THE WATERFRONT

The rich maritime history of Millers and Dawes Point have given the precinct a special character with particular emphasis on sights, sounds, smells and memories connected with a working harbour. Interviewees mentioned the sounds of the coal lumpers as ships loaded their fuel, the blasts of ship’s horns, the sirens that went off in the wool stores when shifts started and ended and the sound of wool wagons coming up Kent Street. They also remember the smell of diesel oil and lanolin that pervaded the district. All these were comforting – it meant that there was work and income.

Most Millers Point men and their fathers were traditionally coal lumpers, wharf labourers or tugboat and ferry deck hands. All work was casual. Some days or weeks there would not be any work at all. During the Great Depression, men walked ‘The Hungry Mile’, the stretch of Hickson Road between pick-up points, looking for work. This period coined the term ‘Bull’ system:

‘The ‘Bull’ system was where the stevedore stood up in front of a crowd of wharfies looking for a job and he would pick out the bulls - that is the big, tough, strong ones, and if you didn’t work to the pace of the bulls then you were sacked. So it was pretty unfair. The bull system was also a corrupt system, it was not unknown to bribe the stevedore to ensure you got the job that day.’ (Bill Ford, Tape MP-SM16A Side A, 21:56)

In the 1950s that iniquitous system was replaced by the ‘Gang System’ – at five o’clock each morning Radio 2KY would broadcast the names of work gangs, their badge numbers and the pick-up centres where they were to report for work.

Men did three shifts on the waterfront, the day, twilight and midnight shift. A wharfie had an iron hook, made for him by the blacksmith in Rhodens Lane, which they used to sling the wheat sacks and wool bales over their shoulders in the days before mechanisation. Conditions of work before the 1960s were often atrocious - the men came into frequent contact with asbestos, coal lumpers worked in coal dust and contracted emphysema and lung cancer, men worked in extreme heat on decks and in intense cold in freezers below. Facilities were primitive:

‘They weren’t supplied with anything, they never had a canteen, they used to sit on the edge of the wharf and have their smokos and on the ship. They never had change rooms. There used to be nails on some of the posts in the shed and they’d hang their gear on that - just go home in that. If they did dirty jobs sometimes the billies which they used to make their cup of tea in - they’d have an extra one that would have holes in the bottom and put water in it and just rinse the water off to get a lot of the dirt off before they’d go home, because they had no showers or anything. Pretty rough times.’ (Warren Cox, Tape MP-FH18 Side A, 04:36)
John Ross' father was a waterside worker:

'The timber boats was the worst job – they'd have to go up the river and unload timber off the boat – it had come out on the lighters – they'd have to stand in the lighters and sometimes the big logs would come down and they had to stand on the logs in the water, sort of tie them together and I know there was a couple of bad accidents down there.' (John Ross, Tape MP-FH16, Side A, 12:45)
Accidents on the waterfront were serious and frequent:

‘A lot of people were killed, falling down holds, getting crushed by cranes dropping loads. There was a young fellow, ‘Darkie’ Hogan was his name, from Woolloomooloo, he died. I worked for the Waterside Union for 11, 12 years and there were a lot of people killed.’ (Amanda Barlow, Tape MP-FC2 Side A, 13:48)

‘People used to get hit with the crane, the actual hook because once the crane driver started to lower the hook he could no longer see down below. I witnessed a foreman – he used to scream all the time, he was a screamer and he’d be screaming at everyone – he’d say ‘come out and meet the hooks’ – everyone used to shake hands with the hook, and it was on a Sunday and he was screaming at these forklift drivers and the forklift’s as big as this house, huge. He was screaming that much that the forklift driver couldn’t hear him and consequently he ran over the top of him, so he never screamed again.’ (Don McWorthy, Tape MP-BH2 Side B, 32:58)
Many men were also killed or injured by falling wool bales. Gaylene Harkin’s grandfather died that way:

‘His name was Teddy and in Merriman Street there was the wool store, that’s where the wool came off the boats and the guys would pull it up and store it in bales and build them up. He worked up the top of Bettington Street. That is where he was later on killed by a falling bale. I was a young child at the time and I remember a lot of people running around and I remember being chased out of the room. When I got older my grandmother said that it was part of the job - in those days there was no warning if a bale fell. He got hit on the back of the neck and there was no point in taking him to a hospital because they didn’t have the technology they do today, so he died at home.’ (Gaylene Harkin, Tape MP-FH37 Side A, 05:51).

