

By Johnny Hilhorst and Brigid Dighton

Famous Maxi yacht *Brindabella* now calls the Squadron home!



Johnny and Brigid

So we bought an 80 ft Maxi yacht ... not just any yacht, but Australia’s most famous Maxi, *Brindabella*! Named after the range in the ACT, *Brindabella* is also known as The People’s Yacht. Believed to be conceived on the back of a beer coaster at the CYCA, in 2021 she was recognised by the Australian Maritime Museum as an ‘historically significant vessel’.

Brindabella certainly has earned her reputation. In 1997 she won line honours in the Sydney to Hobart race and has come second place four times, making her Australia’s most favourite underdog. At one stage she held every race record out of Sydney and still holds the race record in the 1999 Sydney to Hobart for a conventionally ballasted yacht. This record will go down in history at 1 day, 20 hours, 46 minutes and 33 seconds. She won line honours and set a race record in the 1994 Auckland to Noumea race and has campaigned in the Hawaii Transpac race. She also still holds the race record for the Sydney to Noumea, Sydney to Mooloolaba and the Sydney to Wollongong races. Her entire victories are too great to list. *Brindabella* was commissioned by George Snow, designed by Scott Jutson and built by Boatspeed in 1992-1993. The IMS rules she was designed under restricted the use of carbon fibre composites. The rules were relaxed the following year, putting her at an immediate disadvantage of yachts built in her wake. Constructed of laminated Kevlar and still bearing the original aviation paint she was launched in, she is literally bullet proof. While heavier Kevlar is able to flex, common carbon fibre boats crack under extreme force, thus she barely shows any sign of structural derogation today. This disadvantage in construction material is also her reason for longevity – most of the yachts which subsequently beat her in the 1990s have been sent to the scrap heap.



Sailing in the Gulf Photo: My Australia Downunder



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Brindabella is 80 feet long, 14 feet deep, stands at 105 feet above the water, and weighs in at 22 tonnes. She was the first Maxi yacht in the world to be fitted with a Harken winch and grinder set, setting the scene for Harken’s success in this market globally. These winches are ‘one off’ items – museum pieces in their own right.

George Snow sold *Brindabella* to Andrew Short (of Andrew Short Marine) in 2007 without naming rights, after subsequently naming her *Brindabella ASM*. George agreed this looked wrong and allowed the naming rights to follow the boat. Andrew made improvements, including a more competitive keel allowing higher upwind performance, as well as a bow sprit and sugar scoop, increasing her length on water performance. By this time her competitive racing career was over, superseded by a sophisticated canting keel and composite technologies. However, she still retained an enormous iconic pull with the Australian public and is always a crowd favourite at any regatta.

Jim Cooney purchased the boat in 2010 from Andrew Short’s estate, knowing she would never compete at the top end. Out of adoration for her legacy, Jim invested in giving her an extended racing life that would form the foundation of his racing team, and subsequent campaigns onboard his Super Maxi, *Comanche*.

Brindabella is synonymous with the Sydney Hobart race, an Australian-built yacht that has competed against the best in the world. She is adored not only by the yachting community but by the Australian public in general. Even those who don’t follow yachting know of this legendary sailing icon.

Brindabella has sailed with many celebrity Australian crews in her lifetime. More than 500 crew have sailed *Brindabella* to Hobart over the years and now, in her new life in Adelaide, we look forward to offering many more people the opportunity to get onboard this iconic piece of Australian history.

In 2021, we purchased *Brindabella* to offer her a new life and narrative in South Australia – and we are incredibly excited about what the future holds. It all started around three years ago when we spent a couple of nights in our studio completing a ‘Values Elicitation’ session. This was designed to find some understanding of what we both want and value in life. We filled a wall with a sprawling ‘mind map’ with the main themes being creativity, our love for the ocean, our environment, our family, the community, social justice and inclusion, hospitality, and a longing to own and run our own business. We didn’t know exactly what we wanted to do, however this set the foundation for our search.

We had been thinking about how to plan to buy a yacht for a while, maybe when the kids are older. We were conflicted about wanting to start a new venture too. One night in October 2020 when we were

lying in bed surfing Boats for Sale online we came across her. I grew up watching *Brindabella* every Boxing Day as she rounded Sydney heads. I couldn’t actually believe she was for sale! I suggested jokingly to Brigid that we buy her, thinking what a cool family cruiser she could be! For whatever reason we couldn’t get her out of our heads but realised she could never be a family cruiser. Mid-November the penny dropped – this would be our new venture! Bring the People’s Maxi to the people! Offer a sailing experience charter out of Adelaide with high-end catering and involving community outreach ... it was all there and made so much sense. It has, and continues to be, both excitement and disappointment, working through so many issues and getting some great wins along the way too. We have had her since May 2021 and, at the time of writing this article, we are so very close to getting her into survey and finally operational. Check out our website or social pages for details on our offering.

In original racing mode she would take up to 23 crew. However, we have simplified her configuration by adding a furling headsail, lazy jacks and a powered winch which makes her easily crewed by only four people. We hit 23 knots boat speed on the way back from Sydney, so performance drop will need to be recognised by anyone new to the boat.

We are a blended family with four kids – Iris, Austin, Levi and Mackenzie, aged between 8 and 14. We have all been made extremely welcome at the RSAYS, with our two older kids joining the Cadets and loving it!

Brigid’s professional background is in film, television and design. She does not have a great deal of sailing experience, however her enthusiasm would rival anyone’s. Her sailing highlight so far was on board the five-day delivery back to Adelaide at the helm and coming into Portland in a 25 knot breeze – just magical! *Check out the footage on our socials.



Testing the navigation lights



Sailing in the Gulf Photo: My Australia Downunder

I have sailed since first stepping onto a windsurfer at 13 years of age. A life member of surf life saving, my need to race and compete rowing surf boats was exhausted after 25 years. Professionally I have worked in commercial insurance, and risk and project management in some of the world’s largest organisations. I recently completed my Master 5 and MED 3 Certificates which will enable me to skipper *Brindabella* commercially.

We have taken on a massive undertaking that is requiring a huge amount of tenacity, ambition and support from those around us. We have also been blessed with extraordinary support from our great friends Tim and Tash Edkins who have helped guide us along the way. It is a massive life change for all of us and we cannot wait to start to share her with the broader community. As soon as she is ready to sail we will open her up for a Club viewing. We are living locally and are at the boat most days so come and say “Hi!” We love a chat!

