Newcastle's waterfront

In 1996 I wrote a social history of the Newcastle waterfront for the Hunter Bicentenary, using individual life stories to illuminate the wider society and economic structures that shaped Newcastle's waterfront society. In 1998 I completed a larger history of 200 years of coal loading at the port. This brief account of that waterfront history uses the concept of place as an organising principle — how people lived on the waterfront and how they shaped and were shaped by it, especially those who lived and worked in the suburbs closest to the waterfront: Newcastle, Stockton, Carrington, Wickham and in 'lost' settlements such as Moscheto Island.

British exploitation of the Hunter Valley soon followed the establishment of Sydney in 1788. Coal River was the first name given to the Hunter River, after the coal discovered in 1797. Coal was the reason the New South Wales administration placed a settlement at the mouth of the Hunter and the coal trade still underpins waterfront life. In 1801 a convict camp was set up to mine coal close to deep water on the southern shore. Convicts also went up-river to cut cedar. A permanent convict station (now central Newcastle) was established at the same convenient loading place in 1804.

From 1812 some convicts were permitted to establish farms up-river at Wallis Plains (Maitland) and Paterson’s Plains — the most famous of them, Molly Morgan. Farmers and their assigned servants rowed wheat and potatoes down to Newcastle, setting a pattern for river transport which persisted into the 20th century. Initially, most opportunities for waterside employment were also offered up-river along the Hunter and its tributaries, the Williams and Paterson rivers. A hectic river trade developed with the expansion of free agricultural and pastoral settlement from the 1820s. The Hunter Valley’s centre was Maitland and by 1833 Maitland’s population surpassed that of Newcastle. Coastal steamers ran from Sydney through Newcastle direct to the terminus at Morpeth, Maitland’s port. Other river ports were established at Clarendown and Raymond Terrace.

The harbour and the river’s navigable inland reaches were also crucial to the rise of Newcastle. But today’s harbour was made, not born, constructed from a wide and shallow estuary. Beyond a swampy foreshore the land rose sharply to the south, with cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. On the north side was a long, sandy peninsula and in the river channels an archipelago of muddy islands. At the harbour entrance ships had to cross a bar and brave a rocky, narrow passage between Nobby’s Island, a reef and high surf along the peninsula. More than 120 ships were wrecked at the port’s entrance over the next century.

Despite these dangers, Newcastle’s convict status and its subordination to Sydney meant that provision of harbour facilities lagged well behind those at Sydney. The only large improvement the government provided in the first half-century was a breakwater connecting Nobby’s Island to the southern mainland. Governor Macquarie laid the foundation stone in 1818. This work was the main reason a contingent of 250 convicts was kept at Newcastle after the penal station was removed to Port Macquarie in 1823. The breakwater was not completed until 1846 and forms a major feature of the present harbour.

Convicts waded out to load ships with baskets of coal until 1804 when a small timber wharf was built. The convict labourers then used wheelbarrows but no further technical improvements were introduced. This limited the development of the port, earning much complaint. In 1828 the government granted the Australian Agricultural Company (AA Co) a monopoly to mine coal in NSW. Newcastle was at this time the

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only place in Australia where coal was mined. The company purchased land on the southern side of the Hunter next to Newcastle where most of its coal mines were opened.  

In clear contrast to the government administration, in 1831 the AA Co loaded its first coal using up-to-the-minute technology: the first 'railway' track in Australia; Sophia Jane, the first coastal steamship (this was only for show and coal continued to carried by sailing vessels); a new wharf and staiths. The scale of mining and trade soon expanded. The government mine exported 1,789 tons of coal in 1825 and by 1842 the AA Co sold 34,000 tons. Railways, steamships and ever-more sophisticated loading mechanisms at the wharves were the making of the port of Newcastle. When the AA Co monopoly was broken in 1847, new mining companies quickly increased coal shipments. Australian demand grew with each influx of immigrants. During the Californian goldrush of 1849, the American west coast became Newcastle’s largest overseas customer. After the Australian goldrush Victoria became Newcastle’s largest coal market, a position it retained until well into the 20th century. Domestic gaslight, steam-powered industries and above all, steam locomotives on the ever-lengthening railways further increased demand. By 1870, tonnage clearing Newcastle rivalled Sydney’s exports. Steamships also required coal as fuel and Newcastle was an important bunkering port until diesel replaced coal-fired ships after World War II. 

