

## **St Ayles Skiffs Row the Rip**

After a life time at sea, I must have entered, or departed Port Phillip Bay on numerous occasions in vessels from 800-ton coasters to sizeable 23,000-ton bulk carriers to much larger tankers. Transiting “The Rip” was always undertaken with great care and under the direction of a well experienced Port Phillip Pilot, and sometimes under horrendous conditions.



**‘Mordy Skiff’ with crew from the Mordialloc Sailing Club crossing the Rip**

In fact “the Rip” is renowned as a very dangerous transit also known as "The Heads". It is the narrow entrance connecting Bass Strait to the bay of Port Phillip in Victoria and it is the only route into Port Phillip, and thus sea access into Melbourne and Geelong. Because of large tidal flows through the relatively narrow channel from the bay to the ocean, and a high rocky seabed, The Rip is a notoriously dangerous stretch of water that has claimed numerous ships and many lives. Geographically, it is the roughly triangular area of water between the land points of Point Nepean on the Mornington Peninsula, Shortland’s Bluff and Point Lonsdale on the Bellarine Peninsula, with these three forming The Heads.



**'Fast Messenger' and Warrnambool crew rowing the Rip. Point Lonsdale Lighthouse in the background**

I would never have believed I could be introducing an article like this superb report from Event host, Peter Doyle of RGYC, but then those hardy and versatile Iain Oughtred designed St Ayles skiffs, their dedicated builders and their crews, never fail to amaze me!



**The Point Lonsdale Lighthouse by the late Eva Richmond with permission from Lindsay Richmond**





**'Imagine' and the Living Boat Trust crew from Franklin, Tasmania**

“Sunday the 5<sup>th</sup> of March saw St Ayles Skiff crews from Victoria and Tasmania launch from Mordialloc Sailing Club on a six-day, open water expedition to Row the Rip (RtR). This was an official St Ayles Skiff Community Rowing Association of Australia (SASCRAA) event, managed and delivered by the Royal Geelong Yacht Club (RGYC). The route would take them down the eastern shores of Port Phillip Bay to Portsea, across Port Phillip Heads via the famously mercurial Rip to Queenscliff, St Leonards and Port Arlington. That done, the ultimate destination was more rowing in the more formal guise of the ‘Spirit of St Ayles Cup’ regatta at the Wooden Boat Festival of Geelong.





**The LBT crew in 'Imagine' lead the 3 skiffs out of Queenscliff on the way to St Leonards**

As many readers will know from previous articles in this magazine, the ancestry of the St Ayles Skiff lies with the Vikings and more recently in the cold seas of the Fair Isles off northern Scotland. A coxed four-oared rowing boat of twenty-two feet, they are built by community groups around the world, are easy to row and a very capable sea boat. Their current incarnation is as a flat-packed kit boat that was commissioned by the Scottish Fisheries Museum and designed by Iain Oughtred. With nearly four hundred world-wide, the nearly forty in Australia were purchased from Robert Ayliffe of Stray Dog Boat Works.

After what was jokingly referred to as “*the warm-up row*” from Mordialloc to Portsea, crews and boats gathered for the feature row across “the Rip” at the Portsea Quarantine Station. This is a restricted-access, National Park beach just under Port Phillip’s Point Nepean headland. With a tidal flow often hitting twelve knots there, getting the slack tide timing right is always critical for boats of any size using this notorious waterway. Event host Peter Doyle of RGYC stressed this in his ‘Row-the-Rip’ briefing and went on to say that as the route crossed busy shipping lanes, it was also advisable for crews of our four-oared rowing boats to keep a weather eye out for tankers.

Under the paternal guidance of Queenscliff Marine Rescue officers and Vic Gow of Marine Training Services, the official tide chart was taken as a guide only as crews launched on the out-going tide toward the rip to await slack water as the signal to start the 3.5km crossing to Queenscliff. With a stiff 28-knot breeze running from the east, sterns were set to take it square, deep breathes were taken and bows pointed due west to Queenscliff. With a six-to-ten-foot rolling sea, the nearest boat was often hull-down over the waves, the crossing was exhilarating.”

