

Australian National Maritime Museum Volunteers' Quarterly



All Hands



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Lady Nelson – His Majesty’s Tinderbox

For 25 years the *Lady Nelson* was the tough little workhorse of the fledgling colony of NSW. Bob Hetherington takes a trip on her replica namesake.

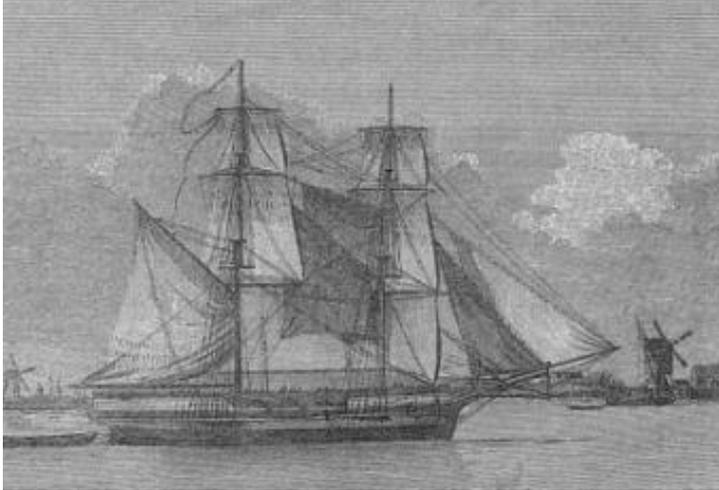
There are always interesting sights on the Hobart waterfront: Antarctic research vessels, cruise ships, the occasional floatplane and the sleek MONA cats to name a few. Pride of place in Sullivans Cove belongs to two wooden square-riggers, well known to Hobartians and a privileged band of mainlanders. They are the brigantine *Windeward Bound* and brig *Lady Nelson*; both are beautiful replicas of earlier craft, built locally and operated by Tasmanian foundations. *Lady Nelson’s* namesake was the first vessel to regularly sail the waters of early New South Wales, and here is her story.



Lady Nelson with Endeavour at Port Arthur, 2015.

The original *Lady Nelson*

On 13 November 1798, a small 60-ton brig-rigged ship, fitted with an unusual sliding keel (centreboard) system for work in shallow waters, was launched at the Royal Navy’s Deptford Dockyard. Because of her diminutive size she soon acquired the nickname HM Tinderbox, although officially she was *Lady Nelson*. The reason for this choice is not certain, but some say it was in honour of the dutiful and long-suffering wife of Horatio Nelson who at the time was commencing a scandalous affair with Lady Emma Hamilton. Philip Gidley



Left: a woodcut of the Lady Nelson in the Thames, 1800.

King was in England preparing to replace Governor Hunter, and he persuaded the Admiralty to assign the new ship for exploration and communication in New South Wales.

Her initial challenge would be the voyage of 13,000 nautical miles to the new colony, and many said she was too small to undertake it. However, under the command of Lieutenant James Grant and with only 14 men, she reached the Cape in July 1800, where Grant received news of the discovery of Bass Strait. After a three-month layover to avoid the winter weather, the ship resumed her voyage, now aiming to transit the strait en route to Port Jackson. She became the first ship to do so from west to east and after 10 weeks' continuous sailing from the Cape reached her destination.

Less than three months later, Grant was at sea again, tasked with charting Bass Strait, and he became the first European to enter and chart Westernport Bay. Later in 1801, now under the command of Lieutenant John Murray, *Lady Nelson* explored the Bass Strait islands and in another first entered Port Phillip.

The following year she acted as tender to Matthew Flinders' *Investigator* on his voyage to northern Australia, but being unable to keep up with the larger ship had to return to Port Jackson.

Over the next 20 years the hardy little vessel became a familiar sight in the ports of New South Wales and Van Diemens Land. She was present at the establishment of Hobart in 1803, and took part in the relocation of the Norfolk Island settlement to Port Dalrymple (near settlement to Port Dalrymple (near Launceston)). She made a return voyage to New Zealand and carried Governor Macquarie on his tour of the Tasmanian settlements, Newcastle and Port Stephens.

She was sent to establish Port Macquarie, and like many vessels since was badly damaged by rocks inside the infamous sandbar there.

