

CHAPTER SEVEN:

THE HEYDAY OF THE PUNTS

Although vehicular ferries were part of Newcastle for most of the twentieth century, the two decades from roughly 1950 to 1970 were their golden era. There was always a car punt to be seen making the crossing, or exchanging vehicles at the docks on either side of the harbour. The punts had become such a familiar feature of the Newcastle maritime scene that locals and other regular passengers came to regard them with considerable affection. In their own smoky, sooty, gritty, throbbing and slightly anachronistic way they were a time-worn and rather romantic feature of the harbour as they relentlessly plied the crossing 24/7. People met and nattered with friends during the crossing or while they were waiting in the queues for the punt, and many regulated their lives according to the punt timetable. In peak periods when the queues were long there was always the option of a beer or two at the Boatrowers' Hotel for the thirsty, especially on weekends. As we saw in the traffic statistics at the end of the last chapter, there were thousands of people who used the punts, and thousands of regular commuters who travelled on them to and from work every day. To the DMR the punts may have been a slab of floating roadway to be scheduled, manned, maintained, and bureaucratically overseen, but they also figured prominently in the everyday lives of the regular users, most of whom speak about them, now that they are gone, with more than a hint of nostalgia. It is to this human dimension of the story of the punts that we now turn.

To recap: In the heyday of the punts, the service was handled by three vessels. When things were chugging along normally the service was maintained by the two largest punts, the Lurgurena and the Koondooloo. When either of these was due for maintenance overhauls and/or repairs the Kooroongaba was brought in as the replacement or relief vessel. During the day there were two punts in operation simultaneously, but after midnight only one punt was used because of the obvious drop in traffic.

An average day in the life of a car punt

When one of the punts was taken out of service at midnight it was moored on the Stockton side of the harbour, at the DMR's Stockton Mooring Berth. The steam was kept at a uniform pressure to allow the boiler tubes, back ends and condensers to be cleaned, as well as any other cleaning and maintenance and minor repairs that had to be undertaken as a result of the day's operations such as leaking boiler tubes, damaged sponsons or electrical faults. This of course required workmen who had to work through the night to carry out these tasks – something not always appreciated by the crowds using the punts through the day. Before starting back on the run at 5:45am the next day the fire had to be stoked and the engine warmed up. It took the best part of an hour to build up enough steam to be operable, and once that was achieved the furnaces still needed stoking at half-hourly intervals by the fireman.

This overnight procedure had side-effects for many residents of the Stockton Peninsula. Ross Craig remembers one of them: *When the three punts were in operation, the reserve punt was tied up over here just at the back of our place. Then, after about 11:45pm the second ferry would come off the run and tie up there as well. They'd bank the coal up – shovel on as much as they could - which kept the fire*



Glenys Payne Pic

Driving on at Stockton

going but made a lot of smoke, so they could go and put their heads down for a few hours till they started back on the run the next morning. As a result, of a morning we'd have soot all over our patio out the front, and the wife couldn't hang clothes on the line till she'd washed all the lines down – the soot was so bad.

Keeping the punts going involved more people than just the crew. Being steam powered, the punts needed to take on coal and water at regular intervals. Coal was supplied daily by a contractor who brought it on a truck and tipped it down into the punt's bunkers. On average, twelve tons of coal were used daily by each of the ferries. The coal came from mines at Merewether about five or six miles away, and often the quality wasn't very high. Ross Craig referred to them as "little ratholes around Merewether and a few small mines around Wallsend". There was a general coal shortage in the mid-fifties. Several times a day a hose from the punt was connected to a valve on the dock's water supply, and water was pumped into the vessel's water tank, which held around

500 gallons. (I haven't been able to establish who actually did this watering.)

The crew

It took six men to run a car punt – these were Blue Jobs and in those days it never occurred to anyone that women might like to have a go, (nor would they want to, probably, given how laborious many of the jobs were). Ross Craig: *There was a sort of camaraderie among the punt crews. They had their own little stories, each crew thought it was the best. There was a lot of banter.*

First in the hierarchy was the **Master**. He had to hold a Harbour and River Master's Certificate and had complete responsibility for whatever happened with the vessel, including the recording of the number of vehicles and passengers per trip.

Next came the **Engineer**, who had to hold at least a 3rd class Marine Steam Engineer's ticket. He had the responsibility for the operation of all the machinery on the punt, keeping the bilges pumped out and checking that the engine was operating properly.

