

SHIP BUILDING IN WAR TIME MORUYA

by John Sewell

In 1939, Moruya still depended on coastal steamers of the Illawarra and South Coast Steam Navigation Company for the bulk of its trade. The river was regularly dredged and there was a substantial wharf and produce sheds, where the swimming pool now is.

A Shipping Crisis

In 1940, the Department of Navy was authorised to requisition as many ships as it needed, and soon the South Coast towns were reduced to one ship, the *Kianga*, and a shallow draft boat, built 28 years previously at Huskisson for the Narooma company of Mitchell Bros. It was not enough, and there were strong complaints of monopoly charging and of goods, particularly timber, piling up at the wharves. In early 1941 a deputation from the shire, consisting of Messrs Hanson, Fenning, Heffernan, Ryan, Sheridan and King, waited on the Honourable McBride, Federal Minister of Supply and Development, to persuade him that the answer lay in building wooden ships locally. An Australian Shipbuilding Board had been appointed and was inviting proposals for building merchant ships. Council responded by letter in March 1941:

Council feels that in offering to assist, it is helping the Government and incidentally the Empire in the fight against the aggressor... ships have been built within the shire in the past, and can be built again... Facilities for shipbuilding are available on the Clyde River at Batemans Bay, the Moruya River at Moruya and the Wagonga Inlet at Narooma. All timbers necessary for construction are to be had locally, such as turpentine for bottoms and bottom sides; blue gum, spotted gum, black-butt and ironbark where strength is required, such as for upper sides, deck beams and keelsons... The services of such experienced men as Captain Lucy, who supervised the build-

ing of the Kianga, which is regarded as one of the most serviceable wooden boats to have entered Sydney Harbour, and two other shipbuilders from Huskisson could be obtained.

It is suggested that three types of boat could be built:

(1) Strong timber boats for heavy cargo, which would stand up to heavy bumping over bars and be suitable for coastal service.

(2) Boats not quite so strong which could be used as fishing trawlers.

(3) A cheaper class of boat for mine sweeping and inside work.

Council went on to offer to handle any funds the Government might make available and passed on information which Councillor Fenning had gleaned from a Sydney firm on its "reciprocating, propelling machinery."¹

Rupert Beale, M.L.A.

In the State elections of 10th May 1941, Rupert N. Beale, standing as an Independent, unseated the long-time South Coast member, H. J. Bates. His electorate stretched from Gerrigong to Bega. Beale had taken over the Brighton Hotel in Kiama in 1936, and had become a prominent citizen of that district. He had interests in fishing, and owned a 44 foot long fishing vessel and a 26 foot sailing boat. His brother-in-law was a marine engineer and his cousin a naval architect.² With this background, it was natural that he should embrace with enthusiasm the shipbuilding plan. His letter to the elector includes the comment, *I cannot understand why the coast is not alive with shipbuilding, when we could build wood en ships to replace iron ships which could go overseas.* At a meeting in the Star Hotel in Milton on June 17th, he was speaking of orders for ten ships, to be built by a co-operative, which would attract £100,000 of Government funding.²

The following month, on 5th July, he organised a large gathering of Government Ministers, M.P.'s and officials at

Grumley's Hotel, Narooma, (the choice of venue caused Moruya to feel snubbed — Mr. Zann, the Secretary of the Moruya Chamber of Commerce wanted Mr. Beale to understand that *Moruya is on the map and Narooma and Batemans Bay only suburbs.*) Expert speakers were confident that the industry would be viable, though surely, the claim that a 130 foot craft with 9 foot draft could be built for £150 is either wishful thinking, or a misprint.³

Next day, the party moved on to Moruya to lunch at the Monarch Hotel, and to hear more representations. Mr. Larry Anthony, the Federal Minister of Transport in the Menzies Government (and father of Doug Anthony) arrived two hours late, but in time to hear an impassioned address from Mr. Zann, in which he was bombarded with statistics to prove how dependent was the district on its ships, and what a disaster it would be if *Kianga* was requisitioned by the Navy. He concluded, *We are not asking for favours. We are asking the Government to carry on with our war effort by allowing us to build ships to replace those required by our Navy.*

