

CHAPTER TWO:

THE MILDRED

The Mildred was quite an advance over the horse punt. For starters it could carry 15 vehicles and 70 passengers (13 in the lower deck cabin and 12 in the upper deck. The remainder were presumably in the cars or out in the weather). Built of steel, she was 100ft long with a 27ft beam, and had a draught of 7 feet. She was propeller-driven by a triple-expansion steam engine, displaced around 200 tons, and could chug along at 10 knots. She was built by the NSW Public Works Department, and was the first vessel to be built at the newly-opened NSW Government Dockyard at Walsh Island. Geoff Ford (see list of sources) tells how, in November 1914, the new ship was decked out with the flags of Australia and the Allies, and Mrs Mildred Griffith, wife of the dockyard superintendent, broke a bottle of Australian wine over the stern of the new ferry to launch it. She had followed its construction from the initial ceremony when she had put the first bolt in the keel, so, fittingly, it was named SS Mildred after her.

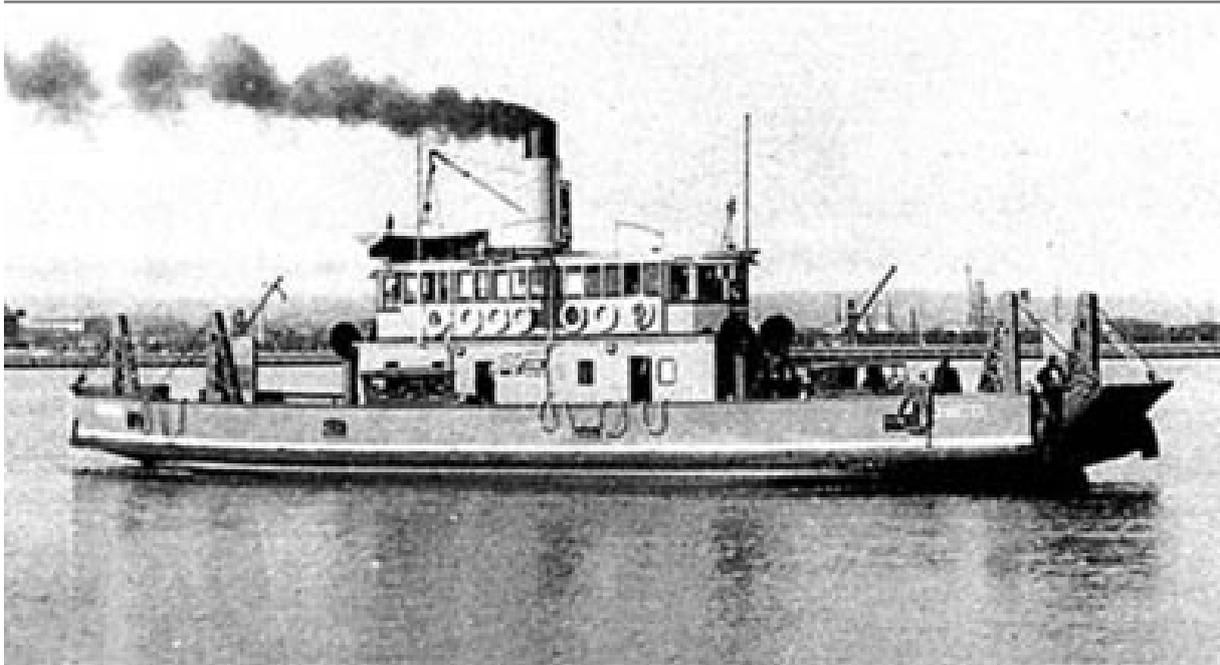
When she first began on the Stockton/Newcastle run in 1916 the Mildred made a crossing every hour, but traffic soon increased and she began to run every forty minutes, and it wasn't long before it was making the crossing every half hour. In 1930 operation of the punt was taken over by the Main Roads Board (subsequently the DMR, which later became the RTA). The November 1932 edition of Main Roads reported that in that year the daily average number of vehicles carried by the Mildred was 400, with the maximum just under 700.*

