

CHAPTER THREE: THE KOOROONGABA

The Kooroongaba (frequently mis-spelled “Kooroongabba”) was built in Newcastle to service the Bennelong Point/Milsons Point run on Sydney Harbour, and took up her duties there in 1921. But as the 1920s progressed, vehicular traffic was building up on the crossing to such an extent that it became clear that she would need assistance to cope with the volume. (The nearly always belated attempts on the part of the authorities to keep up with the demands of ever-increasing traffic flows on car ferry crossings is a feature of just about every chapter in this overview). To try to meet this increasing demand in Sydney, Sydney Harbour Ferries decided to order three big car ferries from the UK to help handle the traffic during the last ten years of the building of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. In 1924 the Koondooloo came out from England and joined the Kooroongaba, and two more car ferries, the Kalang and the Kara Kara, came out to join the fleet in 1926 (see chapter 6).

The Kooroongaba was a steel hulled, propeller-driven steamer with a wooden deck, and was powered by a 69hp triple-expansion steam engine that drove her along at 10 knots. Built at the NSW Government Dockyard at Walsh Island she was 313 gross register and was the last car ferry built in NSW. She was 137ft long, with a beam of 35ft 9in and a draught of 11ft. (The Stockton Historical Society Newsletter of July 1997 gives these dimensions as 145ft 6in long, 38ft 6in beam and a draught of 8ft 6in.) She could carry 190 passengers and 28 vehicles, (though the DMR magazine Main Roads of November 1932 says she had a 30 vehicle capacity and a draught of 8ft). For an explanation of these divergent specifications see the box opposite.



SS Kooroongaba on Newcastle Harbour in the 1960s

The various published specifications for all of the car punts are frequently contradictory. When I began noticing these discrepancies, I initially thought that some of them might disappear if we knew whether the lengthwise measurements were done with the flaps down or not (or if the flaps were even included in the measurement at all), how big the cars were, and whether the vessel was laden or unladen when the draught was measured. But when I raised this with a mate of mine who earns his living as a marine engineer on tugboats he informed me that the length of vessels is usually measured "over all", which means the overall length of the hull, and that the flaps almost certainly would not be taken into consideration. Occasionally the length is measured at the waterline, but whenever this is the case it is always mentioned immediately after the length is stated. Furthermore, a vessel's "draught" is the depth of water that is needed for it to float freely, and it is usual to measure a vessel's draught when it is fully laden, so knowing how many cars were aboard at the time of measurement and how much they weighed would be unlikely to resolve the discrepancies. Also, the 'draught' (from waterline when fully laden to the bottom of the keel) should not be confused with the 'depth moulded' (MLD), which is the distance from the top of the hull deck to the bottom of the keel.

When I interviewed Jack Carpenter, the model-maker, he said that he had made his models of the Lurgurena and the Koondooloo to scale from plans supplied by the then DMR. So I got onto the DMR's successor, the RTA (who have been particularly patient and helpful with my many enquiries while putting this book together). They were able to come up with construction drawings for the Kooroongaba and the Lurgurena, which cleared up the discrepancies for those two vessels, at least. According to the drawings, the Kooroongaba was: Length overall 145' 1.5", Length B.p. (between perpendiculars) 132' 0", Breadth extreme 38' 4.5" Breadth MLD 35' 10", Depth MLD 11' 0".

From these figures we can only conclude that the discrepancies came about through different sources not making the distinction between length Bp or length overall, breadth extreme or breadth MLD, and depth MLD with draught. But it doesn't explain them all.

Now it seems to me that the exact dimensions don't matter all that much for our purposes anyway. All we need to know, really, is that each succeeding ferry put onto the run was larger and more powerful than its predecessors, and could carry more cars and passengers. For this, near enough is good enough. But the rather pedantic demands of scholarship can't abide discrepancies like these, so I was obliged to try to explain them – if for no other reason than to preserve my credibility as a researcher. But it does make it all a bit dry.

It's much the same with talking about how 'big' a vessel is. A recent international conference agreed to no longer use the words 'ton' or 'tonne' when talking of gross or nett, and present-day usage is to refer to 'XXXX gross register' (or just 'gross'), and 'XXXX nett register' (or just 'nett').


