

Shipping Out —

by Mary Shelley Clark

Wallarrah's last run



The glory days of the NSW coastal shipping trade are past, but until now the Wallarah has carried coal to Newcastle from Catherine Hill Bay. BHP Billiton still owns the ship, but subsidiary Coal operations Australia Ltd has sold the mines to Lake Coal who do not want to continue using sea transport.

Now trucks will carry the coal, cluttering up the roads and bringing environmental blight all the way to the Port Waratah Coal Loader. Two ship crews will lose their jobs and more jobs will go if two mines are closed. Precious coastal land may be threatened with profit-making development.

The bad news that *Wallarrah* was probably running her last voyages in late July took me to Dyke Berth 6 on a cold, blustery and pitch dark June morning. The air conditioning hummed and the empty decks were lit as I made my way up the gangplank and three sets of stairs to the bridge. Was this the *Mary Celeste*?

The only person I could find aboard was second mate Peter McCormack who was running the unloading controls suitably named 'Keyboard'. There was still a hefty amount of coal in the hatches from yesterday's run and I watched as the load diminished, slipping down the smooth lining of the hatches. It disappeared into trapdoors onto a belt which

carried it up to be unloaded through the ship's long arm to the shore facility which loaded the coal into waiting railway trucks.

While I watched *Wallarrah* doing her coal thing and looked back at the diminishing site of the once-active BHP plant, the rest of the thirteen man crew came aboard. Some initial doubts about the day's sailing subsided and we cast off at 7.09am, proceeding down the Hunter with a well-practised duet of commands playing between skipper Robin Blackmore and his helmsman Brendon.

"How are the sea legs Mary?" asked Robin, just before we cleared the harbour.

I wasn't too confident when we turned into the force of the southerly at 7.30am and what was cunningly described as a short, steep swell. I agreed to go down the four stairways to breakfast with Brendon in a saloon full of seadogs and hearty cooking smells. Brendon piled on the food as if he'd missed dinner last night, but I ate a lady-like helping of cereal, fruit and yoghurt, and soon longed for the fresh air again. There was plenty of it out on the wing of the bridge.

We were at the halfway mark with Swansea coming up on our starboard side, and I was just getting acclimatised to pitching through the four and a half metre swell at a modest 6 or



Skipper Robin Blackmore on the bridge.



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Catherine Hill Bay's loading jetty.



7 knots. Suddenly at 8.42am we did a wheelie to port and I wondered if we were taking off for New Zealand, but the news had just come up from Catherine Hill Bay Wharf that conditions would be too rough for safe loading. With the wind urging us on we zipped back to the Hunter at 12 knots and made a spectacular entry into the harbour rocking from side to side like a huge bath toy. Though I didn't see the loading at the Catherine Hill Bay my *Wallarah* trip was a memorable adventure.

Wallarah was built in 1986 at Ube Dockyard, Japan and her overall length is 97.9 metres, her breadth is 19.5 metres and she draws seven metres. Her port of registry is Newcastle.

She's a state-of-the-art self-discharging ship, very manoeuvrable with stern and bow thrusters and a large rudder. Her two Daihatsu engines produce 2200hp each and are coupled through a single gear-box to a controllable pitch propeller. The hoppers cargo holds are lined with material like Teflon so that the cargo slips down the sides easily, fed onto a bottom belt by sequence through 16 gates. She can discharge 2,500 tonnes per hour of coal, but she could also carry grain or any free-flowing dry cargoes. Navigation bridge, accommodation and machinery spaces are located aft.

The end of July will mark the end of an era. Since 1903, four ships called *Wallarah* have faithfully done the short coal run.

Losing today's *Wallarah* from the run is not only sad, but ludicrous. One day we might wake up to the fact that coastal



Wallarah at Catherine Hill Bay.

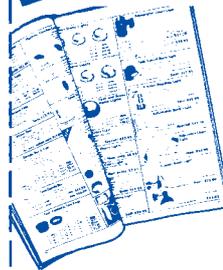
shipping could still play a role in our economy. Not everything has to be delivered in five minutes! Since just late April, *Wallarah* has carried over 150,000 tonnes of coal and saved 12,000 truck movements ... and *Wallarah* leaves no potholes. ↴

Postscript: My old sea-dog friend Fred Thomas took his trip on July 22.

"This day's voyage on the *Wallarah* was its last," Fred said.

"I had the greatest day's voyage one could wish for with skipper Robin Blackmore and his crew. I was given an official engagement and discharge document. I had the freedom of the vessel! Thanks for the contact, Mary."

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