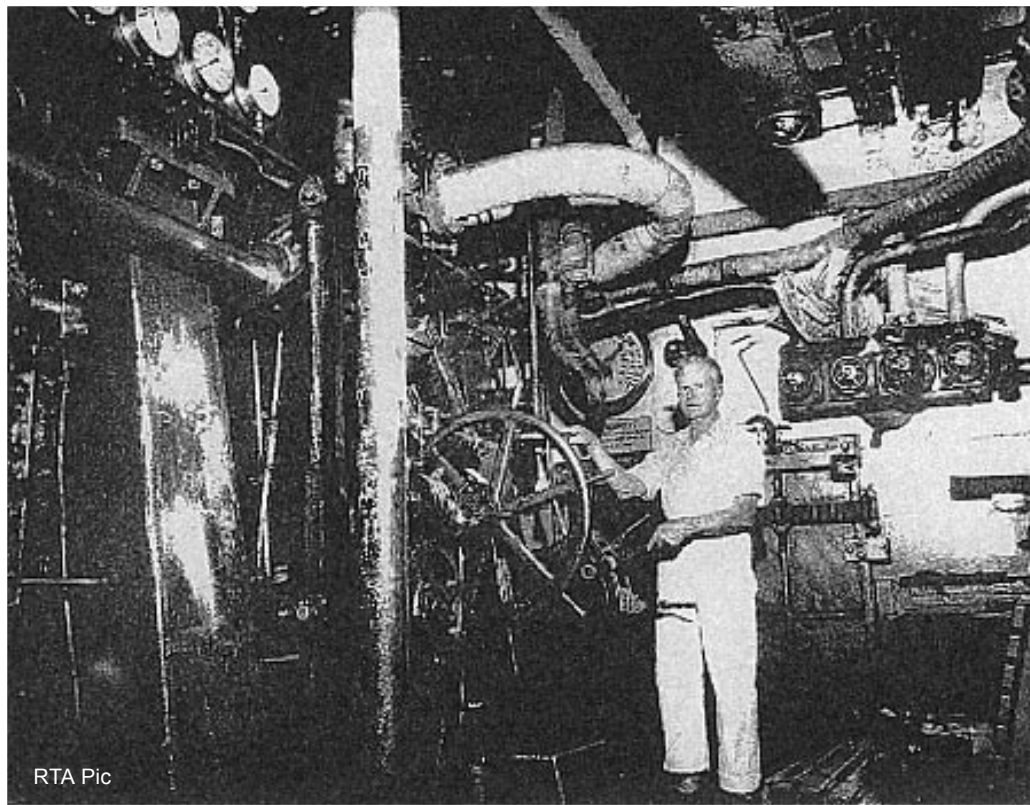
The **Fireman** or stoker's job was to stoke the fires and keep the steam pressure up (usually around 160 psi) as well as keeping the boiler tubes and back ends clean. It must have been a hot job in summer being a stoker, because the only ventilation below decks were turnable funnels/airscoops that could be faced into the wind each way to push some air down.

The **Fireman/Deckhand's** job was to assist the Fireman, keep the brasswork shiny and everything in the engine room clean and shipshape. He also had to relieve the deckhands when either of them was on their meal break, and do anything else that



Glenys Payne Pic

A punt Master at the helm. This one is Tom Payne.



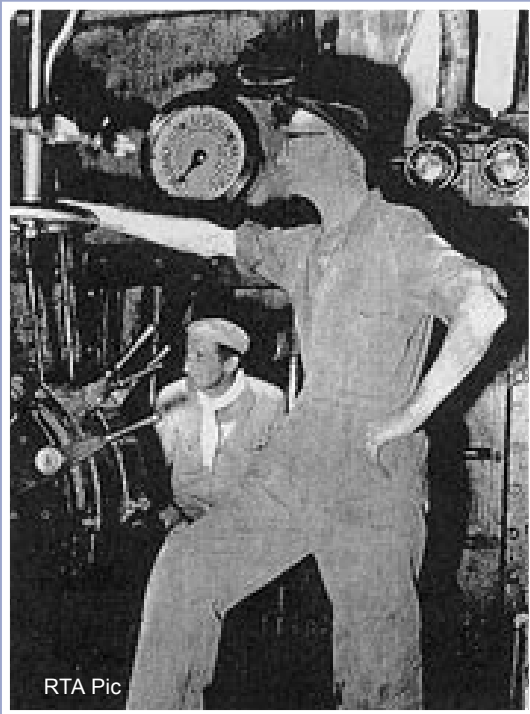
RTA Pic

Below decks on the Koondooloo



RTA Pic

Fireman Brian Russell



RTA Pic

Fireman Bill Hill and Engineer Charles Morton on the Lurgurena.



Neil Matterson pic

Captain Joe Matterson and crew

the Master Engineer might think of.

