C.Blunt Boatbuilder

Surviving the slings and arrows

BY JAMES SMITH

For 150 years, C.Blunt Boatbuilder, of Williamstown and Geelong, has been launching wooden boats into the waters of Port Phillip Bay, from seafaring vessels carrying missionaries to the New Hebrides to race-winning yachts. Still occupying its heritage-listed site and run by a fifth generation of the Blunt family, the business has survived a tumultuous history and today provides a unique link to Victoria's maritime past.

LOSING home and possessions to a bushfire might be enough to send all but the hardiest of new immigrants scurrying back to their homeland. Yet, when such a disaster struck English newlyweds, Clement and Sarah Blunt, shortly after their arrival in Australia in the early 1850s, they entertained no such thought. Back then, the coastal outpost of Lorne, 140 km south-west of Melbourne, was no place for the faint-hearted. Settled by a handful of timber-getters, it was otherwise frequented only by the indigenous people of the region, sealers, whalers and adventurers.

Clement Blunt, a boatbuilder by trade, must have been one of the latter, taking a wife barely in her 20s to live on the beautiful, wild coastline, where he sought to eek out a living by building a boat for one of the squatters. The fire that ravaged their home did not deter the couple and, with the few possessions that had survived the blaze, they walked back to Geelong, a journey which in those days followed a treacherous route

ABOVE: Vintage tools in the Blunt's shed. Photo: James Smith. INSET: Clement Blunt I who established the business in 1858. Courtesy of the Blunt family.
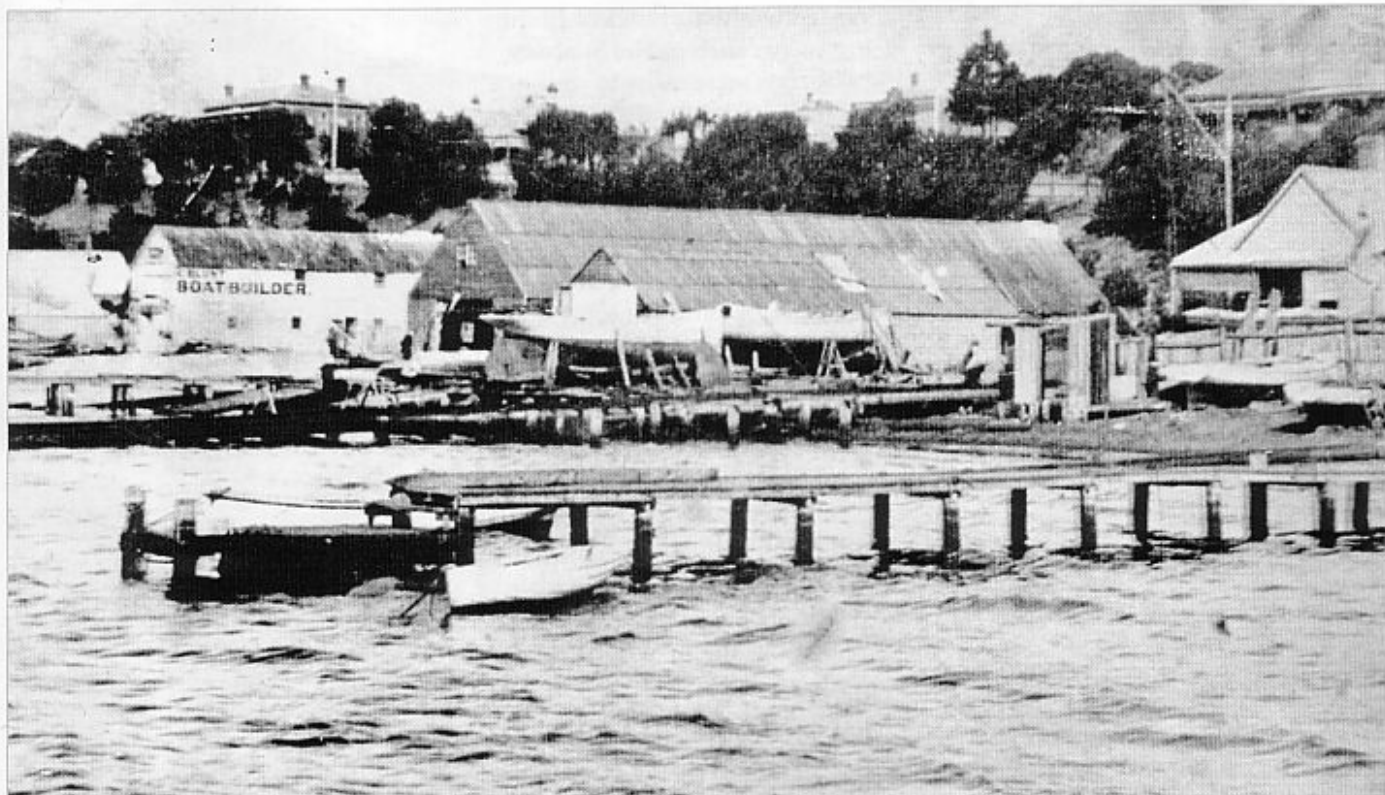
Blunt's on the Geelong waterfront, undated. Photos courtesy of the Blunt family.