Gross is the total volume of the enclosed internal area of the ship.

Nett is that same area, LESS crew accommodation, fuel tanks, engine and machinery spaces, store rooms etc – i.e. minus the non-earning spaces.

Displacement is the actual mass/weight of the whole structure and this can be given as light - (no stores, cargo, fuel,) standard - (STD) operational but not fully loaded, or full.

To make things even more confusing, the Koorongaba's Harbour Certificate (below) states Koorongaba's carrying capacity to be a total of 185 passengers and 5 crew, and 35 vehicles, while the letter of certification from the Harbour Master to the DMR (opposite) outlines a much more complex set of rules to be considered when determining the vessel's carrying capacity.

NEW SOUTH WALES
No. 710



HARBOUR OR RIVER CERTIFICATE

Issued by the Maritime Services Board of New South Wales,
in pursuance of the Navigation Act, 1901-1949

Name of Steam Ship "Koorongaba" Class P

PORT OF REGISTRY and Official Number	REGISTER TONNAGE
<u>8</u>	<u>141</u>

NUMBER OF PERSONS AND CREW

This Steam Ship is, according to the declaration of the Shipwright Surveyor, adapted for Harbour, River, or Lake Service, and is constructed and fit to carry, when there is no encumbrance of accommodation, the undermentioned number of Persons and Crew:—

NUMBER AND DISPOSITION OF PERSONS OTHER THAN CREW	No. of Crew to be Carried	Total No. of Persons (including Crew)
<u>Main Deck 175 and 35 vehicles</u>		
<u>Upper Deck</u>	<u>10</u>	
	<u>5</u>	<u>190 And</u>

On Newcastle Harbour within a straight line drawn between Stony Point and the green light on Stockton Point IN SMOOTH WATER ONLY. Persons in vehicles may be increased to 275 provided that one vehicle is deducted for every 20 persons or proportion thereof carried in excess of 175 in vehicles up to a maximum of 100 additional persons.

Local Limits within which this Steam Ship may navigate

**BOATS, LIFE-SAVING APPLIANCES, &c.,
required to be carried by this Steam Ship:—**

BOATS and LIFE-SAVING APPLIANCES	EQUIPMENT
No. <u>1</u> Boats ^{<u>CLASS III</u>} of the aggregate capacity of <u> </u> Cubic feet, {and capacity of} <u>8</u> Persons	Fire Hoses, with nozzles attached, No. <u>1</u>
<u> </u> Approved Life-boats capable of carrying <u> </u> Persons	Compasses, No. <u>2</u> Fire Extinguishers, No. <u>10</u>
<u> </u> Approved Buoyant Apparatus, capable of supporting <u> </u> Persons	Distress Signal Rockets, No. <u> </u> Red Flares, No. <u>12</u>
<u>290</u> Approved Life Jackets. <u>2</u> Self-igniting Lifebuoy Lights.	Two Safety Valves on each Boiler, one of which shall be out of the control and interference of the Engineer except only for the purpose of opening same and keeping it free.
<u>45</u> Approved Lifebuoys. <u> </u> Self-igniting Lifebuoy Lights.	

THE AUTHORISED MAXIMUM PRESSURE ON THE SAFETY VALVES OF THE MAIN BOILERS OF THIS STEAM SHIP IS 100 LB. PER SQUARE INCH.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY that the provisions of the Law with respect to the Survey of the abovementioned Steam Ship for Harbour or River Certificate have been complied with.

THIS CERTIFICATE, unless previously cancelled or revoked, remains in force until the 15th day of August, 1950.

DATED this 13th day of October, 1950.

By direction of the Board,
W.H. Brotherson
President
A Commissioner of the Board.

87 THIS CERTIFICATE, or a true copy thereof, in distinct and legible characters, must be exhibited in some conspicuous part of this Steam Ship so long as the Certificate is in force, under a Penalty not exceeding TEN POUNDS (vide Sec. 41, Navigation Act, 1901-1949).

