



John Crawford

Ian Macintosh: John, who brought you to the Sydney Amateurs in 1985?

John Crawford: Charles Maclurcan. Unlikely, but true. And the reason for the connection with Charles was that he was in the architectural year that my wife was in, well my now-wife...I was married when she was still at university...and that's where I met, well it was earlier than that even, it was around Balmoral.

IM: Had you sailed with Charles?

JC: No, no, I've rarely sailed with Charles in fact.

IM: But you sailed before you came to the Amateurs?

JC: I started my sailing when I was about 12, maybe a little bit less than that, at Balmoral Sailing Club. My first Moth was purchased, I can't remember how much it was. A hundred quid or something, number 377 called Dickie, and it was a hard chine boat. And I sailed that for quite a while, learned how to sail. Prior to that my father had converted a nine-foot clinker dinghy into a sailing boat, and my mother made the sails and it was gaff rigged, so there must be something somewhere, but it was terrible.

IM: So when you joined the Amateurs, were you sailing on other people's boats?

JC: No, no, no, I wasn't. In fact, the catalyst for joining, apart from Charles, was probably the purchase of *Sana* with my then architectural colleague John Howard, no relation. We had a lot of fun with that boat. It was, still is, on the Harbour as you know.

It was designed by a fellow called Frits (Frederic) Fenger, the rig was. It was a wishbone rig, and it was designed to sail shorthanded, and in fact every sail was able to be handled by one person without trouble. And it was a good thing because the guy that built it had a wife who was a ballet dancer, and he was going to sail around the world with it, so he needed to be able to deal with the whole thing. Her problem was only that she was 16 tonnes, and even though you can sail it single-handed, if you wanted to trot around Sydney Harbour and pick people up from a wharf, or do anything like that, it was a bit of an exercise.

You needed to be careful, because you could demolish a wharf quite quickly.

IM: So what took you from *Sana* to Ranger class boats?

JC: The answer to that is I realised that she was too big. I couldn't sail her single-handed on Sydney Harbour, and John Howard wasn't that interested in sailing single-handed, but I was. So I then found a boat, which was in fact a Ranger, in this case *Valiant*, which I bought from John Westacott. She was a really interesting boat, she's one of the original Rangers.

I remember the first race we had at the Amateurs, I had Nigel Stoke, who owns *Fidelis*, as the crew, so we were shorthanded, and it was a rocking Nor'easter. When we'd finished, and got across the finishing line, which took us a long time, we were about not quite knee deep in water down below. So that was my first sailing lesson on a Ranger. And the story went from there really.

We improved her, we put new sails on her, we did all the things that one probably shouldn't do without actually doing the hull, because the loads that we started then to put on the boat were... Rangers, they've got these two rectangular ports on either side of the companionway and the mouldings around these used to go into parallelograms when you put the runners on. You could wind a runner on, pull the mast back, potentially pull it out of the boat, I'm sure. So it continued to leak, because it just couldn't deal with it.

IM: Well if there's a yacht that's synonymous with the Amateurs, it's got to be the Ranger. At what point did you, and as I understand it, others, start conjuring up what is now the beautiful *Vanity*?

JC: It came out of a collaboration with Sean Langman, who had done an exercise on *Vagrant*, his family Ranger, of rebuilding it effectively. He didn't fully glass that boat, he glassed it up to the waterline, or down to the waterline, which I can't quite remember which. But it was a major initial full restoration.

Kilkie was the other one, owned by Alick Osborne, club member. And *Kilkie* was a very original boat, and unfortunately not sailed by Alick with us, only occasionally, which is a shame, because it's a lovely boat. And it was beautifully restored too.

So that was the start of restoration work on classic yachts, basically was the start of it. And of course there was a lot of contention about covering them in epoxy, and doing all those sorts of things. But frankly, if you didn't do it, and you were trying to sail, or compete, and put (on) go fast gear, then you're going to have to make sure the boat can handle the loads.

IM: But *Vanity* is a development of a Ranger, it's not a replica?

JC: No, it's not a replica. I've still got the mylars that were laid in the loft floor at Nokes. But she is an amalgamation of the lines of *Vagrant*, and of *Kilkie*, and of *Ranger*.

They were the three picks of the Rangers, in terms of their shape and attributes that were favourable towards faster sailing, I suppose. We could change *Vanity's* lines a little bit, but basically she's proven to be a quick boat.

IM: Well there's a marvellous photo of her in 40 knots, screaming down the Harbour.