Newcastle was surveyed in 1822-23 and opened to free settlement. Greater Newcastle grew as a series of separate villages, most oriented to water transport. The first was Stockton, developed on the northern peninsula in the 1830s. Other villages grew at coal pits and the AA Co first subdivided land west of Newcastle in 1853. Coal mining and settlement expanded along the southern seafront and westwards along the Hunter. By the early 1900s, there was no longer a close proximity of coal mine, town and waterfront, and mining became centred on inland towns such as Cessnock and Maitland. When a railway was completed between Maitland and Newcastle, Morpeth's role as rival port began to decline. Between 1856 and 1871 the population of Newcastle and nearby villages grew from 1500 to 16,400. By 1891 it was 49,900. Newcastle had assumed pre-eminence as maritime port and regional capital. 

The increasing trade demanded significant changes in the layout and facilities of the harbour. In 1857-58 the Northern Railway was extended along the city’s harbour frontage. Wharves were built parallel to the railway and fitted with steam cranes to load the coal. The cranes — a novelty in Australia at the time — represented a further mechanical advance in waterfront work. By 1860, the harbour had been dredged and a lighthouse was built on a cut-down Nobby’s Island. Yet sailing vessels were moored for weeks waiting for favourable winds or taking their turn at the cranes after steamers. The lack of wharf accommodation was relieved when coal loading was transferred northwards to the ballast dyke which was created off the shore of Bullock Island (Carrington). Hydraulic cranes, installed along the dyke in 1878, increased loading speed. (The Italianate hydraulic pump station still stands at Carrington.) The southern wharves were used for general cargoes until the 1960s. Coal is still loaded at Carrington. 

The remaking of the port depended heavily on the NSW government and companies with resources larger than those of Newcastle alone. Harbour-makers were labourers and businessmen, engineers and company managers, captains and dredge crew, and a plethora
of government administrators. From 1856, when NSW gained responsible government, the Department of Public Works (PWD) provided most of the colony’s infrastructure. Construction, wharfage and dredging at Newcastle remained under PWD control until 1961. Dredging work at the harbour and in navigable rivers along the northern coast provided employment for hundreds of Newcastle men for more than a century. The building and repair of new northern and southern breakwaters was also a continuous task between 1861 and 1915 — except for stoppages when government funds ran out.13

Between 1908 and 1961 NSW Railways controlled train traffic to public wharves, coal loading and berthing. From 1856 the Colonial Architect’s Office constructed public buildings, including Nobby’s Lighthouse, the handsome Customs House and Fort Scratchley (now the maritime museum). Harbour shipping was under the control of NSW maritime authorities from 1859, initially the Harbours, Lighthouses and Pilots Department.14

Harbour improvements also involved dredging the river and building up the marshy land at its margins. By 1886 Bullock Island was joined to the mainland and nearly doubled by reclamation and a basin was later carved out of the southern end.15 The name was changed to Carrington but the real change was from a quiet island of 11 rural families in the 1860s to an industrial suburb of 2000 people. A similar social transition occurred from the 1920s on the islands in the Hunter River beyond Carrington, now joined together as industrial Kooragang Island and long since emptied of residents.

