

## Reflections on the Steamer's Run

What was to become the Steamer's Run St Ayles Skiff raid was born of a collaboration between the [Paynesville Classic Boat Rally](#) team and the [St Ayles Skiff Community Rowing Association of Australia](#) (SASCRAA). The Steamer's Run would follow the 19<sup>th</sup> century steamers' route from the Port of Sale down the Sale Canal into the La Trobe River, across Lake Wellington and McLennan Strait and across Lake Victoria to Paynesville, a distance of 74 km. The distance would be rowed in 3 days (26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> Feb 2020), seeing the raid party arrive in Paynesville on the day before the Paynesville Classic Boat Rally. The four skiffs would then participate in the Rally's Grand Parade on the Saturday 29<sup>th</sup>.

The Gippsland Lakes form the largest inland navigable waterway in Australia and are the historic homelands of the Kurnai people. The Steamer's Run will traverse Lake Wellington (*Murla* in the Gunai Language) and Lake Victoria (*Toonallook*). Europeans started to move into this area from 1839 onwards after which a permanent opening to the ocean was created at Lakes Entrance, about 5 km from the systems natural and intermittent opening. The artificial and permanent opening has resulted in greater salinity in the system as well as a loss of depth in the order of about 60 cms. Regardless, this amazing body of water continues to support significant ecosystems with a large part of the system listed as a Ramsar wetland because of its importance to waterbirds.

The suggestion by Peter Medling to stage a raid through this system was met with great enthusiasm by members of the St Ayles Skiff community. It is hoped that this inaugural Steamer's Run will lead to replications of this event over time.

Participating skiffs/clubs were the Welsh Church/ Box Hill boatbuilding groups (*Cariad, AU02*) Warrnambool St Ayles Skiff Club (*Fast Messenger, AU07*), Marlo Coastal Rowing Club (*Da Mirrie Dancer, AU14*), Mordialloc Sailing Club (with newly launched but *unnamed skiff, AU23*), a contingent of the Living Boat Trust members from Franklin, Tasmania, and members of Community Rowing Williamstown (CREW). Backup vessels supporting the Run were **Rubeena** (Sale), **Moongalba** (Paynesville), **Sea Fog**, (Lake Wellington/The Heart), and **Beachcomber** (Paynesville). Vehicular support teams were supplied by the Tasmanian rowers, the Mordialloc Sailing Club and the Marlo Coastal Rowing Club.



Alan Lewis with the Rubeena (a 36 foot Pittwater style ferry) – built in Balmain in 1911 and launched at Lakes Entrance in 1912, now moored at the Port of Sale.

In the early stages of organising the Steamer's Run various Gippsland local contacts were provided which could potentially assist in putting all the things we would want in place to make the raid safe, successful and above all enjoyable. Alan Lewis of Port of Sale Heritage Cruises was immediately supportive in offering the *Rubeena* as the support vessel for the first stage of the Run. Peter Medling sourced additional support crew and boats for other stages of the Run.

The Port of Sale was constructed in the 1880's when there was no rail link between Gippsland and Melbourne with the steamers providing the first relatively efficient form of transport and a shipping link to Melbourne and beyond. Initially paddle steamers were used with the more efficient screw steamers eventually taking over. The Port of Sale is linked by the Sale Canal to the Thomson and Latrobe Rivers and the Lakes beyond. The Sale Canal is 2 km long, built by man and horse over a three year period.