JC: Yes, and with two on board. That was very interesting actually. It was one of those breezes that came up, and we were sheltering down behind Shark Island, I think at the time, in a strong Sou'easterly. And Liam Timms and I were the only people on board.

So we reached across, which is what the photograph shows, and I realised as we came almost in line with Mosman Bay, we bore away, went down the bay, and I said, don't worry Liam, we'll be right. Anyway, the wind didn't get less down in Mosman Bay, it got more because it was funnelling down there. And I went past Old Cremorne, still doing, I don't know, 10 knots, 8, 9, 10 knots, which is a lot for a Ranger. I realised I wasn't going to be able to round it up and get the sails down, because there just wasn't enough sea room.

And so we did a crash gybe, and headed for Mosman Wharf, and managed to fetch up on the end of the marina. This woman came out and marched down the marina and told us to get off (laughs). You know, we just come out, just managed to save ourselves, I thought.

IM: She wasn't impressed.

JC: Absolutely. Anyway, the club eventually came down with a tender and towed us back. But we should have left it there overnight, it was still howling. Anyway, that was quite exciting.

IM: Presumably Bill Gale played the role of overseer in the *Vanity* project.

JC: Look, Bill's a good sailor, but he doesn't know anything about boat building, and he doesn't know anything about how to finish your boat. He's in there for the racing, and the enjoyment of sailing.

IM: But you wouldn't have been able to do this without him, surely.

JC: No. Oh no, I think that's right. Oh no, he's been great. He's the one that keeps saying, "Oh the *Vanity's* a small heavy cruiser". I thought, there's a description (laughs).

IM: The small heavy cruiser. Going to the club you joined in 1985, and looking at it now, how's the club changed?

JC: I think the thing that has changed the club a lot is the new membership. Before that happened, the club had always had a population of about 300, 350 people, max. Now we're approaching 450. Which is a major change, frankly. I can go into the club now and not know more people than I do know.

IM: But it had to do that to survive.

JC: It did, yes. I think it's a good thing. It's probably my fault that I haven't been more involved recently. I'm getting back to it now, because we've sort of dealt COVID a bit of a blow, and we're racing again.

IM: But you did a term as Commodore, the club's 43rd Commodore. You did a much longer term on the Board. You contributed a lot to the club, and that's the essence of the club, I think, the volunteerism. How important is that in a small club?

JC: I didn't really think of it as volunteering. I enjoyed the people. I wouldn't be encouraging too many people to go down there, because I'm selfish (laughs). I'd like to keep it to myself, sort of. The number of people who go into that place and say, "God, I never knew it was here".

I was involved when the slipway was being discussed, the possibility of putting a platform in there. Well, that wouldn't have been a good decision, I don't think. It would have physically changed the thing. And there's something really nice about a traditional slipway.

Obviously, pollution was the major issue, people tipping stuff into the Harbour that they shouldn't. But there are ways around that in the sense of controls that we've put in place over the years.

IM: I think that upgrading of the slipway was a major development in the prolonged life of the club.

JC: Funny, I was just looking the other day in an old file, and I've got all these environmental plans that were put together to accompany an application to do this, that, and the other to the slipway. But that didn't proceed in that way. It's proceeded in a terrific way.

IM: So, another working bee.

JC: Yes, and working bees are fantastic. I had an interest in a timber yard many, many years ago, and was able to get all the the planking at a very fine rate. This is 20 years ago, and the first time we replaced the deck.

IM: As an architect by profession, is there anything about that clubhouse that you do differently or seek to improve?

JC: The thing I like about it is that it hasn't been changed too much. Things like the ladies toilets and the mens toilets and those areas, they could afford to have some money, again, spent on them. But you're not really going to change anything very much. And as long as the club has the capacity to cope with the membership numbers without starting to kill itself, I think that's fine. I mean, there is a limit, isn't there, to how many people (you can) have at a Flag Officers Dinner, for example, things like that. Prizegivings, you know, we're chockers, we've got marquees on the deck. And we're doing that for a while, I know.

IM: It's about right.

JC: It's about right, yeah. And in fact, the recognition that it's about right needs to be foremost in people's minds, because you can't go well, you can but I mean, to go further with the membership and make more people there, I think will put more pressure on the club that it doesn't need.

Tom Moulton is leading the charge on membership and has done a wonderful job. That's not many changes, is it? It's not.

IM: As I mentioned earlier, John, you spent a prolonged period on the Board. We members only read the minutes of the Board, which are of course sanitised. But you must have some very interesting stories about what really goes on at Board meetings.