Then there were two **deckhands**. They had to make fast the vessel when docking, shepherd the cars off and onto the punt, as well as looking after the raising and lowering of the flaps. They also had to keep the decks and passenger cabins clean and get rid of the ash from the stokehold to the ash dump on the Newcastle side.

Denis Banks: *They had about 20-litre drums, and they'd pull the drums of ash up on a pulley, put them into a barrow, and tip them onshore from where it would be carted away later on.*

Keith Player: *We'd get rid of the ashes while they were cleaning the tubes. We'd pull them up and take them to the ash bin, and contractors would take them away from there.*

Pat Conway interrupts: *As long as you could make it up the ramp!" (both laugh) You'd get half way up the ramp and suddenly you'd get a speed wobble up and it'd tip into the river!*

Keith Player: *There was a big blue about it one day. You could see the ashes on the bottom of the river – they'd built up.*

There was also a **Shore Skipper**, who was the conduit between the crew and the DMR. All of the crew were answerable to him, except for the Engineer who was answerable to the DMR Chief Engineer. The entire crew were employees of the DMR.

A typical crossing took the following form: Once the punt had been eased inside the dolphin piles of the dock, one deckhand tied a 5in sisal rope to the mooring pile on the wharf and to a bollard on the punt, before the flap was lowered. Lowering the flap was done with a treble and a double block and 2in sisal rope and needed both deckhands to do the job. (During the heyday of the punts, rope sizes were still measured by circumference

rather than diameter.) There was one of these mounted on each sampson post – one for lifting the flap and one for lowering it. Then, while one deckhand remained on board ready to direct traffic, the other one went onto the dock itself to operate the controls for the hydraulic dock ramp, which had to be raised or lowered depending on the tide height in the harbour – which means it was adjusted just about every crossing. The onshore deckhand usually remained at the controls of the hydraulic ramp in case it had to be adjusted to accommodate any vehicles which had particularly heavy loads.

The ramp had to be placed on steel safety pins which were inserted into safety bars. Once the punt was made fast the cars on board were directed to drive off, which they did by taking turns to drive out of the single car egress alternatively – one from the left and one from the right (and woe betide anyone who tried to go out of turn!).

When the ferry was emptied the oncoming cars were directed by the deckhands to their places. The Master rang the punt's bell when he was satisfied that the oncoming vehicles were safely loaded, and this was the signal for the toll collector to close the gate on the dock while the deckhands raised the flap again and removed the mooring line. Then the Master would walk through the upper passenger compartment to what was now the front of the vessel to take her across to the other side again, where the whole process was repeated. As Neil Matterson (whose father was a punt skipper) put it: *Dad used to ring a bell to bring the bikes on after the cars were on and just before they were about to leave. As the punt left, the ramp was pulled up, and the skipper had to scuttle from the aft end of the boat along the length of the top deck to the forward bridge. All of the ferry would be out of the dock by the time he got there and actually had control of it again.*

In his interview with the RTA Ross Craig described the ramp-lowering process: *When the punt came in they lowered the ramps. Manually. They had pulleys and the rope went around a cleat and they'd just let it off and it would drop down. Now when the ferry was ready to go they took that rope and put it around a pulley on the dock and back to the cleat on board. So... as the ferry went out, it would pull the ramp up and the other deckhand on the other side would tie it off, then they'd let that other rope go... and so it was held in position.*

