

Basic Detail Report



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Title

18-foot skiff FLYING FISH on Sydney Harbour

Date

c 1951

Primary Maker

William James Hall

Medium

Cellulose nitrate negative, black and white

Name

Negative

History

18-footer skiff sailing has been a central feature Sydney Harbour since the late 19th Century. The long and colourful history of 18-footer skiff racing saw the development of strong competition in which changes in technology and design flourished. Aside from length, the 18-footer yachts of today bear little resemblance to their early predecessors. Prior to federation in 1901, the most popular sailing races on the harbour occurred around the larger 22 and 24-footer yachts. Towards the turn of the century, with the number of sailing clubs increasing, the 18-footers began to grow in popularity as their smaller size meant they were cheaper to build and easier to crew. The 18s were characterised by their oversized sail plans, small foredeck and narrow side decks. This design left little margin for error but ensured exciting sailing for both crews and spectators. The increase in popularity of the 18-footers on Sydney Harbour coincided with the patronage of businessman and sailor Mark Foy, who focussed his entrepreneurial skills on advancing the sport of 18-footer racing into the 20th Century. Supported by the club that he helped establish, the Sydney Flying Squadron, Foy made changes to several core ways in which the 18-footers were raced. He instituted a triangular racing course through the harbour in which the boats were never out of sight of spectators. Foy also moved the handicapping to the beginning of the race, meaning that the first yacht over the line was the winner. For spectators, and perhaps the competitors, this was much more satisfying than the previous system in which, post-race, the winning announcement was made after a delay to calculate handicaps. Lastly, Foy's new rules also required competing vessels to display distinguishing emblems on their mainsails, as opposed to the traditional club numbers, so that spectators could more easily identify the individual boats during a race. Foy's changes made the sport more accessible to spectators, and were initially met with a mixture of support and distrust in the sailing community. However all three elements remain essential features of the modern day sport. Foy's efforts were rewarded in the steady growth of crowds and competitors and 18-footer skiff races became the highlight of the weekend club regattas, as well as larger events such as the Anniversary Day Regatta. The sport continued to operate through the

First World War, and with the end of this conflict entered its most popular phase. The decade between 1920 and 1930 is often referred to as the 'Golden Period' of 18-footer skiff racing. Many of the vessels of this era and their skippers, such as AUSTRALIAN and Chris Webb, and BRITANNIA and Wee 'Georgie' Robinson, became household names and legends of the sport. Competitions flourished, interstate events were held and prize money increased. In the 1930s another entrepreneur became prominent on the 18-footer sailing scene; James Joseph Giltinan. Giltinan was a businessman who had been heavily involved in establishing the sport of rugby league football in Australia. In opposition to the dominant Sydney Flying Squadron, Giltinan formed the Australian 18-footers League in 1935 and, most significantly, he instituted an international competition; The J.J. Giltinan International Trophy. While initially the Giltinan Trophy was fought out between Australian and New Zealand boats, the event is still raced today and has attracted competitors from over 40 countries. In the period after the Second World War, 18-footer skiff designs continued to streamline and change, with an emphasis on smaller crew numbers with higher technical skills. The yachts of the 1970s and 1980s are characterised by their colourful sponsorship logos, increased width and larger rigs as well as different materials such as aluminium. From the technological heights of the 1970s and 80s, the class adopted restricted, manageable proportions on vessels and the sport continues into the 21st Century. Throughout its developments and history, the 18-foot skiff has become an icon of Sydney Harbour and retains its place as one of the most challenging and fastest dinghy designs racing anywhere in the world.