



The Wooden Boat Builders

The hey day of commercial shipbuilding on the Gippsland Lakes may be gone but timber boat builders like James Frecheville and Tim Heaney are ensuring that some of the industry's rich history is preserved.

Words by Melissa Farley. Pictures by Lisa Baker.

The woman could see the man staring at the old boat, transfixed. A restoration project, it wasn't much to look at; not yet anyway. She was insisting her shipwright son restore the dilapidated wooden cruiser to its former glory, remembering lazy summer days on the Thames before the war.

"Can I help you?" she asked, approaching the man slowly. In her mid eighties, she no longer did anything quickly. Still, she enjoyed the banter of the boatyard in preference to the quietness of her empty home.

The man turned to face her. He looked to be in his late forties and there were tears in his eyes.

"This was my father's boat," he said. "I saw it from across the road, so I had to come in to be sure." He smiled. "You won't believe it, but I lost my virginity on this boat."

The man glanced quickly at the old woman, concerned he may have offended her. He was surprised when she merely smiled and winked at him conspiratorially.

"Young man," she said laughing, "so did I!"

Spend some time with sailor and boat builder, James Frecheville, and you'll hear lots of stories like this one. He was privy to this particular exchange while working at *Freebody's*, England's oldest and most revered boatyard. James and his wife sailed from Australia to England in the eighties aboard a yacht they built themselves, and then spent happy days living in Hurley, Berkshire, while James honed his chosen craft of building and restoring timber boats at *Peter Freebody*

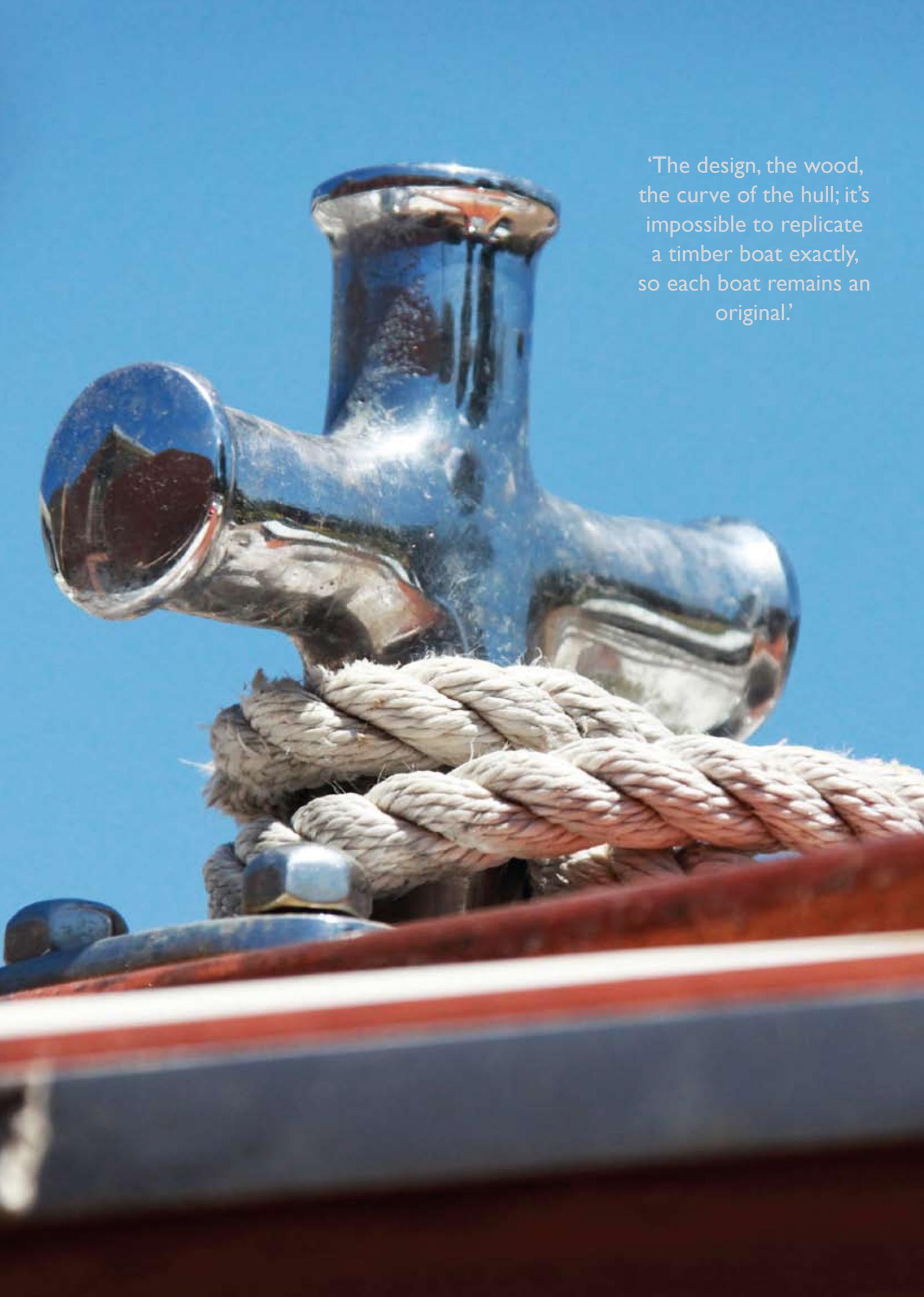
& Co on the Thames. An avid sailor from the age of eight, James and his wife returned to Australia and their home on the Gippsland Lakes in 1990.

