

Jack Williams

Peter Last

Like many others of his time, Jack Williams started sailing before the Second World War in heavy-weight sharpies, in his case at Grange. He kept himself fit, and once rode his cycle to Mildura, which must have been in large part on unsealed roads. But he was more of the water, watery than of the earth, earthy. He married Iris in 1942, and the following year began to build a 20 square metre Tumlarén, which he named *Sirocco*. With wartime pressures this was not launched for several years. Thus began a keen racing career at the Squadron, making Jack one of the most highly regarded skippers of his generation. Alex Burnside was with him throughout. Alex helped to build *Sirocco* and became Jack's forward hand, participating in every available inshore race. In his early days Jack had as third crew member on *Sirocco* his cousin Howard Williams. During the war years the Squadron and the Port Adelaide Club joined forces to race round the beacons of the Port River. While waiting for *Sirocco* to be completed they raced in twenty-one footers.

Alex Burnside started as an enthusiastic bailer boy waiting on the beach in hopes of a berth in a fourteen-footer at Largs Bay. He began racing at the Squadron in 1928-29 in one of Mark Mitchell's twelve-foot cadets, *Luana*. His skipper was Bruce Tunbridge. The generous Professor later provided a sharpie for them at the Squadron, and Alex also did a few races under Ken McLaren in Professor Mitchell's twenty-one footer *Nerana*. Another sharpie skipper at the Squadron at that time was Len Wigan. Alex moved to *Gymea* under Jack Dowsett, who had bought her from Bill Powell. Alan Jordan's Tumlarén *Celeste* was kept at the Squadron, with a twenty-one in a shed beside her, somewhere near the present



slip area. In 1949 there were five tums in the fleet, and *Sirocco* won the first State championships for a keelboat class. There were said to be 300 tums world-wide.

Racing in and out of the Port River in those days called for much local knowledge. We started roughly at the southern end of the container wharf, where there was a beacon we called the Black Pole (not to be confused with its namesake north of the Silt Ground). This was one end of the starting and/or finishing lines. As the tide flooded there was a re-entrant eddy close by the rocks of the northern breakwater, which lifted a boat very significantly to seaward. The nature of this eddy was greatly changed by more recent revisions of the channel and the breakwater. It was exciting and exhausting to take quick little legs in order to exploit this eddy and to push an opponent out into the full force of the flooding tide. We went as close to the rocks as we dared, with a Blackwall lee-oh when this was possible. In the end-of-season flatties the keen ones would anchor until the full force of the tide abated. By contrast, if the

Jack Williams ...

tide was still flooding, we sat in the middle of the River on returning to the finish. Courses were about the (lesser number of) outside navigational marks and the beacons of the River. In those days they were lit by kerosene lamps, replenished by a man who rowed a dinghy from one to the other, often during our races. The ketches and SS *Karatta* (coming and going from Kangaroo Island via Glenelg and Second Valley) usually obligingly manoeuvred about us.

In *Sirocco* Jack cruised to Port Vincent and to Kangaroo Island, an experience Iris did not enjoy. Loyally she continued to support him throughout his career. I am reminded of another yachting wife with a husband also very committed to racing. They arrived at Spalding Cove with their children, I think non-stop from home, one New Year's Eve—seasick, cold and very tired. Her husband had just returned from a Hobart race in another Squadron vessel. "I do wish it had been cricket," she said.

Seeking a larger and faster vessel, Jack brought a six-metre from Melbourne, *Judith Phil*. With her he was Cock-of-the-Walk in 1958-59, having taken this championship pennant in *Sirocco* in 1948-49 and 1953-54. Still after something bigger and better, in about 1961 he built a 38-foot Buchanan sloop, *Canopus*. Now he could set his sights further afield, both in racing and cruising. He twice won the long defunct Queenscliff-Port Lincoln race (1965 and 1967). He achieved a very creditable eleventh on handicap in the Sydney-Hobart race of 1966. Still he faced the yachtsman's perpetual challenge to achieve ever more speed and power. This came in 1973 with the Cole 43 *Minna*, in which by a matter of seconds he was first over the line from *Banjo Paterson* in the Melbourne-Hobart race in 1974. He had already won the

Cock of the Bay race from St Kilda to Queenscliff.

By now Jack had enjoyed a very successful racing career. He felt that it was time to relax with more space and comfort. Thus he built his last yacht, *Allemanda*, which was launched in November, 1980. In her he and Iris cruised extensively, and at other times Jack and his cronies enjoyed themselves exploring and fishing in local waters.

Alex Burnside described Jack as a very able skipper, who exacted a lot from his crews, but who was always concerned for their safety. He was very much master of the vessel, and greatly disliked anybody else trying to give orders when he was on deck. After the race was over he was good-humoured and did not nag people about what might have been. Those who raced against him respected and admired his skills. We sadly mourned his passing in 1991. SQ



Canopus