



**ALL ABOARD:** Without a bridge from Walsh Island, newly built electric cars bound for Sydney rail network in the late 1920s had to be ferried across Newcastle Harbour propelled by the steam tug Minerva.

# The old 'Red Rattlers' live on

HO remembers the

deals with the earliest power cars (C3171 to



**W**HO remembers the infamous "Red Rattlers"? Anyone who once rode in ageing rail carriages with their faded red livery on the Sydney suburban rail network until the early 1990s would know what I'm talking about.

Noisy, weather-worn, cold in winter while hot and stuffy in summer. Such was their reputation.

The poor public image of the 1920s-vintage carriages rattling around the Sydney rail network was because they were used well beyond their use-by date.

According to one Sydney newspaper report in mid-1989, the "Red Rattlers" still made up a quarter of the seating capacity of its rail system, yet cost twice as much to run as modern trains and travelled about half as fast on a good day – without rain.

The reporter involved commented it was "hard to believe" that anyone in (then NSW premier) Mr Greiner's cabinet ever travelled to work by train.

And yet these outmoded, slightly raffish people-movers were extremely durable and faithfully served NSW for six decades. The first ones were imported from England but the other power cars proved Australian-built quality was equal to the world's best.

And they were built to last right here in Newcastle at the now defunct Walsh Island Dockyard in Newcastle Harbour.

Now largely forgotten, the sprawling industrial complex was on the isolated island, now part of Kooragang. A planned railway bridge with the mainland never eventuated.

Instead, its newly-built electric cars had to be individually transferred by water, lashed down on rails on a purpose-built barge propelled by the steam-powered tug S.S. Minerva.

The shipyard and large engineering works existed for about 19 years. Opened by the state government in November 1914, it closed in December 1933. Years later it was all dismantled. The former concrete slipways, however, were still visible until at least 1977. Virtually no trace exists today.

At its peak, up to 2200 workers were employed, with shipbuilding being the main activity although rail carriages were a later mainstay. Also built were four



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36-seater motor coaches, a prototype toast rack tram, heavy steam road tractors, steel colliery skips along with boilers, deck fittings, propellers, fish bolts, dog spikes and cast iron pipes.

But with no shipbuilding orders and no government subsidies to assist, the dockyard's mounting losses spelled the end during the Depression years of the 1930s. Extra costs and delays involved in transporting men and materials to and from the island didn't help.

By 1941, the last of the big Walsh Island buildings had been demolished or recycled and ferried downriver to be re-erected at the new Newcastle State Dockyard at Dyke Point, Carrington.

A few of these buildings even survive there today. This second Newcastle dockyard closed in 1987.

Two years after, I remember standing alongside former Carrington dockyard director Harry Harding near Walsh Point on Kooragang as he gazed around a windswept and empty site.

Early in World War II, he had supervised dismantling the old dockyard here.

"It's a sad story, I've seen our dockyard washed up twice," Harding said.

Back in 1929, the Walsh Island workforce had even constructed a massive 630-foot (190.9-metre) long floating dock for ship repair. It continued in use, but mostly down the harbour, until 1977.

In retrospect, however, it's the almost legendary "Red Rattler" rail carriages once constructed on Walsh Island which curious people usually focus on.

And these cars are now the subject of a major special interest book by authors Roy Howarth and Glenn Ryan.

Titled, *Single Deckers From Newcastle -- The Cars Built At Walsh Island Dockyard*, it

deals with the earliest power cars (C3171 to C3220) manufactured there.

Authors Howarth and Ryan say the "1927 type" single-deck suburban rail cars paved the way for the continued local manufacture of suburban electric rolling stock to meet Sydney's growing electric rail network.

Their glossy, 178-page initial volume (of a planned three) is impressive and lavishly illustrated with maps and individual car colour photographs.

Diehard rail buffs will find the detail fascinating. The 32-page section concerning early Walsh Island history is also invaluable.

The book's pictorial feast is the result of sifting through numerous photo collections of 17 rail enthusiasts, including rail historian Ed Tonks, of Charlestown.

The book's authors also remind us that despite Walsh Island Dockyard's short lifespan, it made a considerable contribution to NSW industry.

After World War I was declared, the site became in part a munitions factory, before entering into heavy shipbuilding. It soon became Newcastle's second largest employer (after Newcastle Steelworks).

The dockyard-built, American-designed omnibuses in 1930 also deserve a mention here as they are claimed to be the first all-steel buses built in Australia.

To further diversify, Walsh Island Dockyard built steel bridges. Even today, rusted Walsh Island builder plates can still be seen mounted to disused steel structures at remote locations from Myambat in the Upper Hunter to Katherine in the Northern Territory.

Today's unusual glimpse into Newcastle's often forgotten industrial past came about after *Weekender* received a recent email by book co-author Glenn Ryan.

"I hope this might be of local history interest," Ryan wrote.

"Our book, *Single Deckers From Newcastle*, deals with a short history of the Walsh Island Dockyard and profiles the first 50 electric power car railway carriages that were desperately required to be built in Newcastle and to run on Sydney's new suburban rail network.

"The production rate of this order of



carriages [then] was breathtaking. I doubt if it could ever be matched in the current day.

"As I live in Tamworth, I've delivered a carton of books to Vic Barnes' hobby shop in New Lambton. It's the only distributor in Newcastle.

"This volume has pretty well taken us four years to complete.

"There was a bit of laborious detective work involved, including analysing more than 20,000 slides and prints that went into the project."

Surprisingly, not all rail carriages ended up as scrap metal.

"A number of the Walsh Island carriages live on in retirement on properties around the state – so the memory and legacy of this former Newcastle industry lives on," Ryan says.

And looking around, he's right. A little web browsing reveals there's one (from 1928) refitted as overtime accommodation on an alpaca farm in the Blue Mountains.

Another two carriages, also built in 1928, survive in northern NSW, near Murwillumbah. After running on the Sydney rail network for 63 years, then abandoned and vandalised in a central west NSW paddock for 13 years, they have been lovingly restored to their former glory and now serve as the "Red Rattlers Gallery".

■ The book is available from Barnes hobby shop, 213 Lambton Road, Newcastle, for \$60.

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