In 1942 the two vehicular ferries that had been operating at Peats Ferry (the George Peat and the Francis Peat) were requisitioned for war service and the Mildred was transferred there to replace them for the duration. (Newcastle and Stockton were served by the Kooroongaba during this period, which had joined the run in 1932. See next chapter). On May 5 1945 the Mildred was back at Stockton, but not for long, and after the newly-purchased Lurgurena (see chapter 4) arrived at Newcastle on Christmas Eve of that year the Mildred was sold to the Phillip Island and Westernport Shipping Co. for 9250 pounds in 1946. They refitted her with oil-fired boilers, a mast and an extra upper deck for the passengers. She was renamed the Westernport and for the next two years plied between Westernport and Phillip Island. She spent her last years as a barge at Geelong, where she was eventually scrapped.

Well, that's a skeletal run-down of Mildred's career. What follows is intended to add a little meat to the bones.

The Mildred operated between a dock at the foot of Merewether St Newcastle and the dock at Old Punt Rd Stockton. In his interview with the RTA, Ross Craig tells of how in the 1930s punt queues used to stretch back up Punt Rd, into Factory St, and into what was then Thornton Street. He goes on: *Later on they had to build a new punt wharf, which was when they built the new Punt Rd which is the one that*

*Given that the Mildred's carrying capacity was 15 vehicles, to carry just under 700 vehicles in one day she would have to be almost fully laden for most of her daytime crossings, since the frequency of service was halved after midnight.



R. Jones Pic

SS Mildred in her prime

exists today. The area where they wanted to turn off Fullerton St to go down to the punt there was an old burial ground on the corner. It wasn't a dedicated cemetery or anything, but they had to pass a special bill in Parliament to get the bodies removed from there to the dedicated cemetery at North Stockton. The cemetery hadn't been used since late nineteenth century. This was now 1932.

Denis Banks recalls: On the Newcastle side the Mildred docked about three or four hundred yards to the west of the dock that was built for the bigger ferries when they came on the scene in later years. The dock at that time was built originally for the horse punt and would only take a vessel the size of the Mildred. When the bigger punts came they had to build a bigger dock which was further east near Dark's Iceworks – where the parking station is these days. In those days though, it was just to the east of No1 Lee Wharf, where the passenger liners used to come in and berth. Driving to the dock to take the Mildred across you'd go down Merewether Street from Civic Station, over the railway line, turn left at Wharf Road and you'd park adjacent to the railway line. When the punt came into the dock you had to do a 180 degree right turn – a Uey – in order to then drive onto the punt.

Every year the Mildred was taken off the run for routine maintenance and was replaced during that period by a flat-top barge towed by a tug – just like in the days of the horse punt. The relief punt was temporarily equipped with flaps and a handrail for these duties, and could take 16 vehicles. It was considerably slower than the Mildred, and an hourly service was the best that could be managed with it. This lengthened the punt queues, and the annual overhaul of the Mildred was a source of irritation and inconvenience for regular users of the crossing.

Denis Banks remembers those times: During the Mildred's time it had to be taken for an inspection every year and regular maintenance carried out. If I remember rightly it would be out of service for about a fortnight. During that time, one of the tugs on the harbour – one of the Waratah tugs I think it was, I don't think it was a black-funnel tug – brought in a barge sort of thing, with level decks. You drove onto that and because there was no wheelhouse in the middle you could stack the vehicles three abreast. As soon as the tug moved the barge out into the harbour they had to

All of the punts were steamers, and all had triple-expansion steam engines to drive their propellers. When Denis Banks mentioned a triple-expansion steam engine in his conversation with me about the punts I asked him to describe how such a thing worked.