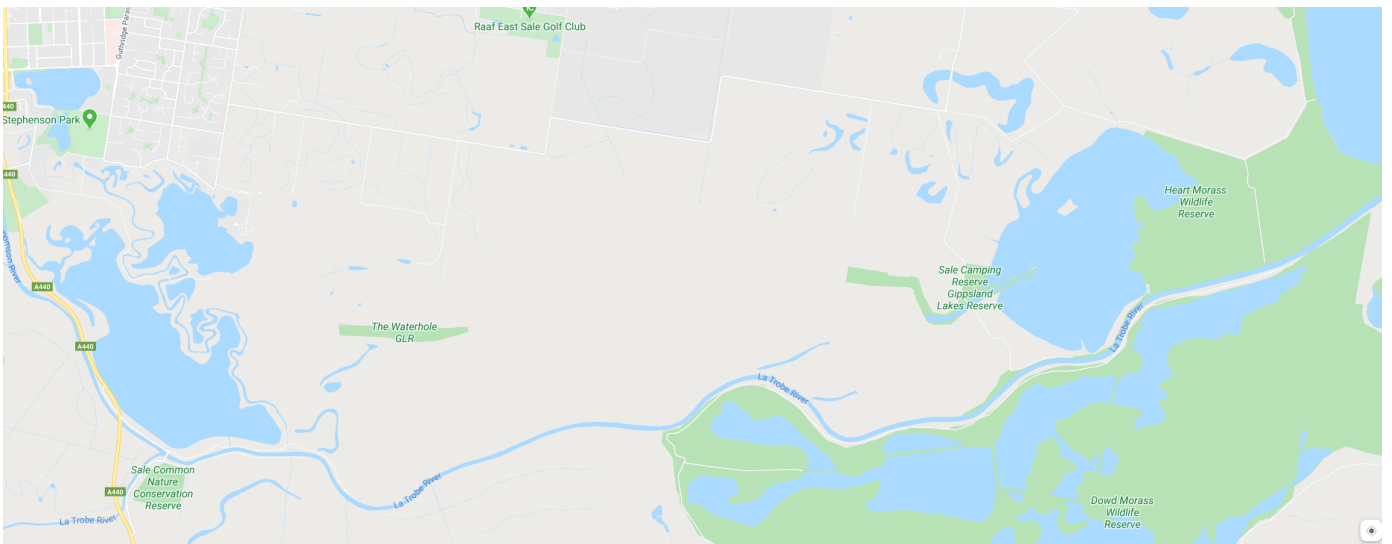
### Day 1, 26 February 2020, Port of Sale to the Morass of the Heart



Port of Sale with skiffs and the *Rubeena* and a healthy SW breeze.



**Da Mirrie Dancer, Marlo Coastal Rowing Club**



**The first stage of the Steamer's Run from Port of Sale to the Heart Morass Wildlife Reserve**



***The Rubeena and the as-yet unnamed Mordialloc Sailing Club St Ayles Skiff in the Sale Canal***

Rowers and skiffs had travelled various long distances to Sale and it was a great relief to finally launch and row the skiffs along the scenic waterway. The recent Gippsland fires ensured that our long awaited expedition came attached with a sense of poignancy given the impact that local people, property and the natural world had suffered. The Sale Canal, Thomson and Latrobe Rivers' stage on the Run saw the skiffs rowed along sheltered waters bordered by forest and views to low lying farmland.



***Rubeena, Da Mirrie Dancer, Mordialloc Skiff and Cariad***



**The *Rubeena* at the Swing Bridge**

The centre-pivot swing bridge designed by South Australian engineer, John Granger was opened in 1883 and is located 4.5 km down river from Sale at the junction of the Latrobe and Thomson Rivers. At its peak the bridge was opened up to 20 times a day allowing the steamers to run between Sale and Melbourne. The bridge is swung open on Saturdays between 3 and 4 pm or other times at a cost of \$200 plus – fortunately the skiffs squeezed under with plenty of room.

The fact that the Steamer's Run was the first mainland St Ayles Skiff raid to be staged added a degree of excitement and just a bit of uncertainty. However, as novice and experienced rowers alike progressed down the Latrobe River uncertainty was swept aside and only joy and excitement prevailed as we marvelled at the environs of the river. Sea Eagles and Wedge-tails observed us from above and a fast swimming snake managed to find a gap between the skiffs as it crossed the Latrobe.