At this point Patrick Groot added the following:

“Whilst open water experience in skiffs varied between groups and rowers, with members of the Tasmanian, Living Boat Trust and the Warrnambool crews having rowed in the raids conducted in Southern Tasmanian open waters and elsewhere. The Mordialloc Sailing Club crew cut their rowing teeth on Port Phillip Bay and at events like the Steamers Run raid on the Gippsland’s lakes of Wellington and Victoria where waters can be as challenging as so-called open waters. The actual crossing of the Rip saw no incident; however, the crossing almost did not proceed due to the Warrnambool skiff rolling over in the waves at Tycondroga Bay.

The plan was to beach as a group and await slack tide and then proceed together from Bend Beach. This event is happily perceived as a “near miss”

though, as by providence rowers were not badly hurt and deemed themselves as able to continue. The Warrnambool crew, despite 2 broken oars and a damaged rudder system managed to deploy their spare oar, receive a second spare from another crew and resourcefully replace a pintle with what turned out to be a very useful Phillips head screw driver.

This incident could have resulted in a significantly worse outcome, and it has been treated as a definite learning experience by all rowers and clubs and one that will result in the modification of behaviours and safety procedures, in particular how St Ayles skiffs might approach a seemingly benign beach landing in relatively small waves.

The eventual re-launch off Bend Beach with the assistance of RGYC members saw the raid proper proceed after *'Fast Messenger'* and the Warrnambool crew were reunited with the small flotilla of skiffs and safety boats. All handled their boats with confidence, skill and without incident from this point on. The heritage of the St Ayles Skiff shone as they comfortably handled what is a truly serious seaway, and keeping their crews dry and relaxed."



**Peter Doyle**



Peter Doyle continued:

“Days two and three of the Row the Rip were comfortable rows from Queenscliff to St Leonards and on to Portarlington. Rowing out through ‘The Cut’ at Queenscliff and around the SAS security zone which is Swan Island, crews inspected the wrecks of Australia’s World War 1 submarine (*HMAS J3*) and the wreck of the paddle steamer *Ozone* at Indented Head. We lunched on remote beaches with old and new friends and celebrated with the “We-made-it” dinner at Portarlington.



**Swan Island and the WW1 submarine (HMAS J3)**



**Lunch break at Edwards Point**

As all who're involved with the St Ayles Skiff community in Australia and world-wide know, these boats are all about fun and well-being. Most of their builders and rowers are over 50 years old and over 50% of them are women. The moto of the international St Ayles Skiff Association is, "*Communities build boats. Boats build communities*". This was exemplified in spades by the comradery of the Row-the-Rip event, with lunches catered for and dinners hosted along the way by the Queenscliff Cruising Yacht Club and St Leonards Sailing Club, and our skiff rowers were exposed to the amazing hospitality that is so typical of yacht clubs. The other side of that same coin is that building and rowing St Ayles Skiff is emerging as a phenomenon among yacht clubs around the world as they look to welcome people who don't sail, but who would enjoy being active on the water with friends, and as an activity for their older members."



**At the St Leonards Yacht Club**



I would have to admit I am filled with admiration for the organisers and participants in this Maritime Adventure which totally justifies my faith in the sea keeping qualities of these hardy versatile skiffs with their northern heritage and immaculate pedigree.



**Moored and ready for the Spirit of St Ayles Regatta**



**Coastal Rowing Williamstown (Crew) in one of the Geelong skiffs, 'Covent Garden' participate in the Spirit of St Ayles Regatta**

In conclusion Patrick Groot, President of The Warrnambool St Ayles Skiff Community Rowing Club Inc has added a timely observation:

“SASCRAA is always keen to welcome new members into the St Ayles Skiff community and coming up there is an opportunity on the New South Wales southern coast to get acquainted with the St Ayles Skiff. In an earlier edition of this magazine there was a story on the Eden Marine High School skiff build which is progressing very well. At the Eden Whale Festival (7-9 October) the build to date will be on display via a parade as well as on the hard. Jim Barr (SASCRAA's new President) and Dave Craigie from Marlo are planning to take 2 skiffs from Victoria to participate in the display as well as in a 'come and try' event on the waters of Two-Fold Bay. So, as well as celebrating the southern migration of the humpback and other whales, folk can check out the Eden skiff build and even hop into a skiff to see how well they perform.”

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Compiled and edited by Jonathan Wallis from reports by Peter Doyle and Pat  
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