Des Gray’s father was also hit by a bale of wool but survived to tell his tale:

‘He was off work for six months with a broken leg, so he decided to build a rowing boat. He built it in my sisters’ bedroom and when it was finished he couldn’t get it out because it wouldn’t fit through the door or the window. So he had to pull it half to pieces and then take it out into the backyard, which was a very small yard and put it back together again.’ (Des Gray, Tape MP-FH28 Side A, 14:32)

With the advent of oil-burning ships the coal lumpers lost their jobs and livelihood. Many joined the Communist Party in the 1930s believing that it would give them a better deal. In the 1950s many more joined the two mainstream unions, the Waterside Workers Federation and the Seamen’s Union of Australia. But it was not a simple matter to join a union:
'It was a Catch-22 situation. To get to sea you had to be a member of the union and you couldn’t be a member of the union unless you were already at sea.’ (Russell Fitchett, Tape MP-FH42 Side B, 33:01)

'It was a big part of my life being a trade unionist, as were most of the people in Millers Point. The men were very proud of their unionism, I mean May Day march, the first six rows were all from Millers Point, Balmain and Pyrmont.’ (Russell Fitchett, Tape MP-FH42 Side B, 34:31)

In 1954 a prolonged strike by waterside workers tested the patience of both unions and stevedoring companies. Eventually, the Waterside Workers Federation under its leader Jim Healy and the Seamen’s Union run by Elliott Valance Elliott agitated for better conditions which were granted eventually in the 1960s.

In the days before containerisation, it was considered fair game to steal from the waterfront employer but not from the community, or each other. Bill Ford has this story to tell:

'I learnt very quickly some of the cultures of the waterfront. The first day I was sent across to the goods yard - they were unloading pigs, big porkers, to be taken off the rail trucks and delivered to either a ship or a freezer area. My job was to count them coming off and I remember saying to the first truckie, ‘You’ve got twenty-five,’ and he said, ‘No, no, you can’t count, kid, I’ve got twenty-four.’ I said, ‘You’ve got twenty-five!’ He said, ‘Listen kid, you’d better learn to count in this area.’ One of them was a freebie which would be delivered to a friendly butcher’s shop somewhere.’ (Bill Ford, Tape MP-SM17 Side A, 12:50).

Goods pilfered from the waterfront would often turn up for sale in the pubs:

'I remember I had a job selling newspapers at age about ten, I guess and I used to do the Palisade, the Cook and the Nelson. I remember particularly walking into the Lord Nelson one night selling newspapers and at one end of the bar there was a guy selling Alaskan crab claws and at age ten I had never even heard of Alaskan crabs, but he had quite a supply of frozen Alaskan crab claws. There were quite often situations where in the Palisade, particularly the guys that came off the ship then had access to a room, and I remember being invited in. I wanted a pair of shoes and I was invited to have a look in the room and the place was just chock-a-block from floor to ceiling with boxes and boxes and boxes of shoes. I had fairly large feet but no problems with sizes. I remember buying a pair of pointy-toed oxblood red shoes that were just my favourite shoes.’ (Robert Johnston, Tape MP-FH32 Side A, 09:24)
Don McWorthy worked on the waterfront for twelve years:

‘Well it was never really called thieving but at the end of the day it was. I do remember a couple of incidents. There was a couple of wine barrels (in the ship’s hold) made out of oak and a few of the old wharfies were alcoholics, so they got a little nail and went in between one of the boards in this oak barrel and they got a paper cup and tasted it, and they said ‘Oh, that’s all right, that’ll do us.’ So no-one went to lunch and they were all down there, getting blind drunk and of course they wouldn’t send it up onto the wharf in the crane. And then a couple of days later this guy comes down and put his head over the hatch and said, ‘Is there a couple of oak barrels down there?’ They said, ‘Yeah, it’s beautiful – what is it?’ And he said, ‘I hope you haven’t been drinking it.’ They said ‘Yes, we have – why, what’s in it?’ And he said, ‘Well I’m from Sydney University and there’s preserved monkey inside there, in white spirits’. So they finally put it out on the wharf but there was a lot of sick people after that.’ (Don McWorthy, Tape MP-BH2 Side A, 24:12)
THE PUBS

