



CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021

**2127 Phantom – Richard Henry
Thompson**

By Allison Peters

***Phantom* – a very real presence in the life and maritime legacy of Richard Henry Thompson**

My grandfather, Richard Henry (Dick) Thompson, has been described as ‘probably Tasmania’s most prolific [boat] designer’¹, believed to have designed his first boat at around age 13². Dick lived on or near the Tamar River, Launceston for most of his life.

His boating life included racing speed boats³, qualifying as Master for the Marine Board of Mersey⁴ where he worked as tugmaster and also dredgemaster⁵, being appointed as Secretary and Harbour Master of the Marine Board of King Island⁶, founding and owning a boatyard at Blackwall⁷, running the first Johnson outboard agency in Tasmania⁸, owning a variety of boats (up to 22⁹) across his life, and designing over 500 vessels¹⁰, ranging from cattle barges to ferries, fishing boats, tugs, yachts and dinghies, many of which are still in service in Tasmanian waters and further afield, including on the Queensland coast.

One boat, possibly more than any other, had a great influence on his life. As a young man, Dick would give part of his wages to his mother to save for the dream boat he wanted to build. It took such a long time to save enough that “his mother would speak of his ‘phantom’ boat”¹¹, and therefore, once it was built, what else could it be called, but *Phantom*?

Dick designed *Phantom* himself and oversaw the building at Jack’s boatyard on the Tamar River. Built of huon pine, *Phantom* was launched on 17 March 1937 and was described as “one of the largest and most graceful looking pleasure yachts on the River Tamar...of most pleasing appearance with clipper bow and attractive lines”¹². Dick lived aboard for several years, fitting out the interior, moored in Cataract Gorge, or sailing between ports on Tasmania’s north-west coast,

¹ Ritchie, Philip, ‘After 60 years, Dick still loves creating boats’, *The Mercury*, 16 April 1980.

² Percy, Betty, *The Tamar Boats: A Complete Reference Book*, Foot & Playsted Pty Ltd, Launceston, 1993, p128.

³ Percy, Betty, *The Tamar Boats: A Complete Reference Book*, Foot & Playsted Pty Ltd, Launceston, 1993, p79.

⁴ Family documents: The Marine Board of Mersey, Tasmania, Certificate of Competency as Master, River or Harbour Trade, dated at Devonport 11th July 1933.

⁵ Family documents: Letter from J Laker, Harbour Master, Devonport dated 5 March 1936 & Memorandum from Netherlands Harbour Works Co, Devonport, dated 5 May 1939 & Letter from J N Wesselingh, Manager, Netherlands Harbour Works Co, Devonport, dated 16 June 1939.

⁶ Family documents: Letter from L Birch, Harbour Master, King Island, dated 19 June 1939.

⁷ Percy, Betty, *The Tamar Boats: A Complete Reference Book*, Foot & Playsted Pty Ltd, Launceston, 1993, p128. & *On The Tide 3 - More Stories of the Tamar*, ‘Dick Thompson’s First Boatyard’, Richard Curwen, edited by Peter Richardson, published by Launceston Library, 2007, p130. & *On The Tide 3 - More Stories of the Tamar*, ‘Stony Creek Boatbuilding’, Gus Green, edited by Peter Richardson, published by Launceston Library, 2007, p132.

⁸ Percy, Betty, *The Tamar Boats: A Complete Reference Book*, Foot & Playsted Pty Ltd, Launceston, 1993, p128.

⁹ Percy, Betty, *The Tamar Boats: A Complete Reference Book*, Foot & Playsted Pty Ltd, Launceston, 1993, p128.

¹⁰ *On The Tide 3 - More Stories of the Tamar*, ‘Dick Thompson’s First Boatyard’, Richard Curwen, edited by Peter Richardson, published by Launceston Library, 2007, p130. Boat plans held by the writer of this essay.

¹¹ Percy, Betty, *The Tamar Boats: A Complete Reference Book*, Foot & Playsted Pty Ltd, Launceston, 1993, p96.

¹² ‘Large Pleasure Yacht Launched on Tamar’, *The Mercury*, Hobart, 18 March 1937, page 7

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/25385474?searchTerm=ketch%20phantom#>

both working and holidaying. All in all, his life comprised “simply messing about in boats”, an idyllic pastime it would seem.¹³



Figure 1 - *Phantom* under sail, photographer unknown, collection of RH Thompson

However, by 1943, now married to Marjorie Marsden Waterhouse, and with a baby daughter, World War II was impacting daily life. *Phantom* was requisitioned for war service¹⁴. Seven months and many bureaucratic delays elapsed between *Phantom's* departure and the compensation payment finally being made, and not before solicitors were called in. Dick's letters to the Department¹⁵ seeking payment set out the impact of changed living arrangements and having to move ashore, the ability to obtain only temporary accommodation given the difficulty of renting houses in a wartime rental market, and the struggle with ongoing illness and medical bills.

Family legend held that *Phantom* was sunk in Papua New Guinea and one source suggests operations in PNG waters during WWII¹⁶. My family is not given to making up tall family tales, and much of the source history I have discovered so far tallies closely with family recollections.

