

Characters I have met, as told by Dennis Burchill.

Having lived on Bulimba for seventy five years, I have run across some very interesting people during my travels. All districts have their local characters, and Bulimba was no exception. The place to see and meet them was the local watering hole, the Balmoral Hotel. The time that I rubbed shoulders with them was the period 1950 to 1960. The pub had been up and running since 1888 and was starting to show its age. There was a spot in the public bar near Wambool street where you had to be careful, as the floor had started to collapse and one false step could land you in the cellar. The hotel was run by Mrs. McFadden, a rather large woman, who ruled with an iron fist. She was also a kind person, and many of the locals who were down on their luck, would find she would help with a little "something" to keep them going till pay day. Mrs. McFadden suffered from varicose veins, and the locals, very unkindly, called her "knotty legs", and then shortened it to "knotty".

The main customers at the pub were meat workers, wharf labourers, stockmen, painters and dockers. A pretty rough mob, but they had a strict code of conduct while in the pub, with very little trouble and no swearing in front of the barmaids. The locals who drank there every day had their favourite spots to sit or stand, and any stranger moving into a local's spot was soon told to shift it. Two of the locals that I remember were "Jingers Watson" and his brother "Wiffels". They were both ice-men, who picked up ice from the Ice Works and delivered it to all the people who still had ice chests - and there were still quite a few in the early fifties. The Ice Works was part of Uhlmann's butchers shop which was on the corner of Oxford St. and Duke St. The Watson brothers would pick up the ice in their delivery trucks and carry a block of ice with a pair of tongs into the customer's house and place it in the top of the ice chest. All the time that I knew them, I never did find out what their real names were.

Another daily customer at that time was Billy Bedser. Bill was quite a large man and I never saw him in anything other than a pair of shorts. He wore the largest size that King Gee made, and they said that if he got any bigger he would have to go to George Pickers Canvas to have them made. Bill never wore shoes and a quick perusal of the bar at the Balmoral proved that he had plenty of mates. When Oxford 152 opened a couple of years ago, my neighbour Charlie Roberts went down to try out the new premises. He had been a customer of the old pub for over 50 years. He ordered a beer and was having a quiet drink when the manager came up and asked him to finish his beer and leave. When he asked why, they told him his footwear was not up to their standard. In the old days they would throw you out if you wore shoes. Bill had a duck farm in the country and every Saturday he would run a raffle and the prize was always a dressed duck. The funny thing about the raffle was that there were never any tickets sold. He took your money and he would come up and tap some one on the shoulder and say 'You won the raffle'. Every one trusted him.

Bob Kirk was another regular. He lived up near the school and would ride his bike down to the pub. On the way home he was in no condition to ride it and used it to support himself for the return journey. If he fell over, that's where he stayed! Other regulars at that time were Johnny Stevens, Smokey Parsons, Jimmy Sanderson, George Franz and Jerry Blondell. In the fifties, quite a few of the locals obtained work at the Tangalooma Whaling Station, and one incident that I remember was some of the local lads calling the barmaid over to show her something special. When they had her full attention they placed a whale penis on the bar.

Although it was before my time, the Goanna Man Joe Marconi of Goanna Salve fame, was a regular customer at the Balmoral. Joe was leaving the pub one day and fell down the steps, hitting his head. The blow proved fatal. The locals honoured his passing with a poem. Poor old Marconni is dead.
He died from a blow to the head.
All Bulimba is sad.
But the Goannas are glad.

One person who made his mark on the district was Jack Sinden, Jack was the local plumber and was assisted by his offsider Les Silsbury. Jack was not more than five foot tall and about seven stone wringing wet. He had a hair-lip which affected his speech, but not his drinking ability. As the pubs were shut on Sundays in those days, Jack would arrange a five-gallon keg on Sunday mornings under his house in Elliot St. Hawthorne, and invite selected guests. One Sunday the session was in full swing with Jack and three of his mates drinking a "Five" when he heard the front gate opening. He immediately raced out shouting 'you're barred, there's too many here now'. On another occasion he was drinking at the Balmoral and the keg ran out. As beer was in short supply, the publican was debating whether to put on another keg. This delay was too much for Jack, so he gathered all the drinkers in whatever transport they could arrange and shouted 'Story Bridge' As they were climbing into the trucks to go to the Story bridge Hotel. he heard the sound of the barman spiking another keg. He shouted 'Music to mine ears' and they all tramped back into the pub.

