



COOEE a Bailey Brothers circumnavigator

In 1894, C & W Bailey built the 39ft fishing boat, Cooee. A century later, she completed a 12-year circumnavigation – possibly the world’s oldest yacht to do so.

Charles Bailey Jr and Walter Bailey were the eldest and third eldest sons of the highly successful Auckland ship and boat builder Charles Bailey Sr.

Born in 1845, Bailey had been the foremost builder of yachts and Pacific Island trade schooners in Auckland since 1875 when he took over the business of George Beddoes who shifted to Fiji. In 1893 Bailey Sr retired to be a publican, leaving the goodwill of his thriving business to his two sons who traded formally as C & W Bailey but were soon called Bailey Bros on the analogy of their close rivals, Logan Bros.

In the December of their second year of business, 1894, the

Baileys produced two landmark yachts, the 38ft 4 rater *Rangatira*, for Dr A W Chatfield of Parnell, and the similar 39ft fishing boat, *Cooee*, for Messrs Cow & Gane, fish merchants of Parnell Rise. The two keel yachts shared the same rakish schooner bow of the time, although *Rangatira*’s had more hollow to it, but *Cooee* had a foot more beam, at 9ft, and a lot less sail area.

Cow and Gane had commissioned her for line fishing in the Hauraki Gulf; the target catch was snapper. Typically, these so-called schnapper boats followed the hull-form and rig of the individual builder’s current racing yachts, exemplified in *Cooee*’s case by *Rangatira*, but with an extra foot or so of beam to increase



“Lidgards were commissioned to extract her from the mud, for a fisherman, for her fishing quota.”

LEFT: *Cooee* racing on the Waitemata in the 1920s.
TOP: *Cooee's* near twin, *Rangatira*, at left.
RIGHT: *Cooee* sailing on the Waitemata Harbour at Auckland in 1927, just before she returned to fishing.



the carrying capacity and stiffness in the sometimes heavy weather experienced in the Hauraki Gulf. The term schnapper boats was coined by analogy with the numerous Auckland centreboarders, mullet boats, which were used for netting mullet in shallow waters.

Cooee was a gaff cutter with dimensions of 39ft x 28ft x 9ft x 5ft 6in and, conventionally for Auckland builders at the time, her hull was of triple diagonal construction of heart kauri timber. The newspapers thought she would be fast.

Rangatira, sailed by Charles Jr, won her first race in the Judges Bay Regatta of January 1895, surprisingly beating top guns, the Logan 5 raters *Aorere* and *Yvonne*, the Logan 4 rater *Ngaru* and the new steel 5 rater cutter *Thetis*. *Cooee* proved to be a fast boat too, and won her first race, the January 1895 Auckland Anniversary Regatta race for fishing boats over 4 tons. From then on, she raced frequently in Auckland regattas, often “winning as she liked, the others not getting within cooee of her”, punned the Observer.

The Logan Bros' *Dolphin* of late 1895 finally displaced her as the fastest fishing boat in town. *Cooee* carried on fishing for a succession of owners, gaining an auxiliary in 1911. After the Great War, when there was a huge demand for sound and competitive keel yachts, Ponsonby yachtman W J Davis bought her and converted her into

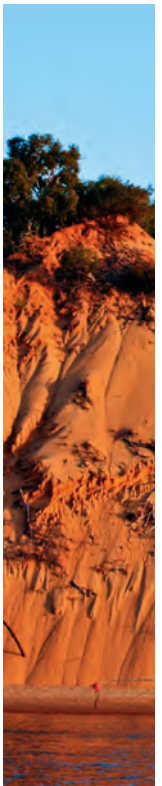
a smart racing yacht, equipping her with the high quality internal fittings of her near-twin, *Rangatira*, which had been critically damaged when she fell from her cradle in August 1921.

Davis raced *Cooee* with several Auckland clubs as B18 until 1927 when she was sold to fisherman Jock Mackay who fitted her with a big, ancient, two-cylinder 'Frisco Standard engine, a wheelhouse and belting around her gunwales. He renamed her *Viola*. Mackay was contracted by the Fisheries Department to use *Viola* in experiments on seine netting in the Hauraki Gulf, experiments which eventually resulted in a burst of seine boat building in Auckland, mainly for Dalmatian owners, that kept the yards of several boatbuilding firms open during the grim times of the 1930s Depression.