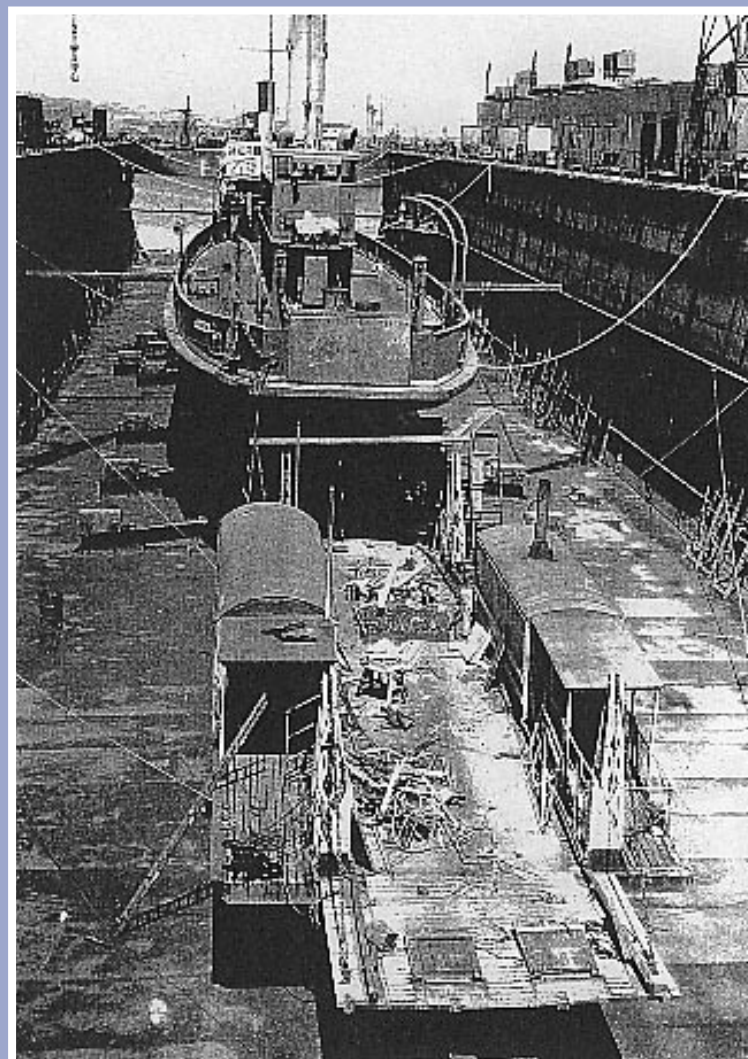
At this point, Ross' interviewer expressed surprise that this somewhat cumbersome procedure had never been modified or streamlined in all the years the punts had been running, to which Ross replied: *Yes. Well they might today, but they served the purpose. Why spend extra money on something when you've already got something that's adequately doing the job?* (an economical "if it ain't broke" approach that seems to be increasingly rare these days).

Denis Banks described the flap-raising procedure a little more fully: *On the Koorangaba there was a double lane of vehicles down each side of the punt around the double-ended driving cabin. Instead of raising the flaps by muscle power the Gaba had a much more sophisticated idea. They simply had a single pulley fixed to the landing ramp on shore, and they passed a rope through that pulley and back. When the punt moved out, the end of that rope was fastened, and the punt going out pulled the flap up. The second deckhand was over on the other side, pulling the rope in as it lengthened, and when the flap was up the first deckhand yelled out and the second one made the rope fast around a bollard on the punt. To lower the flap one deckhand undid the rope and let the flap down while the other went ashore and passed the rope through the pulley ready to pull the flap up when they went out again.*

Maintenance and Repairs

Each punt had an annual overhaul at the floating dock at the State Dockyard. The overhaul included an engineering and shipwright survey and any repairs deemed necessary by Maritime Services Board ship surveyors. The MSB was the authority that decided how many vehicles and passengers the punts could carry, specified what life-saving equipment should be on board, and issued an annual certificate stating that the punts were in safe working order and complied with statutory regulations.

There was also a six-monthly overhaul carried out at the Department's Stockton Mooring Berth, locally known as The Ballast, near the Boatrowers Hotel. This overhaul entailed an underwater survey, washing down, scraping and painting the hull, (colloquially known as "a haircut and shave") and making any repairs necessary to machinery. To carry out this work the DMR employed a senior engineer, a maintenance engineer, a leading hand fitter, a boilermaker, a shipwright, three painters and dockers and nine casual fitters. As I said earlier, there were a lot more people involved in keeping the punts running to schedule than just the crews that operated them.



RTA Pic

Lurgurena in dock with one of the local ferries - mid 1950s

Hazards

Sometimes crossing the harbour on the punts could be less than straightforward, sometimes even a tad adventurous. Punt crews had to contend with bad weather, the movements of shipping in the harbour, poor visibility, heavy swells, and even flood debris washed down the Hunter River. Even when conditions were favourable it was not uncommon for punts to run aground on the shallow mud bar that complicated the approach to the dock on the Stockton side.

Sue Pendlebury: *On the Stockton side it wasn't as deep as it is now because they dredge it a lot, and there was only a narrow channel coming in to the Stockton side. Either way, there was many a time the punt would just stop dead, 'cos they strayed or were washed onto the mud. The engines would rev up and the water would turn to mud, and eventually they were usually able to back off and go into the wharf. It was a regular occurrence.*

Ross Craig: *On the Stockton side, when they shifted the dock from the Mildred position which was around the bend, there was a fairly strong flow around there. Going back to the late 1800s there was a good depth of water there. They used to tie up steamers near the ferry wharf in 25 feet of water and there was a fair sort of a channel running down alongside Stockton. But they built the new dock right on the bend, and it was an out-bend and that made slack water there, and it started to silt up. The ferries would make a sort of channel of their own with their propellers churning up the mud, but there were no markers to tell them where this slightly deeper water was, and if they got a little bit off the track they'd run onto the mud and be stuck there for hours.*

Keith Player and Pat Conway recalled how sometimes the punt would run aground so firmly that they had to wait until the tide turned to enable them to get off again. It wasn't unusual for car drivers stranded on the punt for some hours to pass the time playing cards with the crew. Even though there was the relief punt tied up at The Ballast it was of no use in such circumstances because it would not have steam up – a process that took some hours to achieve from cold.