through virgin forests. There, on 9 June 1858, the 34-year-old began a boatbuilding dynasty that survives to this day, winning a tender to the Chief Port and Harbour Master of Geelong for a pair of centre-board whale boats.

Before migrating to the colonies, Clement had grown up as the son of a coal whipper, unloading coal in the docks of Regency, England. Born on 22 January 1824, by the age of 17 he was already an apprentice boatbuilder.

Working as ship's carpenter aboard the *Isabella* in 1850, Clement paid his passage to Australia. According to family stories, it was on that voyage that he met and fell in love with his future wife, Sarah Emerson, ten years his junior and daughter of the ship's owner.

Within two years of establishing the Geelong business and at the height of the gold rush boom, Clement and Sarah took their three young children to Melbourne where Clement built the first hire boats on the Yarra River. However, nature struck another blow when, in 1865, the yard he

had established to the east of the Princes Bridge was flooded. With three more children in tow, he returned with the family to Geelong, after a brief stop in Sandridge, now Port Melbourne.

After several unsuccessful attempts to obtain permission to operate a pleasure cruiser on the Barwon River, Clement returned to boatbuilding, passing on his skills to

Clement Blunt II.

his five sons who all joined the family business.

Within two months of opening his yard, it became home to the Geelong Rowing Club. According to the local newspapers, his designs soon began to turn heads. One report of 1 May 1874, said a 24-foot yawl built for a local doctor "skims over the water like a thing of life".

A death notice posted shortly after Clement passed away in 1899 at the age of 75 praised his "superior" workmanship and popularity with "all classes of yachting men, few of whom ever put in a day at Geelong without whiling away half an hour 'yarning' to the old man".

Long before he died, the old man's eldest son, also Clement, who had won numerous trophies in competitions on the waters around Geelong, headed up the coast to start his own business on the foreshore at Williamstown. Already a major maritime centre following the opening of Port Phillip's first patent slip by the Duke of Edinburgh in 1868, Clement the younger opened up alongside other pioneers, including

Herbert Blunt

William White, originally from the Isle of Wight, who designed the first steam ferry to operate on Port Phillip Bay. Displaying a similar longevity to his father, Clement would oversee the yard's operations well into his 70s.

The new C.Blunt Boatbuilder was founded in 1887 on Nelson Place at Williamstown when Clement was granted 33 feet of frontage for a £10 annual rental. All manner of boats began flying off the slipway, including Williamstown's first motor boat, the *Ariel*, and a fleet of 24 power launches and sailing boats for missionaries headed to the Solomon Islands.

Boosted by the fortunes of Blunt racing yachts such as the *Sunbeam* and *Hyacinth*, respectively winner and runner-up in the St Kilda Yacht Club's N H Roberts and Corio Bay trophies of 1892, the business was soon unable to cope with the volume of orders, despite its ability to produce boats in astonishingly short time.