Mr. Anthony's reply was less than encouraging: *... sea lanes had to be kept swept — only the previous day, two men had been killed by an enemy mine in South Australian waters; shallow draft boats were needed and the Kianga would have to go, to be replaced by the Bergalia; with Japan likely to enter the war all services might be disrupted.* Of the shipbuilding scheme, he said that if responsible people came along with *... a proposition of a concrete nature and could show the Government that they could build ships complete with engines and not in any way interfere with the Government's efforts, the Government would talk to them, but he could not promise anything.* He could not give the assurance, sought by Mr. Beale, that if ships were built, the Government would not requisition them.⁴

The C.D.S. takes shape

Mr. Beale, who at one time owned an hotel in Tuncurry, knew an excellent shipbuilder there, Ernest Wright, whose family had been building ships for seventy years, and who gave enthusiastic support. The proposal took shape: there would be The South Coast Co-operative Shipbuilding, Canning and Development Society Ltd (soon to be shortened in popular use to the C.D.S.) a Registered Co-operative, with half a million pounds capital in one pound shares, which would build ships, and establish fish canneries and refrigerator plants — not just for the war effort, but as a viable long term enterprise. A fishing fleet of 500 boats was seen as a possibility.

Then followed a bureaucratic runaround which Rupert Beale described in a letter to the editor of the Examiner, dated August 30th, 1941:

To form our society, we first have to satisfy the State Registrar of Building Societies. He can't act until we get the Federal Treasurer's consent to our application. I saw Mr. Fadden, the Treasurer. He sent us to the Commonwealth Actuary at Canberra. The Secretary there is also the Secretary of the Capital Issues Board, which sits in Melbourne once a month (and there is a war on). The Actuary referred us to the Shipbuilding Board in Sydney to get their approval to build our wooden ships ... they say they have no power to deal with us.

The protest worked. The following week, the paper carried an indignant denial of incompetence from Treasurer Fadden, and a report that the project was approved. Work would begin as soon as possible on six hulls, with an estimated cost of £30,000 each, half for timber, and half for wages. Two second hand steam engines had been earmarked.

Two hundred people attended a public meeting in Moruya on October 18th, 1941, chaired by C. A. Chesher, President of the Moruya Chamber of Commerce. By this time the Menzies-Fadden Government had resigned and John Curtin's ministry was welcomed as more likely to be supportive. It was announced that Moruya would have the first keels, followed by Batemans Bay and Huskisson. The prospectus, which named Rupert Beale as the Managing Director of C.D.S., indicated that ships

would also be built at Nowra, Greenwell Point, Ulladulla, Narooma, Bermagui and Eden. The authorised capital was £100,000. The list of subscribers, published three weeks later, showed that



The late Arthur Harris, who came to Moruya as manager of the shipyard.

many well known local families had bought shares on an initial payment of two shillings, followed by two shillings on allocation, then the remainder to be paid on demand. The actual paid up capital was small throughout the history of the Society.

Death of a Visionary

Around 1942, there is a gap of more than a year in the Historical Society's collection of newspapers. From correspondence with Rupert Beale's son, Jack, it seems that during this year, Rupert shifted his representations from the Ship Building Board to the Munitions Department, and it was from the Small Ships Division of the latter that the first order came — six 45 foot tugs. The week before the order was placed, Rupert Beale had gone to hospital for a simple prostate operation, tragically, a blood clot formed, and he died in September, 1942, aged 53.

Rupert's son, Jack, a professional chartered engineer, was 25 years old at that time, managing a division in a munitions factory, and, in the evenings, lecturing R.A.A.F. pilots. Rupert's supporters persuaded Jack to seek election to his father's seat, and to take over the C.D.S., as Chairman and Managing Director.

The Shipyard is Built

An acre of riverside ground, where the caravan park now is, was acquired. The plans (which were not submitted for Shire approval until a year after the event) show provision for a machine shop, mould loft, stores, change room, and two lavatory pans. A large galvanised roof covered the slipways, with room for four boats in various stages of construction.