According to Russell Fitchett, there were 27 pubs in a one-kilometre radius from Observatory Hill. Frank Hyde can remember back to the 1920s:

‘A common phrase, when I was that high, among my elders was ‘What pub do you drink at?’ There were no clubs then, there were just pubs. I could tell you which fellows drank at the Palisade Hotel, I could tell you who drank at the Lord Nelson, the Orient Hotel and the Dunbarton.’ (Frank Hyde, Tape MP-SM4, Side A, 10:52)

Judy Taylor was the publican’s daughter and barmaid at the Captain Cook Hotel:

‘When the wharfies came for their morning tea - they only had a fifteen minute break - we used to have to watch every car that pulled up and we learned what they drank and we’d have their drink on the bar when they walked in the door and as soon as one was emptied you had the next one ready for them to drink. Some of them might have six schooners in their morning tea break.’ (Judy Taylor, Tape MP-FH45 Side A, 07:58)

The pubs were more than just places to drink, they had social clubs where patrons might be taken on dances or ferry cruises, the Palisade had its own golf club and the Captain Cook ran raffles to raise money for worthy causes:

‘We used to run a chook raffle every Friday night, sometimes Thursdays, for St Brigid’s School and for the football club that was later formed in Millers Point. Many times that one chook could have been won fifteen times because people would win it, get a few beers under their belt and they’d leave and the chook would be sitting on the bar and we’d raffle it again.’ (Judy Taylor, Tape MP-FH45 Side A, 16:20)
As expected, every pub had its SP bookie. Russell Taylor was a one-time-bookie himself:

‘SP bookmaking, from a community point of view - apart from a protest against authority was considered to be a legitimate occupation. Everybody on Millers Point had an interest in the races, whether they be the thoroughbred, the greyhounds or the trots. So in every pub there was an SP bookmaker and there were some that were based in some of the houses – there was one in Merriman St, there was one in Windmill St, Cumberland, Kent St. – you know, you had a choice.’ (Russell Taylor, Tape MP-FH12 Side A, 24:50)

Pat Armstrong ran the Palisade Hotel in Bettington Street:

‘Everyone knew about it While I was living there, Armstrong was a member of Parliament and it was common knowledge that he ran several bookie shops around the area.’ (Lawrie Anderson, Tape MP7 Side B, 33:25)

‘Lucky’ Fernleigh was in the paper - he died the other day, eighty-eight, came originally from Millers Point - he used to run the SP down there in the back of a house opposite the Palisade, next to the little grocery shop. I remember dad used to be the cockatoo out the front of the Palisade standing on the corner on a Saturday arvo, and when the coppers would come a message would go across, ‘Close up the shop, close the back gate’ so they couldn’t get in. There was another one down at Windmill Street, Cec Moore’s. They got raided quite a bit but they just got a fine, they were back operating the next week anyway. My wife’s nanna in Argyle Place used to have a couple of bets, like a shilling bet or something, and they used to drop a tin on a rope over the back of Cec Moore’s and the cockatoo out the back of Cec
Moore’s would grab the tin and take it in and put it on for them.’ (Warren Cox, Tape MP-FH18 Side B, 50:17)

The SP bookies were loyal to their customers:

‘There was one in Windmill St who was the most frequented because he had a better set-up than most. At Christmas time, if you had gambled with him, depending on the rate of your gambling there was always an envelope for you – I used to bet as a kid threepence each way and at Christmas time there might be 10 shillings in there and that was your rebate for gambling with him. The bigger gamblers, like the fathers and that, they might get £15, which was a lot of money.’ (Fitchett, Tape MP-FH42 Side A, 25:22)

It was not unusual to witness a fight outside one of the hotels:

‘There were scenes of all sorts of interesting activity, including violence, not just between locals who may have had too much to drink from time to time but also between visiting seamen, particularly Pommies and the locals who always wanted to work out who was the strongest, who were the best drinkers and who were the best fighters. As kids that was part of our entertainment – if you sat outside of one of the busier pubs of a Friday or Saturday night you could be assured that you’d see a few interesting fights.’ (Russell Taylor, Tape MP-FH12 Side A, 19:48)

‘I can remember seeing two well-known street fighters fight on the corner of Kent and Argyle Street and they literally belted one another for 20 minutes, stopped, went and had a couple of schooners, then went back and got into the fight again.’ (Russell Fitchett, Tape MP-FH42 Side B, 30:35)

