The Fascinating History of the Barque “Polly Woodside”

By Geoff Walker



(Melbourne Maritime Museum)

Walking around the wharf side in the South Bank area of Melbourne’s Yarra River, one is immediately confronted by the masts of a Tall Ship. This is the barque, **“Polly Woodside”**, now a museum ship permanently located at the old “Duke and Orr's Dry Dock”. The **“Polly Woodside”** is an iron-hulled, three-masted barque, currently the major feature at the Melbourne Maritime Museum.

Built at the north shipbuilding yard of Workman, Clark and Co, Queen's Island, Belfast, during 1885, for William J. Woodside and Co. She was launched on 7 November 1885; the naming ceremony was performed by the owner's wife, Mrs. Marian ("Polly") Woodside, after whom the ship was obviously named.

The **“Polly Woodside”** was captained by Gilbert Yeates, on her maiden and subsequent voyages operating as a cargo vessel carrying coal, nitrate, and wheat between British ports and the ports of South America, such as Montevideo, Valparaiso, and Buenos Aires, during her initial years. In sixteen voyages between December 1885 and August 1903 she made several laborious passages around Cape Horn. The **“Polly Woodside's”** operating crew, including master and mate was generally less than 20, which was quite a trim number as far as sailing vessels were concerned during the era.

In 1904 **“Polly Woodside”** was sold to **A.H. Turnbull** of New Zealand, and renamed **“Rona”,** after Miss Rona Monro, daughter of a major shareholder in the company. Valued in 1906 at £4,300, **“Rona”** then generally operated on the New Zealand–Australian run, carrying timber, salt, cement, grain, and coal.

The ship changed hands once again in 1911, being sold for £3000 to Captain Harrison Douglas, of New Zealand, and again in 1916, to the George H. Scales & Company. Because of the heavy loss of shipping in the 1914–1918 war, **“Rona”** mainly traded between New Zealand ports and San Francisco, carrying case oil and copra.

Two mishaps occurred in the last years of the ship's sailing career. In March 1920 the schooner W. J. Pirie, under tow in San Francisco harbor, collided with **"Rona"** whilst she was at anchor, carrying away her headgear. Then in June 1921 the **"Rona"**, carrying a cargo of coal, grounded on Steeple Rock, off Wellington Heads. The shingle bottom caused little damage and she was able to be towed into Wellington harbor. However, some slight stress fractures to the iron hull plating could still be seen when the ship was dry-docked in 1974.

Below, the barque **"Rona"** (ex-Polly Woodside) after her sale to NZ interests, image taken around 1911. She had a variety of owners during her trading life, namely., William J. Woodside & Co, Belfast, Northern Ireland (1885–1904), A.H. Turnbull (1904–1911), Captain Harrison Douglas (1911–1916), George H. Scales Ltd (1916–1922), Adelaide Steamship Co. (1922–1953), Melbourne Steamship Co (1953–1962), Howard Smith Industries (1962–1968), National Trust of Australia (Victoria) 1968 – present.



(Unknown Photographer)

Above, a splendid image of the **"Polly Woodside"** captured whilst at sea.

The abandonment of sail early in 1920s by most of the world's maritime nations, signaled a shift towards steam ships. However, by 1922 this had changed. World freight rates were sliding in the post war slump; what had been marginal beforehand, was now uneconomic. A few larger sailing ships defied this trend, and remained employed, but not the relatively small "**Rona"**.

In September 1921, the **"Rona"** was laid up, then sold to Adelaide Steamship Company for service as a coal hulk in Australia. She arrived in Sydney on 8 October 1922, and by early 1923 had been stripped

down to essentials. In March 1925, the **“Lammeroo”** towed **“Rona”** to Melbourne for this purpose. She spent the next 40 years quite unremarkably, bunkering coal-burning ships in the Port of Melbourne.