If the number of Persons carried in any portion of the Steam Ship exceeds the number stated on this Certificate, or if the Total number of Persons carried exceeds the Total number stated on this Certificate, the Master or Owner will be liable to a Penalty of not less than FIVE POUNDS and not more than FIFTY POUNDS (vide Sec. 43, Navigation Act, 1901-1949).

Whenever this Steam Ship has sustained or caused any accident occasioning loss of life or any serious injury to any person, or has received any material damage affecting her seaworthiness or efficiency either in her hull or in any part of her machinery, the Owner or Master of such Steam Ship shall, within twenty-four hours after the happening of such accident or damage or as soon thereafter as possible, transmit through the post to the Board by letter, signed by such Master, a report of such accident or damage. If such Master neglects to do so he shall for such offence incur a penalty not exceeding FIFTY POUNDS (vide Sec. 50, Navigation Act, 1901-1949).

44/30380

11th February, 1946.



The Secretary,
Department of Main Roads, N.S.W.,
500 Castlereagh Street,
SYDNEY.

SUBJECT: Newcastle-Stockton Vehicular Ferry Service.
Ferry Vessel D.M.R. No. 34, S.S. "Kooroongaba."
REFERENCE: Your letter of 18th January, 1946, No. 408.57.

I am directed to inform you that the Board has decided that the S.S. "Kooroongaba" may be certificated to carry -

175 persons in vehicles, 10 persons on bridge deck and 5 crew - total 190 persons and 35 vehicles. Persons in vehicles may be increased to 275 provided one vehicle is deducted for every 20 persons or proportion thereof carried in excess of 175 in vehicles, up to a maximum of 100 additional persons.

subject to the following conditions :-

- (a) Public Conveyances such as omnibuses, service cars or lorries carrying large parties should be placed at the side of the deck, preferably on the port side, in relation to the direction in which the vessel is heading, for omnibuses having left side doorways.
- (b) There should be a clear space of 3 ft. between the side of the vehicle and the rail or kerb.
- (c) There shall be a clear space of at least 4 ft. between the front and back of the conveyance and the nearest vehicle in the case of a single decker bus. If a double decker bus is carried the space fore and aft to be increased to not less than 6 ft.
- (d) Additional life jackets must be carried and stowed to the satisfaction of the Surveyor.
- (e) Additional buoyant apparatus sufficient to support 40% of the additional persons carried must be supplied and stowed in approved positions.

The Board directs that all officers operating the Newcastle-Stockton Service are to be issued by your Department with strict instructions for the careful observance of the requirements stated in (a), (b) and (c) above.

For your information

W
12/2/46
Inspector

The Harbour Master,
NEWCASTLE

L.C. Milgate
(L.C. MILGATE),
Secretary.

(L.C. MILGATE),
Per: *L.C.*
Secretary.

Certification of carrying capacity for SS Kooroongaba, 1946

Meanwhile, back at Newcastle Harbour, the DMR had taken over the running of the Newcastle/Stockton punt in 1930. Traffic on the crossing was still continuing to grow and the Mildred was having difficulties handling it, and lengthy delays had become the order of the day (of which, more in later chapters). When the Sydney Harbour Bridge was opened in 1932, all of the car punts that had been carrying the cross-harbour traffic while the Bridge was being built became obsolete. They were offered for sale by Sydney Harbour Ferries at what were considered to be quite reasonable prices for the time, and the (then) DMR was able to pick up the Kooroongaba at the bargain price of 7,500 pounds.

The Kooroongaba, (affectionately known to the locals as the 'Gaba), like all Sydney ferries of the time, was fitted with kerosene lighting till 1924, when some war disposal generators from WWI became available, and their installation brightened things considerably in after-dark crossings. Before she could be put into service at Newcastle a few other modifications were made, and her superstructure was extended and the upper passenger deck enclosed.

On top of these refitting costs, there were infrastructure costs as well. New docks on both sides of the river had to be built to accommodate the extra width of the 'Gaba compared to the Mildred. On the Stockton side the new dock was 150 yds upstream from the previous dock, and on the Newcastle side it moved to near where Darks Ice Works used to be – on the site now occupied by the Water Police. The new docks were constructed on driven piles, and simplified the approach manoeuvres both for the ferries and for the vehicles waiting for them. (See Dennis Banks' description of the boarding procedure for the old docks in Chapter 2).