The Captain Cook was reputed to have some unsavoury characters among its clientele:

‘A lot of them had chequered pasts and they were the local crooks that used to drink there. Some of them were criminals, really good criminals, some of them were only petty crooks, but Mickel Hurley is one of them and ‘Abo’ Henry, who has a book out now. Neddy Smith used to drink there. There was one chap who used to come there that was known for doing a couple of robberies and he used to wear a wig, and being a hairdresser in my past life it was not uncommon for him to ask me could I cut the wig into different styles so that he would look different at each job that he might have gone to. But when my mum passed away - she was very loved by all of them, her funeral was at St Brigid’s - everyone of them came to her funeral and to me that speaks volumes, they may be crooks but they were crooks with a heart. They were crooks who would help anybody that was down and out in Millers Point, particularly the older men and older ladies. They always made sure that there was a dollar in their pocket, particularly the old men, so that they could have a drink, they never saw anybody go without money.’ (Judy Taylor, Tape MP-FH45 Side A, 11:21 & 19:31)

But it was not only the crooks who were corrupt:

‘We actually had a Police Prosecutor that lived at Millers Point at the time, whom my dad nicknamed Elliot Ness, and nobody really liked him and he was very critical of the crooks that drank at The Captain Cook Hotel but he ended up one himself.’ (Judy Taylor, Tape MP-FH45 Side A, 11:32)
In the 1970s when drugs came to Millers Point petty crime lost whatever innocence it may have had and took on a new dimension. Danny Chubb was one of the local boys. Brian Harrison remembers him well:

‘One guy who was the worst thug of all was Danny Chubb, who lived down in High Street and he was three or four years older than me but he was a real thug – at school he would do terrible things to people – kids, and I remember when I was 17 I happened to be in the Hero (of Waterloo) Hotel and I came out with a friend and Danny Chubb walked past. He grabbed me and gave me two black eyes and a broken nose with one punch – my nose has never been the same. Six years later they shot him outside the Lance Kindergarten and I asked a paramedic who came to my door who lived in High Street and he told me the end of the story years later. I asked him ‘Is it true that his mother raced out of the house and said ‘Don’t touch him, he’s got gold teeth?’ and he said it was true. He said, ‘It was a hit job - they put two bullets into his chest and walked up to him and put another one in his head – he said, ‘I was the one who covered him up.’ (Brian Harrison, Tape MP-FH3 Side B, 51:56)

‘We actually spoke to him ten minutes before he was shot and one of the local kids came up on his bike singing out that Danny had been gunned down in front of his mother’s house in High Street, next door to the Lance Kindergarten.’ (Judy Taylor, Tape MP-FH45 Side A, 13:54)

Surprisingly, despite several murders committed in Millers Point and a continuing drug problem residents generally feel very safe, with a few exceptions:

‘It depends who’s living in the area. We’ve had families from time to time that have been a serious problem. Some of them mug people, some of them do break and enters, some break into cars and that changes over the years. We’re going through a good patch at the moment.’ (Millicent Chalmers, Tape Mp-SM12 Side B, 42:24)
For those living in ‘residentialis’, the glorified name given to the boarding houses of Lower Fort Street and Argyle Place, owned by the Maritime Services Board (and later the Department of Housing) life also had its ups and downs. Hundreds of mostly single men lived in residentialis at the Point. Many of the landladies had divided their substantial terraces into what Amanda Barlow describes as ‘rabbit warrens’. Bede, one of Sally Clough’s boarders lived in one ‘shoe box-size’ room at her boarding house for 43 years. When Clough bought the goodwill to her terrace at No 9 Lower Fort Street in 1979 it had one bathroom for ten people and only one toilet. The only water was a cold water tap on the back veranda and the house had no cooking facilities whatsoever. At her own expense, Clough added additional bathrooms and a kitchen.