By 1937 *Cooee/Viola* was no longer viable commercially and was abandoned in Freemans Bay near the Birkenhead vehicular ferry wharf, derelict and full of mud. Our old friend, and our accurate window into the past, Jack Taylor – long may he continue to prosper in his nineties – was an apprentice boat builder with Lidgard Bros and tells the tale of how Lidgards were commissioned to extract *Cooee/Viola* from the mud for another fisherman, for her fishing quota.



Cooee sailing off Hout Bay, South Africa in 1992 with *Ngataki*.
INSET: Jill Knight and *Cooee*, 2012.



She remained derelict ashore until October 1938 when photographer Arthur Powell bought her and paid Shipbuilders Ltd to carry out a massive refit, including a new stem, stern post, deck and cabin top. She was refastened and fitted with new garboards. Her lead was remoulded and refitted, the rig altered to bermudan and an auxiliary fitted. Her counter was bobbed for the usual reason; ie, that the plank-ends had rotted. She re-entered the racing fleet with the sail number B27 and raced in Anniversary Regattas during the Second War. In 1946 Powell sold her to Con Gilmour.

Australian lass Jill Knight first encountered *Cooee* in 1983 in Mooloolaba, Queensland. New Zealander Peter Cree had paid \$6000 for *Cooee* in Whangarei where Gilmour had kept her for 35 years. Peter had entirely refitted the interior, including a new maststep and several new kauri floor timbers to replace the softening pohutukawa timbers, and had partially refastened her. He replaced the bermudan rig with gaff at the urging of Tim and Pauline Carr of *Curlw* [Boating NZ, July & August 2014] who



were in New Zealand at the time. He made the main and topsail smaller in the interests of easier management for offshore work and cruising, with a shorter boom and no yards on the topsail. He also restored the shape of the after end of the counter with a solid piece of laminated kauri.

In 1982 Peter sailed her into the Pacific and then to Australia to earn some money before sailing on. Jill joined him as crew in 1983 when they sailed into the Pacific and up into Asia. They were both offered boatyard jobs in China in 1984 and sailed *Cooee* to Xiamen, formerly Amoy, in Fukien Province. She was probably the first western yacht to sail voluntarily into China for many decades.

After four or five months, they sailed south to the Philippines where Peter wanted to stay and build wooden boats. Driven to keep moving, Jill bought *Cooee* from him in 1988 and set sail alone, knowing little about boats and sailing, and never having sailed solo. She believes that *Cooee*, being strong and seaworthy, looked after her for the next few years as Jill made every mistake possible, including breaking most breakable things and travelling up a steep learning curve. Jill was constantly



The business end of *Cooee*.

Cooee anchored at Yellow Patch, Queensland.



helped by the people she warmly regards as “the tribe” – other escapees from the artificiality of modern society who were sailing the oceans of the world.

The intention to sail alone around the world was not a conscious one, but came in small increments. It was Jill’s white whale, her *Moby Dick*. She read *Out of Africa* while aboard in the Philippines and thought, “Africa, it isn’t so far.” Jack, her cat, was dubious, but went along. “Five years on, my boat and I were comfortable old friends. The engine and I had a cautious understanding. The weather had browbeaten me into a respectful humility. The years had given me a degree of self-sufficiency I’d craved. My white whale had crept up on me while I wasn’t paying attention. In the best development of all, I’d discovered profound delight in ocean passages.”

Over a 12-year circumnavigation, 1983 to 1995, *Cooee* sailed to about 40 countries – under Africa, where there was a long pause and a meeting with another Auckland cutter, *Ngataki*, sailed by Debbie Lewis and her young son Jason; across the Atlantic, through Panama, across the Pacific – and ended up where Jill had met *Cooee*, in Queensland.

Since then Jill and *Cooee* have roamed the Queensland coast and islands and taken one trip to New Caledonia in 2005. Jill has delighted in her correspondence with Jack Taylor which has given her a deep understanding of the materials, the processes and the skills that produced *Cooee* in 1894 and shaped her form since.

“*Cooee* has given me so much,” Jill says. “The Escape. The Afterwards. So much learning, adventure, joy and freedom. So far, it feels as though I’ve remained escaped, to the degree that makes me happy. And as long as I have my beautiful wooden boat, my detachable flight capsule, I don’t see any reason for that to change.”

Jill has asked me: “Is *Cooee* the oldest boat to have circumnavigated?” When her circumnavigation started in 1983 *Cooee* was 89 years old. When the circumnavigation ended she was 101 years old. I can’t be certain, but I would be incredibly surprised if any other yacht that ancient has been around the globe. It says a lot, mostly about Jill, but also something about the Bailey family’s design skills and their craftsmanship. ▣

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