

## **"THE ILLAWARRA STEAM-PACKET COMPANY"**

Notes on a paper read to the Society, 5th July, 1951, by A. P. Fleming,  
Esq., Hon. Treasurer.

With the arrival of the tiny "Sophia Jane" on the night of 14th May, 1831 in Port Jackson, a new age was to dawn in the colony of N.S.W. The age of steam navigation which was to have a marked effect on the development of coastal settlement and trade. The "Sydney Gazette" rightly regarded her arrival as the event of the week

and proudly reported that "the inhabitants of Sydney had the extreme gratification of seeing for the first time a steam vessel in their harbour (and although) . . . arrangements are too immature . . . to say how she will be employed . . . we wish her every success, and congratulate our fellow colonists on so valuable an acquisition for their pleasure and advantage."

Although the "Sophia Jane" pioneered steam navigation in 1831, eight years were to elapse before a shipping service powered by steam was inaugurated on the South Coast.

This came about by the formation of the Illawarra Steam Packet Co. in May 1839. The Co's. life was brief as it was dissolved in August of the same year, but it was the first company, sail or steam, to provide regular water transport to the Illawarra. (The dictionaries define "Packet" as a "vessel conveying dispatches, mails, passengers, goods, and having fixed sailing days).

The Sydney Press of 1839 was definitely "steam navigation" minded and the space allotted to the subject for comment, either commendatory or otherwise, is remarkable. The "Herald" in February had a series of editorials strongly demanding bigger, faster modern steamers with more frequent sailings to the Hunter, and suggesting that the time was long overdue for services to the Illawarra and Brisbane Water districts.

However, an advertisement dated 10th May, 1839, advising that "a meeting of shareholders and others favourable to the establishment of steam navigation between Sydney and Illawarra will be held on 14th instant at the Union Assurance Co's. office at 2 o'clock p.m. precisely" was met with unqualified approval by the Press.

The meeting was duly held and a Co. formed with the name of the "I.S.P. Co." with the object of building or purchasing a steamer or steamers to ply between Sydney and Wollongong or other ports in N.S.W. The capital was £10,000 divided into 200 shares of £50 with provision to increase if required.

A Committee of 10 shareholders was appointed to manage the Co's. affairs for the first year of its operations, and of these ten, four had affiliations with Illawarra. They were Messrs. J. H. Plunkett, R. M. Westmacott, C. T. Smith and Gerard Gerard. The moving spirits of the venture appeared to be Messrs. A. B. Spark, a leading general merchant, and Edye Manning, who was interested in the Newcastle shipping trade as the owner of the steamer "Maitland."

The "Herald" of 3rd June, 1839 printed a letter signed "A Settler on the Hunter," which referred to the intended purchase of the "Maitland" by the Illawarra settlers and asked for a move to be made to keep her wholly in the Hunter River service.

The appeal was of no avail, as on 8th June it was announced that she would commence her trips to Wollongong on Saturday, 15th June, and from then on would run to Wollongong and the Hunter alternatively once a week. The timetable was — Leave Commercial Wharf for Wollongong 8 a.m. Saturdays, leave Wollongong Mondays at noon. Sailing for Morpeth every Tuesday at 8 p.m. The Wollongong fare was 20/- Cabin, 12/6 steerage. (The Commercial Wharf was in Darling Harbour at the bottom of King Street).

The "Colonist" of 12th June reported the purchase price of the "Maitland" as £6,500 and at that time she was about a year old. She was the usual wooden paddle steamer of the day, her builder being John Russell of Pyrmont and her engines were by William Bourne, also of Sydney. When originally launched she was 103 tons register and 111ft. in length. She was later lengthened and her original engines were replaced by a 60 h.p. single engine. She traded on the N.S.W. and Victorian coasts until the sixties when, renamed "Samson," she was sent to New Zealand, eventually being wrecked at Hokitika.

