

THE SHIPBUILDERS OF BRISBANE WATER NSW

by

GWEN DUNDON

(P.O. Box 202, East Gosford, 2250: Price: \$42.00 posted)

I must declare at the outset that even though I don't know her especially well, Gwen Dundon has nonetheless had a great influence on me.

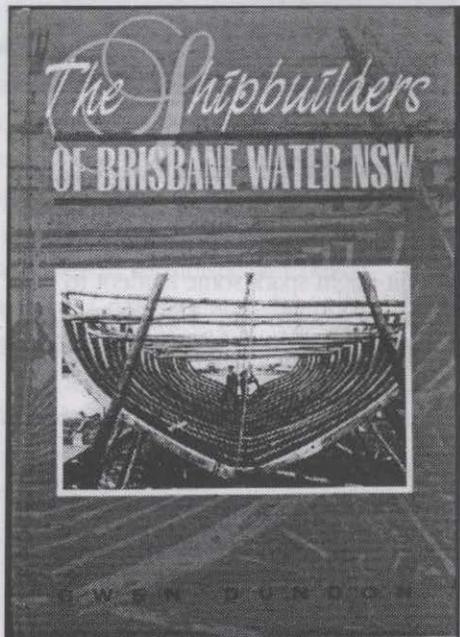
We became acquainted perhaps 10 years ago when she and her husband Gene were dealers at a Postcard Fair in Sydney.

On their dealers table they also had copies of books on the Gosford area they had published and which were crammed with images of postcards and photographs. I never bought copies but I now wish I had because the five different photo histories in the series (published between 1977 and 1985) are now all out of print and very hard to come by on the second hand market - people just don't seem willing to part with them.

Nonetheless, it was Gwen Dundon's photo histories that inspired my wife and I to launch our own ventures in publishing photographic history.

But I doubt we'll ever be able to afford to launch a book with the very high production values of Gwen's latest.

The Shipbuilders of Brisbane Water has a fine colour cover wrap on a hard case with one of the finest shipbuilding images I've ever seen: a black and white F.H. Paddison glass plate negative of MV ERINA of 1934 under construction. The back cover contains an impressive William Foster painting of the barcantine SARFIELD of 1883 and Foster will be well-known to some readers for his paintings of South Coast vessels too.



Printed on high quality stock with many very fine black white photographic illustrations and a great three part (name, ship and general) index, this is 336 pages of serious publishing. Handsome and generous is the only way to describe the book's presentation.

It's also a brilliant book concept - an effort to record the builders, details and fate of all the ships built at Brisbane Water between 1829 and 1953 (fairly specialist stuff) but presented in such a way that I feel sure it will sell because of the way it targets a particular and very precise audience.

Shipbuilders is very much an uncovering of a neglected aspect of local history - shipbuilding - but because Brisbane Water became dotted with families associated with this industry this specialist book has wide general appeal for two reasons. It fills in (and illustrates) a limited geographic region and hence has all the appeal of narrowly based local history but then through a clever focus on the shipbuilders themselves it becomes very much a really serious history of families.

By that I mean not simply Family History (which can be deadly and have very limited appeal if done badly) but a serious history of numerous families in a restricted geographic area.

And because ships often sail far away from where they are launched, *Shipbuilders* turns out to be something of a model for local history writing: a specialist local history with very wide appeal. In turning inward and focussing on such a narrow specialist interest - shipbuilding - its target audience becomes miraculously large by means of a family history focus and the succinct tracking of some 500 vessels from their launch to their demise.

I believe 2000 hardback copies have been printed and I feel certain every one will quickly be sold.

Gwen Dundon already has published six complete sell outs. This book will be her sixth in a row. And a double hat-trick is as hard in publishing as it is in cricket.

Illawarra residents will find the tracing of the shipbuilding descendants of Wollongong's second schoolmaster, William Davis (no relation) a revelation. Terrigal, Davistown, Kincumber and Cockle Creek would all have very different histories if William Davis had not indentured his son to the shipbuilder Cunningham down on Brighton Lawn after

enduring the rigours of teaching in Throsby Smith's barn in the 1830s.

IHS Bulletin readers will also be pleased to see that our own late Peter Doyle is credited with much of the research on the Davis family's Wollongong origins.

The shipbuilding interest of the Settree family at Huskisson and Nowra will also be of interest to South Coast readers.

Perhaps the best testimony to the book's strengths is that I purchased it purely for reference and found that within little more than a week I'd read every page.

This book seems to me to be at the interface of local and family history. It has also kept me quite dizzy in trying to unravel the centripetal and centrifugal forces involved in writing history which is so specialist that it transforms itself into a kind of writing which is not quite local and not quite general.

If you're a family historian thinking about writing up your work and you want to see a different direction in which your research can take you, then this book is highly recommended.

Joseph Davis