Bill Birnie and his *Wylos*

Peter Last

Bill Birnie (1862–1944) and friend, 1902, a picture from one of his albums.

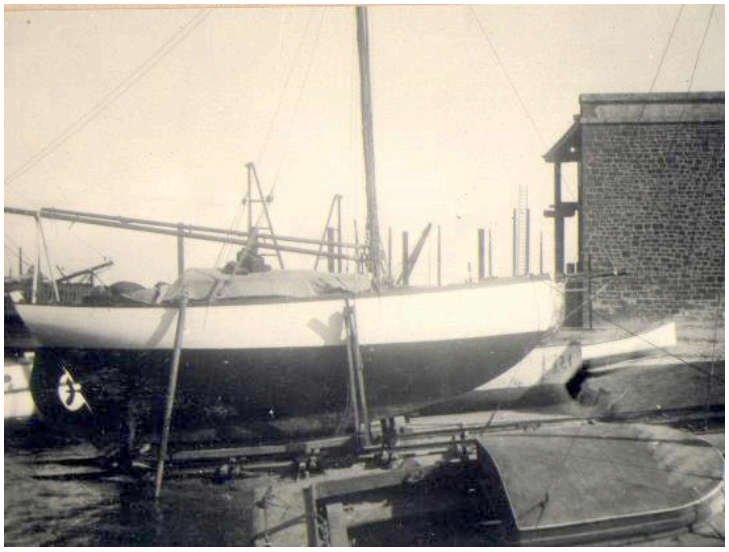
WH (Bill) Birnie was a banker, whose work took him to other states and New Zealand, before returning to South Australia. He retired in 1927 as State manager of the Bank of New South Wales and died a childless widower in 1944. All his life he seems to have had a succession of yachts, each called *Wylo*. 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.

The *Wylo* of 1907 off Manly in Sydney Harbour

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

Wylo in the Squadron Opening Demonstration of November 1921 with *Wongalere* in the background. She was 25 ft overall. (King album).



Two pictures of *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 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.

The *Wylo* some time after 1927 was the Victorian Forster Cup restricted 21-footer *Ardale*, which came here that year to compete in the national championships. She did not distinguish herself in that series, but in 1928 she won the Good Friday race across the Gulf to Port Vincent in a drifter. On 7 March 1931 the restricted 21-footer *Lady Alice* won a 60-mile Gulf race, which was probably the Orontes Cup. The race started in a drifter and *Wylo* withdrew. Bill Birnie didn't keep her long and she resumed her old name. In the 1960s, having been converted for cruising, she was owned by Dr Alan Cotton.

Perce Howie's *Argo* on a Ladies Day. On the back of one of the photographs she is labelled *Wylo XI*.

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 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*.

A social column in *The Advertiser* of 15 November 1935 noted that on Opening Day Miss Evelyn Bristow was 'hostess' on *Wylo*, but Mr Birnie was not named and there is no way to know which of the *Wylos* this was. In the report of Ladies Day 1928 she took the helm of *Wylo*, but Mrs TM Hardy won in *Norallie*.

Bill Birnie from the Angas album (1930s).

After Bill Birnie retired, in 1930 he was appointed a director of Walter Reynell and Sons Limited.

The Advertiser Monday June 3, 1935

Cyclist seriously injured in collision

REYNELLA, June 2.

E H Dunkley, 22, of Sturt road, Brighton, received serious injuries to the head when the bicycle he was riding came into collision with a motor car on a bridge two miles south of. Reynella about 1:30 pm today. After treatment by Dr. Salter, he was taken in Mr J Myren's ambulance to the Adelaide Hospital, where he was admitted in a semi-conscious condition. As the windscreen of the car was broken, it is thought that Dunkley must have been hurled against the glass. His bicycle was badly buckled. Dunkley was travelling from the direction of Adelaide, and Mr William Birnie, retired bank manager, of Childers street North Adelaide, was driving the car from Noarlunga. Mounted Constable Ridgley, of Morphett Vale, investigated the accident.

In the following year, in the Adelaide Local Court there were claims and counter claims between Mr Birnie and Mr Dunkley, but the outcome seems not to have been reported.

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. He acquired the last of the yachts named *Wylo* under unusual circumstances. 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.

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.

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.

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

A *Wylo* passed to Howard Byerlee. She broke her mast early in the race to Port Lincoln of about 1965, and Howard rerigged 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, I believe he sold it to Howard Byerlee. I notice that it was owned in 1986 by a Mr RB Martin and in 1990 by Leon Simms. It 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.

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

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.