Strong westerly winds were a test of the punt skipper's prowess, because as the punt slowed down to approach the dock the westerlies made steering much more difficult, accounting for much of the damage done to the dolphin clusters on the way into the dock.

In time of big floods on the Hunter it was not uncommon to see trees, horses, and cows floating into the Harbour. In extreme cases of floods, such as the one in 1955, the ferries would be taken off the run so that their propellers and hulls wouldn't be damaged. On one occasion in 1966 the Lurgurena was held up for hours when a log jammed its propeller on the Newcastle side of the Harbour.

Despite these hazards there have been no fatalities associated with the punts, though there have been a number of "incidents". The article in *Main Roads* of Sept 1972 lists them:

(Back in the days of the Mildred), in 1934, a cyclist fell from the ferry into the harbour, but was saved by the quick and courageous action of one of the crew. Since then, only two accidents of a similar nature have happened: In July 1952 two motor cyclists slipped off the ferry flap and survived, and in November 1968 a station wagon slipped into the water off the flap and the sole occupant also survived by exiting the car and climbing to safety.

Keith Player and Pat Conway mentioned that when the car slipped into the river there was a lot of fuss. The punt hadn't been properly moored and when the car

The Chief Engineer,
HEAD OFFICE.

MEMO. FROM

NEWCASTLE

(PERSONAL OFFICE)

22 MAY 1967

(DATE)

City of Newcastle. Main Road No. 108. Newcastle-Stockton
Vehicular Ferry Service. Collision between Ferry Vessels
"Koondooloo" and "Kooroongaba" on 11th May, 1967.

On Thursday, 11th May, 1967 fog began to gather on Newcastle Harbour at about 6.15 a.m.. The vessels on the run at that time were the "Kooroongaba" under the command of Captain W. McNamara, and the "Koondooloo" under the command of Captain T.A. Jones. At 6.40 a.m. the "Kooroongaba" was at the Newcastle dock and the "Koondooloo" at Stockton dock. The Masters assessed the visibility and decided to proceed. Both vessels travelled slowly with lookouts posted and sounding whistle blasts at two minute intervals.

At 6.50 a.m. when the vessels were near the No. 2 buoy, visibility had decreased to about 100 ft. At this time each Master sighted the other vessel directly ahead, and immediately gave a warning of three short whistle blasts, and went full speed astern. However, the vessels collided, the port bow of the "Kooroongaba" striking the "Koondooloo" slightly to port of centre on the bow. The sponson on the "Kooroongaba" being slightly lower than that on the "Koondooloo" crushed the sponson on the "Koondooloo", passed under it and stove in plates between the sponson and the water line. The "Kooroongaba" suffered some damage to the bulwarks.

There was no personal injury, but some vehicles on the ferries suffered slight damage. Both vessels proceeded to Newcastle where the "Koondooloo" entered the dock and the "Kooroongaba" stood by. After cutting away timber from the damaged sponson which prevented lowering of the flap, the "Koondooloo" was unloaded at 7.30 a.m. The "Kooroongaba" then replaced the "Koondooloo" in the dock and unloaded at 7.45 a.m. Reports from the Senior Master, the Master of the "Koondooloo", (Captain T.A. Jones), and the Master of the "Kooroongaba" (Captain W. McNamara) are forwarded herewith. Forwarded also is a list of the vehicles which were damaged and a map of Newcastle Harbour showing the route of the ferry service and land marks referred to in the Masters' reports.

The damage to the ferry vessels was not sufficient to prevent their operation and the service was resumed when the fog cleared sufficiently at 9.05 a.m. from Newcastle and approximately 9.15 a.m. from Stockton. The hull of the "Koondooloo" was examined inside by the Senior Engineer, Mr. O'May, who pronounced it safe to continue in service. The "Lurgurena" is undergoing annual overhaul, and will not return to service until approximately 9th June, 1967. Consequently repairs to the damaged vessels could not be started before that date without leaving the service with only one vessel. As such inconvenience to the travelling public is not considered to be justified, repairs will be delayed until the "Lurgurena" returns to service.