Denis: *Well, if you had an ordinary steam engine – one cylinder – the steam from the boiler would go into that. That would push the piston down, and drive the crankshaft, and so you'd have a revolving motion at the bottom... just a simple engine. Now in a triple expansion engine, suppose you had, say, 100lbs pressure in the boiler – these are only figures I'm just guessing at – it would go into the first of the three cylinders and drive that piston down. But it wouldn't use up all the pressure to do this. Now suppose it only took up 30 lbs pressure to do this, that leaves 70lb pressure left over. Instead of that spare 70 lbs pressure being exhausted to the outside and wasted, it feeds into the top of a second cylinder, which has to be of larger diameter than the first. Because you have less pressure it needs a larger surface to provide the same amount of torque. And the same process goes on again with the third cylinder, which is even larger in diameter again than the second. (All of which I thought was pretty impressive, as he was 93 at the time).*

unhook the tug and turn it around the other way, so they could then push the barge into the dock on the other side so the people could drive straight off and not have to back off. Backing off might have been OK for a car, but you couldn't do it with a horse and cart.

He continues: *The Mildred used to run aground reasonably regularly in the early days, as did the passenger ferries. Parts of the crossing were very, very shallow. Often I've seen the propellers in the mud stirring everything up. On the Stockton side, between the present Punt Rd and the present passenger ferry wharf there were mud flats which were very shallow. But there must have been a bit dredged there at one stage for Callen's Slipway, as it's no use having a slipway there if you can't bring the ships into it.*

You could get out of your car if you wanted to, and people used to wander around and talk to one another (not like the Wisemans Ferry today where present OH&S rules, springing from a fear of litigation has made it mandatory to stay in your vehicle). Drivers were carried free. I used to cross free with my motorbike. Sometimes I'd take a little kid across with me on the pillion, and sometimes he didn't have to pay his tuppence because the collector didn't notice him on the back!

Foot passengers who were going to the western end of Newcastle would take the punt rather than a ferry. It was no distance to walk over the high-level bridge there. In the early days I used to go across on the punt on foot because when I first got my motor bike my Dad said I wasn't to ride it in Newcastle because of the traffic. No other kids had a motor bike then. I used to have to leave it at Charlie Russell's garage which was right where you wait for the punt. So I used to take the punt across and walk up the hill to High School.

After the Kooroongaba joined the service in 1932 the Mildred became the relief vessel for when the Kooroongaba was off the run for maintenance and for whenever a supplementary punt was needed. The Mildred filled this role for the next 14 years – not counting her stint at Peats Ferry during the war.

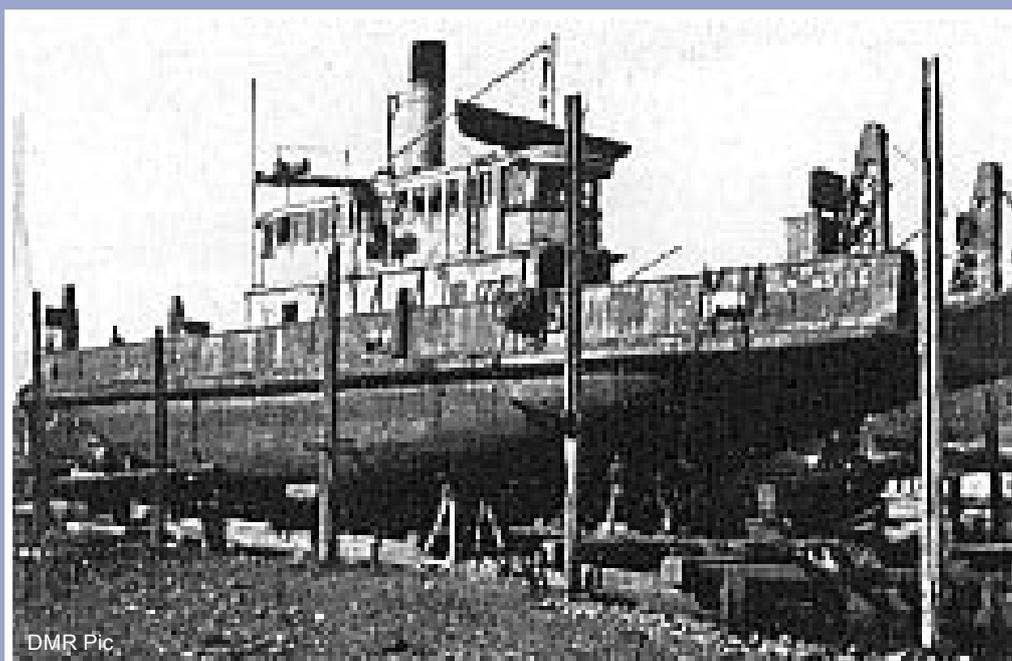
To expand a little on the Mildred's tour of duty on the Hawkesbury: when the