Once upon a time there was several boatyards dotted around the Gippsland Lakes. The Bull family owned and operated one of the most prolific. Captain James Bull arrived in Gippsland in 1878 and was master and commander of many well known trading and tourist vessels. His son, Joseph Bull, started building trading vessels and charter boats in Metung in 1924. *Bull's Cruisers* was finally sold in 2006.

Although the hey day of commercial shipbuilding on the Gippsland Lakes is gone, timber boat builders like James Frecheville ensure that some of that rich history is preserved. Today, James and his business partner, Tim Heaney, are recognised Australia wide for their craftsmanship and passion. Tim was a carpenter-builder for many years before approaching James to work with him. Like James, he learnt to sail as a child and is passionate about sailing and wooden boats.

Now co-owners of *Frecheville Heaney Boat Builders* (and Commodore and Rear Commodore respectively of the local yacht club), the dynamic duo salvage childhood memories and maritime treasures alike in their small but busy Paynesville workshop.

"Wooden boats are special because each one is unique," explains James. "The design, the wood, the curve of the hull; it's impossible to replicate a timber boat exactly, so each boat remains an original."



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But James and Tim are selective when it comes to choosing their next restoration project. A timber boat has to have at least one of two things to capture the interest of the Frecheville - Heaney crew; it has to have a boat building pedigree, which makes it of historical significance, or it has to be of sentimental value to the owner.

"Otherwise it's just an old wooden boat," shrugged James.

The story of *Silver Gull* is a case in point. Sydney owner, David Latham, tracked James and Tim down at the 1999 Sydney Wooden Boat Festival; he had a 1941, 22' Chris Craft Sedan he wanted restored. No-one in Sydney would touch it.

James went with David to see the boat and tentatively agreed to undertake the restoration, subject to a thorough inspection back at the Frecheville - Heaney workshop.

"It was one of the worst days I can remember when the boat arrived from Sydney on the truck," says James. "We got her into the workshop and started stripping her; before long we had little more than a pile of oil soaked firewood."

James had the unenviable task of ringing David in Sydney to tell him that his boat was all but gone.

"The stem, apron and transom fashion timbers were all that could be resurrected," said James. "At least I had the frames from which to

make patterns for new ones."

Tim added, "We could rebuild her, but the only original part would be at the stem and stern, rather than restoring the original from stem *to* stern!"

