PAST AND PRESENT
Our First 100 Years
One hundred years ago the sport of rowing was making a dignified retreat from the increasingly busy waters around Sydney’s Circular Quay. What had long been the city’s favourite recreation had finally lost its territorial battle to the forces of marine commerce. But history would judge this as anything but a defeat.

Rowing was leaving town, and needed somewhere to go, but it seemed as though the quiet bays, upper reaches and tributaries of the world’s greatest working harbour had been waiting forever for the sport to arrive. With a century of hindsight, the exodus of rowing from the city to the harbourside suburbs can be seen as a reason to celebrate. It was how Mosman Rowing Club came to exist, and this is the story of our first 100 years.

Early Years

Those outside rowing find it difficult to imagine rowing as Australia’s most popular sport, but for the half century until World War I rowing was enormously popular with all levels of society. This was also the case in England and parts of the United States.

Not unlike motorsport, where a practical means of transport evolved into a competitive infatuation, rowing had many categories of boats and racing. There were many types of people involved, some in it for the fun or honour, others for cold hard cash.

Money—and lots of it—could be made in single sculls. The men who could make these boats move fast were superstars. Their professional status was at odds with the customs of club rowing, but the fact remains that in Australia at that time, nothing could pull a crowd like a rich sculling race. Sculls weren’t called wager boats for nothing. The betting was furious, and the athletes shared in the proceeds.

Rowing Celebrities

The best scullers were phenomenal athletes—hardened and mentally ruthless—and were treated much the same as today’s biggest celebrity sports stars. In illustrations, photographs, and on tobacco cards they often look like prizelighters—wager sculling was indeed mostly one on one—attended by a proud and nervous entourage.

Take Edward ‘Ned’ Trickett, the son of a convict from the waterside suburb of Greenwich. Ned’s day job was delivering sandstone by rowboat around the edges of Sydney Harbour. In 1876, when he arrived back from England as newly-crowned World Professional Sculling Champion, he was greeted by a crowd of 25,000—said to be a quarter of Sydney’s population. He was the first Australian recognised as a world champion in any sport.

So began a great Australian sculling lineage—with each story seemingly more fantastic than the last. Blacksmith Bill Beach learnt to row on Lake Illawarra, and in 1894 he raced Englishman Ed Hanlan on the Parramatta River. One hundred thousand people lined the banks, with 30,000 waiting at the finish line.

Yet these crowds did not generate any gate takings, so the bulk of the income from professional sculling came from wagering. Shady practices were poisoning the sport abroad, and in the late nineteenth century amateur rowing associations were formed in England and the United States in an attempt to distance the sport from elements perceived as undesirable.

In Australia rowing was not united nationally under one body until 1925, and until then the states had differing attitudes to professionalism. In NSW the problem was not that a sculler had competed for cash prizes, but that he might be a manual labourer. Victoria, as might be expected, thought the opposite.

Rowing arrived in Australia under sail, imported by ship. The crews serviced their anchored vessels in cutters, gigs, longboats or jolly boats, and competition was natural. In 1818, a race was held on Sydney Harbour between crews from the Batavia, the Minerva and the Guildford.

In 1837, a regatta was held on what was to become Australia Day. The regatta was so successful that an event was scheduled annually for 26 January, embedding the sport in the city’s calendar of events.

Amateur Rowing

In March 1859, this country’s first two clubs were founded. The Australian Subscription Boat Club in Woolloomooloo Bay no longer exists, but Melbourne University Boat Club surely does, celebrating its 150th birthday in 2009.

Amateur rowing took proper hold in Sydney in 1870 with the formation of the Sydney Amateur Rowing Club, and the establishment of a clubhouse on the eastern side of Circular Quay. We now know this as Sydney Rowing Club, and it was only four years before it had a neighbour—one that was also to become its main rival.
Faintly as tolls the evening chime,
our voices keep tune and oars keep time.

Thomas Moore, 1779–1852, Irish poet

Birth of Mercantile Rowing Club

Call it confidence, optimism or just the use of good contacts, but Mercantile Rowing Club beat the southern pylon of Sydney’s Harbour Bridge to Dawes Point by 56 years. Staying there was another question of course, but the initial location and its success sums up the attitudes to rowing in the colony.

In 1874, a group of Sydney merchants, clerks and warehousemen met to form a rowing club, immediately subscribing £500 to help the formation. They had the support of the Governor, and were able to secure some land on the western side of Circular Quay for a peppercorn rental. As far as prime real estate goes, it couldn’t possibly get much better.

City Success

Two years later Mercantile had a boatshed, a fleet and a reputation for holding the best annual balls around the city. One of the club’s boats had belonged to the Sydney Morning Herald, and was previously used to pick up mail from arriving ships. The club even prompted the birth of an eponymous pub.

In 1878, the Mercantile Rowing Club Hotel was built nearby, around 200 metres north of the current Mercantile Hotel in The Rocks. Inside 10 years, Mercantile Rowing Club was thriving, and in 1883, it made a second, and this time successful, attempt to establish what was then called a branch on the banks of the Parramatta River. Many races were run between the new shed and Blaxland’s Point. This was in line with a rash of clubs forming all over Sydney—Glebe, Leichhardt, Balmain, North Shore, University of Sydney, Sydney Grammar, St Ignatius College, Parramatta and Penrith. Balmain Rowing Club allowed manual labourers to join, though they were not allowed to contest amateur races.