War broke out in 1942, the crossing of the Hawkesbury at Peats Ferry was being handled by two vessels, the MV Frances Peat and the MV George Peat. Each could accommodate 20 passengers and 37 cars. But the army soon realised that their vehicle carrying capacity would translate to 50 jeeps or 14 trucks on each ferry, so both were commandeered and pressed into war service in the islands to our north.

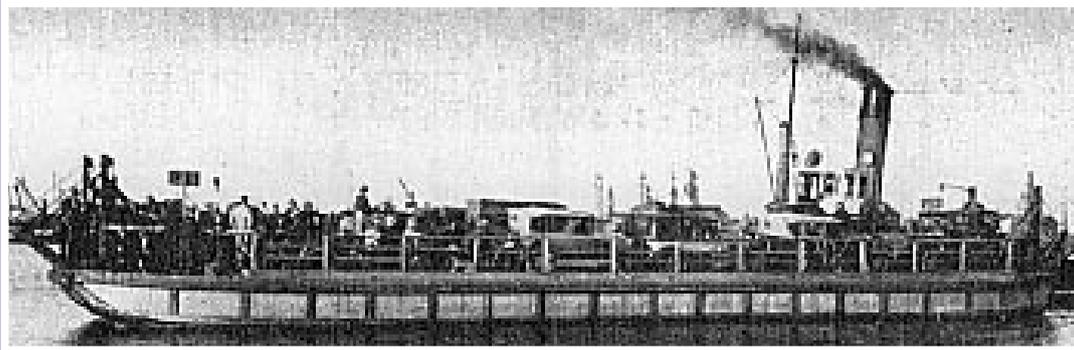
Another vehicular ferry built at Walsh Island in 1921 was used on the Sydney Harbour crossing before the Sydney Harbour Bridge was built. It was the SS Kooroongaba. After the Sydney Harbour Bridge was opened, the volume of traffic had been steadily building up on the crossing to Stockton as cars became more commonplace, and in 1932 the Kooroongaba was transferred to Newcastle to take over the Mildred's run and the Mildred was relegated to relief vessel until her transfer to the Hawkesbury in 1942 where, as Geoff Ford puts it: *Day in and day out with no respite, no sleeping at night, the valiant SS Mildred puffed away as fast as she could go, fully laden with cars, her coal fired boilers running hot.* And no regular maintenance.

With the advent of petrol rationing in the war years it was thought that the patronage of the car punts would not continue to increase at the rate it had been doing, and when the Mildred was transferred to the Hawkesbury, the Kooroongaba managed to cope with the demands of the Newcastle/Stockton crossing because it was a bigger vessel than the Mildred. But in order to do this it had to operate alone through the war years – again, like the Mildred down on the Hawkesbury, without a major overhaul.

The Hawkesbury River road bridge was opened in May 1945, making the crossings via the Mildred obsolete, and she returned to Newcastle. However, a vehicular ferry built for the Derwent River crossing in Hobart, SS Lurgurena, arrived from Tasmania a few months later and the Mildred retired from the Stockton/Newcastle run at Christmas that year after 31 years in service.