Despite being told it would be much more cost effective to build a new boat, David Latham insisted that *Silver Gull* be brought back to life. His father had taught him to water-ski behind the boat; David had taught his son to water-ski behind the boat, and with his son getting married the following year, David had every intention of teaching his first grandchild to water-ski behind *Silver Gull*. So that was that.

Though at times tedious, the restoration was one of the most satisfying James can remember.

"David and his wife would visit every few weeks from Sydney to see how things were going," says James. "They would fly into Melbourne, catch the train to Bairnsdale and I would pick them up at the station and bring them to the workshop."

The boat, like others, was rebuilt section by section using modern wood epoxy technology and coatings to create a more durable boat that would ultimately require less maintenance.

David and James became firm friends during the process, so much so that James drove *Silver Gull* at the harbor side wedding of David's son.

"It was a high society affair in Pittwater," recalled James, "but the highlight was when the



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bridal party took off in *Silver Gull* after the ceremony."

Wedding photos show *Silver Gull's* mahogany hull gleaming in the late afternoon sun as she flies across the water. The growl of the new V8 engine mixed with the cheers of family and friends.

"Everyone knew the history of the boat and what it had taken to get her there," said James.

James and Tim agree that a passion for wooden boats can be an expensive past-time, where the heart often rules the head.

"You don't become involved with wooden boats for the money," laughed James.

James and Tim refer to their customers as 'patrons' rather than clients, and concede that quite a few are wealthier than the average Joe. But they are at pains to point out that there are also many ordinary people who scrimp and save to restore an old friend, or an antique found forgotten and rotting in a backyard.

"Wooden boats have a special character," said Tim. 'Each boat has its own soul.'

James agreed. "At the end of the day, none of us ever really own a timber boat. We just have temporary stewardship of something that we will be around long after we've gone."

Looking at their expressions, the thought seems to please James and Tim. And given the months, sometimes years, that can go into a single build or restoration project, it seems only fitting that the final creation be a permanent tribute to the passion and skill of these gifted and generous artisans.

You can visit Frecheville Heaney online at www.fhboats.com.au or in person at 59 Slip Road, Paynesville.





Timber Converts

Words by Melissa Farley. Pictures supplied.

Wayne Sleeth and Lesley Thomasz had decided to buy a small cruiser for overnighting around the Gippsland Lakes. Keen sailors, they wanted something they could spend time on when the weather wasn't suitable for sailing.

Then they met *Miss Australia*.

"It was love at first sight," admitted Lesley. "We certainly hadn't planned on buying a forty foot timber boat, but we were captivated by her lines and her history."

Miss Australia was built in Mordialloc in 1954 for industrialist, Bernard Dowd, Chief of Dowd Associates, owner of Hickory Lingerie. Dowd is credited with reinvigorating the Miss Australia Quest through Hickory's sponsorship of the event from 1954. He initially commissioned the boat as a prize for the Quest, but decided to keep her as a fundraising and party boat. Many of the newly crowned Miss Australias were entertained aboard the motor cruiser.

"My husband was very impressed when he read the plaque over the head (toilet) which says, "Miss Australia 1961, Tania Verstak, sat here", laughed Lesley.

A retired naval officer, Wayne liked the solid seaworthiness of the boat and its log of successful sea passages. One trip was an unscheduled one, after *Miss Australia* was stolen from her Mordialloc pen and taken for a joy ride across Port Phillip Bay in gale force conditions. Rumour has it that Bernard Dowd had a helicopter sent up to spot the boat and affect a boarding so she could be taken in tow and the sixteen year old culprit apprehended.

Constructed of Huon pine, *Miss Australia* sports intricate carvings throughout her interior, including that of a shark on the starboard side of the wheelhouse and a porpoise on the port side, allegedly to help Bernard Dowd distinguish one from the other.

"We're timber boat converts now," said Wayne firmly. "They're a lot of work to maintain, but the character and history that comes with them is priceless."



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