JC: I'm not the person to talk to really about this, because as my wife will tell you, all these things wash over me completely. And I just carry on (laughs). Things that other people get sensitive about, I'm pretty relaxed about it.

On the whole, people are very well behaved on the Board. Differences occur occasionally. There's been a couple of times.

Rob Evans asked me to follow him, I suppose, as Commodore by becoming a flag officer. And I think that was partly to help calm things down a little bit. Because there was the offshore group and there was the inshore group, if you like, the Harbour group. I'm never quite sure why. I think perhaps it was just personalities that didn't get on, basically. I became known after a while, I think, as the person who calmed everything down. And I mean, maybe it's because I did nothing (laughs)...I'm never quite sure.

But on the other hand, a lot of things did happen while I was there. I retired from the Board a couple or three years ago now, two years ago. It was a time for a change. And the change has been excellent, I think, so far.

IM: For 20 years on the Board, you've seen a lot of club life. Interesting to reflect on that.

JC: Yes, I think the office staff...Fay Buckley, for example, ran the office with an iron fist. She wouldn't take no from anyone. That's changed. Club management's changed a couple of times. I'll always remember it with fondness. I haven't got any wicked tales to tell, particularly because I enjoyed the time I spent on the Board, and I think finished it in the appropriate time. Change was coming, and change is a good thing. It seems to have done the Amateurs a lot of good.

IM: You mentioned offshore and inshore. I think there's a general view that the Amateurs is a Harbour club, when in fact, it's always been active outside the Heads as well. You, for example, have done a lot of ocean miles, both in Sydney-Hobart and Lord Howe Island and elsewhere, and a lot of Harbour racing. The two aren't mutually exclusive, are they?

JC: No, not at all. My mantra on offshore sailing is that there are very few people that I would go to sea with. Very few. Sean Langman is one of them, and you might say, oh, he's a wild man, but he's a true seaman. And Nigel Stoke on *Fidelis* is the other. He's a very careful, competent, sound person. He's always had a good crew and things. I mean, we've done a lot of sailing...Brisbane to Giza race, Sydney, Brisbane to Gladstone.

IM: Happy ships.

JC: Yeah, happy ships, and particularly Lord Howe Island. I don't think I've ever did a Lord Howe Island race. But non-inclusion of some wooden boats by the Gosford Sailing Club that was running that event at the time prompted Nigel to create the event that's carrying on now, which is the barbecue on Ned's Beach. And I've been on seven or eight of those trips, some very exciting ones and some very quiet ones.

One trip that I did was actually on *Maluka* with Sean (Langman) and Marnie Raprager, who used to sail with Bill Gale on *Ranger* quite a bit. It was an interesting trip. We left Sydney at about six in the evening, and sailed out into a horrible nor'easter and ended up almost beyond Central Coast, I suppose, before we sort of headed across.

Sean, as usual, had been overdoing it and was not feeling too good, and so he went down below and went to sleep. Marnie and I ploughed on out into the Tasman Sea (chuckles).

It was a rough trip. You know, the wind always seems to come from Lord Howe when you're going to Lord Howe, in my experience. But maybe that's a jaundiced view.

So yes, Hobart races on *Maluka* again were really interesting. And that was combined also with following through the construction, the reconstruction of *Maluka*. Tricky thing to do, to take a hundred-year-old boat and make it pass Div. 1 type offshore requirements.

IM: How did she handle that race?

JC: Beautifully, yeah. I mean, dry down below.

Sean's very good at it. You weren't allowed to go down below with your gear on at all, really. You had to shed it as you went in the door. You certainly weren't allowed to sleep in your bunk with wet weather gear on.

Down below, she's quiet, just beautifully quiet. You hear this, the foam running down the hull on the outside.

Sean's quite competitive, as you might well imagine. Peter McCorquodale and I, were the two other members. Sean and his son, I think, was the fourth.

We were chasing down a Nor'easter in the Hobart race. We were doing extremely well, and it was a 25 knot Nor'easter. We had this spinnaker up, and we had three people on the helm. We had one up in front, one behind, and one down leeward pushing. Because she was very well behaved, but if you lost it, you lost it, and really hard to get back again. So

that was exciting, and we got something like 14 or 15 knots down waves, which was really quite...

IM: So what condition were you in when you got to Hobart?

JC: Very good, really, because as I said, down below, it was really, really very comfortable.