"A smart piece of workmanship was displayed by Mr Clem. Blunt, boatbuilder, this week. In six days he turned out a large six-oared surf-boat for work at the stranded *Drumblair*," reported *The Chronicle*, on 22 October 1892.

In 1898, the business was forced to move to a bigger yard, at Clark's Slip, now the site of Williamstown's police station, where Clement was praised by *The Advertiser* "upon his determination to launch out in a large way." Among the boats to grace Clark's Slip were oil-powered pleasure boats capable of carrying up to 40 people and the sloop-rigged yacht *Aotea*, designed by famous Scottish designer, William Fife Jr, which sails in Hobart to this day.

Meanwhile, the Geelong business was kept running by Clement's brothers, Herbert and Charles. They produced numerous large yachts, most notably the sturdy, sea-faring *Shamrock*, which made history as one of only four boats to compete in the first Australian Ocean Race from Geelong to Tasmania in 1907, a race that was nearly abandoned due to fierce weather on Bass Strait. As he approached his 60s, Charles decided to join his older brother in Williamstown. It was 1922 and already the third generation of Blunt boat builders was being groomed.

Within four years of moving their yard once more onto the grounds owned by the Royal Yacht Club, this time at the behest of the Melbourne Harbour Trust who had earmarked their site for land reclamation, tragedy again struck the Blunt family. In the early hours of Sunday, 30 May 1926, despite the best efforts of the fire

Charles Blunt

brigade, their boat shed was gutted by fire, along with timber, tools and a 16-foot boat ready for delivery to the Railways department.

Thankfully, with the Blunt name well-known in the sailing world and the family well-loved in Williamstown, their wide circle of friends ensured the business was not short of offers of a new home. And, if the small matter of a devastating blaze had not deterred the first Clement, neither would it beat his sons and grandsons, who combined to build a new shed adjacent to their first site in Nelson Place. They took over a building previously used for motor repairs

Clement Blunt III

Arthur Blunt

Blunts and customers at launch in 1960s. Photos courtesy of the Blunt family.

and, using timber from Port Phillip Bay's first floating dock, laid down the yard and slipway that is still in operation today.

Among the grandsons were the third Clement, born in 1894, and Arthur, two years younger, who would gradually take up the reins. By this stage, a large part of their work was contracted up-river where Clement oversaw the work, while Arthur took charge of the shipwrights at the yard. The former Naval Reservists became a formidable partnership, leaving an indelible mark on Williamstown.

Stories abound of Clement and Arthur during their time in the yard. One is recalled so often that it is commemorated by Hobson's Bay City Council on a plaque outside the yard. "A client neglected to retrieve his boat," it reads. "Frustrated with it taking up space, Arthur recycled it into wood needed for the new pier. But the owner reappeared. He unwittingly leaned against the pier, resting his foot on what was once his boat's keel and hollered 'Where's my

bloody boat?' According to the current yard's owner, Greg Blunt, Arthur – never one to take a backward step – chased the man from the yard with an earful".

Such mishaps did nothing to stem the yard's progress; at one stage ten shipwrights made up orders from rowing skiffs to wheelhouses for tugs. And when Clement III was diagnosed with diabetes and had both legs amputated, they installed ramps throughout the yard so he could continue working. The firm also secured regular contracts from the local naval authorities, ultimately forcing them to request an extension to the site from the Melbourne Harbour Trust in October 1942.

The Blunts became so integral to Williamstown life that they took over part of the Steampacket Inn, an old pub one block back from the waterfront. Blunt's Room, to the side of the main bar, had its own sign and boating paraphernalia and was off limits to all but the Blunts, their employees and friends, a cosy corner that served generations at

their shifts' end. The men's only distraction was the need to take lemonades to the wives and girlfriends waiting patiently in cars outside.