Master's report on the Koondooloo/Kooroongaba collision in May 1967

Over the years Newcastle Harbour has been no stranger to collisions between vessels, and the punts have been involved in some of them. Rather tersely, the *Main Roads* article lists these as follows:

- # *Between the Lurgurena and the tug Heroic (no date).*
- # *Between the Lurgurena and the Koondooloo in September 1961.*
- # *Between the Lurgurena and the SS Tatana (owned by the Union Steamship Co) in February, 1964.*
- # *Between the Lurgurena and the Stockton passenger ferry Newcastle on Hunter in December 1966, and*
- # *Between the Koondooloo and the Kooroongaba in fog in May 1967.*

Given that the Lurgurena featured in four out of the five collisions listed, one wonders how she would have got on if she hadn't had her wheelhouses modified to improve visibility before she started on the Stockton/Newcastle run!

Ross Craig expands on the hazards that could accompany a punt crossing: *When there was a flood in the river and there was strong current coming down it went straight across to the Newcastle side (this was when the dock was moved to near Dark's Ice Works) hit the bank, and turned round. The vehicular dock was at a bit of an angle to the shore, and any strong current, particularly with a run-out tide, used to hit the punts and – they weren't what you'd call very manoeuvrable, they were flat bottomed, no pointed bow, - and quite often if they didn't allow enough for the strong current they'd plough into the piles. Nobody ever got hurt, but if you were standing up it would certainly make you stagger. They'd put it in reverse as soon as they saw that they'd lost control. They still had forward way but they wouldn't hit quite as hard. There were occasions when all the ferries and punts had to stop because of all the logs coming down if the Hunter River had been in flood. The logs got jammed into the ferry docks and the ferries couldn't get into the docks until they got a tug down to clear the logs out. The '55 floods were the worst.*

Emergencies

In the event of an emergency the timetable of the punts was often disrupted to accommodate the special needs of ambulances, the police and maternity cases. At least two occasions have been recorded, in 1959 and 1965, when babies were delivered in cars making the crossing. Glenys Payne tells the story of queue-jumping by someone with a dying passenger in the car. Her father Tom Payne (who was a punt skipper) set off for the other side as soon as the car was aboard, even though there were only a couple of cars already on board. The irate car drivers who didn't get on were left fuming. Glenys also tells of when she was in labour and one of the punts was a bit delayed waiting for her in the ambulance, and how everyone joshed her about disrupting the punt's timetable and inconveniencing people.

Ross Craig: *I used to work for Shortland County Council as an electrician (among other things) and if we had any sort of emergency (wires down or something like that) we'd ring the punt wharf and they'd hold the punt till our vehicle got there. If I was coming home to knock off at two in the morning after being out on some emergency and it looked like I might just miss the punt, I'd call the control room and they'd call the punt and let them know and they'd hold it for me so I wouldn't have to wait the hour till they next came across. It was the same with the ambulances. And Fire Brigade. All emergency vehicles. In a real emergency you could even jump the queue and be first on so you could be first off. ... It wasn't unknown for the punt to leave the wharf immediately an emergency vehicle got on, leaving cars waiting. But this was rare.*

Queues

Neil Matterson: *Once the population started to grow around Fern Bay, Medowie and Nelson Bay the punt queues developed. The queues were known as “the battleground”. Dad had to go to court one time because one of the car drivers ran into him. He’d gone down to settle a dispute between a car driver and the ticket collector and the driver started the car and ran into him. It really was like a battleground sometimes – it was always hot and there were always arguments. People would try to jump the queue and that. There was always someone trying something on.*



A queue for the punt on the Newcastle side



A queue on the Stockton side when one of the ferries went aground

Denis Banks: *The queues were nothing like the early days at Hexham and Brooklyn, though. At holiday times there the queues would be over a mile long and you'd have to wait for a long time to get across. Coming home from Nelson's Bay, say, on a Sunday afternoon the queues would be so long that you'd have miss two or three punts before it was your turn to get on.*

Glenys Payne: *It was the done thing. That was the way it was. You sat in that queue, and people didn't seem to care. They were quite resigned that that's the way things were.*

Ross Craig: *Sunday afternoons the punt queues were right up almost to the Boatrowers Hotel – about a mile and a half at least. You'd get people trying to cut in on the queues – because they had to leave an opening at each of the cross-streets, somebody would come down and whiz in. So the practice was to wait until you got down close to the ferry, then jump out and go and tell the toll-collector that this fellow had jumped the queue, so when he came to collect his toll he'd tell that fellow to get out of the queue and go back on the end. The queue might be moving along slowly and someone would come racing down the side. The toll collectors would stand in front of the car to stop it, then wave the others around.*

The toll collectors.