Drinking in the fifties was a far different experience than it is today. For a start, most of the pubs were tied houses which meant that they could only sell one brand of beer. The choice was Fourx or Bulimba. All beer was delivered in wooden kegs - Five-gallon, Ten-gallon and Eighteen-gallon, and you could always tell which beer you were drinking, by the colour of the keg. The Fourx Kegs were painted red on the end and Bulimba green. Bulimba became known as the green death. Also you had no choice of strengths. Both beers were full strength. The fourx pubs would outnumber the Bulimba pubs about ten to one. Bottled beer was very hard to get, so anyone wanting a beer on a Sunday would have to pick something up on a Saturday. One local would turn up at the Balmoral on Saturday morning with a little hand-cart loaded with one-gallon flagons with screw top lids. The barmaid would not fill them from the keg, so he would line them up on the floor, and then order the necessary number of pots. He would then proceed to syphon the beer from the pots on the bar to the flagons on the floor. He would go round and finish any beer left in the pots, load up his trolley and make his way home.

Any one having a party, or any social event that required a keg, had to go through a set ritual. First of all your planning had to start a week in advance. You had to know a publican who would sell you a keg. The next step was to arrange to pick up the keg at least two days before the event and deliver it to the local ice works. This was to ensure that the wooden keg would be cold enough to provide beer at the right temperature. Another trap was to find out that no one had remembered to pick up a tap. Any one with the good sense to weld a 3/4 inch b.s.p. thread on to a tank tap was always in high demand. They would receive a frantic phone call to get over here quick smart and bring your tap. The kegs were plugged with a wooden bung in the middle, and the usual caper was to drill a small hole in the bung to let some air in and then plug it with a nail. When the flow slowed you lifted the nail for a second and away you went again until the keg was dry.

I remember the local deadbeat who was not the full quid, but had a very novel way of having a beer. When the pub was full for the after work session, the workers would stand with their backs to the three large windows facing Oxford St. and rest their beers on the window sill. His trick was to work his way along the foot path and with the aid of a plastic tube, take a sip out of each of the beers on the window sill. They finally caught him in the act, but let him off with a caution.

Oxford St. on a Saturday night in the fifties was like a morgue. After the patrons had entered the Avro theatre at 7.30, there was not a soul in sight. If you fired a shot gun down the street at 8 o'clock you would not hit any one. Certainly a contrast to the situation as it stands today. I wonder if the ghosts of all the characters who frequented the old Balmoral Hotel would be seen dead in Oxford 152.

Bulimba is a suburb surrounded on two sides by water, in fact the aboriginal name for our suburb was Tugulawah, which means bend in the river. It was only natural that water sports figured prominently in the locals leisure activities, with Bulimba producing many famous sailing champions and characters. My association with the sport started in 1947, when I started as bailer boy in the 16ft. skiff "Joy" sailed by Ron Wright and has continued up till the present day. A glance at the records will show that prior to WW2, Bulimba was the home of many champions including Alf Whearet, Ron Hendry, Norman Wright Snr., Lance Watts and Jack Carey, all before my time. The champions that I had the good fortune to meet and sail against were Vic Lucas, Norm Wright Jnr., Eddie Smith, John Cuneo, and many other fine gentlemen. Of the champions mentioned above, the one that stands out is Vic Lucas. Vic was a long time resident of Bulimba and his record shows that he went on to win 52 championships, not a bad effort. Norm Wright made his mark in the eighteen footers in his famous "Jennys", winning World and Australian Championships, as well as line

honour wins in the Brisbane to Gladstone Yacht race, also crewing in "Gretel in the America Cup challenge in 1962.

Eddie Smith was one of the real characters of sailing. He was about the same size as Jack Sinden and could match Jack in the drinking stakes, pot for pot. Eddie won a world championship in a twelve ft. skiff called "Storm" on Sydney Harbour in 1938. He had a green and gold blazer made, with a pocket on it proclaiming him world champion. In about 1950 I was having a haircut in George Edwards' barber shop in Oxford St. when I walked Eddie wearing his blazer. It was falling to bits. but he would not part with it.

John Cuneo was another long-time Bulimba resident. John made his mark in the trainee's, graduating to the 12 square meters, and then the light-weight sharpies, winning titles in each of these classes. He is best remembered for his Gold medal win in the dragon class at the Munich Olympics. He travelled to America to try to win back the Americas Cup in "Southern Cross, under the sponsorship of Alan Bond. He still continues to provide support for up and coming sailors.

Bulimba these days is becoming infested with "Yuppies", who have no interest in sailing. Most of the sailing takes place down the bay. The Brisbane Sailing Squadron still caters for river sailors on Bulimba Point; however the Eighteen Footers are flat out putting a boat on the water. The cost of building and fitting out a modern sailing boat has become too great a financial burden for the average worker, and although men will always go down to the sea in ships, they will do so in diminishing numbers.