SS Mildred undergoing routine mainenance on the slip at Stockton



DMR Pic

Relief punt and tug

Ross Craig tells us that on the Newcastle/Stockton crossing drivers travelled free on the Mildred, but passengers in cars, and foot passengers, paid. The punt was considered part of the main road. There was no toll on the punts originally, but when the passenger ferries fares went up, the Progress Association was urging people to cross on the punt, because it was still free. This is back in the 1920s or so. The local newspaper at the time carried a story on June 7 1922. *As a result of the boycott of the Stockton ferries by a large number of people, the free punt has been crowded lately. Over 1100 people were carried in one day according to a circular issued by the organisers of the boycott. Crowding onto the punt is however a breach of the regulations and yesterday a notice was displayed drawing attention to Clause 27 of the regulations which say that only a certain amount of space is allocated to the pedestrians on the punts which is not to be exceeded, and that they must not travel among the vehicles.*

He also described the upstairs passenger accommodation: *The funnel was right in the middle of the ship, and it came up through the middle of the upstairs cabin. It was insulated with wooden boards so you couldn't accidentally put your hands against the really hot metal, and upstairs was a very warm and cosy place to travel*



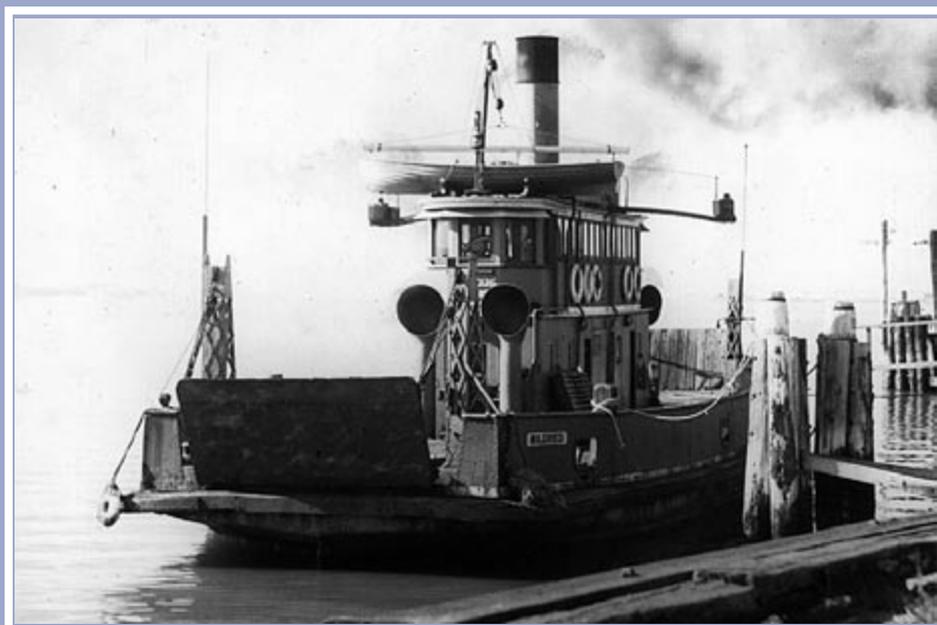
Matterson Pic

MV George Peat

during the winter. The funnel took up two-thirds of the space that was available in that upper deck, and with the insulation around it I'd reckon it would have been five feet through. On this point, Pat Conway remarked: We used to go to school on the Mildred. We used to go upstairs where the smokestack was, it would come right up through the accommodation, and Captain Barker was a big man – about that round, you know – and he'd have to stand sideways to squeeze through the space. This was in the early 1930s, and there were still quite a few horses and carts on the Mildred then.