The Workforce

No shipbuilders were available. Jack Beale put together a work force of carpenters, timber industry workers, sleeper cutters, handymen, farm-hands and labourers. Arthur Harris, a carpenter from Glen Davis, was recruited to head the team. Another Glen Davis carpenter, Jack Brown, joined the work force in mid 1943. The Moruya yard was then employing about thirty men, half of whom were out in the bush selecting suitable trees. Jack's recollection confirms that none of the carpenters had previous experience in shipbuilding. With initial help from a retired naval architect, they worked to detailed plans, and were provided with moulds, or templates, which were attached to the roof of the long shed, so controlling curvatures and placement of the ribs and strakes.

Each keel was a square timber beam of the required length. The stem was preferably a trunk, and root, of approximately the right shape. The Congo flats were the source of much of the turpentine and spotted gum. There was a steam boiler and steam box to help in shaping the timbers, which may have had some seasoning effect, but generally, structural timbers were still green. The cladding, either an inch and a quarter planking, or, if a cross-ply finish was needed, a thinner board came from Sydney, and was kiln dried. It, too, needed steaming, to fit the finer curves. At the final stage, a shipwright, named Martin, would come from Sydney, to supervise the caulking(s).*

¹ Examiner 22 March 1941

² Examiner 28 June 1941

³ Examiner 12 July 1941

⁴ Examiner 19 July 1941

⁵ Examiner 18 October 1941

* Conversations with Jack Brown, Murray Street.

† Letter from Honourable Jack Beale, 1st March, 1995

To be concluded in December Journal

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In the Journal for September we covered the beginnings of the Moruya shipyard. This concluding article takes the story to the winding up of the shipyard in the early post-war period.

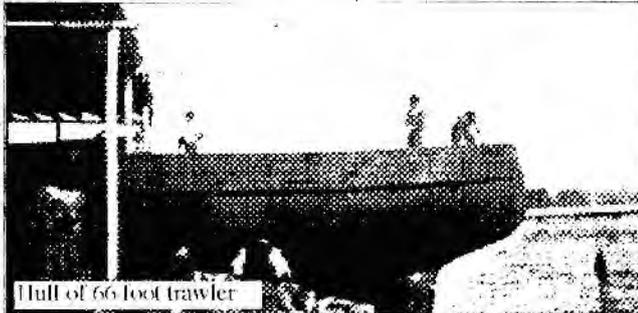
The First Launchings

In May, 1943, the *Examiner* reported that the Shipbuilding Board had placed an order for further ships of the Seine trawler class, similar to those nearing completion at Moruya. *There can be no doubt that the quality of the work already carried out has prompted the Board to entrust further construction to South Coast Industry ... many local people are shareholders ... the shipwrights are obviously proud of their work and have shown their confidence in the venture by becoming members of the Society; practically every man in the yard is a shareholder in the C.D.S. ...*

The first two vessels were launched on 5th June, 1943. The sandy soil beneath the hull was dug out to allow a cradle on greased runners to be inserted. Some leverage at the appropriate time was needed before gravity took over.* The *Examiner* reporter arrived early on the scene to find the yard gay with flags and the boats fully dressed in bunting. The yard was crowded and he comments that many must have saved their petrol coupons to travel great distances to the launch. The Hon. J. J. Cahill, Minister of Works (Premier of N.S.W. 1952-59) arrived to do the honours. He had some problems:

The Minister laid firm hands on the bottle and hurled it from him with great vigour and firm intent, but no golden fluid gushed forth to christen the wooden lady. Mr. Cahill had another try, still another and yet another, then, with memories of his schooldays and visions of scuttling someone's stumps, he launched a deadly overarm which achieved its purpose; as the wine, in token of blessing trickled down the hull, the boat commenced its journey to the river. There was a sigh of relief, then — IN SHE WENT.