Keith Player became a toll collector on the punts in the early 50s. He describes the way it was then: *Toll collectors were stationed on both sides and collected the tolls onshore, (but later on the tolls were collected on board the punts). You'd walk along the queue of cars and take the money. Often the queues were very long. They often walked as far as the Water Police Station, about 500 yards from the approaches, and Keith joked that they often used to duck into a nearby café for a bite to eat when they reached the end of the line. As he explained: *It was the only way to get a**

feed. You'd get two puntloads in front then you'd dash back to the tollhouse and fill your book in, make a cuppa, and then take off again.

I was collecting fares one night and I stepped out and I got knocked by a car. My bag and tickets were all over the place. They took me up to Newcastle Hospital. I was off work for a while. I didn't get home till late that night – in an ambulance – and my wife had apparently joked with my son that she thought I might have another girlfriend! The job wasn't usually dangerous, though. In those days driver and car were free, and passengers paid a toll. The toll was charged on the punts to ensure that the privately-owned and operated passenger ferries wouldn't lose customers. When decimal currency was introduced in 1966 the fares were 8c per adult, schoolchildren 2c and concessions 2c.



DMR Pic

Toll Collector Alex Donnyman

Neil Matterson: *When TAA opened up their service at Williamstown, the toll collector had a phone. The pilots and air hostesses would sleep in a hotel in Newcastle, and if they were running late they'd ring up the toll collector and get him to hold up the punt for a few minutes till they got there. Any food left over from the plane they'd pass on to the punt crew. In those days they used to only have sandwiches and they were three slices with two fillings. Dad used to bring them home and they were beautiful toasted.*

Pat Conway had a job as a guard on the punts after war broke out. *We had two guards on the Newcastle side, and two guards on the Stockton side, and a guard going backwards and forwards on the punt. They issued us with an armband, a whistle on a string round your neck, and a pick handle. The theory was, that if you saw anyone strange hangin' around the wharf, you were to blow this whistle and the police would hear it. Now if you know Stockton, you'd know that the police station was half a mile away, and they'd have a hard time of it hearing the whistle. The money was good, though. It was all because of fear of sabotage.*

We got a scare there one day on the Lurgurena. They got a phantom phone call that there was a bomb planted. Jackie Schofield and I were the deckhands. We had to race around to all the drivers and tell them there was a bomb on the boat and to get off as quick as they could. They took off in top gear at the first opportunity. But it was a bum steer. There was no bomb. We looked around everywhere, in the scuppers and God knows where, and couldn't find anything. The skipper came down and called out to Jim Jordan, who was down by the stoke-hole, firing. We called out and told him there was a bomb on board somewhere, and to have a look amongst the coal. The next thing we knew he was up alongside us, and I think he could have been the first one of us off the boat!

Denis Banks: *In the later years there was a skipper called Jack Carmody. Around four and five o'clock in the afternoon on the Newcastle side, when people were going home from work, the foot passengers had to line up and wait until all the cars were on. Carmody would count the paying passengers in the cars, then he would only let on a certain number of foot passengers until he made a quota which corresponded to the number of lifebelts that were carried on the punt. None of the other skippers as far as I can remember used to go to these lengths, and he wasn't too popular with those who he wouldn't let on, who had to wait for the next ferry (even when they could see that there was still room on Carmody's).*

The social importance of the punts

Ross Craig: *I used to travel on the punt every morning and afternoon to and from work. It was quite a pleasant journey. You'd sit upstairs and read the paper if you were on the Lurgerena or the Koondooloo, but the Koorangaba only had a small cabin downstairs. The funnel came right through the upper deck, and in the wintertime it kept you nice and warm. In the summer they opened the windows and got the north-easter sea breeze through. You'd adjust your life around the ferries, like people in outer suburbs have to build their lives around the train or bus timetable. The vehicular ferries were a great meeting place. They had a yellow line drawn across behind the cabin, and of a morning going to work, from that line back to the back flap was completely filled with bicycles. It didn't cost you anything to ride your bike across because you were considered to be a vehicle. You'd line up there some time before the punt came in and you'd talk to all your mates. You knew everybody, and once you were on the punt you yarned all the way across. When the punts stopped you lost that personal touch with other people. But people had been agitating for a bridge for many years, and towards the end of the punts most people were anxious*

to see the bridge built and didn't feel much nostalgia for the punts at that stage. Of course the people in Newcastle who used to go to Port Stephens on the weekends, they were quite happy about the idea of a new bridge.