In the late 19th century Newcastle was renowned as ‘Coalopolis’, Australia’s coal port. By 1900 Newcastle was the fifth largest port in the world and a record 5043 vessels arrived in 1906.16 Waterside work grew and diversified with the development of industrial enterprises around the harbour. Several companies established plants to process ore. The trend culminated in a decision by the Broken Hill Pty Ltd (BHP) to ship South Australian iron ore to Newcastle for the production of steel. The site was at Port Waratah, on the south arm of the Hunter. Australia’s first steelworks began production in 1915. This had profound significance for the economy and it concentrated employment close to Newcastle’s port and the city centre.17

In 1914 the state government’s Walsh Island Dockyard started operations opposite BHP. It remained one of the largest employers until it was closed in 1933 (reopening at Carrington during World War II). Other engineering plants were also established, together providing over 10,000 jobs by 1921 and confirming the port district as one of the major industrial areas in Australia.18 Their imports and exports increased the demand for wharf labourers and merchant seamen. By 1921 industrial workers formed 43 per cent of the male workforce of Newcastle with transport (16 per cent) also exceeding mining (10 per cent).19

However, the numbers of workers at any time fluctuated wildly. The interdependence of mining, manufacturing and maritime industries meant that strikes and lockouts in one soon had wide impact. ‘Mining disputes and stoppages were doubly complicated for waterside workers by the fact that ships and coal mines were usually owned by the same companies.’20 In 1921 BHP decided to lay off 4000 workers because of the high costs of coal and wages, and closed the steelworks for a year, with devastating impact on the whole Newcastle economy.

Between 1913 and 1930 port improvements by state authorities were an integral part of the port’s industrialisation. The Walsh Island Dockyard occupied land built up by
reclamation by the PWD. The PWD's dredge workshops at Carrington employed 300 workers — dredging the 'Steelworks' Channel was one major task. BHP and expanding port activities also increased the rate of the city's growth, as evident in the sharp rise in Newcastle's population from 54,600 in 1901 to 84,400 by 1933.

During the second half of the 19th century waterfront life was at its most diverse. There were four waterfronts: by the sea; in the harbour; at the river ports and landings; and at Lake Macquarie, south of Newcastle. Ships waited off the seafront, as they do now, and were served by butcher boats, tugs and pilots, but the work loading was done in the harbour. Industrialisation of the port was reflected in the growth of organised unionism just as physical differentiation of port functions was evident in the differentiation of waterside work. By 1885 Newcastle wharf labourers had formed three distinct groupings — general wharf labourers, crane employees and coal trimmers — and each formed their own unions or trade associations.

Crane employees worked on contract to the Railways Department operating cranes which lifted railway wagons loaded with coal to ships’ hatches. The work of the ‘crane boys’ was affected by the introduction of new technology with further coal-loading capacity introduced when electric cranes were built at the dyke in 1915. These and some of the older hydraulic cranes remained in use until the 1960s. Coal trimmers were engaged as casual workers by stevedores and trimming and general wharf labouring remained back-breaking manual tasks, which changed little until the 1960s.

‘Ducky’ Williams, born in Carrington in 1934, was a third-generation wharf labourer, whose grandfather and an uncle were coal trimmers, and father and brothers were waterside workers. Most men who lived near the water worked on the waterfront. 'The whole lot of us were members of the Waterside Workers Federation. In Newcastle it was for many, many years a family industry.' There were 300 to 400 coal trimmers in the 1930s and as many as 150 at a time worked on one ship. As a boy Ducky watched them work.

The pin boss was the expert ... he used to knock the pins out of the [bottom of the] coal wagon. The coal'd drop down to the hatch and ... they'd put the trimmers down there to trim the coal out into the wings of the ship. Spread it around so the coal would be level. Soon as the ship'd come up they'd be down shovelling while the coal was being dumped down on them. They used to give them a candle when they'd be working down there. [The coal] was all loose. It was a hard job. They'd shovel and shovel.

Wharf labourers manhandled most cargoes — in an eight hour day one man would shift 50 tons of wheat, lumping it in bags on his shoulders. Many were badly injured or damaged in health. Lorna Greentree used to hear her wharfie father struggling for breath at night after working with phosphate. But competition for jobs was fierce and from the 1920s membership of waterside and maritime unions was keenly sought and tightly controlled.