In 1970, the local paper noted that "In Williamstown, they say that Clem and Arthur Blunt are as well-known as the Gellibrand Light." Well-known they may have been but, like Hobson's Bay's most famous lighthouse, which closed in 1976 after being struck by the *Melbourne Trader* in heavy fog, the brothers could not keep going forever. Arthur died within six months of that article's publication and Clem passed away in April 1973.

In a break from tradition, Clement Blunt III's eldest son, Clement, chose not to inherit the boat-building mantle, instead opting for a career at the Altona refinery as a fitter and turner. He retained a love for yachting, but not the art of building them, so younger brother Robert, who had served his boat-building apprenticeship with the Melbourne
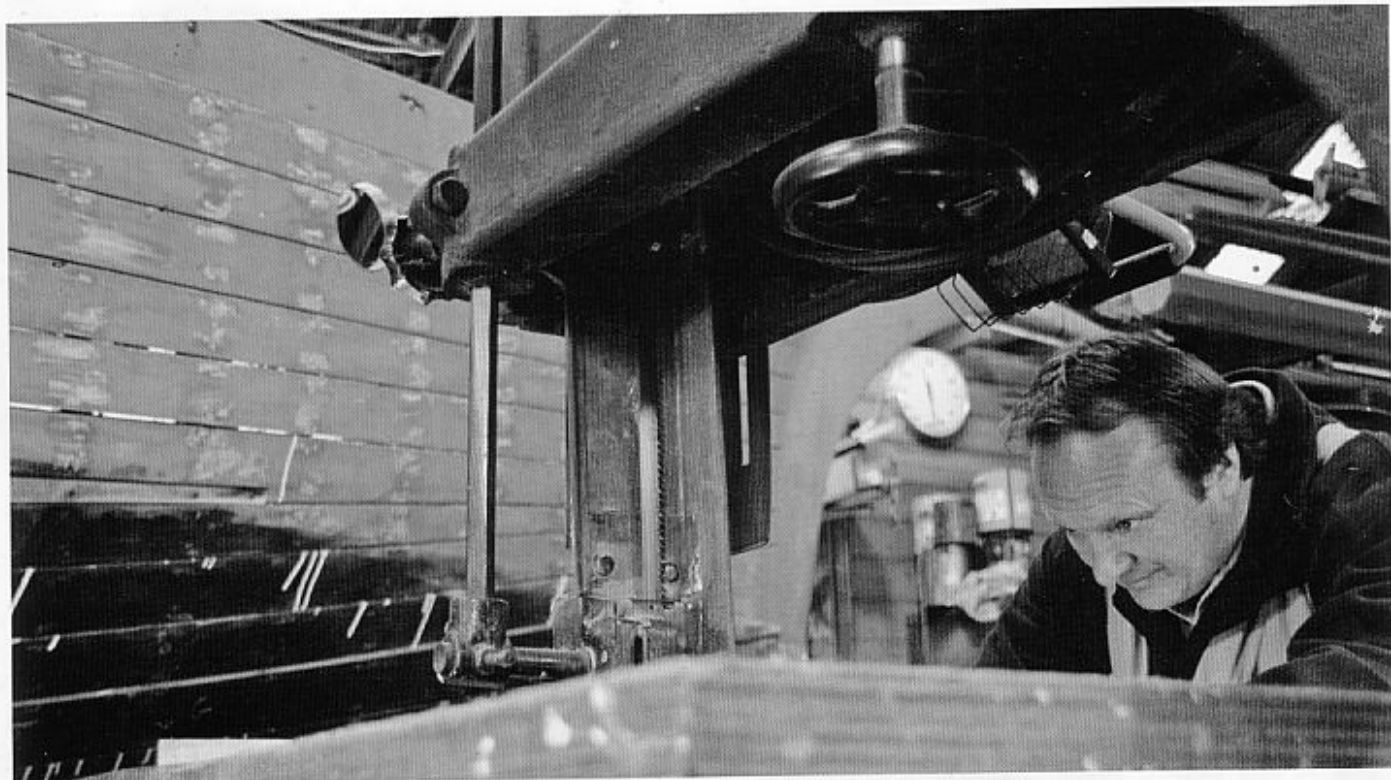
Greg Blunt, with the *Janet* in the background. Photo: James Smith.