***Cariad* with Chris Kennedy, Mandy Whyatt and Nicole Tierney**



***Mordy Skiff***

The Mordialloc Sailing Club had the Parkdale / Mentone East Bendigo Community Bank as their financial partners and this has been a recurring theme with other skiff builds, whereby community banks and philanthropic trusts have provided funding for these types of grass roots activities. It had been hoped that the Mordialloc skiff might have been officially launched and named before the raid, however as is often the case, St Ayles Skiff builds have a life of their own not necessarily conforming to a schedule. Regardless, Bart Scheen (Commodore of Mordialloc Sailing Club), Geoffrey Daniel and the build team have excelled in having their skiff involved in the Steamer's Run. Geoffrey Daniel advises they are planning to conduct the official launch in October 2020.



***Cariad*** and crew heading down the beautiful Latrobe River



Jon Narik from the Warrnambool Skiff Club in *Fast Messenger* and Peter Bell's *Moongalba*

As the raid party progressed along the Latrobe River the support vessel *Rubeena* was exchanged for Peter Bell's *Moongalba*. Forest slowly gave way to thick tea tree, swamp paper bark and sweeping reed beds which eventually opened out into the Heart Morass Reserve where the boggy wetlands support a multitude of waterbirds and potentially squadrons of mosquitoes. This first stage from Sale to the Morass was a 17 km row which served to provide rowers who had barely rowed a skiff before some valuable oar time ahead of the potentially more challenging waters of Lake Wellington and Lake Victoria. Of course the experienced rowers who had rowed the *St Ayles* in a variety of conditions knew how versatile the craft was, however we were all hopeful that the westerly and freshening wind would persist enabling us to cover the next 35 km stage from the Heart Morass Reserve to Loch Sport in relative comfort and in good time.

The Heart gets its name from a report written in 1840 by Commissioner Tyers who described the area as "truly.....the heart of Gippsland" resulting in a pastoral run of that name and subsequently the name of the locality. Formally the Heart Morass was heavily grazed but now as a reserve managed by Parks Victoria it has been restored over time now consisting of a 1,800 hectare wetland wedged between two Ramsar sites.

For the purpose of the raid party a small cleared area at the end of a sandy/muddy track culminating in a rudimentary boat launching facility was to be our first night's campsite. Thanks go to Chris Svenson (Secretary, Paynesville Classic Boat Rally Inc') who orchestrated the raid's insurance coverage which in turn allowed us to secure the permit to camp at the Morass from Marina Scott of Parks Victoria's Activation Agreements Team. Everyone agreed that camping where we pulled up in the boats was a far better option than heading back into Sale to stay the night then returning in the morning. The reputation of this area being mosquito infested proved to be somewhat ill-founded, however we were all tucked up in tent and swag pretty early. The waterbird night-time chorus provided us with a very pleasant aural backdrop.



**Camp at the end of day 1 at the Heart Morass Wildlife Reserve boat ramp**

The Living Boat Trust rowers from Franklin, Tasmania were supported by Warren Harrison in their hire vehicle and he was able cart gear for LBT and other rowers. Marlo and Mordialloc were also supported by road crew. Other gear was carried on the support vessels.