Sue Pendlebury: *I can remember when I was younger and going out on the town, the last passenger ferry would leave at midnight. Of course I'd miss that because even in those days we were still raging on after twelve o'clock. It was always nice to know that you could catch a punt at one o'clock, two o'clock...every hour. In the winter when it was cold we'd get inside near the engine room where it was nice and warm. So when the punts finished, it was always harder for the younger people to get home later at night, and it was a long drive.*

Neil Matterson: *Late at night, if you just missed a punt, you'd often have an hour's wait, and when the punt finally arrived the toll collector had to go down the line of waiting cars tapping on the windows to wake the drivers up.*

Keith Player: *We thought it was marvellous. The smell, and the steam and the lagging and all that. It was a fantastic smell. They used to take a hundred walking passengers free. (Then they brought in the toll collectors when the bigger punts came on). If the queue was 100 people long and you were the 101st, then you'd have to wait for the next time because they only had enough lifebelts to cover the crew and the 100. The car drivers and passengers would have been included in the 100 I think.*

(And a bit of entrepreneurship – Keith Player again): *We'd get over to Newcastle on the punt and we'd walk all along the wharves on our way to school at Marist Brothers. We'd strike the north coast boats – the sixty milers, as we used to call 'em - and they'd be loaded with sugar cane. We'd get a stick of sugarcane about a foot long for a penny, then we'd take it to school and cut pieces off and sell them for a penny!*

Keith Player: *There was a Gantry service to BHP – a privately-owned passenger service that took people to work at BHP. It was called the Gantry service because it left the Stockton side near where a gantry crane was when they were building the breakwater much earlier - it used to load rocks onto flat-topped train carriages to be taken out and dumped at the end of the breakwater. Most of the men in Stockton in those days worked for Rylands, Lysaghts, Stewarts and Lloyds and BHP. And most of them rode pushbikes to work. There was a mark on the punts beyond which pushbike riders were not supposed to go while the punt was travelling. Sometimes you'd get 30 or 40 blokes on pushbikes on board going to work that way.*

Glenys Payne: *I had four little kids, one in the pram, one standing on the pram, and the other two whingeing, and the bus would drop me at the ferry wharf and I'd walk with them to the punt wharf because I could go across on the punt for nothing in the early days.*

Being a punt skipper

I spoke to the family of Joe Matterson, who used to be a punt skipper. Neil, Joan and Sue were his children. Their lives were governed in all sorts of ways by the punts that their father commanded. I'll quote some sections of our conversation at length because I think it conveys a pretty fair idea of how the punts were woven into the lives of many people.

Neil: *Dad worked on the vehicular ferries in Sydney before the Harbour Bridge was built. When they built the Bridge they sent him to Peats Ferry and he worked there from Sydney. He'd spend a week up there and come back to Sydney for his days off. He was in charge down there.*

Joan: *I can remember he was there when King George V died, the telephone call*

came to our house and I had to go down and tell him to fly the flag at half mast.

Neil: *When they built the first bridge across the Hawkesbury River they sent him up here to run the punts. We came up here and moved in to one of the first Housing Commission homes in Stockton. I can remember coming across on the Mildred. I was 8 yrs old. It didn't take many cars, and as well they'd have drays and the baker's cart. Dad worked shiftwork then too. He'd be on night shift one week and day shift the next. It was "Don't make too much noise – Dad's asleep" a fair bit.*

(As Glenys Payne put it: *On shiftwork they learned to sleep through the noise of a family. They rotated between day and night shifts. It was a bloody nuisance but you got used to it.*)

Sue: *He used to like to take last night's leftovers in an aluminium saucepan with a clip lid. He'd put it on top of the punt's steam engine and keep it warm that way.*

Joan: *He worked shift work pretty well all his life and I think he was used to it. I don't remember it disrupting the family.*

Neil: *I worked shiftwork for BHP for five years and I have to say it mucked up my social life! I was only in my early twenties, and I left there to go to a lower paid job just because I wanted a life.*

Joan: *Dad would go in to the stores, to get things they needed on the punt. Amongst the things he had to get was paint, and he developed an allergy to the red-lead in the paint. So when he became Senior Master and was onshore all the time his health wasn't as good as it was when he was on shiftwork because he developed this dreadful dermatitis.*

I ask whether being a punt skipper made them a bit special as a family in the community, but the general feeling was that it didn't. Joan reckons that any



Captain Joe Matterson

Neil Matterson Pic

status it might give you was offset by the fact that you were living in a Housing Commission house (nearly everywhere a stigma). It was a close community and a hard one to break into and be accepted. They all agreed that it took many years, and mentioned the Catholic/Protestant religious split which was more pronounced in earlier days as a factor in this.

Neil mentioned how, when his Dad became Senior Master, he gained a few extra perks – not the least of which was that he no longer had to work shiftwork. There were other unforeseens, though, such as his dispiriting discovery that he couldn't drink at the Boat Rowers any more because nobody wanted to be seen drinking with him in case it was interpreted by their mates as sucking up to the boss. He used to have to go over to Newcastle to have a drink with a mate there who was also a master. Male culture can be callous.