Brian Harrison’s grandmother bought the tenancy lease to ‘Milson Terrace’ at 11 Lower Fort Street, built in 1896 and reputed to be one of the finest terrace houses in the land. Harrison recalls that a boarder hanged himself in the bathroom and he recounts another occasion:

‘I remember in my grandmother’s place – she had a young Greek sea captain and this night she heard a lot of voices in the hallway – could have been one of the many men, so she went to sleep. At two o’clock in the morning she woke up and she heard moans coming from upstairs and she went up and there was this young guy in bed, blood all over the sheets and up the wall and what had happened was, this young Greek guy was saving up enough money to bring over his family from Greece - and after his caller had left, guilt had got the better of the young guy and he had pulled down his trousers and sliced off his penis.’ (Brian Harrison, Tape MP-FH3, Side B, 44:12)

Marie Shehady, a woman with a big heart ran one of the Point’s many boarding houses:
'I know when we had the residential when people were sick I would cook for them, I wanted it to be a home for them. We'd help each other out, if they couldn't pay the rent this week well, we'd take it next week, or we'd take it in instalments. If they didn't have any money for food we'd give them back the rent. I think we used to call it, 'St Vincent de Paulo', but great times. I used to clean their rooms and change their sheets every week. I did all the stairways, the hallways, the bathroom, the backyard, front yard, all polishing and dusting. I might add I was very houseproud, so it was really done well, it was a full-time job. Then I actually worked for a period during that time too. I had my aunt come to live with us when her husband passed away and she was a very lovely lady, she was there fifteen years and she was quite ill and bedridden, so apart from working, looking after the house and the children I used to cook and look after her and her son. I might add now, thirty-one years later I still come back every fortnight and look after her son and clean his unit. (Marie Shehady, Tape MP-BSC3, Side A, 06:20 & 14:50)

Marie saved a tenant’s life when he overdosed in the residential next door. At times she also provided additional voluntary services:

'I remember this dear old gentleman - he was a builder and he used to have I think it was six-monthly washing experiences and I've never known one man to have so many flannelette shirts. He would do his washing when he was on holidays and he would hang it all over the clothesline and over the bushes because he had so much, there was never enough clothesline space. Then he'd go up to town to be with his mates and I would run to the shop, buy two bottles of bleach, come back and take all his washing in and re-wash it, hang it out again. I don't think he ever knew that after he had done his washing I would do it again for him.' (Marie Shehady, Tape MP-BSC3, Side A, 10:35)
THE MARITIME SERVICES BOARD

Although the Maritime Services Board owned the properties, they were landlords by default, as Graeme Goodsell points out:

‘The Maritime Services Board really were only interested in running the business of the Maritime Services Board, which is ports and docks and things, which is what they were originally set up to do. It was an historical accident, if you like, after the Plague and clearing of the bad housing stock down there that they became a landlord.’ (Graeme Goodsell, Tape MP-FH39 Side A, 15:15).

Some of our interviewees remember the MSB fondly:

‘They were excellent landlords. They had their own tradesmen which were on call any day of the week, virtually. The rents were quite adequate at the time for working people, whatever, but if anything was wrong electrically, plumbing or whatever it was always instantaneous and you always were able to speak to the boss of the section. The Maritime Services Board even had their own Rat Squad, which was a set of Fox Terriers – they always had six to eight dogs and they always had a set of puppies coming on and these Fox Terriers, they’d take them onto a wharf and they’d seal all the sheds on the wharf and they just put them in there and at the end of the day there’d be hundreds of (dead) rats – that’s something I’ll always remember, and some of the rats were humungous.’ (Fitchett, Tape MP-FH41 Side B, 33:53)

Other interviewees insist that the MSB did little to repair their properties and that it expected tenants to fix the interiors themselves, but they did paint the exteriors every few years - all in one colour, beige. But the Maritime Services Board never asked their tenants to sign any lease and they allowed an unofficial ‘hereditary’ system to continue:
'I guess the most important thing about the MSB was that it was a benign landlord for the people in Millers Point, that it didn't fix their houses up, it didn't look after them, but it left them alone and it ignored them and that was, in a way, the best thing that could have happened from some points of view because it meant that people just were allowed to alter their houses, put on a lean-to at the back if they needed grandpa to stay over or whatever. It almost became that those houses were hereditary. If the Maritime Services Board had been more concerned to look after its housing property then you would have had to apply and when somebody died there would be lists and it would have been done properly and bureaucratically. In fact it was done quite word-of-mouth and if somebody died and they had an aunt or somebody else that could take over that house it would almost happen automatically. So that actually deepened the sense of place of a village of families who had long-term connections to the place and there was almost an expectation that is 'our house' whereas of course it wasn't.' (Shirley Fitzgerald, Tape MP-FH23 Side B, 53:17)