

A SHORT HISTORY of SOUTH WHARF



The glass, chrome and concrete of today's South Wharf belies the fact that it is one of Melbourne's oldest and most colourful heritage precincts.

The cargo sheds that house the variety of restaurants look polished and near new, but they hark from a much earlier time and are the result of 6 years of refurbishment and renewal. Between 2005 and 2011 a group of leading Australian heritage architects and designers transformed a very neglected part of the Yarra waterway into a showpiece blend of hospitality, shopping and business venues.

The entire wharf was raised by 30cm during restoration, and while the sheds have been restored to what they looked like during the booming years of South Wharf – 1920 to 1940 – they



actually date back to 1884. There are four different types of sheds on site. Some of the structures were taken apart and reconstructed in situ, while one of the sheds was completely rolled off-site for restoration and then wheeled back into place.

Original floorboards were removed and re-laid onto concrete slabs. Original features such as customs cages, offices and windows were restored into their primary locations, many fixtures and fittings were retained, and materials salvaged during the restoration were reused wherever possible.

It was a painstaking and expensive process, but the attention to detail and quality is apparent, resulting in authenticity that creates a very special ambience.

What you see now is a short section of what was once a very long wharf area. It's one of the few surviving relics of an extensive ship building and repair industry that extended along the Yarra banks for nearly five kilometres below the Queen Street Bridge.

Small boats had been built in the area since the 1840s, but it was Captains John Hughes and William Sinnot who obtained a seven-year Crown lease of land during the 1860s to build the first graving dock, completed in 1868. The river was widened and wharf construction started in the 1870s. In 1874 George Sampson Duke gained a three acre Crown lease that had previously been occupied as a dock by Thos. Norton. Dukes Dock opened in 1875 and in mid 1876 the company Wright,



Orr & Co obtained its lease for land on which to also build a dry dock.

The leases on both docks had expired by 1900 and both the companies submitted plans to the government for an enlargement of their facilities to accommodate ships up to 6000 tons and a minimum size of 450 feet (137 m). The rebuilding of Duke's Dock in a mixture of ironbark, redgum, bluegum and grey box took 3 years and was re-opened in 1904 at a cost of £43,000. Competition between the two dry docks remained keen, but in 1910 the two adjacent docks decided to amalgamate. Duke's Dock and Engineering Co. Pty Ltd and Wright, Orr & Co. formed Duke's & Orr's Amalgamated Dry Docks Ltd.

Around the turn of the century steam began to overtake sail, which saw a huge increase in the amount of cargo carried on ships. Around that time, about 90% of everything that came into Victoria came via either Victoria Dock in the Docklands or via the river wharves. The creation of a new, faster, deeper and wider Yarra River in the late 1890s by the Harbor Trust, under the British maritime engineer John Coode, had enabled many large ships to come all the way into the city and to use South and North Wharves.



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About a third of South Wharf was built around the time of WW1, and it was further extended downstream during the 1920s. South Wharf was the main dock for timber and steel. It was also the place where travellers and cargo from interstate arrived. The dry docks at South Wharf facilitated the cleaning and repair of many of these ships.



The Interstate Swinging Basin (now where Marina YE is located) was being constantly enlarged and improved over this period. In 1931 it was enlarged again, with new timber and concrete wharves installed. Sixteen new berths below the Swinging Basin gave a total berthage space of 6,944 feet. By 1916, sailing ships, barques, brigs, brigantines, schooners and cutters had largely disappeared, but the number of steamers had nearly doubled.

In 1878 the net registered tonnage was 1,159 tons. By 1916 it was 5,555,000. Turn-around was also much quicker. While a four masted schooner bringing timber from Scandinavia in the 1880s might have waited months for a return cargo of wheat, the new vessels were being unloaded and reloaded within a week.



Ship repair and cleaning flourished through WW1 and into the 1920s. However, the Great Depression reduced the need for dock facilities. In May 1932, Orr's Dock handled its last ship and by 1935 it had been filled-in. It had not been helped by severe damage from two floods during the early 1920s and in 1935. In the years up to World War II business picked up due to the end of the Depression and there was again brisk trade as Australia geared up for the Pacific War. Duke's Dock was now able to take ships up to the 7000-8000-ton (7112 -8128 tonne) range.

The dock was very busy during and immediately after World War II. However the late 1950s saw the end of the coastal shipping trade in Australia and international ships became too large to be accommodated in the dock. The dock could not be extended further because Normanby Road prevented extension to the south east. The dock closed as a commercial operation in August 1975.

A succession of new, low-lying bridges on the Lower Yarra had also progressively forced the city's shipping activity

downstream. The building of Queens Bridge in 1889 was the first to cut off access, with the Spencer St Bridge following in 1930. The final blow was delivered in 1975 when the Johnson Street Bridge (now called Charles Grimes Bridge) was opened, which completely closed access to larger ships.

When it closed in August 1975 Duke and Orr's Dock had been in almost continuous operation for 100 years. It was the last timber walled dry dock to operate in Australia, and, of its size, possibly in the world.

In 1977 the site was ceded by the State Government to the National Trust.

Since 1978 Duke and Orr's Dry Dock has accommodated the Trust's 1885 barque Polly Woodside, which opened to the public following 60,000 hours of voluntary restoration. The length of the dock was reduced (by about one third) to allow the construction of the Melbourne Exhibition Centre, which opened in February 1996. The old dock was partially filled with 11,000 tons of bricks to reduce the volume of water and to help support the wooden walls.