Mercantile rowed hard and died young, but it must be said the club lived life to the fullest. It was social, progressive and competitive, and unafraid to bump gunwales with rowing authorities, or even its neighbours.

Stirring the Waters

Alan May’s history of the Sydney Rowing Club, Sydney Rows, records that by 1885 Mercantile had 30 boats and a membership of 215, and that the annual balls held at Sydney Town Hall were highly successful.

Yet the Mercs weren’t always hail fellow well met. In 1883, they took a swipe at the competency of the Woolloomooloo Bay Regatta Committee. After the Krug Cup for single sculls, Mercantile members alleged an opposing competitor rowed inside a beacon. The protest was dismissed, and 40 members met and withdrew from the NSWRA for two years. Life in the colony was anything but dull.

As anyone who has caught a Sydney ferry knows, Mercantile’s stretch of the ‘Emerald City’s’ waterways was often exposed to the weather. In 1895, the Sydney Morning Herald’s Monday edition reported, ‘an oarsman’s day it certainly was not. The south-east gale, meeting the heavy flow of the tide between Dawes Point and Goat Island, raised a swell that was particularly dangerous to the light rowing craft, often filling them with water, and rendering them unmanageable. But the rowers in red and white persevered.’

As the century drew to a close, the Mercs were increasingly competitive. ‘The Mercantile Rowing Club, which has been under a cloud for the past few seasons, closed the decade of the century featured more rowers in red and white winning races around Sydney Harbour.

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If the 1880s largely belonged to the Sydney Rowing Club, the closing decade of the century featured more rowers in red and white winning races around Sydney Harbour.

Cracking a seat in the NSW Eight was a bit harder. In 1885, after NSW won with a crew dominated by Sydney Rowing Club representatives, one Merc carped, ‘I am sure we could repeat that performance if club jealousy was dropped and the best eight sent. I would like to remind the selection committee that the Mercantile Rowing Club is still in existence.’ SMH, 17 February 1894.

As the century drew to a close, the Mercs were increasingly competitive. ‘The Mercantile Rowing Club, which has been under a cloud for the past few seasons, was once again prominently to the front.’ SMH, 28 January 1895.
On Friday night 5 August 1910, Mercantile was finished. At a well-attended meeting the committee tabled the following motion, ‘that owing to the action of the Sydney Harbour Trust in cancelling the club’s tenancy of its present site, and also that there is no other suitable site in the metropolitan area, your committee recommends with much regret that the club disband.’ The motion was carried unanimously, and ‘Auld Lang Syne’ was sung.

Mosman Rises

Just 10 days after Mercantile disbanded, the embryonic stages of Mosman Rowing Club were recorded in the Sydney Morning Herald of 15 August, 1910. ‘Messrs M. Ariel and N. Graham are convening a meeting to be held at the Cremorne Club on Wednesday evening, having a view to the formation of a rowing club in Mosman Bay.’ The meeting was attended by the President and Secretary of the NSWRA and a number of Mercantile members. Finding a site for a shed at the head of the bay wasn’t considered a problem. Nor was finance, and it was decided that acquiring Mercantile’s redundant shed and fleet should be a priority. The evening finished with a statement by the NSWRA President, Mr. A. K. Nash, ‘that this meeting affirm the desirability of forming a rowing club at Mosman.’

The Mercantile Rowing Club had passed on, but its reincarnation at Mosman Bay was already in progress.

Riding High

By the beginning of the twentieth century, development of every kind around Sydney Harbour must have surely told Merc’s members they were on borrowed time. But in 1902, the Harbour Trust gave the club another five-year lease. The Annual General Meeting of that year reported the terms of the lease as favorable. The club’s membership was 70; a new four and three double sculls had been bought, the club won 11 of 14 races entered and came second in the premiership to Glebe.

The following year the Rowing Association’s premiership pennant was raised over Mercantile’s clubhouse on a Saturday afternoon in February. Five hundred people (including ladies!) were there to see the Mercs on top. A Bavarian band played, and Rowing Association President Mr. Q. L. Deloitte made some observations about the club, ‘it was a club that had always been popular, and had not only looked after its own interests, but had in many ways helped the Rowing Association, regattas, and other clubs. It has always been at the front of all movements for the good of rowing. The inter-states eight oar races had been started by the club, and the existence and success of the Rowing Association was largely due to the Mercantile Club.’

It was about as good as it was going to get for Mercantile. Many of its members were businessmen involved in waterfront commerce, who would’ve understood the vulnerability of paying a peppercorn rent for prime space. It couldn’t last, and it didn’t.

Death of Mercantile Rowing Club

There had been warnings from the Harbour Trust that Mercantile’s site was earmarked for resumption, and that the club should look for alternative accommodation. When notice to quit did finally come, the timespan given was a matter of weeks.

The committee held a meeting at the end of July 1910 to consider the Harbour Trust’s resumption of their site ‘for wharfage improvements’. A new site had been offered at Blackwattle Bay, but there was little enthusiasm. Maybe there was fear that what happened at Dawes Point might be repeated down the track.