**LBT with Warren Harrison (Road Support)**





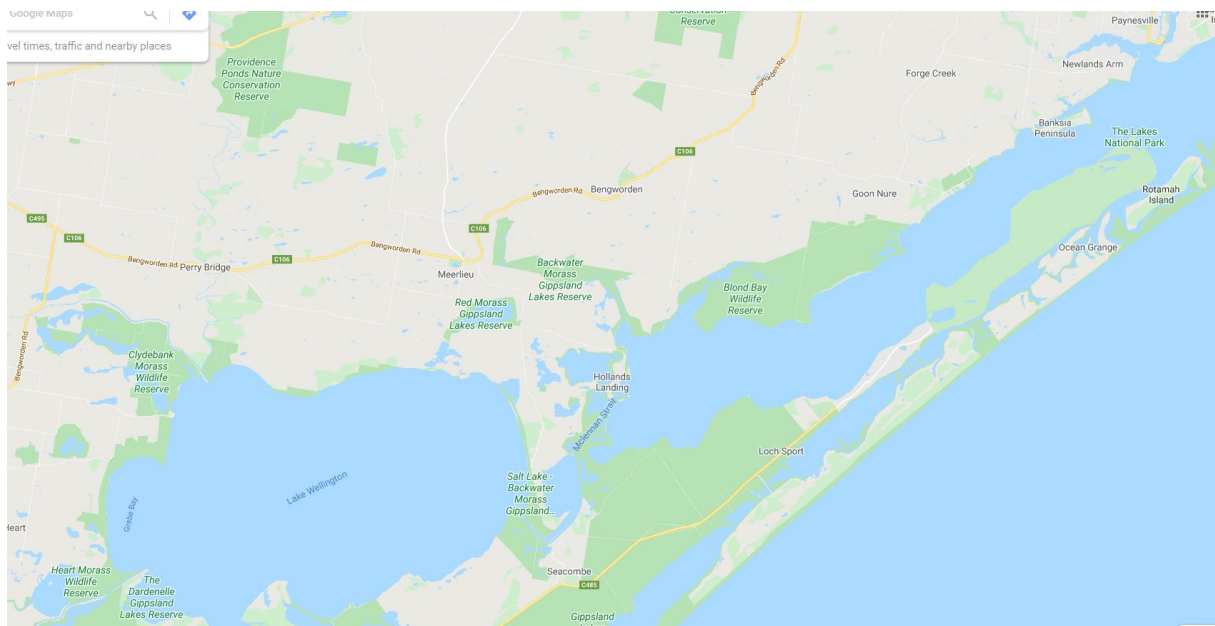
**Steve Boyce and the Sale Lions Club team with their mobile BBQ and kitchen**

The plan for this raid was to travel as light as possible given that the participants were well away from their own homes, club supports and waterways. To that end there was a concerted effort made by the organisers to engage support and services from the Gippsland community. The Sale Lions Club catered superbly for our 30 plus party at the Heart Morass. The sentiment expressed by Steve Boyce was that they were grateful for our patronage given that the recent fires had caused quite an economic downturn in Gippsland generally.



**Alfresco dining at the Heart Morass courtesy of the Sale Lions Club**

## Day 2, 27<sup>th</sup> February 2020, The Heart Morass to Loch Sport



Camp was struck early at the Morass with a view to getting out of the last section of the Latrobe River and commence the crossing of Lake Wellington in the best possible conditions. The *Moongalba* and Peter Bell was joined by Gavin Mills in *Sea Fog* as our support vessels for the Lake Wellington crossing and we were joined by three new rowers from Williamstown Coastal Rowing. *Da Mirrie Dancer* led the way into the rising sun as our small flotilla exited the Latrobe River.

The combined forces of the sea currents of Bass Strait creating the Ninety Mile Beach barrier to the ocean and the output of the Avon, Thomson, Latrobe, Mitchell, Nicholson and Tambo Rivers and their associated delta systems have created this amazing network of lakes, marshes and lagoons.

These wetlands form part of the dreamtime stories of Bimba-towera, the fire-tailed finch and for marriage, within the creation story of Borun and Tuk. A partnership between the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation and the Gippsland Lakes Environment Fund has led to a mapping of the Gunaikurnai cultural sites which both parties believe will add value to this site.



Peter Bell from the *Moongalba* captures the silhouette of *Cariad* and rowers as they cross Lake Wellington. *Fast Messenger* is a small blob in the distance.



Mark Burnside steering *Fast Messenger* across *Murla* or Lake Wellington

A sense of urgency prevailed at the outset of the Wellington crossing as local knowledge informed us that winds often came from the east as the day progressed and waves and chop could prove difficult and even treacherous due to the relatively shallow depth and changing weather conditions.

