

Thomas Watt - Moruya Pilot by John Sewell

Over two years from March 2008 we published a series of articles about the work of the Moruya Pilot Station, based on the diaries of James Constable, one of the boatmen there. They covered the period 1881 to 1899. Thanks to the generosity of Ron Trill of Mooloolaba, we now have copy of another diary, that of his grandfather Thomas Watt who was the pilot at Moruya from August 1909 to May 1912. One single book covers his long career. In it he gives the basic details of ships and ports and a listing of the officers and the distances travelled in the voyages of the vessels in which he served.



Thomas Watt was born in Scotland in 1872. His father was a railway employee. He began his seafaring career in 1891 working on paddle steamers on the River Clyde. His first seagoing voyage was on the *Loch Vennacher* in 1894. On her he travelled 113,000 miles on voyages between Australia and the UK.

This was followed by service on Australian and New Zealand owned ships working mainly in Australian and Asian waters. This gave him the opportunity of attending Mackenzies Navigation School in Sydney to gain his 2nd Mate's certificate in 1898. The following year he switched to Edmonds Navigation School to gain his 1st Mate's certificate to be followed at the same school in 1902 by his Master's certificate, so gaining the title "Captain". A year later he spent six weeks at the school to gain an Extra Master's certificate. However he did not immediately gain a captaincy, sailing for several voyages as first mate on the passenger/cargo ship *Chingtu* - taking time off to get married in Melbourne in January 1905 to Nelly Deane, by whom he had three daughters. His first home was established in Melbourne.

He left the *Chingtu*, in which he had travelled 132,700 miles, to work on the coastal trade on the *Ouraka*. An accident at Port Kembla which crushed his foot was followed soon after, in May 1907, by a move to government service on the pilot boat *Captain Cook* stationed at Watsons Bay in Sydney Harbour. This was the second

vessel of that name, this one built in Australia, and destined to serve as the pilot boat for 45 years.

In his first two years in the service, Thomas made two extensive trips inspecting lighthouses and pilot stations along the NSW coast, including the Pilot Station at Moruya Heads.

On 31 August 1909 he left Watsons Bay on appointment as pilot at Moruya. He seems to have swapped positions with Captain Troupe, who had been in charge of the Pilot Station since the retirement in April 1907 of Captain Sutherland, the man whose chequered career found frequent mentions in the Constable Diaries.

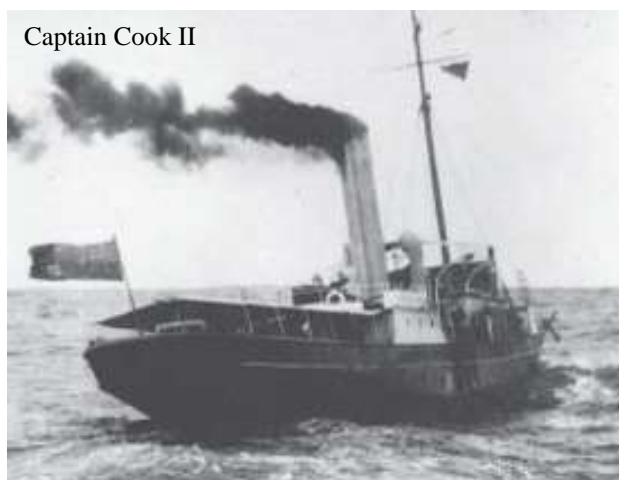
The Moruya Years

Only six pages of the diary are used to cover his years at the Pilot Station. His heading "Vessels piloted in and out" is adhered to throughout - nothing about the station, the house, his family, the two boatmen or the many tasks involved in keeping the river navigable.

In fact, his workload as a pilot was very light. In his two and a half years at Moruya he records only 37 occasions when he piloted ships to or from the town wharf. Of these eight involved moving the tug *Rhea* which was working with the dredge *Eta* and a further three with the *Astra* which was also involved with the dredger. Only seven ships are named.

But in fact river traffic was much heavier than these figures indicate. The Illawarra and South Coast Steamship Navigation Company was again in a monopoly position. As a minimum service the *Hillmeads* would leave Sydney each Thursday morning and reached Moruya the following day. A telegram to the *Moruya Examiner* would confirm or amend these timings. The Company supplemented this service by frequent visits by the *Moruya* and on one occasion by the aging *Coomonderry*. Yet the Company required the pilot's services on only eighteen occasions.

It was a similar story with 68 ton steamer *Wee Clyde* built locally by McMillan Bros and Riley



Captain Cook II

and with *Ellerslie*, a small 147 ton steamer owned by Alan Taylor, the Lord Mayor of Sydney. These small ships were built specifically for the timber trade which was booming because of the demand for railway sleepers. Each needed the pilot on only two occasions.

Captains of steamers could qualify for an official "Pilotage Exemption Certificate" which would cover a nominated vessel entering a nominated port. So, for example, while *Hillsmeads* was under the command of Captain Basclain she was free to make her own way to the Moruya wharf, but when Captain Willis took over, the pilot was needed.

S.S. Hillmeads approaching Moruya Wharf



A major part of the pilot's task was to identify a sea lane through the bar at the river mouth. Despite the efforts of the dredger over eighteen months and continued work on seawalls there were frequent groundings and many delays. Two months after taking up duty, the pilot was involved with the dredge *Eta* in attempting to free the *Hillmeads* which on Monday ran aground at the river entrance. It did not get clear until the Thursday, by which time its cargo of 60 calves, 40 pigs, a horse, four tons of fish and a consignment of cheese must have lost considerable market value. Little wonder that the *Moruya Examiner* was scathing in its criticism of the attempts to train the river.

Life After Moruya

In the *Moruya Examiner* of 16 March, 1912 the following appeared:

Retirement. We understand it is the intention of Captain Watt, Pilotmaster at Moruya Heads to retire from Government Service and reside in Melbourne, the climatic conditions at the seaside being injurious to his wife's health.

His last pilotage on 20 April was to bring down *Wee Clyde* from the wharf to the sea. He writes "Resigned position as Pilot at Moruya to go into

business. Left Moruya for Melbourne via Sydney. 1st May 1912." followed by a later entry "Distance travelled short journeys, holidays etc from time of joining "Ouraka" till arrival in Melbourne, May 1912. 6,150 miles"

The *Ouraka* was a coastal steamer, 709 tons, owned by the Adelaide Shipping Company.

Whatever business he had was short lived because he was back at sea in December 1912 as first mate on the China Navigation Company's *Changsha*, on which he had previously served. This ended in May 1913. Then there were no voyages until March 1919, and it seems that during the years of the first World War he was operating stores in country towns - his third daughter was born in Boree Creek in 1915.

He was back at sea in 1919 as second mate on the *Kametz Podolski*, a Royal Mail Steam Packet operating between the UK and Australia. From her, he was discharged to Fremantle Hospital on 31 December 1919.

The diary did not accompany him on his last and fatal voyage on the *Southern Cross*, an old three masted schooner. She left Williamstown for Hobart with 1,000 cases of benzene on 10 September 1920. Two weeks later

wreckage found on King Island indicated that she had burnt. All ten crew were lost.

Ron Traill has two other note books, containing poems - an extraordinary collection of 365 poems beautifully handwritten by his grandfather. There is a poem for each day of the year by a poet who was either born or died on that date. These are then indexed both by author name and first lines.



Thomas Watt emerges as a complex individual - methodical and neat to a degree, but surely an adventurer. Our genealogists may well envy Ron Traill his grandfather.