¹³ Grahame, Kenneth, *The Wind in the Willows*.

¹⁴ Requisition order under regulation 57 of the National Security (General) Regulations, dated 12 October 1943, in file NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/4072

¹⁵ NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/4072, letters from RH Thompson to Department of the Navy, dated 17 November 1943, 15 December 1943, 20 January 1944, 25 February 1944, letters from Rodda, Ballard & Vroland Solicitors to The Secretary, Department of the Navy, Melbourne, dated 30 May 1944 and 13 June 1944

¹⁶ Percy, Betty, *The Tamar Boats: A Complete Reference Book*, Foot & Playsted Pty Ltd, Launceston, 1993, p97.

I therefore decided to see if I could unearth any documents relating to the requisition and confirm this family story. This led to my most unexpected research finding: there is overwhelming evidence from various sources that *Phantom* definitely was not sunk during the war years, nor for many years after, and served in Australian waters (albeit sometimes very close to PNG).

Phantom's War Service Movements card¹⁷ shows the departure from the Tamar River on 2 November 1943. *Phantom* was then remodelled and refitted under the supervision of Officers of the Commonwealth Navigation Board¹⁸, including removal of the bowsprit, addition of a wheelhouse and conversion to carry cargo. *Phantom* departed Melbourne for Northern Australia on 31 March 1944. Routes between Townsville, Cairns and Thursday Island were standard from May 1944 to May 1945, and the last entry on the movements card shows *Phantom* arrived in Darwin on 21 May 1945. In 1948, *Phantom* was purchased by the Northern Territory Administrator¹⁹ and was used for transporting supplies and people between settlements, and for coastal patrols and inspections of mission settlements^{20,21}.

In September 1952, *Phantom* was declared surplus to requirements²² and sold by tender for £1,500 to the Methodist Overseas Mission²³. In March 1954, The Methodist newspaper noted *Phantom* had been refitted, that other over-worked district boats would “be relieved of a great deal of work, and that the timber output from Croker Island would increase considerably”²⁴. I am still working to uncover how long *Phantom* served the missions, and what followed.

The final unexpected twist in the tale? The Methodist Overseas Mission, operated by the Methodist Church, was essentially begun in Tasmania by Reverend John Waterhouse, Marjorie's great great grandfather. Reverend Waterhouse was a member of the legislative body of Methodism and became the General Superintendent of the South Sea Missions, sailing from England to Van Diemen's Land in 1839 to take up the position. He also purchased the mission ship Triton to visit his areas of responsibility, including many islands.

¹⁷ https://www.navy.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/PELEUS_TO_POLYDORUS.pdf, page 94, downloaded 17 January 2021.

¹⁸ NAA: MP138/1, 603/201/2062, including blueprint of alterations

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=1185680&isAv=N>

¹⁹ Department of Defence, Naval History Section, image of page from Disposals book, file no: 603/246/6977, sold to Northern Territory Administration Darwin, receipt 144158 of 12/3/48, £3,000 (emailed to the writer on 1 February 2021)

²⁰ NAA: A452, 1953/331,

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=3434810&isAv=N>

²¹ Exploring the legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land expedition, edited by Martin Thomas and Margo Neale, National Museum of Australia Press and ANU Press, 2011. *Phantom* and *Victory* being unloaded at Oenpelli Landing, 20 September 1948, p183 <https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p116081/pdf/book.pdf>

²² Northern Territory Administrator, Memorandum dated 1st September 1952 To The Secretary, Department of Territories, Canberra, in file NAA: A452, 1953/331,

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=3434810&isAv=N>.

²³ Northern Territory Administrator, Memorandum dated 10th April 1953 To The Secretary, Department of Territories, Canberra, in file NAA: A452, 1953/331,

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=3434810&isAv=N>.

²⁴ *The Methodist* 20 March 1954, p5,

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/155622618?searchTerm=phantom%20methodist>

Boats have always been an integral part of life in the islands of Australia and the South Sea and *Phantom* carried on that work, starting with my grandfather's vision and design, and moving to serve my grandmother's ancestor's dedication to helping others through the Methodist Overseas Mission²⁵.

This is just one example of how Dick's "all consuming passion...with every aspect of boat design and construction"²⁶ has produced a legacy of boats which have provided, and continue to provide transport, cargo capacity, leisure, and service to many thousands of people around Australia. A vast maritime legacy, with unexpected stories to tell along the way. Tracing the final fate of *Phantom* and Dick's many other designs has become my mission. The physical property (and not just houses) that was important in, and sometimes defined, our ancestors' lives may also have their own stories to tell through various record sources.

²⁵ Olsson, Marilyn, *The Waterhouse Padman family history*, Boolarong Publications, Brisbane, 1987, pp11, 41-47, 520-522, 537-538, 542-544.

²⁶ Percy, Betty, *The Tamar Boats: A Complete Reference Book*, Foot & Playsted Pty Ltd, Launceston, 1993, p128.