The second ship was then launched by Rupert Beale's widow, who needed only two attempts with her bottle, but by this time the tide was going out and



Hull of 66 foot trawler

the launch ended with a drop which proved somewhat disconcerting for the people on deck. Mrs. Frank Hartley was a passenger on this maiden voyage and proudly boasted that she had managed to retain her equilibrium, although her escort was not so fortunate.¹

Seven weeks later there seems to have been some censorship in reporting the locations from which the boats were launched — two more ships had been launched at a South Coast port (almost certainly Moruya) by Mrs. Fenning of Batemans Bay and Mrs. Burr of Moruya. New yards were to be opened at unspecified locations. Shire President Jack Hansen reported that the industry was worth £450 per week to the shire in wages paid.²

C.D.S. Expands

Moruya was the cradle of the C.D.S. The rate and quality of construction achieved there made the enterprise competitive. As other centres opened, in Nowra, Eden and Bermagui, Moruya provided some of the skilled manpower — for example, one of Moruya's carpenters, Bill Dunne, was transferred to Batemans Bay when the shipyard opened there in late 1943.

Orders came in for 45 foot tugs, 66 foot supply ships and 115 foot shallow-draft cargo ships. Jack Beale was looking to the post-war scene: C.D.S. was so constituted that it would be able to absorb manpower released from the fighting services and from munitions factories. *Population and decentralisation are Australia's twin problems, which the South Coast can help to solve because its natural resources are comparable with those to be found anywhere in the world. The C.D.S. aims to develop those resources, and surely development can proceed by no more democratic lines than co-operative effort. The C.D.S. belongs to the people of the*

Minister for Labour and Industry and Social Services
New South Wales

S Y D N E Y

29th February, 1944

Dear Mr. Harris,

The inspection of your shipyard at Moruya was one of the most interesting and pleasant items on my itinerary during my recent official visit to the South Coast, and the cordial and hospital welcome you extended to me and my party contributed greatly to the pleasure of our stay at Moruya.

The vessel I had the pleasure of launching was a credit to your management and to the workmanship of your employees.

I trust you and your management will experience continued success as the production of your shipyard represents a notable contribution to the development of the South Coast.

With all best wishes and kind regards.

Yours sincerely,

Hamilton Knight

A. Harris, Esq.,
Manager,
Moruya Shipyard,
M O R U Y A



After the flood

coast, and all the people should belong to the C.D.S.³

The second Annual general Meeting was held in the Mechanics Hall, Moruya, on November 21st, 1943. Eight thousand shares had been issued and a dividend of 5% would be paid. Operations had extended to Eden, Bermagui and Batemans Bay. The overall wages bill had risen to £1,200 per week. Censorship rules prohibited the publication of most of the Annual Report, but Jack Beale again stressed that the C.D.S. should be looking to its peace time role.⁴

The launch of another ship by Mrs. A. J. Fenning somewhere on the South Coast was reported on March 3rd, 1944. At the same ceremony, the wife of Shire President Jack Hansen laid the keel of a second vessel. From the attendance listed, particularly of the Fenning family, it seems likely that this was the first launch at Batemans Bay, where the shed had provision for two boats, side by side.

At the third Annual General Meeting in October, 1944, Mr. Beale spoke of criticism at street corners about the conduct of the Society ... no one had come along to have their say. Shareholders had increased to 10,000, but not all shared their responsibilities, so that arrears amounted to £2,500. Nevertheless, it had been a good year. £100,000 had been paid in wages, 29 ships had been launched and ten more were under construction at the various yards. Mr. Beale was voted a salary of £7.10s per week.⁵

The Great Flood

On 9th April, 1945, Moruya suffered one of its most disastrous floods, chiefly remembered because it washed away the 45 year old bridge, so that for months, all wheeled traffic was diverted via Larry's Mountain and Kiara, while foot passengers crossed the river

by boat.

The shipyard was badly damaged. Sand was washed away from under the hulls and they settled, with their moulds bringing down the roof structures to which they were attached. Vic Bonnet, one of the carpenters, had a launch tied to the bank. After the flood, some of its contents were found near the wall, but the launch was gone. Shortly afterwards, a workman repairing the damage dropped his hammer, and a fellow workman, Harry McDiarmid, volunteered to dive for it. Searching for the hammer underwater he found himself on a level surface which turned out to be the missing launch, now firmly wedged under the weight of the hull.⁶ John Bowyer, then a lad of 10, spent an afternoon helping Vic clean out the mud from the salvaged launch, on the promise of two shillings — which was never paid.⁷

