

12TH INTERNATIONAL HARBOUR MASTERS' CONGRESS
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA, HOBART, 5TH OCTOBER 2020

Good afternoon (AEST) and welcome to the 12th International Harbour Masters' Conference, which was to be held in Hobart, Tasmania but is now, because of COVID-19, a virtual event.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land, lutruwita, Tasmania, the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and who continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

And I mourn the fact that there are no living descendants of the mouhineener people, the Aboriginal people who lived on the banks of the Derwent where Hobart now stands. In the context of COVID-19, it is sobering to reflect that the principal reason that the mouhineener perished so soon after colonisation is that they were decimated by contagious lung disease for which they had no immunity.

Fortunately, we have a thriving Aboriginal community who are, for the most part, descended from Aboriginal women of the North East Nation and their straitsmen partners who lived on the Bass Strait Islands. If you were here in Hobart, you would be able to visit the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) and ningina tunapri Tasmanian Aboriginal Gallery. One of the first objects you would see in this gallery is a stringy bark canoe, the kind of vessel that Aboriginal people used to travel between Tasmania's many islands.

In the absence of a visit, I encourage you to take a look at TMAG's website where there is an excellent introduction to the ningina tunapri gallery and the 40,000 years of Aboriginal occupation of lutruwita, Tasmania.

I am aware that the theme of your congress is 'The Next Wave - Navigating Towards the Digital Future', a theme which I support but feel I have no qualification to address in a way which could add value to your discussions.

My background is as a law academic and I have in, that capacity, attended many conferences in Australia and around the world and so I know the benefits of

conferences are not only for the intellectual stimulation they provide and the contacts made but also the opportunity to travel to places you would not otherwise visit. There are some advantages to virtual conferences and arguments for why they trump live events. However, travel is not one. To compensate for not being here, I thought I would tell you a little about the maritime and port history of this island and of Hobart, in particular, in the hope that it might whet your appetite to visit on some future occasion.

Hobart on the Derwent estuary has a splendid deep-water harbour and safe approaches from the open sea. It was viewed with surprise and delight when first sighted by Admiral Bruni D'Entrecasteaux and his crew in 1794. To quote the Admiral:¹

A sailor can never be accused of exaggeration in showing enthusiasm at the sight of a harbour twenty four miles long, everywhere safe, without reefs, where one can drop anchor without fear, and approach without danger a cable's length from the shore.

Except for increasing numbers of cruise ships pre-COVID-19, Antarctic supply vessels, ships serving the Zinc works up-stream, occasional commercial vessels and the fishing fleet, Hobart is no longer the major port it once was. In the twenty first century, it suffers from its distance from Bass Strait and hence the Australian mainland. However, in the early days of European settlement and for its first one hundred and fifty or so years, it was a thriving port. It was on the favoured route to Sydney and ships could sail down on the westerlies.

Two things underpinned the port's management, growth and prosperity in the early years – whaling and the fact it was a landing destination for the convicts sentenced to transportation who crowded the hulks and prisons in Britain. Convict labour accomplished all the major port construction beginning with the stone causeway which was built in 1820 along the spit which connected Hunter Island to the shore. This became the first wharf where warehouses were built. The place where convicts disembarked is marked by a series of striking bronze statues of convict women and children standing outside what is now Macq 01 Hotel, of the same shape and occupying the same footprint as the Mac 01 wharf shed it replaced. The stone warehouses lining the dock are now cafés, bars, restaurants and the University of Tasmania's Art School. Underneath the concrete it is still possible to see the causeway steps to the island.

¹ EPE de Rossel, *Voyage de D'Entrecasteaux envoyé à la recherche de La Pérouse* (2 vols, Paris, 1808, 245.

With the increase in shipping, the wharf proved inadequate and attention turned to the southern side of the cove and work began on the New Wharf. A quay was excavated by cutting into the dolerite slope, leaving space for warehouses and trading traffic. The New Wharf became one of the greatest whaling ports of the world and, as Van Diemen's Land's trade increased, the need for dockside warehouses grew to store wool, grain, fruit and whale oil and imported goods from around the world. This row of Georgian sandstone warehouses constructed in the 1830s and 1840s is now known as Salamanca Place.

The next development occurred in the central cove area with land reclamation, walls out in the water and eventually the creation of Constitution Dock, opened in 1850 and named to commemorate the passing of the Constitution Act, an English Act which allowed the Legislative Council to create a bicameral parliament. This dock has been made famous as the mooring place for yachts completing the Sydney Hobart Yacht Race, which it was until the maxi yachts forced a move to the Kings Pier Marina.

After the decline in whaling as a result of over exploitation in the nineteenth century, the row of warehouses lining New Wharf was given new life as fruit processing and jam producing factories. Jam and fresh and canned fruit exports dominated the port until the 1960s when the demand for jam and canned fruit fell and the final blow to fresh fruit exports was Britain's entry into the European Common Market in 1971.

We are fortunate that the old warehouses remain and have found new uses. Indeed, much of the port infrastructure remains including the old signal stations.