The new docks on the Stockton side



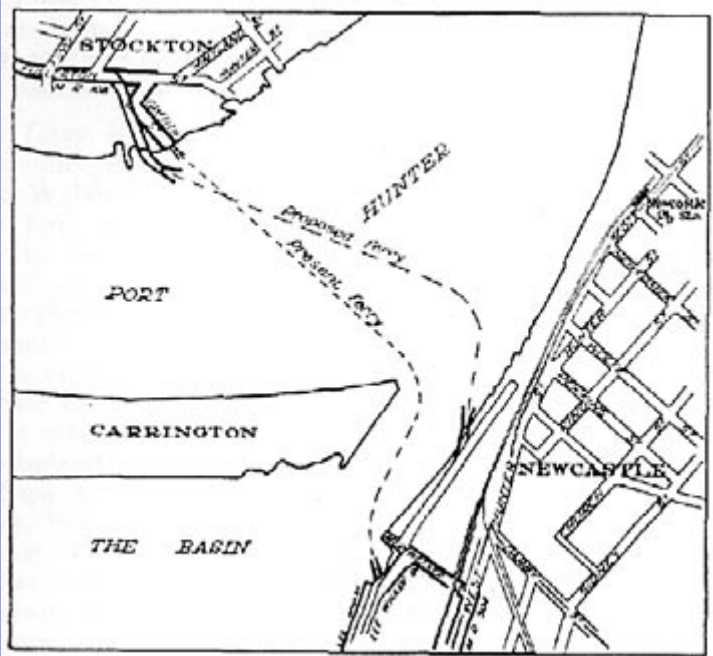
SS Kooroongaba's nameplate, now at the South West Rocks Maritime Museum

L. Banks Pic



Matterson Pic

Approaching the new docks on the Newcastle side



Sketch plan showing the old and new punt routes
(Courtesy RTA)

With the new docks built the 'Gaba, being much bigger than the Mildred, took over the service on her own in 1932 and the Mildred was used as a relief ferry until 1942, when she was moved to the Peats Ferry crossing on the Hawkesbury during the war years (see chapter 2) and the 'Gaba was left to soldier on alone in Newcastle until the war was over.

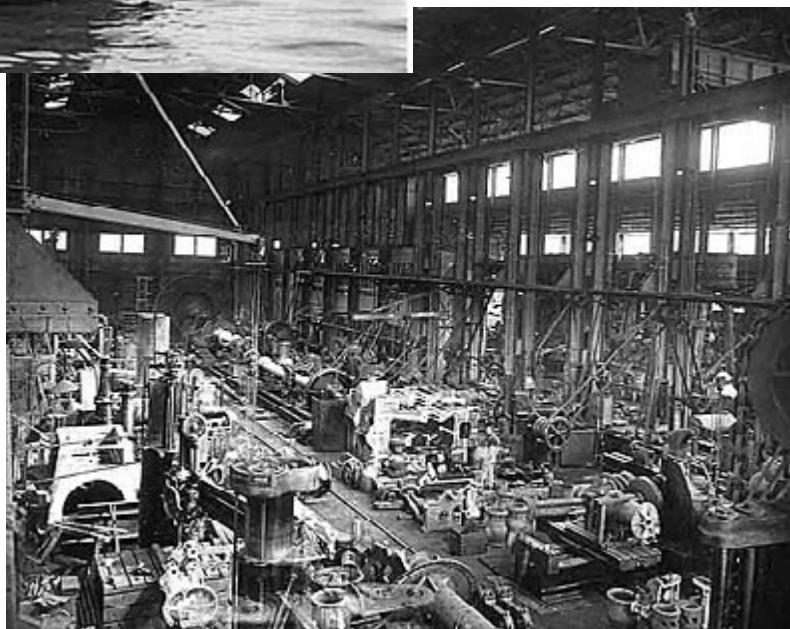


*SS Kooroongaba
undergoing inclination tests
at Walsh Island Dockyards*

RTA Pic

*Inside the machinery shop
at Walsh Island Dockyards,
where the Kooroongaba
was built*