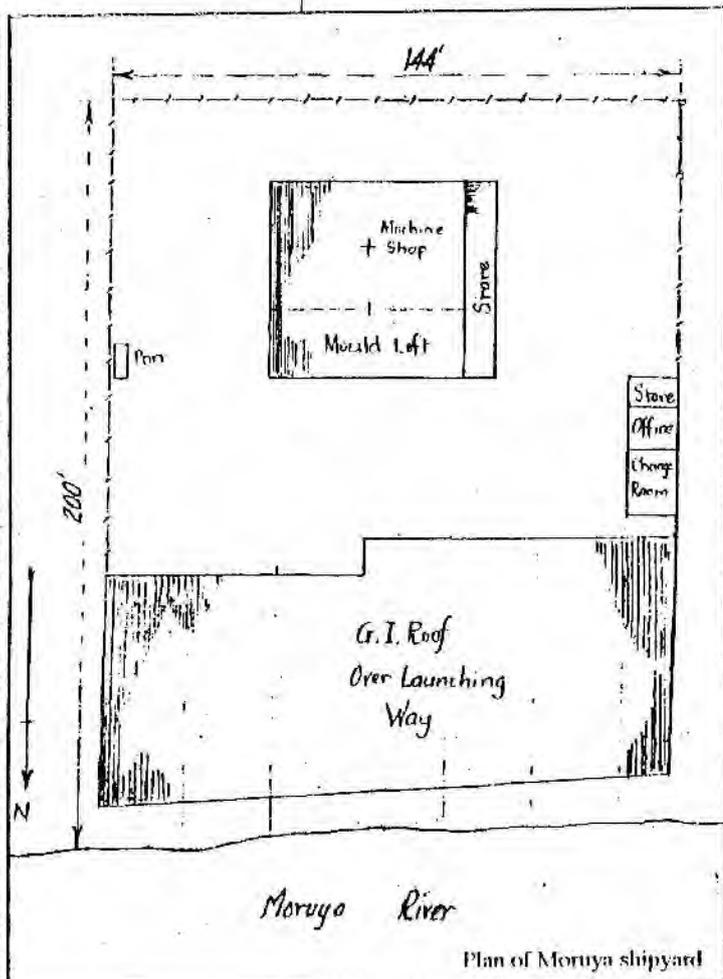
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The End of the Venture

1945 was Victory year, celebrated on Friday, June 14th, by a great Victory Ball in Moruya. Unfortunately, the Historical Society holds very few *Examiner* newspapers for that year, so we do not have the report of the first post-war Annual General Meeting of the C.D.S., at which a change in direction must have been high on the agenda.

95% of C.D.S. ships had gone to battle. Government orders ceased at the end of the war; demand for trawlers was small, and for coastal shipping was non-existent. In 1946, directors and shareholders reviewed the future. There was no demand for ships, but there could be a future in a cannery at Eden; there was some possibility of shore based whaling, also at Eden; there might be some profit in post-war housing. However, the paid up capital of the C.D.S. was too small for the canning operation and it was resolved to wind up the Co-operative, and move on to an incorporated



Plan of Moruya shipyard

company, Australian Fishing Industries, Limited. C.D.S. shareholders were offered return of capital, or shares in the new company. Jack Beale joined the A.F.I. Board of Directors, and designed and supervised construction of the cannery at Cattle Bay, Eden.¹

So, the Moruya yard closed. In the *Examiner* issue of September 20th, 1946, there is a report that *While demolishing the iron buildings at the shipyard on Friday last, Mr. Charles Lowe had the misfortune to fall off a ladder and was injured sufficiently to warrant admission to Moruya Hospital.*

Jack Brown's recollection is of the work force running down as no new orders came in. He himself left, to be employed by Dr. McKay's wife in converting the old *Royal Hotel* on the corner of Page and Queen Streets, into the *Holiday Haven* apartments. Soon he branched out on his own and over the years was responsible for much of the post-war building in Moruya. Arthur Harris, too, stayed on as a builder. Others who had come to Moruya to work in the yards and who stayed on included Vic Bonnet, Charlie Franks and Billie Turner.*