At first, signalling the arrival of a ship was primitive. Convicts would be taken to Betsey Island near the mouth of the Derwent, (this island is clearly visible from my study window at Government House) and they would light a fire when the expected vessel came into view and when the fire was sighted, a gun would be fired at Hunter Island to signal the ship's arrival.²

Communication improved with the erection of a signal station at Mt Nelson in 1811 (now a Hobart suburb) with a flag staff, guardhouse and set of signalling flags. Shipping movements were communicated by means of coloured flags from Mt Nelson to Mulgrave Battery in the town. Signalling stations were also

² Audrey Hudspeth and Lindy Scripps, *Capital Port : a History of the Marine Board of Hobart 1858-1997*, Artemis Publishing, 2000, 13.

established further down the Channel including Mt Louis at Tinderbox. This was particularly important because it was from here that signals were provided to the nearby pilot station.

It seems the signalling stations were early adopters of emerging communication technology using the simple fixed vertical pole with two movable arms which had been introduced two years earlier in England. The semaphore system soon became more sophisticated and was eventually supplemented with radio communication, but flags were still also used at the signal station at Mt Nelson and at the Battery on the wharf until the late 1960s.

Almost from the beginning of settlement, there was a Harbour Master and their stories are intriguing. The most famous is no doubt Captain James Kelly, a whaling boat captain and explorer and said to be the first white Australian to become a master mariner.³ Before his appointment as Harbour Master, he circumnavigated Van Diemen's Land in a whale boat and discovered Port Davey and Port Macquarie on the West Coast. He served as pilot and harbour master from 1819-1832. His tasks were varied and included assisting in transporting convicts to Macquarie Island and helping to set up the secondary penal station on Maria Island. After his resignation he became actively engaged in whaling, had an interest in several ships, extended his farming interests on Bruny Island, contributed to the costs of building our beautiful Theatre Royal, owned property in Battery Point, built Kelly Steps from Salamanca Place to what is now Kelly Street in Battery Point and was a well-to-do local identity. Kelly's Steps and many other landmarks have been named in memory of this Harbour Master.

Reading the history of the Port of Hobart and the Marine Board, I was intrigued to learn about the career of Captain Charles Woods a century later. Woods was a Lieutenant Commander, fresh from World War 2 with a young family, when interviewed in Sydney for the position of Assistant Harbour Master and pilot. He was asked if he was aware that his duties included looking after the lavatories on the wharves at Hobart. He immediately replied, 'No job is too large or too small'. He got the job.⁴

Responsibilities included not just wharf housekeeping, but replacing floating plant, issues with safety at sea, improvements and decisions about pilot and signal stations.

³ ER Pretyman, 'Kelly, James (1791-1859)', Australian Dictionary of Biography.

⁴ Hudspeth and Scripps, n 3, 234-235.

Hobart had no tugs for some years after the War. In November 1947, Captain Woods was given the job of bringing a 45-foot wooden tug boat from Melbourne to Hobart. The crew had a hair-raising ten-day journey with only two hours of calm weather for the whole trip. At one stage, Captain Woods had to plunge into a racing sea to cut a tangled rope which was fouling the propeller and preventing the vessel from reaching shelter.⁵ Pilotage too could be hazardous, particularly when trying to board a liner in Storm Bay with a thirty foot rope ladder swinging off the side of the ship.⁶

Captain Woods made a major contribution to the safety at sea by persuading naval authorities to give priority to survey work around the island and at a conference in 1960, he detailed six major inaccuracies in the official chart of the east coast and nine on the west coast.⁷

Captain Woods became Harbour Master in 1966 and a decade later was given the responsibility of Port Manager in conjunction with that of Harbour Master.⁸ I would assume that one of the most stressful times in his career must have been the Tasman Bridge Disaster. At 9.25pm on 5th January 1975, the *Lake Illawarra* on its way up-stream to the Zinc Works at Risdon, crashed into the Tasman Bridge bringing down two piers and three spans and leaving a gap of 128m. Headlights of cars could be seen tumbling into the water below – at least five people died in this way and seven of the ship’s crew were lost when the ship sank under the debris.⁹

Immediately, Captain Woods received a call from the Duty Petty Officer at the Dockhead building and the search for survivors began. The aftermath was intensive. Not only construction work for ferries to replace the bridge but also inquiries.¹⁰ The Court of Marine Inquiry explored the adequacy of the pilotage regulations, the exemption that the Captain of the *Lake Illawarra* had from pilotage and Captain Wood’s failure to exercise a possible discretion to prevent the ship’s captain proceeding under the bridge without a pilot. While Captain Woods was exonerated from any blame, regulations and practices have changed since.¹¹ Whenever a ship passes under the bridge, at

⁵ Hudspeth and Scripps, n 3, 235.

⁶ Hudspeth and Scripps, n 3, 239.

⁷ Hudspeth and Scripps, n 3, 275.

⁸ Hudspeth and Scripps, n 3, 295.

⁹ Hudspeth and Scripps, n 3, 311.

¹⁰ For more information about the Tasmanian Bridge Disaster including footage, see <https://www.ccc.tas.gov.au/community/culture-history/tasman-bridge-disaster/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDaVhDIR-IQ> viewed 23 September 2020.

¹¹ Hudspeth and Scripps, n 3, 341.

Government House we can hear the siren that announces that the bridge is closed to allow a vessel to pass under.

Looking at a job advertisement for TASPOTS last year for the position of Harbour Master, I can see that while technology has changed dramatically since the days of Captain Kelly and even Captain Woods, the basic function of ensuring safe navigation of shipping through Tasmania's ports remains the same.

My research for this opening address has filled me with great respect for the role of Harbour Masters and I give you my best wishes from Tasmania for the success of your congress in this online format.

Thank you.