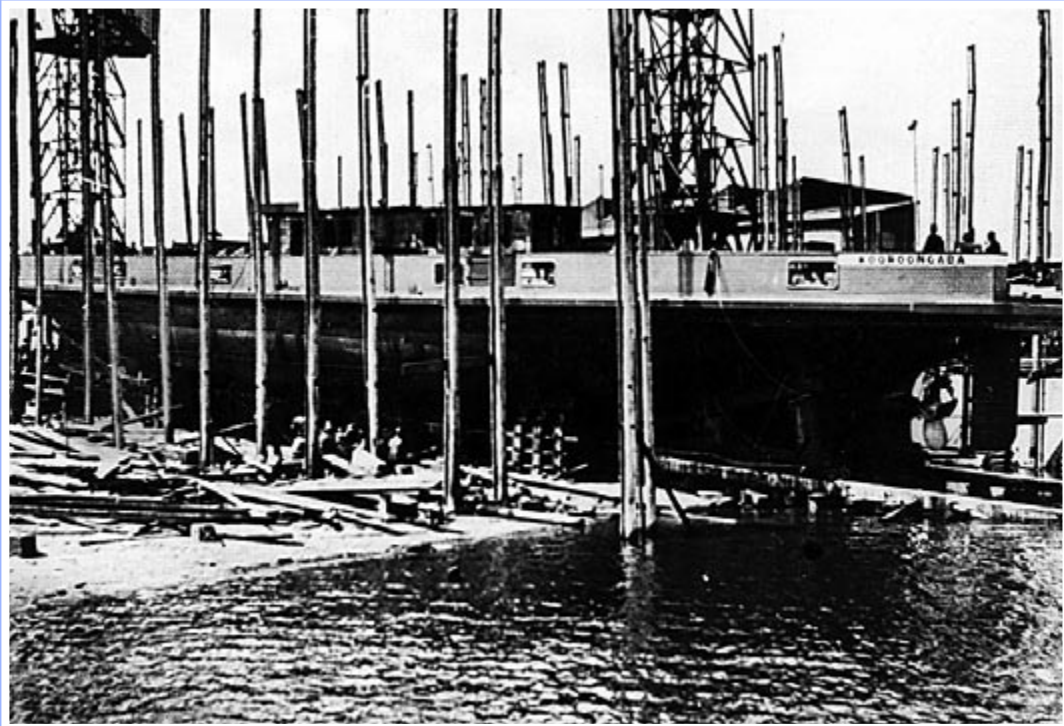
RTA Pic



In the early days after the purchase it was mooted that the 'Gaba might also operate at Peats Ferry when the two ferries there were unable to cope with the peak weekend traffic that was steadily building up in the decade or so prior to the opening of the first bridge across the Hawkesbury. There was a bit of a problem with this idea though, in that the two Peats punts ran on oil, and consequently there were no facilities at the Hawkesbury crossing for a steam vessel. But given that the Kooroongaba's fuel consumption was only around 10-12 tons of coal per day it was thought that the ferry could carry enough fuel with her from Newcastle to enable her to help with the run at Peats Ferry on the weekends when the traffic was heaviest, and still have enough coal left over to get back home to Newcastle again. However, the whole idea was eventually found to be impracticable and the regular service at Peats Ferry envisioned for the 'Gaba didn't ever eventuate.

"Kooroongaba" is said to be an Aboriginal word for "pelican".

