

BILL BIRNIE AND HIS WYLOS

Dr Peter Last, Squadron Historian, weaves another interesting article about a past Squadron member and his yachts, all called *Wylo*.



Bill Birnie (1862–1944) and friend, c 1902,

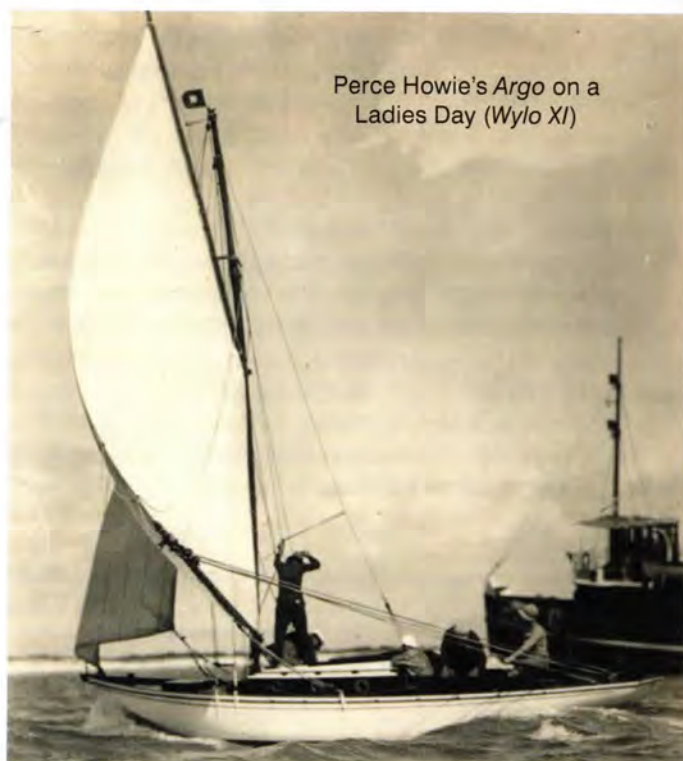
WH (Bill) Birnie was a banker, whose work took him to other states and New Zealand, before returning to South Australia. He retired in 1927 as State manager of the Bank of New South Wales and died a childless widower in 1944. All his life he seems to have had a succession of yachts, each called *Wylo*. He refused to sell the name with the boat, which makes it impossible to follow the provenance of all of them, but some can be identified from his photograph albums and by other means.

He was first elected a member of the Squadron on 14 January 1897, but resigned on 19 March 1899. On 12 November 1919 he was re-elected to membership, which presumably he retained for the rest of his life.

In January 1924 Bill Birnie cruised the Gulf and to Kangaroo Island in this *Wylo*, accompanied by PP King, whose log I have transcribed. For many meals they went ashore to hotels.

In The Advertiser 25 October 1926, headed 'Yachting News, Port Adelaide Sailing Club', a list included 'Mr W Birnie's Marconi-rigged 18-footer.' This is the earliest Australian citation I have found for this rig. The first in Oxford English Dictionary is Yachting Monthly, 1912, named by association with radio (wireless) masts.

In 1927 the national championship for restricted 21-footers (the Forster Cup) was held in Adelaide. A Victorian entry, *Ardale*, was sold here and was briefly a *Wylo*. After Bill Birnie sold her, she reverted to *Ardale*, and in the 1960s was owned by Dr Alan Cotton.



The Angas album of the mid 1930s has two undated pictures of a *Wylo*. In those days many members wore their old business suits and hats to go sailing, and the man so dressed beside



The *Wylo* of 1907 off Manly in Sydney Harbour



Another *Wylo* racing out of windy Wellington, 1913.



Wylo in the Squadron Opening November 1921 with *Wongalere* in the background.



Bill Birnie at the helm

the helmsman was very likely Bill Birnie. If so, he would then have been in his seventies. She was probably the one which passed to Doug Verco, to be renamed *Nautilus*.

The last of the Birnie boats was built in 1937 by Peter Clausen of Fletcher Road, Birkenhead. Kenneth Francis Villiers Sanderson (1895–1973) was long-serving Judge of the Adelaide Local Court. Bill Birnie bequeathed her to him in his will. Judge Sanderson removed the short bowsprit, which once holed *Grelka*. The incident occurred because the engine controls were almost inaccessible from the cockpit, and later owners restored it.



Doug Verco's *Nautilus* in Nepean Bay, 1948, a sometime *Wylo*.

A *Wylo* before that was bought by W Douglas Verco, who named her *Nautilus*. She was a heavy cutter of about 40 ft, in which I made my first cruise to Kangaroo Island in 1948, and I went across the Gulf in her for the Port Vincent Easter regatta of 1949, after which Doug bought Norman Ford's elegant cutter *Anyndah* from Mark Tostevin or Keith Flint. From her I moved to Norman Howard's *Nereid*, but that is another story.



Wylo on Ben Weir's slip, adjacent to the Squadron's Birkenhead premises (before the move to Outer Harbor in 1924), taken in April 1922.



In 2011 a *Wylo* was lovingly restored from a derelict state by Fabrizio Tassalia. She is most likely the vessel once owned by Howard Byerlee and is not the one that I knew as Doug Verco's *Nautilus*. She lies at Geelong. (Peter Richards)

Footnote: Searching newspaper reports has been greatly simplified since I

copied about a third of the cuttings in the three news cuttings books held by the Squadron. The information allowing me to learn more of Bill Birnie was obtained through the superb site of the National Library of Australia, <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

Nautilus had the potentially vicious trait of heavy lee helm when her large jib was hoisted. She was acquired by Dr Bob Downing, and I happened to be at the Squadron one evening when her bowsprit was entrapped under the hydroplane wharf by an inexorably rising tide. There was a fearsome crack when it broke. I don't know what became of her after that.

A *Wylo* passed to Howard Byerlee. She broke her mast early in the race to Port Lincoln of about 1965, and Howard re-rigged her to accept sails for the Tasman Seabird class, that being then a popular style for ocean racing. Dr Peter Irwin had one called *Julie O*. John Moffatt has filled in some gaps in her provenance. 'Wylo was owned by Bob Wheeler, a member of the club, and I believe he sold her to Howard Byerlee. I notice that she was owned in 1986 by a Mr RB Martin and in 1990 by Leon Simms. She was still in the 1995 year book to Leon.'

Some time after Howard's death that *Wylo* passed to Dr Sidney Halloran, my professional contemporary. She went up on Middle Spit and had to be refastened from the resultant pounding.



Restored *Wylo* in Geelong