However, the westerly following wind moved the skiffs swiftly across the lake on waves of a meter to a meter and half seeing any rowing effort propel skiff and crew along to the point of surfing on occasion. The expanse of Lake Wellington, when in its middle, gave the impression of being at sea with shorelines being barely discernible in the haze. As we counted down the crossing markers from number 20 to number 2 we were guided to Plover Point's sandy beach and rendezvous point.



Living Boat Trust members Karen Corbin and Richard Forster enjoying Lake Wellington



***Fast Messenger* joins *Da Mirrie Dancer* at Plover Point**

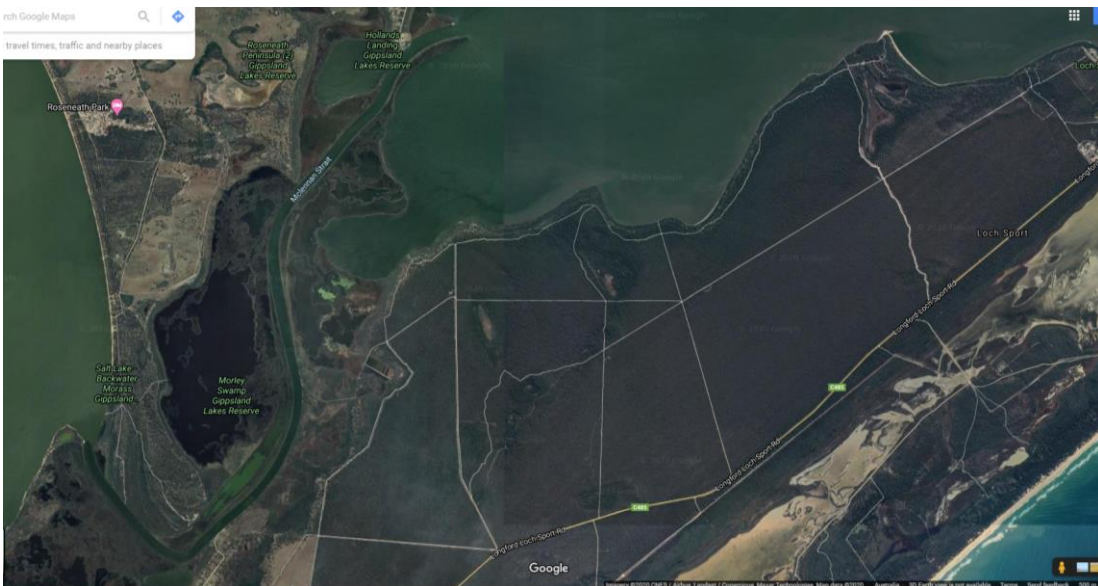


***Cariad*, *Sea Fog* and *Moongalba* at Plover Point, the western entrance to McLennan Strait**

The average depth of the Strait is 4 metres with minimum depths of 1.8 m at entrance and exit.



**Plover Point at the western end of McLennan Strait**



**Lake Wellington, McLennan Strait and Lake Victoria with a hint of Ninety Mile Beach and ocean**

The 9 km row from Plover Point through the McLennan Strait provided the raid party with sheltered waters once again. Waterfowl proliferated along the banks including in the adjacent Morley Swamp. Pelican, several species of Cormorant, Ibis, Spoonbills, Egrets and Herons were just a sample of the sightings and a hint of numbers occurring further into the swamp. We were accompanied by a small pod of dolphins as we progressed along the Strait. The lakes are home to about 50 of the recently described species of bottlenose dolphins, the Burruran dolphin. The other 150 or so of this rare species are to be found in Port Phillip Bay. A pause at Holland's Landing allowed the rowers to use the facilities and change positions for the final stretch of the day across the western end of Lake Victoria to Loch Sport

Lake Victoria or *Toonallook* (in the Gunai language) was quite choppy as a result of the strengthening afternoon south westerly wind. The average depth of Lake Victoria is 5 meters throughout its length, however shallowing towards McLennan Strait requiring vessels with significant draught to follow the recommended and marked channel. A following wind was once again providing the raid party with relatively comfortable rowing conditions which of course was very welcome at the tail end of a 35km row.