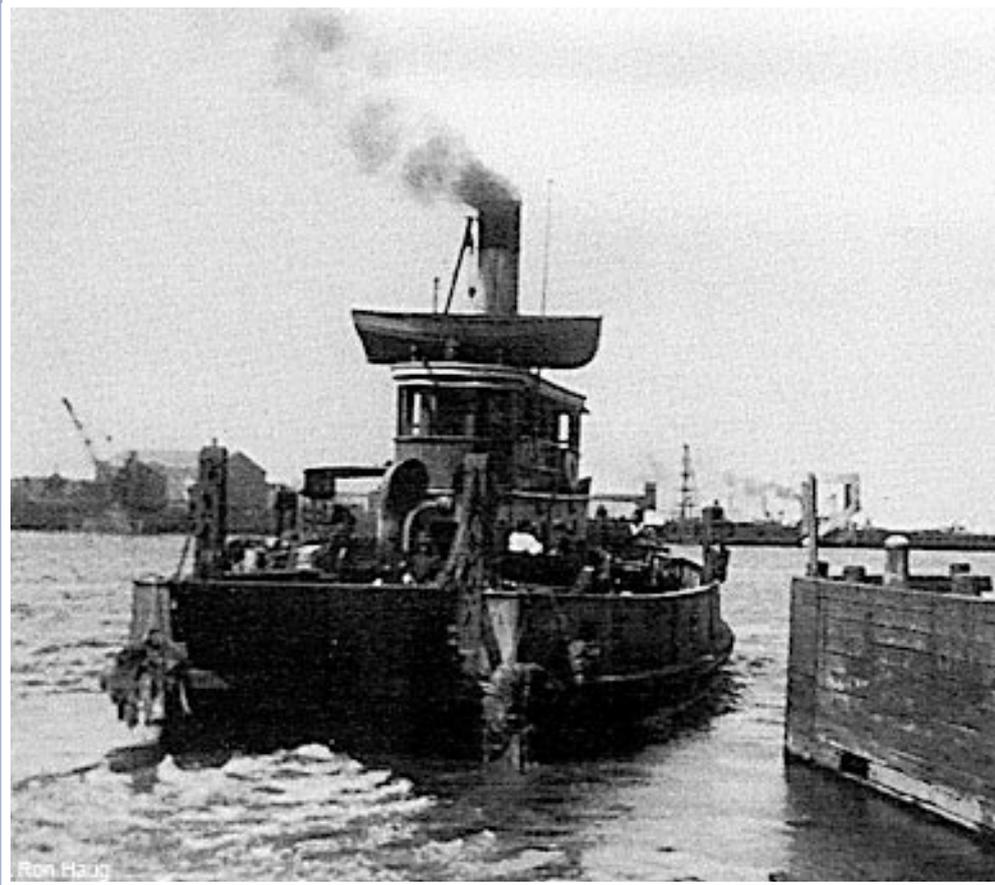
When the Mildred was sold in 1946 her trip to Westernport from Newcastle was anything but uneventful. In fact the voyage was something of an eerie augury of the sort of troubles that were to beset all of the Stockton punts in the last chapters of their lives. Even before she had cast off on the journey south some of the local maritime community were saying that Mildred would be lucky to get much further than Nobbys. She managed that OK, but ran into very heavy seas when she was off the far south coast of NSW. The huge waves battered her so badly that her funnel was said to have been driven through her upper deck – though just how this could happen is not immediately apparent. Somehow she limped into Eden, where rudimentary repairs were carried out, but it was soon discovered that the boilers could no longer deliver enough steam pressure for continuous running. So it set off to Westernport from Eden towed by a tug.

But her tribulations were not over yet. Once the tug was under way and up to speed it soon became obvious to those on board her that the Mildred was slowly beginning to sink. Nobody on board the tug noticed the frantic signals of the Mildred's crew and they were forced to cut the towline with an axe. I haven't been able to find out exactly where all this drama happened, or how they managed to stay afloat and make it to Westernport, but somehow they did. If any reader happens to know more about the closing stages of this adventurous voyage I'd appreciate hearing from you so that I can include it here and the story of the Mildred can be completed.



G. Andrews pic

SS Mildred laid up in Newcastle awaiting sale



You could tell the Mildred by the single lifeboat mounted transversely on top of the wheelhouse. Just how it would be deployed quickly in an emergency is not immediately obvious.
