

The Man O'War Steps.

Since early days, Man O'War steps have played an important part in the history of Sydney and sailors of many nations and I think, deserves a place in our memories.

I mentioned this point to our Vice President Bill Baylis and in his usual manner, still went about the business of collecting as much information from books, documents and other sources as he could.

To the Royal Australian Historical Society for their information and to Bill Baylis for his help, my sincere thanks.

My interest in Man O'War Steps started during the 1930's when as a Telegraph messenger with the then PMG Dept. at the age of 14/15, it was quite common to have to deliver a telegram addressed to some Naval Ship or Sailor which we delivered to Man O'War Steps. During that period also, I remember the sad sight of a lady dressed all in white, dress, shoes, stockings, hat and handbag in the fashion of the 1914/1920 period, walking south up Pitt St, past the G.P.O.

The story behind this Lady was that she had farewelled her son at Man O'War Steps as he sailed off to the First World War 1914/1918 from which he did not return. This lady, who came from Glebe had not accepted the fact that her son was not coming back and each night, walked from Glebe to Man O'War Steps hoping to greet her son on his return. She would walk up Pitt St. and then home to Glebe again. Such was the routine of this lady that she passed the G.P.O. in Pitt St. at exactly 8.45 p.m. each night on her long walk home.

This is the sad part of the history of Man O'War Steps but alas not the last time that Man O'War Steps was the last touch of Australia for too many.

Those who have "stepped ashore" at Man O'War Steps or caught the duty boat back to their various ships from there, will remember that this was the stone jetty on Bennelong Point on the western side of Farm Cove and was the landing point for Naval Personnel visiting Sydney since early days.

For most of us it was a moment of great joy as we "stepped ashore" and later a moment of reflection as we departed Man O'War Steps for our various ships, "swinging around the buoy" or alongside at Garden island which in those days was still an island.

Cattle Point where the first cattle were landed in Australia and later named Bennelong Point was the sight of the first fortification of Sydney.

In 1788, the redoubt was completed and was armed with two brass six pounder cannons.

Among the many buildings authorised by Governor Major General Lachlan Macquarie (1st January 1810 – 1st December 1821) was a stone fort on Bennelong Point for which he laid the foundation stone on 17th December 1817.

Just prior to the commencement of the new Fort Macquarie, Governor Macquarie had a private landing place built for himself and the small sandy beach to the north of this landing place was for a time known as Port Lachlan and later as “Watering Place”. Port Lachlan became the birth place of the watermen of Sydney who plied their trade as water taxis throughout Port Jackson and even as far south as Botany Bay. These watermen were the forerunners of our present water taxis and small ferry owners. Probably the best known families of watermen that we know was Stannards.

Fort Macquarie was demolished and in 1903 was replaced by an imitation fort built for a tram shed which was itself demolished for the erection of the Sydney Opera House which commenced on 5th May 1959.

Whilst all this activity was going on around it, the stone jetty except for the erection of a wooden shelter and an iron fence to keep undesirables away, remained the same.

During the 1859’s, female immigrants were landed at this stone jetty and gradually the place became known as Man O’War Steps.

Since Governor Macquarie’s time, most Governors, Admirals and Naval personnel used Man O’War Steps as their private landing place although towards the end of the 1890’s, a dispute between the then Sydney Harbour Trust, State Government and the C I C Royal Navy as to the right of use and the responsibility for the upkeep of Man O’War Steps arose. It appears that this dispute finally found its way into the “Too Hard” basket and the “status quo” remained.

Man O’War Steps was the only permissible landing place within Farm Cove and in fact, still is to this day.

When the Sydney Opera House was officially opened on 28th September 1973, the then State Department of Public Works and Maritime Services Board restored the Man O’War Steps by adding a ramp and a pontoon to the jetty.

On 20th October 1973, a bronze plaque on the right pillar at the entrance to the ramp was unveiled and the inscription reads

Man O’War Steps

In conjunction with the official opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973, the stone jetty known as Man O’War Steps, was restored jointly by The department of Public Works and the Maritime Services Board when a ramp and berthing pontoon were added to the structure.

The stone jetty is situated near the site of the private landing steps built during the administration of Major General Lachlan Macquarie Governor (1810-1821) and for a period formed one of the walls of a small boat harbour named “Watering Place” and no doubt was used by vessels at anchorage in Farm Cove, to obtain water supplies.

The use of the jetty for the movement of personnel and stores to and from Naval vessels moored in the Man O’War anchorage nearby began early last century and the facilities continued to be used by The Royal Australian Navy until work on the present reconstruction commenced.

The Maritime Services Board
20th October 1973. Minister for Public Works N.S.W.

On 30th January 1983, a bronze plaque was unveiled on the left pillar at the entrance to the ramp and the inscription reads

Man O’War Steps.

This landing area, erected by the Royal Navy was taken over by The Royal Australian Navy in 1913. For 150 years, Man O’War Steps served as a landing and embarkation point for the men of the British and Australian fleets in peace and war.

From these steps 2215 officers and sailors of The Royal Australian Navy left to serve their country in the Great War 1914 – 1918. The second World War 1939 – 1945, Korea, Malaya and Vietnam, never to return to enjoy the fruits of their labour in their native land.

Ye who tread their footsteps, remember their glory.

Erected by Naval association of Australia 30th January 1983.

I recently visited Man O'War Steps to see how things had changed over the years and was pleased to see a clean bare jetty ringed by Standard Lights about 1 metre tall and with two pontoons moored alongside.

The next time that you are around the Circular Quay area, walk past the Opera House, stand and read the two plaques, have a look at Man O'War Steps and over to Farm Cove and if you were ever lucky enough, remember those days "Swinging Around the Buoy" and "Stepping Ashore" at Man O'War Steps.

By Dave Tibbitts