***Fast Messenger and Cariad* keep pace as they fly across Lake Victoria toward Loch Sport**

With good rowing conditions and the support of the safety vessels, the three skiffs that participated in day 2 of the raid were able to spread out and pretty much row at the pace that suited the mood and capacity of the rowers on board. Having said that the skiffs were rarely beyond sight of one another and there is a certain joy to be attained by rowing within proximity of another skiff. Another common phenomenon that seems to occur when two or more skiffs are rowing in company is the occurrence of certain improvements in rowing technique if not boat speed, after all this craft has overwhelmingly been used as a racing boat in Scotland where she was designed and where most have been built by community groups dotting the coastline and lochs of that country. That is not to say that raids or adventure rowing are not a feature. The raids such as Tawe Nunnagah and the Return Raid in Tasmania and now the Steamer's Run are testament to the fact that adventure rowing in St Ayles Skiffs in Australia is growing in popularity.



***Da Mirrie Dancer* on Lake Victoria heading for Loch Sport**



**Jon Narik at the tiller of *Fast Messenger* gazes into the distance looking for the lead skiff, *Da Mirrie Dancer* and our destination, Loch Sport**



**Jenny Weller-Newton and Kaye Hogben at the Loch Sport Boat Club**

The Raid Party were very pleased to beach the skiffs at the Loch Sport Boat Club after the 2<sup>nd</sup> days exertions. After setting up camp and refreshing showers at the Loch Sport Caravan Park, food and drinks were on hand at the Loch Sport Boat Club. Kaye Hogben (Treasurer and Publicity Officer) had taken advance orders enabling the Club to cater especially for our dinner as well as breakfast on day three. She had also similarly arranged for the Loch Sport Lions Club to provide a packed lunch to go on our final leg to Paynesville.