Jobs on the water were also various, arduous and dangerous. Butchers, bakers and providores who supplied goods to shipping, employed skilled watermen as ‘runners’ to row out to approaching sailing ships to collect their orders. Specially designed boats were built, called ‘butcher boats’, whose rowers dashed for the open sea and with a long pole and hook made fast to the ship’s side. ‘Every man for himself was the rule, and in the scramble to reach the ship’s deck, more than one would be hurled into the sea.'
Few jobs were long-term or well paid. Seamen and wharfies assembled twice-daily in all weathers at 'pick-up' sites to be picked for jobs, a method wide-open to corruption. Regulations for wharf labourers defined as a 'constant hand' one who was engaged for not less than a week and paid by the week. Men moved from one job to the next around the Hunter or along the coast. Most entrants described in Turner's *Who was who* for 1888 had pursued a range of occupations—seaman-shopkeeper, policeman–lighthouse-keeper, sailor-boatbuilder, mariner-river trader-building contractor.

Family histories recount the social costs of such working lives. Thomas Latham, who held master's and pilot's tickets, was at various times a berthing master, a contractor for ship loading work and did oystering. His wife Susan had nine children and they 'couldn't make do'. Their son Sam, who was born at Stockton in 1884, had to leave home at 14 and went net fishing at Port Stephens. This was cold and heavy work with one man set ashore with the rope while the other rowed out, dropping the net and the rope off in a semi-circle, and then returning to shore. They would both haul the net in, standing on the water's edge.

Sam also worked with oyster dredges on the Karuah River, was a deck hand on the steamer *Reliance*, bought a draught horse for hauling jobs, and ran boat tours. He married Alice Blanch in 1908 and they had eight children. 'He needed the money. He was a very hard worker. They all had big families those days.' Their son Jim, in his turn, went prawn fishing, 'oyster-stick' collecting from the mangroves, boat touring and boat-building, getting his first permanent job at BHP in 1939. Jim and his brothers and sisters helped support their parents when Sam was crippled with arthritis in his fifties after a working life spent largely in the water.

Local awareness of class difference—if not open antagonism—became a persisting trait on the waterfront after the formation of unions. Newcastle's waterside workers formed their first unions in the 1880s, but they went into recess as owners replaced strikers. Similar tactics defeated workers who joined Australia's Sydney's Siberia, Hunter History publications, Stockton NSW, 1980, p. 4.


A total of 139 were wrecked to 1977. R. Craig, comp., *Shipwrecks on Stockton Beach and the Oyster Bank 1800–1977* (from the records of Captain Jim Fletcher), typescript, author: Stockton, n.d. Captain Fletcher has compiled a 'Shipwreck Index' which lists about 750 local incidents of wreck, stranding, collision, piracy, sinking and fouling between 1800 and 1978.

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The Hunter River also physically divided people. Stockton was accessible only by boat and ferry; Carrington, bounded by Throsby Creek and the Hunter, was also defined by towering coal cranes and crowded railyards. Carrington and the southern suburbs were linked by tram lines built between 1887–1901, but neighbourhood was defined by the Hunter, which lists about 750 local incidents of wreck, stranding, collision, piracy, sinking and fouling between 1800 and 1978.

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The waterfront fostered a very strong sense of identity, but this was an amalgam of local conditions and responses to national and international influences. Also, as at any major port Newcastle was awash with visiting seamen.

You would often see 30 or 60 ships standing off waiting to load ... the interstate vessels had loading preference over foreign ships and they might be forced to wait several months for the berth. There could be 1000 foreign sailors in the port and a lot of them did their drinking in Carrington. We had seven policemen here to keep the peace but most of the trouble was between the seamen themselves.

