldfields, eventually settling with his family at Mandurah in 1911. Ironically, he was supposed to have travelled to Mandurah by sea with his boys on one of the small cargo vessels owned by a Mr 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 coach to Mandurah.

Leviathan

It was about this time that Bolton’s of Fremantle, acquired a timber mill almost at the head of the “creek” which ran in to Soldier’s Cove. After virtually rebuilding the mill and installing quite a deal of equipment, the company began to turn out cartwheel 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 the mill site, was tuart which abounded along the coastal plain and lent itself well to cart, dray, or wagon manufacture, being extremely tough and dense. 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. 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 that the tragedy of losing his beloved *Black Bess* hastened his end.



In 2019 the company **Blank Walls** were selected to complete a mural for the museum. Their design, which highlights the story of Charles Olaf Wilson and the Leviathan was completed in a shaded spray can style which allowed a realistic portrait of Wilson to be included. Jerome Davenport, the artist who completed the mural divides his time between Perth and London, with several of his murals featuring historic scenes and historic figures being found in the UK.

References:

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Richards R. *The Murray District of Western Australia: A History*. Shire of Murray, 1978.

Richards R. *Murray and Mandurah: A sequel history of the Old Murray District of Western Australia*. Shire of Murray and City of Mandurah, 1993.