The total output of the Moruya yard was eight tug hulls, length 45 feet; eight hulls for trawlers, two of 61 feet 6 inches, and six of 66 feet. Over the years, one has been identified as a tugboat in Sydney Harbour, and another in Darwin. Recently, there was a report of a tourist boat *Moruya* operating at a Queensland resort, which may be the last remaining product of the yard.*

The closing down of the C.D.S. at all its centres must have been a complex operation, with workmen to be paid off, and 10,000 members, some with arrears of membership, to be fairly acquitted. Oddly, when the Registrar of Co-operatives was requested to supply information on the close down, he reported that

the Co-operative could not be traced in the Registrar's records.⁶

The skills of the shipbuilders were not entirely lost. Some ships were built locally in the next few years — in October, 1947, two Ulladulla trawlermen, Clancy and Owens, built a fine trawler *Batemans Bay* on the Clyde at a cost of £20,000.⁷

Perhaps the last word should be with the Honourable Jack Beale, still, in his 79th year, working on the design and building of hydro-electric power stations for country locations. *In 1941, the South Coast was a backward region. The highway was unsealed, shipping was unreliable, public infrastructure almost non-existent. World war II hit the economy hard. The initiatives of the C.D.S. leaders aimed to protect the region's livelihood and provide a better future through shipbuilding, canning and development ... (They) sparked economic development in wartime, which flowed to the A.F.I., to experienced boat builders, to tradesmen, to home builders ... The small efforts of the visionary C.D.S. founders sparked larger developments still bearing fruit throughout the whole South Coast Region.⁸*

NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE SUCCESS --

THE C.D.S.

IS NOW GOING STRONG!

The Late Rupert N. Beale had a deep-rooted belief in the industrial possibilities of the South Coast; he could see no good reason why this district should not have a share of the prosperity that has too long been considered a prerogative of the Cities. He launched the South Coast Co-operative Shipbuilding, Canning and Development Society, Limited.

**IT STARTED IN A SMALL WAY
BUT BIG THINGS ARE HAPPENING TO-DAY.**

Certain Coastal Districts are already enjoying considerable benefits from C.D.S. activity and the enterprise is rapidly extending.

The vision, energy and enthusiasm of coastal people made C.D.S. success possible, but there is still room for more members.

CO-OPERATORS ARE CO-OPERATION'S STRENGTH!

If you are not already a Member, it would be wise to look into it. Opportunities for sound investment are limited nowadays and the C.D.S. is more than an investment.

C.D.S. Holdings are earning Dividends, but the True Co-operator is primarily interested in the splendid contribution being made to the Community, to the District, and to the Nation.

Details and Application Forms from—

**MORUYA—ALLAN L. BURR or J. J. KING, DIRECTORS.
BATEMAN'S BAY—ALFRED J. FENNING, DIRECTOR,
MILTON—ALFRED J. CLANCY, DIRECTOR.
MORUYA "EXAMINER," BATEMAN'S BAY or MILTON "TIMES"**