Hotels mirrored the fortunes of the coal trade. In 1871 there were 65 in the region—
by 1891 there were 163. Hotels at Carrington such as the Seven Seas, Glasgow Arms, Oriental, Cosmopolitan and All Nations ‘declared their international affiliations’. Hotel-keeping was one of the few acceptable occupations for married women. Widows carried on family businesses as shopkeepers and boarding-house proprietors. There were less reputable female occupations. Dance halls and prostitutes enjoyed a furious trade. In 1906 the Newcastle Morning Herald condemned ‘brazen women’ on the main streets and in West End houses who consorted with seafarers, and it criticised magistrates for treating the problem with ‘excessive patriarchal good nature’.

The waterfront offered other pleasures. In 1910 Australian Country Life declared that the district’s...

... many beautiful resorts ... give it a strong claim on the attention of the tourist, health seeker, and holiday maker. The grand array of ocean beaches at its very door ... have been so well improved that today they surpass the famous haunts of the surf-bather at Manly, Bondi and Coogee.

Many celebrations were work-related. Coal trimmers held their first annual picnic in 1883 and joined wharf labourers in the first eight-hour meeting in the same year. From 1885 this was celebrated as an annual carnival (later May Day) where hundreds of spectators enjoyed the procession of bands and banners.

Clubs celebrated working skills such as rowing, sailing and swimming. Competition reached a peak in New Year’s Day regattas on the harbour. ‘Most of the people who did any good at rowing were men who worked on the river’, Jim Latham recalled. His great-uncle Ben Thoroughgood ‘was Australian champion in heavy boats up to the 1920s, for 12 years consecutive’. Susan (Ben’s sister) and her son Sam Latham won the double-skull race against all comers at Newcastle in 1917 when Susan was 57.

Although most of the heavy work of the waterfront was done by men, work and living conditions were closely interlocked and wives and children participated in the work and were familiar with its spectacles. Men’s employment and unemployment placed extra burdens on married women, who had to clean filthy work gear and prepare hot meals. Children carried the meals tied in tea towels to their fathers on the wharf when they were due to knock off for lunch and that helped them work through the night. Earnings and hours were traditionally irregular. In 1914 the WWF was awarded a minimum wage for the first time, fixed meal times and limits on weights to be lifted, but these rights were later abolished and the union spent 20 years trying to win them back.

By then waterside work employed up to 1500 men, but was a constantly shifting figure as ships came and went. The 500 members of the Australian Workers’ Union were described in 1909 as ‘practically nomads — men who are today working on the wharves as wharf labourers or as coal trimmers ... are now leaving at this period ... [July] and go up into the bush to shear’. The new labor government’s public works program was literally life-saving. In 1913 public works, including harbour improvements, employed 580 men.

Demand for coal fell precipitously from the early 1920s, further reducing employment. Pre-war coal export records were not reached again until the late 1950s. Collieries were closed in a dispute from 1929 until 1930, throwing out of work 400 miners and 300 wharf labourers. This was at the same time as the onset of the Depression. By then around one third of Newcastle’s men were unemployed.
double impact of depression and heavy industry concentrating at Newcastle meant that older ways of life and work in the harbour, such as fishing and oystering, went into decline or were finally displaced.

Yet in many respects waterfront life changed little with no radical changes in port facilities or working conditions until the early 1960s. Nor was there substantial change in the waterfront suburbs in terms of housing or population, except in Newcastle city. There would be dramatic events but not dramatic changes. A fundamental shift in the city's economic basis, from coal to steel, was in train but for waterfront people heavy industry simply multiplied job opportunities and extended the range of cargoes they handled, whilst also encroaching on their homes and polluting rivers and creeks.

 Interview with Mr J. Latham. 
 As I found when recording interviews, this means that childhood memories of waterfront residents are vivid and well-informed. 
 NBA N14, Waterside Workers Federation: calendar.
 Source for whole paragraph: Docherty, pp. 52, 54. 
 S. Gray, Newcastle in the Great Depression (2nd ed.), Newcastle History Monographs, no. 11, NL, 1989, p. 11. 
 Gray monograph, p. 12. 
 Gray monograph, pp. 11-16, passim.