After 25 years of sterling service, *Lady Nelson* was to meet a tragic fate. In 1824 she was sent with two other ships to the north of the continent to establish a new settlement on Melville Island. In February 1825 she departed the settlement to obtain supplies from Kupang in Timor, but did not return, and some months later her hull was discovered grounded and burnt on Babar Island. It was concluded that she had been captured and the crew murdered by Malay pirates.

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The replica *Lady Nelson*

Our story resumes 156 years later in Hobart with the foundation of the Tasmanian Sail Training Association (TSTA). This was the culmination of moves to build replicas of early square-rigged sailing vessels. *Lady Nelson* was chosen as being of manageable size, and although no original plans were available, a design was prepared for a conventional bilged- hull vessel of the same dimensions.

TSTA was tasked with building the ship as a Bicentennial project, and after the seemingly inevitable frustrations and delays which beset such projects, the new *Lady Nelson* was completed. She made her first cruise on the Derwent in 1989.

In her early years the replica sailed in Victorian, NSW and Queensland waters as well as around Tasmania. She joined the Tall Ships Race from Sydney to Hobart in 1998 and then circumnavigated Tasmania. More recently, working on an all-volunteer basis, she has met her expenses with regular tourist cruises on the Derwent and periodic longer sails out of Hobart. *All Hands* readers may remember seeing her in Sydney in 2013, when she entered the harbour with other tall ships for the RAN International Fleet Review.

Fast forward to February 2015 when your narrator joined *Lady Nelson* for a five-day ocean sail out of Hobart. I had seen her on previous visits, but had forgotten how small she is!

I already knew we would be “18 souls”, comprising 12 volunteers and six passengers of both sexes and all ages (your narrator the oldest). We had all been told to bring the minimum of gear, but as I watched my fellow sailors arrive on the dock, the question loomed, “How would we all fit?”

The vessel is only 16 metres long with a 5-metre beam, but we all squeezed into three compartments below deck, each with six bunks, where we cohabited cheerfully for five days. The midships compartment also contained a tiny galley, head and mess area big enough for half of us at a sitting.



Right: Lady Nelson on the Derwent, 2015.

Skipper Mal briefed us, then deftly manoeuvred away from the dock and into the Derwent for our first leg to overnight in Port Arthur. Mal's day job is with the Bureau of Meteorology, so with the very best weather forecasts he outlined his plan to maximise sailing and minimise motoring (an option not available to Lieutenant Grant two centuries ago!). We were able to sail most of the first leg in company with *Endeavour* which was heading for home.

Our entry into Port Arthur in the late afternoon was beautiful; the visitors had left the historic site and the ruins were tranquil and atmospheric in the sunset. Dinner was on deck, and everyone took the opportunity to become well acquainted. Only two of us were mainlanders and our Tasmanian hosts lived up to their reputation for hospitality.

The next four days were spent chasing the wind. Mal has a reputation for carrying as much sail as possible, so most of us were kept busy setting, furling, trimming or handing sails. The more experienced crew helped the novices, supplemented by the occasional bellow from Mal.

Our route took us north to Maria Island, through the narrow channel west of Tasman Island, where I recognised the lighthouse wharf and access route from the exhibit in our museum gallery. After overnighting in a bay on the west coast of Maria, we returned to Port Arthur, then sailed south to Adventure Bay on the east coast of Bruny Island. This is another atmospheric spot, steeped in the history of 18th-century navigators.

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For our last night there, a strong southerly change was forecast, and Mal was promising a fast sail for our return to Hobart. Sure enough, the southerly hit with a vengeance, and from my warm bunk I heard a commotion on deck. We had started to drag our anchor and the senior crew were mustered to move us to a safer location. Next morning we set all 10 sails and surged out of the bay, reaching *Lady Nelson's* personal best of seven and a half knots. The wind took us up the Derwent and almost back to the dock.

The pleasure (or otherwise) of this type of sailing depends almost entirely on the weather, which gave us four seasons in five days. Sometimes cold, wet and sick, sometimes warm, dry and happy, we wondered at the challenges faced by the original crew. The prospect of working aloft in all weathers and in the dark would terrify me, but it was a matter of survival 200 years ago.

As I write this, I'm hearing reports of the storms which hit our coast during April with gale-force winds and mountainous seas. Facing those conditions in a tiny sailing vessel beyond any means of rescue fills me with admiration for Lieutenant Grant and his 14 iron men.

My thanks go to the TSTA and its dedicated people for giving me at least a taste of living maritime history. If you would like to find out more, visit www.ladynelson.org.au