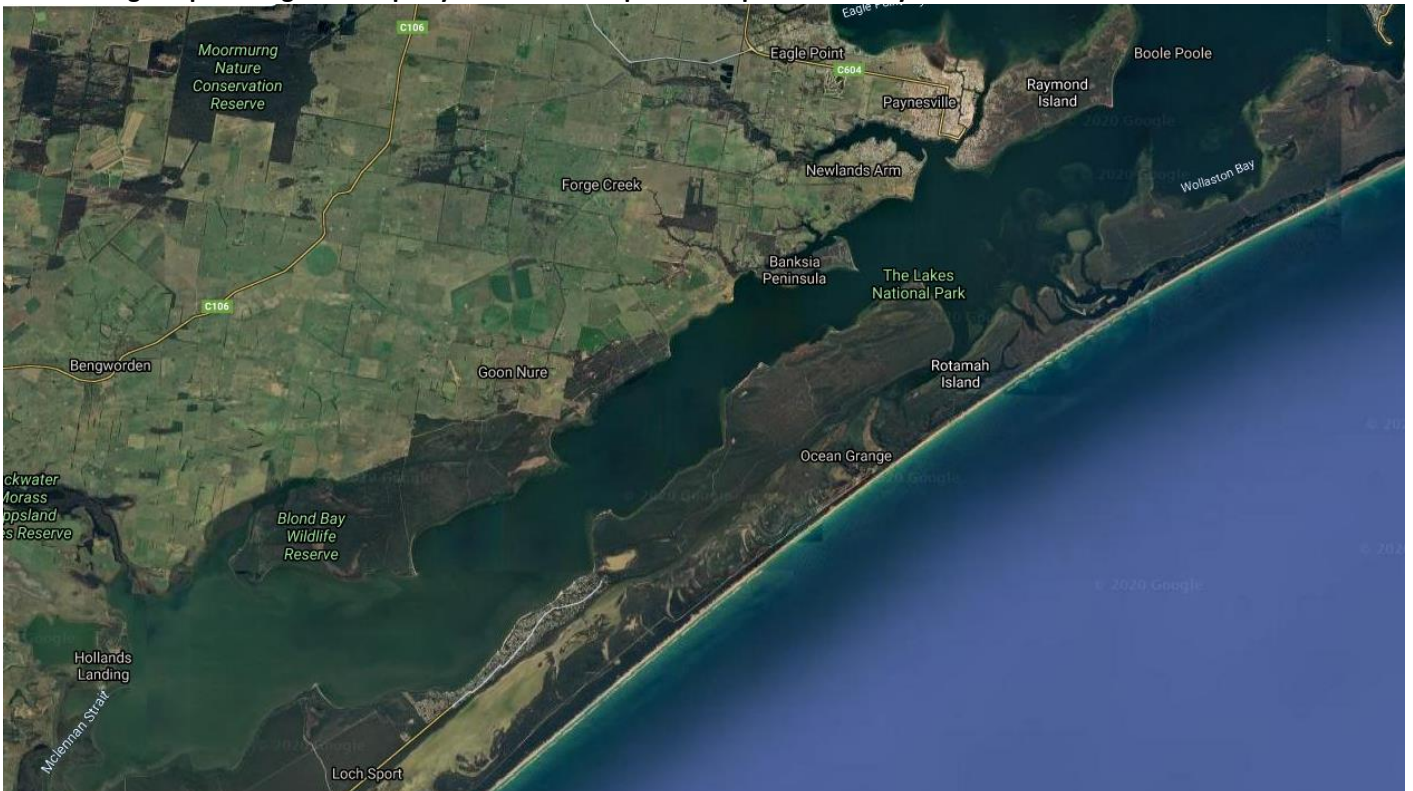
It was fantastic to experience the hospitality of the Loch Sport Boat Club and its members. The sense that one gets from the Gippsland boating community is that it is tight knit and very friendly. By utilising local services and clubs it has been possible to stage the Steamer's Run without having to field a large support crew of our own. And it is certainly true that we could not have conducted our raid without the owners of the support vessels in, Alan Lewis, Peter Bell, Ivan Mills and Geoffrey Tapper. We felt secure in the knowledge that these locals knew the waters well and that they were there in case.



Day 3, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2020, Loch Sport to Paynesville



Graeme Hogben providing the raid party with breakfast prior to departure for Paynesville



Loch Sport to Paynesville



Geoffrey Tapper with *Beachcomber* supported the skiffs from Loch Sport to Paynesville