Steamship Company, first at Williamstown, then for three years at sea, stepped into the breach.

By this stage, the demand for wooden boats was in steep decline, with plastics and fibreglass becoming the material of choice. The Blunt yard had been moving steadily into the field of repairs to compensate for declining orders. Among the staff struggling against the tide of progress were Robert's two sons, Greg and Paul, both of whom had served apprenticeships in other fields at the behest of their grandfather.

It was as well they did, because by 1982 the orders had completely dried up and the dynasty, now in its 125th year, faced a threat to its future greater than those earlier posed by mother nature. Robert had wages to pay, but no income, so both sons offered to leave the yard. Greg returned to his previous trade as a signwriter; Paul became a boatman with the tug company; their father soldiered on.

Orders failed to pick up and Port Phillip Bay's oldest surviving boat building business faced closure. By 1991, Blunts had just one employee

and was in trouble with the banks. That all paled into significance when Robert was diagnosed with bowel cancer and given months to live.

On one of the final visits to see his father in hospital, Greg had in his back pocket a letter from the bank saying they would honour no more cheques from the yard until they received repayments on their mounting debts. It is a visit he remembers clearly to this day:

"Dad said to me, 'You know that if I die there's a huge mess to sort out'," recalls Greg."I told him, 'Don't worry, I'm just the boy to do it'."

Heritage Touring

C.Blunt Boat Builder is located at 150 Nelson Place, Williamstown. If you would like to visit, the instructions are simple: find the little door at the front, and if it is open, you are welcome.

"'That's good,' he replied, 'because I've made you sole executor of my estate'."

Four days later, Robert died, knowing nothing of the letter in Greg's back pocket.

Debts owed by Robert's estate were gradually cleared, but new obstacles soon arose. The lease on the site was up for renewal and vultures were hovering. A meeting of four Blunts was called to decide the fate of the business: Greg, mother Peggy, brother Paul and sister Shelley. Ultimately, it fell to Greg to choose whether to take the business into a fifth generation or consign it to the history books. After much soul-searching with wife Joanne, they chose the former and cobbled together the necessary $20,000 to purchase the business.

Since then, the yard has been hit with a $280,000 bill from state government environmental inspectors demanding the removal of a foot of top soil contaminated with heavy metals. A compromise was reached on covering the costs, only for the Blunts to learn the pan service for the area was finishing

meaning the site had to be connected to the sewer.

"With the lease not up for another 21 years, I started thinking, like my father before me, 'What on earth have I done?'," says Greg.

A white knight arrived in the form of Heritage Victoria who listed the entire site and later agreed to provide a $15,000 grant, funding a complete refit of the floor. Occasional orders for boats began coming in and requests for repairs became regular again. And, with yards like Blunt's becoming increasingly rare, it began attracting inquisitive passers-by through its door; not just boat people, but tourists drawn to its antiquated look.

But, while the yard's value as a tourist attraction may prove central to its future, the Blunt family's past will never be forgotten. The tools and methods used by Greg and his small team of staff and volunteers are the same as they were when the shed was opened by Clement II more than 80 years ago and work is currently under way on a beautiful yacht, *Janet*, that was built by Greg's great-grandfather in Geelong in 1900. She was reclaimed from a scrapyard in the 1960s and returned to Blunts from Kettering, Tasmania. The owner later sold her to Greg for $1 as the scale of her restoration grew beyond his means.

New owners took over at the Steampacket Inn last year, stripping out the bar's traditional furnishings. Blunt's Room is no more, its adornments returned to the yard, but its legacy lives on in a pontoon restored by ten local men behind the yard where they have formed their own club. Greg also keeps an eye out for old Blunt boats still in existence, the oldest to his knowledge being the *Wildflower*, in Oyster Harbour outside Albany. She celebrated her 119th birthday in July.

The Author

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