In 2009, as part of the public/private partnership to build the new Melbourne Convention Centre, the dock was refitted and made even shallower, including the fitting of a new caisson in



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place of the old wooden mitre gates. The Victorian Government provided \$8.86 million for the refurbishment of the dock, while the Plenary Group and the National Trust provided \$4 million for works on the adjacent area and on the vessel itself.

At the same time, the original Pump House was enclosed in a glass building next to the Melbourne Convention Centre, with parts of the original timber framed building removed to allow public viewing. South Wharf's striking pedestrian "Seafarers' Bridge" opened in 2009, after more than 500 submissions were received for a name to honour the rich maritime history of the area.

Today's community of workers at South Wharf comprise white collar professional, retail and hospitality staff – a far cry from the community that once used the area on a daily basis. The dry docks and associated marine industries drew their workforce from the small workers' cottages at the northern end of South Melbourne and in Port Melbourne. Behind South Wharf there were many and varied industries engaged in the repair and maintenance of vessels. It was dirty and dangerous work.

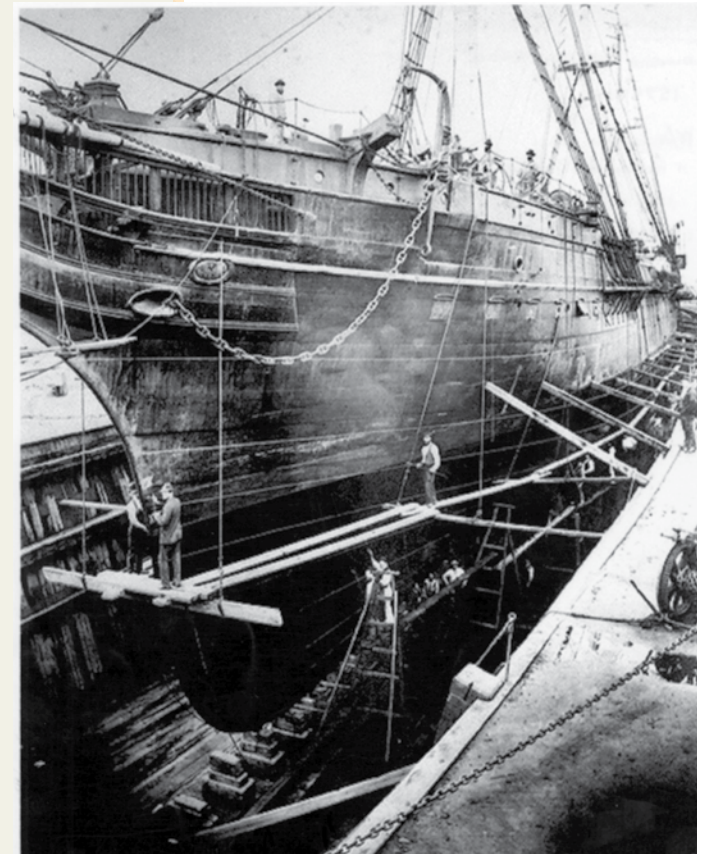


"The work carried out in these docks was characterised by being dangerous, dirty and often carried out under considerable pressure from ship owners who wanted their ship back in the water as soon as possible. The men (they were all men) who worked in these docks were a tough bunch. They got up early on freezing winter mornings and walked or cycled to the dock. They worked down in the docks, often in cold, filthy sea water for long hours scraping, cleaning, painting and repairing ships. They worked in the confined space under the keels of the ships amongst the keel blocks or on makeshift planking high up on the sides of the ships without any safety equipment except their own knowhow. They handled massive baulks of timber with their bare hands."

The Painters and Dockers Union had its Melbourne office in the yard of Duke's & Orr's Amalgamated Dry Docks Ltd from its establishment in 1916. It was the main union of the men working at the dry docks. It had a long history of activism, and during the 1960s and 1970s it acquired a reputation for criminality. A nearby gangland shooting and a decapitation of a person on South Wharf were just two of the more colourful incidents surrounding the union during its later years.

South Wharf Association is indebted to the following people and sources for the information used in this article.

- Buckrich, Judith, 'Docklands History'
- Engineering Heritage Victoria
Engineering Heritage Australia
Heritage Recognition Program
- National Trust of Australia (Victoria),
East Melbourne
- Otto, Kristin. 'Yarra: The History of Melbourne's Murky River' 2009
- Woodley, Arthur E. and Botterill, Bob. 'Duke's & Orr's Dry Dock', 1985.





MARITIME HERITAGE WALK

1. **1885 Barque Polly Woodside & Maritime Heritage Museum (National Trust)**
Open weekends & public holidays. Admission fee.
2. **Boatbuilders Yard**
The location of this heritage cargo shed was the bustling hub of ship repair activity between the Duke and Orr Docks.
3. **Pump House Display**
The cut-away building, equipment and interpretive material is available for external inspection all hours.
4. **South Wharf Promenade/Dukes Walk**
Walk the 200 m among the authentically restored cargo sheds dating from the 1880s and depicting them as they were between 1920-1940. Original artefacts and fittings are on display inside many of the restaurants and bars.
5. **Seafarers Bridge**
Constructed in 2009 and named to commemorate the area's maritime heritage.
6. **North Wharf Cargo Sheds/Historic Crane**
Under refurbishment.
7. **Mission to Seafarers Building & Chapel**
Built in 1917 to provide a place of respite and refuge for mariners from around the world. Open daily to the public.
8. **Wharf Hotel**
Site of the former Australia Wharf. Internal displays depict the history of the area. Open daily.