He's bringing her back to Sydney. I think he's intending to take her to Hobart this year, is my guess.

I mean, apart from taking *Vanity* down to Hobart myself, but that was sort of a series of hops, really.

IM: As an architect, to what extent is your appreciation, knowledge, and so on, of boats driven by your architectural eye?

JC: Look at Ranger types. One of the criteria for building *Vanity* was that you can fit eight people in the cockpit, and if it rains, you can take eight people down below and still carry on.

And I'm a minimalist, I suppose. I don't know whether that comes from architecture or not. But there is nothing on *Vanity* that's not needed. When we took her to Tasmania, we had jack lines, we had a cutter rig on it, organised the jib at the end of the bowsprit, but you could retrieve it without going out there.

We put (on) stuff, metho stove and things like that. But we did that to go down there, and when I came back, I took it all off. And in fact I don't even have a photograph of the boat with that rig. We had (an) electrical circuit with three switches, that was it, so it's all minimal.

IM: What do you make of these highly-stressed carbon fibre rockets that do offshore races now? Would you go in them?

JC: I've sailed on some of them on the Harbour. Sean had *Grundig*, I think, at one stage, a sort of 60-foot 18-footer. I've had a lash at skippering that. It was interesting, and quick, but too light, everything's stretched.

IM: Bill Gale liked to refer to them as skimming dishes, not something you'd want to be caught outside in.

JC: No, not at all. I sailed on a MC38, my brother had one for a while, and he's always encouraging me to come out. But I brought my gear on board, and not much, very modest gear. So where do I put my gear? Well, there was a hatch in the floor.

IM: But you can't bring gear. It weighs something.

JC: Well, that too. But we were just running around the Harbour. There's a hatch in the floor, and they said, "But you can't use that, because it fills with water" (laughs). And I thought, "Yeah, we'll see. Wouldn't happen on a Ranger".

IM: Speaking of water, you also participate in a lesser-known Sydney Amateur Sailing Club group, the trout fishing division.

JC: Yes.

IM: I've always thought that you fellows go bush with your trout fishing gear to drink. Do you actually catch fish?

JC: Oh, fish have been caught. My record is not great. Although (on) the most recent trip I was successful. David Salter, who initiated that Alpine Cruise, SASC Alpine Cruise, and he and I have sort of written it up over the last few years. A magic spot, and the people are invited, and David does all the catering. It is really a very, very pleasant way to go.

IM: So here we are, Sydney Amateurs is 150 years old this year. You've been around for 37 of those years. What's the future of the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club?

JC: I think it will carry on the way it is. I hope we've got through the sort of bureaucratic stage. There was a time on Sydney Harbour when everything was being policed, and we were going to have to go out around the 'Kentucky Fried Chicken' mark if we came out from behind Bradley's, things like that, none of which made any sense to the people who were sailing the boats.

Maritime Services Board were rounding people up. They were applying stuff, rules, if you like, to restrict the enjoyment that we had on the water. Clubs like the Amateurs and the other major Harbour clubs have been really good at self-governing for many, many, many years.

Better than any of the authorities that can come along and try and tell us what to do. The Amateurs are quite good at ignoring some of that stuff too, which I think is rather a nice trait. And maybe because it's a bit of the DIY stuff. If you've got other people taking responsibility for the club, who are officials of the club, compared with members being their own guiding light, I suppose. It's much easier if we do it ourselves. And we seem to do a good job of it.

IM: It's an egalitarian place.

JC: Yeah, very. And self-regulating too. You know, there's always some bugger who might want to park his boat and ignore everyone else, and take dinghies out and leave them on moorings, and things like that. But, you know, I've had a few good words to a few people on that sort of stuff, and they respond quite quickly.

IM: And what's the Amateurs meant to you and your life?

JC: A haven, safe haven. I mean, a sanctuary. It's a really great place to go. Even if you don't know the people these days, as many as I used to know, I can still feel happy to go down there and make myself a cup of coffee.

I mean, it's things like that, you know, you can just go and do that. You can't do that at the Squadron, can you? Or the CYC, or Middle Harbour. You can't do any of those things at those places. The only place you can do that is possibly RANSA, and then maybe some of the smaller clubs, you know, the more dinghy-oriented clubs. But not the keelboat clubs. And after all, the Amateurs is a keelboat club. I think we win all the time.

IM: Well, long may it stay that way, John, and thank you for your time and reflections.

JC: It's my pleasure. Long may I be able to enjoy it, which is the other side of the coin.