An exception was her war service; during the Second World War. In 1943 she was requisitioned as a dumb lighter (coal hulk) by the Royal Australian Navy for service with other hulks in New Guinea waters. She was taken under tow of “**ST Tooronga”** on 28 October 1943, arriving in Cairns on 19 November 1943. She was then taken in tow by “**ST Wato”** and taken to Milne Bay in New Guinea. Captain Douglas Strath described her as; "queen of this dumb (meaning not self-propelled) but mighty workforce was **“Rona”**. She was big enough to supply, unload, store, repair, construct, and function in so many ways. and she was an integral part of the vital servicing fleet." She was towed back to Melbourne in 1946, to resume her career as a coal hulk.

A number, of half-hearted and unsuccessful efforts, were made in the mid - 20th century to preserve Australia's sailing heritage, which had rapidly disappeared from Australian ports. In 1934, the Ship lover’s Society of Victoria arranged for the coal hulk **Shandon** (a 1400ton former barque) to be partially re-rigged and refitted as a static display, to celebrate the centenary of European settlement. However, by the early 1960s, **“Rona”** was the last of her kind still afloat in Australia. There were a few other sailing ships laying full of water, abandoned, and forgotten – the **“James Craig”** in Recherche Bay, Tasmania; and the **“Santiago”** in the Port River, near Adelaide.

The restoration of the **“Polly Woodside”** owes much to the efforts of Mr. Karl Kortum, former director of the San Francisco Maritime Museum, who in 1962, inspired Dr. Graeme Robertson of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) to put up a proposal to save the ship. In the context of the time, this proposal was quite risky but showed extraordinary vision. The National Trust of Australia relied entirely on volunteer labor, which enlarge had no experience in restoring a sailing ship, even for static display. The restoration of the **“Rona/Polly Woodside”** was considered a huge task. The result of a long restoration campaign led to the National Trust of Australia purchasing her from Howard Smith Industries for a nominal “one cent”, in 1968.

An estimated 60,000 hours of painstaking voluntary labor saw the ship refurbished close to its original state. The project received strong support from businesses, unions, former crewmembers, and several Captains and Master Mariners. The first Master of Restoration, Captain G.H. Heyen was a master in sail. **“Polly Woodside's”** chief rigger for 27 years of restoration was Tor Lindqvist, a former able seaman and sailmaker on “**Lawhill”**, “**Passat”** and “**Viking”**.

In 1978 she was opened under her original name to the public and is now permanently moored at the old Duke and Orr's Dry Dock on the Yarra River near Melbourne. Now landlocked by a nearby road bridge, and towering buildings, she cannot take to sea like the restored barque “**James Craig”**, of Sydney.

In 1988 the World Ship Trust awarded their seventh maritime heritage award to **“Polly Woodside”**, for "supreme achievement in the preservation of maritime heritage" – a first for a restored merchant ship. In March 2007, **“Polly Woodside”** was added to the Victorian Heritage Register.



The **“Polly Woodside”** fully re-masted, rigged and restored. Resplendent, as she sits today, in Melbourne’s old Duke and Orr Dry Dock.

She has become the principal feature of the Melbourne Maritime Museum, attracting marine enthusiasts from all over Australia, as well as world-wide.

She will always remain a unique feature, in her final resting place, doing much to enhance Australia’s maritime heritage, for generations to come.

(Unknown Photographer)



The “Polly Woodside” being maneuvered to a temporary resting place in Port Melbourne, to complete her $13million dollar refurbishment, before being opened to the public in 1978.

(Image ABC-TV)

End

References: Melbourne Maritime Museum, Ship Lover’s Society of Victoria, National Trust of Australia, ABC TV, various online data in the Public Domain, from which additional material has been sourced.

Note: This is **“A Not for Profit”** document. Unless otherwise specified, images are from various unknown sources on the Public Domain and used under the Fair Use category for review, commentary, and educational purposes only. Photographs of unknown origin – owners of these images should make themselves known by contacting me via this website and I will be pleased to give due accreditation. No infringement of copyright intended.