C.D.S. Advertisement from *Examiner*, 29 October, 1943

¹ *Examiner* 11 June, 1942

² *Examiner* 30 July, 1943

³ *Examiner* 29 October, 1943

⁴ *Examiner* 26 November, 1943

⁵ *Examiner* 3 November, 1944

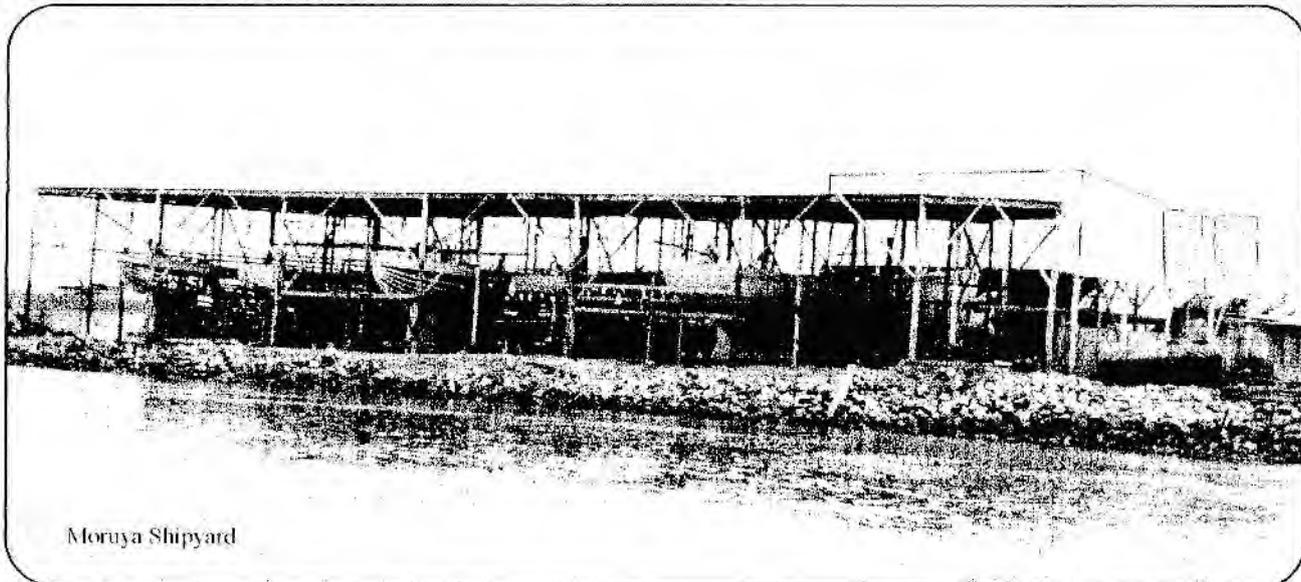
⁶ Donna Croucher, Registrar's Office, 20 February, 1995

⁷ *Examiner* 10 October, 1947

* Conversations with Jack Brown, Murray Street

o Conversations with Jack Bowyer, Campbell Street

† Correspondence with the Honourable Jack G. Beale, March, 1995



Moruya Shipyard



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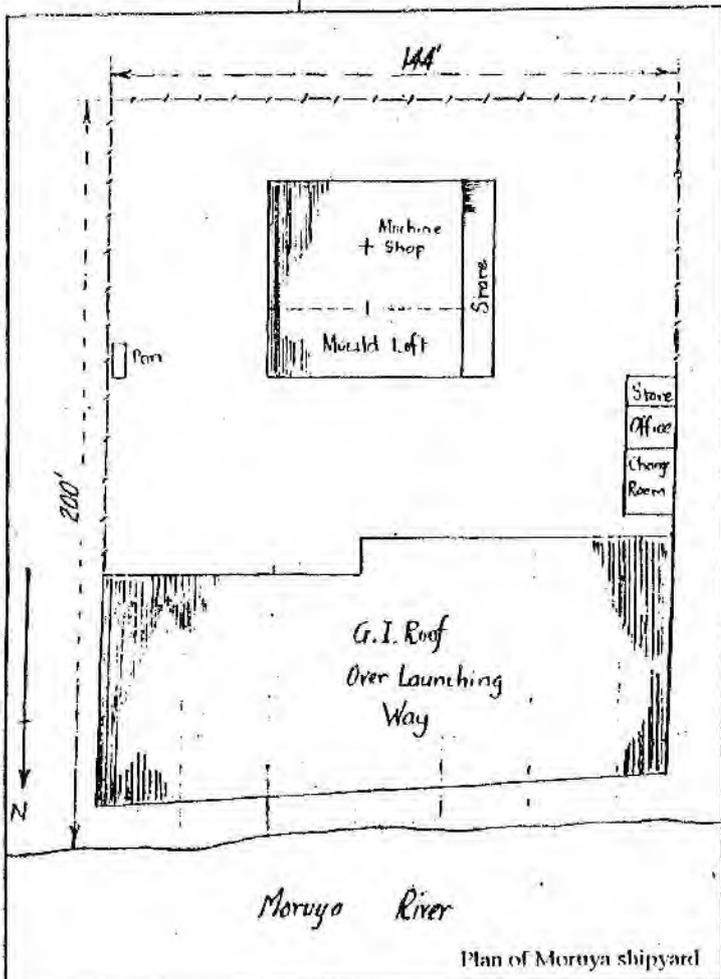
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