The "Maitland" sailed for the Illawarra as scheduled with 65 passengers. "The Sydney Standard's" report read as follows — "On Saturday week (15th June 1839) the 'Maitland' steamer made her first trip to Wollongong deeply laden with merchandise, and a large number of cabin passengers. She had been seen by the anxious inhabitants of that truly fertile district several hours before she arrived. So great was the interest excited that the inhabitants, high and low, rich and poor, were congregated on the strand to greet the steamer's arrival. The day, as far as wind and weather was concerned, could not have been more propitious." She returned to Sydney on the Monday without incident and carried 37 passengers.

The "Australian" a little later commented that the Wollongong folk were quite delighted with the prospect of a weekly visit by the steamer, and the paper expressed the view that it would be of assistance in making the town of some importance.

The time table was soon changed and the Co. advised that commencing Thursday, 18th July, she would leave for Wollongong at 8 a.m. on Thursdays returning to Sydney at 2 p.m. on Friday. It was considered that the previous Sunday stop-over in Wollongong was not warranted and could be better used on the longer run to the Hunter.

Meanwhile an advertisement had appeared dated 27th June, 1839 to the effect that a meeting would be held on 4th July with the object of establishing steam communication between Sydney and Brisbane Water. Here again, Spark and Manning seemed to be the prime movers and the Illawarra pattern was repeated by forming a Co. and appointing a number of Brisbane Water identities to the Board but retaining control in the hands of Spark, Manning and their associates. The Secretary and Treasurer of the Illawarra Co. also carried out the same duties for the new Co. The Treasurer, Leslie Duguid, was also the Managing Director of the Commercial Banking Co. of Sydney.

It is not surprising therefore, that with practically the same control and administration a move was soon made to amalgamate the two companies.

The Illawarra gave notice that a General Meeting would be held on 27th August, 1839 to consider the propriety of increasing the capital and number of shares. It was evident that this proposal was the first step in the amalgamation, as shortly after the Brisbane Water Committee of Directors advised their shareholders that it was the unanimous opinion of the Committee the Co. should be united with the Illawarra provided the Illawarra was agreeable. The shareholders were also advised that a meeting would be held prior to the proposed meeting of the Illawarra Co. and they were asked to attend or communicate their views on the proposed union, as it was necessary to

determine the Brisbane Water's future before the meeting of the Illawarra. This was merely a courtesy by the Brisbane Water Committee as their shareholders were also informed that it was intended to effect union by issuing the new shares in the Illawarra to the members of the Brisbane Water.

The "Sydney Herald" in an editorial dated 14th August, commenting on steam navigation generally, referred to the "William IV" as being purchased by the Brisbane Water Co., but it is certain that whilst under that control she did not make a trip to the district for which she was purchased. For a description of the "William IV" refer to I.H.S. Bulletin May 1948).

She made her first voyage to Wollongong in August 1839 and carried the produce of the district to Sydney for a number of years.

To return to the union of the two steam companies. A deputation from the Brisbane Water waited on the Illawarra and it was agreed to dissolve both and form a new concern with the name of the General Steam Navigation Co. The capital of the new company was £50,000 in 1,000 Shares of £50, and preference for their allotment was to be given to the former shareholders of the amalgamating companies. Plunkett, Westmacott and Smith retained their seats on the Committee of Management.

The new Co. also advised that the "Maitland" would revert wholly to the Hunter River run and the "William IV" would observe the following time table—

To Wollongong—Mondays and Fridays, 8 a.m.; From Wollongong—Tuesday and Saturday 2 p.m.; To Brisbane Water—Wednesday at noon; From Brisbane Water—Thursday at noon.

Concern had been expressed by some of the Illawarra people that with the formation of the General S.N. Co. the needs of the district would not receive as much consideration, but under the new control the service was actually doubled.

In concluding this account of the brief life of the Illawarra Steam Packet Co., for after all from the 14th May to 27th August, 1839 is a very short period, it is conceded that its story was without major incident. It is also submitted, however, that its formation was an outstanding event in the history of the South Coast, for the Co. and its little "Maitland" was the genesis of the shipping companies which for so long served this coast so well.