Stages in the career of the 'Gaba

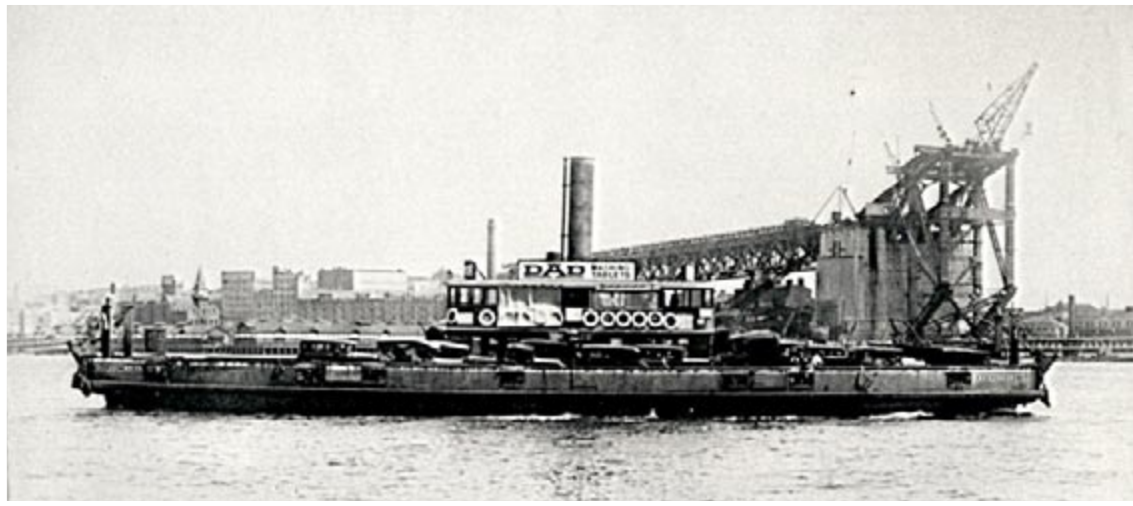


Under construction at Walsh Island dockyard circa 1920



Leaving Jeffrey St wharf on the north side of Sydney Harbour circa 1930

Pics on p33 & 34 from G. Andrews



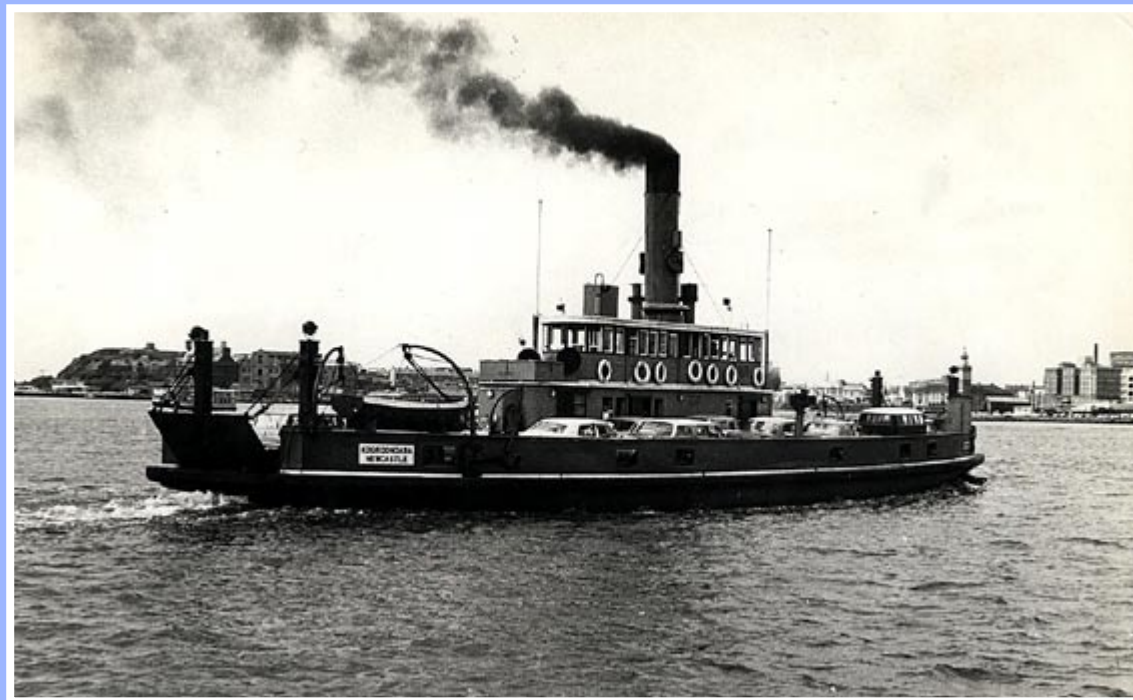
In service on Sydney Harbour in the late 1920s. (Note Harbour Bridge under construction)



On Port Jackson mid 1920s



Coming into Stockton dock late 1960s



On Newcastle Harbour nearing the end of her days in 1970