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*Alexa* (1893–1944)

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On 24 December 1889, Mr Alexander P Wyly applied to enter on the register of the South Australian Yacht Club a new cutter, *Alexa*. There is no doubt about that date, but from *Lloyd's Register of Yachts*, 1908–9, she was built by Alexander McFarlane of Birkenhead in 1898. This must be an error, because Mr AP Wyly's *Alexa* won both the Plympton and Kintore Cups of 1893. According to Commodore FV Sanderson, she cost over £1,000, a very large sum in those days, so perhaps Mr Wyly took time to raise the funds between his application and launching. She was to a design by William Fife Junior, and was said to be named for the builder, although it could as well have been the first owner.

William Fife (1818–1902), son of the founder of the yacht-building firm of Fairlie, Scotland, was succeeded by William Fife Junior, a sort of Bruce Farr of his day. He designed *Alexa*, *Reverie*, and at least two of the Forster Cup restricted 21-footers (*Lady Alice* and *Fife*, which was once owned by James and Anthea Cowell.) He was the favourite designer of Sir Thomas Lipton, including several of the *Shamrocks*, unsuccessful contenders for the *America's Cup*.

Fife designs epitomised the 'plank on edge' concept, with elegant lines, narrow beam and usually with substantial draft, although some versions (*Reverie*, for example) had centreboards. In *Lloyd's Register of Yachts* *Alexa's* vital statistics were LOA 40.5 ft, LWL 31 ft (William Russell measured the LWL as 31.5 ft), Beam 8.75 ft, Depth 6.4 ft, [this was not draught, which was not measured] with 1,407 sq ft sail area and displacing 13 tons. It is likely that the sails were made by William Russell, but when Vice Commodore Edward F Belt owned her in 1909 sails were from the notable loft of Ratsey and Lapthorn, now of Gosport and Cowes.

From the beginning *Alexa* was prominent in local yacht racing. The Kintore Cup, in my opinion our most important trophy, was first contested in 1891 and *Alexa* won five of the first ten events, having gained fastest time in most of them. A newspaper report of 1900, when *Alexa* was owned by Vice Commodore EF Belt, is interesting.

The win of *Alexa* [in a heat of the Tennyson Cup], although undoubtedly well earned, was to a certain extent wondered at, for she represents what may be called the 'old school' of racing craft, and Saturday was essentially a day for the modern type, as seen in *Valeria*, *Geisha* and *Tern*.

With a big display of canvas the *Alexa* drew away early in the race, and reaping full benefit from what little breeze there was, she crept ahead and finished with an excellent lead. It was not expected that *Reverie* would prove a formidable opponent in such weather, but on the whole it was thought that the other craft would have shown to better advantage.

*Valeria*, *Geisha* and *Tern* were 'skimming dishes', the hull forms which competed with the 'planks on edge'. The half-model of *Matangi* in the Clubhouse shows what they were like. They were certainly superior in light airs, but could not match the enormous sail area carried by *Alexa*. On 19 January 1893 Mr Russell recorded three sets of measurements of *Alexa*, all with a LWL of 31.5 ft. Measured with 1411.55 sq ft of unspecified sails, she rated 7.4 tons. A total of 1196.98 sq ft had a note, 'This includes jibheaded topsail & masthead spinnaker, but not jibtopsail, yard or jackyard topsail.' This produced a rating of 6.28 tons. With 'lower sails only, including masthead spinnaker' she rated 5.17 tons.

*Alexa* was sailed to Melbourne for an Intercolonial Regatta, where she beat all-comers. That led to Mr GF Garrard of Melbourne commissioning Alexander McFarlane to build a larger vessel in order to beat *Alexa*. *The Register* of 1 October 1897 reported —

Mr GF Garrard's vessel was only launched on Friday. She was built by Mr McFarlane to designs supplied by Mr W Fife jun. When finished she ought to look a handsome craft and she should prove herself a first-class racing and sea boat. Her dimensions are 60 ft overall, 38 ft 2 in on the waterline, beam 10 ft 7½ in and draught 7 ft 6 in. She is provided with a straight keel, to which is fastened 7 tons 15 cwt of lead. Her foundation timbers are of jarrah and blue gum, the ribs being of the latter timber. She is planked with white kauri. Her deck is of the same wood, whilst the deck fittings etc are of teak wood. She is not unlike the *Alexa* to look at, albeit she has a prettier stem and is a much larger craft, being nearly double her size. The spars have yet to be fitted. They will be of oregon, and the spar fittings will be of galvanised steel. She will be yawl rigged. Her cabin will be splendidly fitted out, and sleeping apartments will be provided for six persons. The cabin panels will be of polished kauri and cedar.

This was *Sayonara*, which won the Intercolonial Regatta of 1898. [See the 'cover' to the Annual report of 2000–1 included in *Squadron Quarterly* June 2002: 26] She was one of the most notable yachts of her time and for her is named the *Sayonara* Cup, which was actively competed into the 1920s. An enquiry addressed to the Royal Melbourne Yacht Squadron about *Sayonara* and the fate of the trophy has not elicited a reply.

Between 1889 and 1903 the only Squadron yacht with greater measured sail area than *Alexa* was Commodore Richard Honey's *Ethel*, 35.67 ft LWL, 1677.75 sq ft with her jib-headed topsail and rating 9.97 tons. It is frustrating that so few measurements were recorded and hardly any photographs have survived of these grand old vessels. Fortunately that cannot be said of *Alexa*, and the dilemma is to restrict ourselves to so few.

By 1919 Len Walter (who built *Norallie* in 1906) achieved a long-standing ambition to own *Alexa*, which he raced regularly as scratch boat in the fleet and unbeaten on handicap until Richard Fisher's *Reverie* won the Kintore Cup of 1920. He was the grandson of her original owner, Commodore William Fisher. [For the expulsion of *Reverie* from the Squadron pool and her sad end, see *Squadron Quarterly* September 1996: 36–7.]

In 1922 *Alexa* changed hands again, and was briefly owned by the partnership of Messrs Angove, Martin & Crompton before they bought *Stormy Petrel* from Napier Birks. In 1927 *Alexa* was owned by Major JM Irwin, and at that time she was much used for racing and social sailing. Thereafter there is a gap in our knowledge, and so far attempts to fill it have not succeeded. All we know is that Mr WF Crook bought her from John Gordon before Easter in 1943, which was as late in April that year as it can get, probably 25 April.

Sad to say, *Alexa* ran aground and on to the beach at North Glenelg in January 1944. In the week that followed, valiant attempts were made to pull her off the beach at high water; but to no avail, as apparently, the six tons of lead in the keel held the hull firmly in the sand. In this way, the yacht *Alexa* became a total loss.