Claire Tierney, coxswain on *Fast Messenger's* final leg to Paynesville



Mandy Whyatt and Mark Burnside



Ready to proceed in convoy to Paynesville



**Beachcomber and Moongalba**



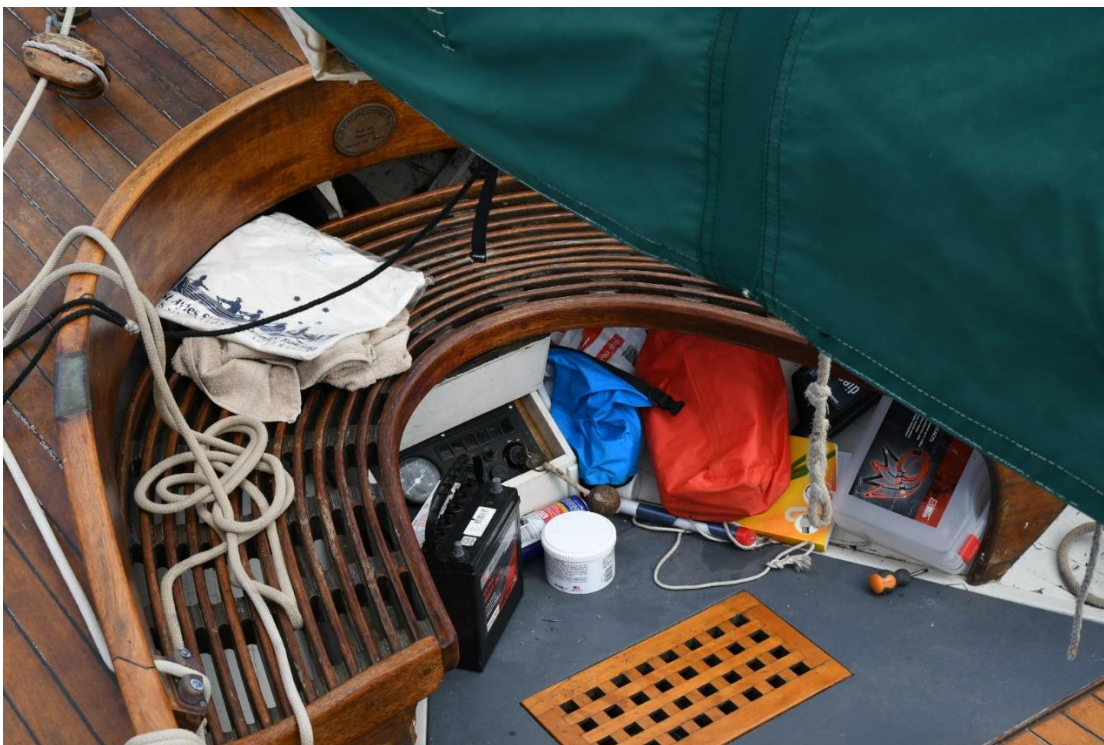
**At Paynesville Beach**

The row from Loch Sport to Paynesville was characterised by deeper water and bigger swells that moved the skiffs along at a cracking pace. With the Mordialloc skiff rejoining us after bowing out on day 2 due to a shortage of rowers we were four again which saw us row past the Gippsland Lakes Yacht Club to applause from those welcoming us after our 74 km journey.

As the Paynesville Classic Boat Rally was kicking off the next day there were lots of boats in town either moored or on the hard - a boat enthusiasts delight. We learnt that we would be up towards the front in the Grand Parade rowing four abreast.



Jon Narik



Interior of *Beachcomber*, SASCRAA shirt included

Day 4 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020, Paynesville Classic Boat Rally Grand Parade



Mordialloc Sailing Club join the *Coral Trekker*









Proof



Some of the usual suspects who form the burgeoning St Ayles Skiff Community of adventure rowers

## Conclusion

The Steamer's Run was a wonderful event:- relatively inexpensive, well supported by shore-side services, well organised without being tightly controlled. It was a great course of varied waterways – canal, river, straits and open water lakes. Participants enjoyed themselves without being over-extended. While more experienced rowers could challenge themselves in rowing harder and faster, novice crews could work within their limits and had the satisfaction of safely completing the course without exhausting themselves.

From SASCRAA's perspective, such Runs provide an alternative way of using skiffs, and alternative ways of clubs and Skiffie communities interacting. Having 6 Tasmanian rowers (with support crew!) joining us added an important dimension. If we could provide more skiffs we would have berths available for rowers from other states (WA?, NSW?) which would widen Skiffie community involvement. It also provides a model that can be used interstate (e.g. if the 4 skiffs in WA were available for a river or coastal row people from Tasmania and Vic could fly there to participate).

Such raids as **The Steamer's Run**, the **Tawe Nunnugah** and **the Return Raid** (Tasmania) add a different element to skiffing. Often undertaken in concert with other wooden boat festivals or rallies they bring a different pace and dynamic to competitive skiffie events such as regattas and should be promoted as part of a balanced program of St Ayles skiff activities.