



The boat built by a town

Lindsay Wright

Like many of New Zealand's little ports, the Taranaki township of Waitara bustled with small coastal shipping. They carried merchandise across the river bar and farm produce back out – but they were also a source of dreams for many young Waitara people.

One of these was Noel Priar, a boatman until the end. Even in his 80s, his rheumy old eyes would gleam when someone dropped by to talk boats, or another refit job pulled into his backyard boat slip.

Noel crossed the bar for the final time last year, but one of his great legacies was the ketch *Pleiades*, the 12m yacht built by a crew of schoolboys in the north Taranaki town.

It was an era of legendary ocean wanderers and writers; Johnny Wray, Erling Tambs, Joshua Slocum and others, who inspired many would-be blue water yachties to dream of running hard before the warm Pacific trade winds or battling over the cold dark seas of the turbulent Tasman.

But first they had to have an offshore yacht – like Johnny Wray's *Ngataki*, and many boyhood dreams dwindled before the daunting task of building one. Or dreams of ocean voyaging were replaced by wedding

bells, mortgages and dirty nappies.

But a group of Waitara schoolboys resisted the lure of domesticity and lived their dream of building a boat and sailing away beyond the far horizon.

Noel Priar and his mates from Waitara, all about 16-years-old started building *Pleiades* on the banks of the Waitara River in 1944.

Unlike Johnny Wray, the Waitara boat builders had no kauri flotsam nearby to salvage but rimu was plentiful so that became their material of choice.

Pleiades was designed by Dick Mallett, another Waitara schoolboy. He drew a nuggety hull which was 40' (12m) long, 13' (3.29m) wide and drew 5' 6" (1.7m). Another local lad, Noel Graham joined the boat building crew.

The 6" x 2" (150mm x 50mm) frames (ribs) were sawn and lofted beside the Priar family home but a flash flood in the river swept many of them away and the design was altered accordingly to a single chine hull form, similar to *Ngataki*.

About 50 pounds (\$100) of the group's building budget was spent on books about boat building and



Gala day on the Waitara River.

PHOTO/SUPPLIED

the well-thumbed tomes were in constant use.

The re-shaped frames were erected covered by 6" x 1 ½" (37.5mm x 37.5mm) rimu planks held together by Ewbank spikes, (Scottish made square galvanised nails with a rose-shaped head).

The teenage builders couldn't afford power tools, so none were used; timbers were adzed to shape, holes drilled by hand and the steam boxes needed to bend the planks around the frames, were made from oil drums, used water boiled on a driftwood fire. Many parents in the town began to wonder where their tools had gone to.

"The old hands said, 'you can't build boats out of rimu'," a neighbour, Harley Watts, said "so the lads soaked all the timber in creosote which was a by-product of the old gasworks – *Pleiades* stunk of creosote all her life."

The seams were caulked using mutton cloth from the nearby freezing works soaked in red lead and putty. The boys' schoolmates scraped melted tar off the roads on hot days to 'pay' the seams between the planks.

Another unwitting sponsor of the project was NZ Rail. The teen boat builders took a train to school in New Plymouth every day and, along with books and lunch in their schoolbags, they carried screwdrivers. As the train rattled along towards the city, the boys would be busy removing brass screws from the seats for later use on *Pleiades*.

Five years later, *Pleiades* was launched into the Waitara River, free of charge, by local contractor Lionel Byran. Her steering wheel was off an old coastal trader, *MV Kotai* and her ship's bell came from another coaster that had been wrecked on the river bar.

The 46' (14m) mainmast for her gaff rig was laminated from 15 lengths of timber. But the gaff ketch proved to be tender and lively under sail, so an extra 21½ tonnes of lead was bolted to the keel, adding to the 5 tonnes of concrete and scrap steel in her bilges.

"A lot of parents around Waitara were left wondering where their lead pipes and sink drains had gone," Watts said.

Fresh from her launching, there was no money in the kitty for an engine, and *Pleiades* was often sailed across the turbulent Waitara Bar for the 12nm passage to New Plymouth. "They'd sail to town for a party at the nurses' home – and sail back again the next day," Watts recalled.

The little white gaff ketch was kept tied to the road bridge in Waitara and became a tourist attraction. Many people drove from New Plymouth to look at her and dream and supportive power board workers rigged



ABOVE: *Pleiades* dressed in her bunting for a gala day on the river.
PHOTOS/SUPPLIED

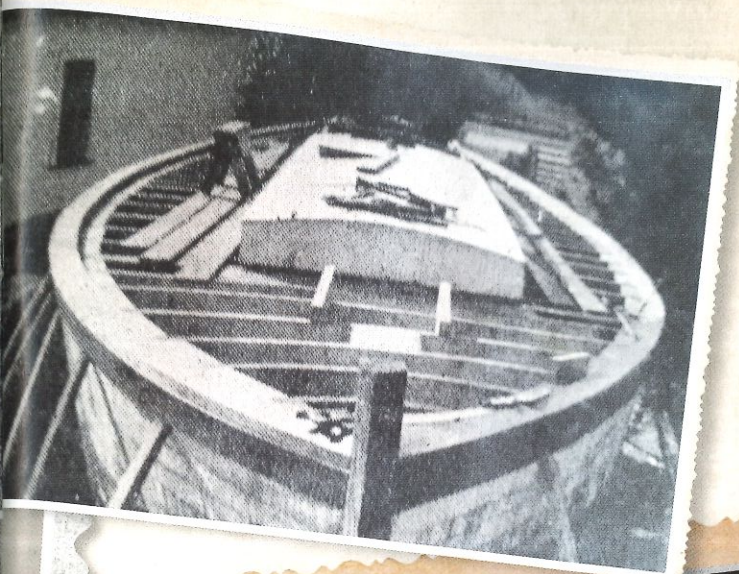
floodlights for the boys to keep an eye on her during flooding in the river.

But it was two years before *Pleiades* put to sea. Finances were limited and in post-war New Zealand, marine hardware and fittings were difficult to procure. Much of her hardware was fabricated and galvanised in the freezing works workshop.

The water tanks were 338 litre fuel tanks from an aircraft, bought at an army surplus store and steam blasted inside. *Pleiades* was wired for 6-volt lighting, but her crew preferred gimballled kerosene lamps and used them instead.

In 1951, she was fitted with a 25hp Kermath Sea Cub petrol engine, a British engine that cost the crew 150 pounds (\$300).

After sea trials, *Pleiades* put to sea on 27 September 1952, watched by almost the entire population of Waitara. Her crew comprised Priar, Mallett, Barry



TOP: *Pleiades* taking shape. ABOVE: *Pleiades* crew for the trip around New Zealand. From left: Jim Vezey, Paul Young, Noel Priar, Rowley Skemp, Bob Burkett.

Kepple, Rowley Skemp, Noel Graham and Ian Robertson, en route for Auckland.

After rounding North Cape, the first port of call was Whangaroa and from there they cruised southwards down the coast to Auckland. After five weeks in the Queen City fitting out and preparing for their Tasman crossing, *Pleiades* set sail for Whangaroa where Graham and Robertson left to return to work and Les Arms joined the crew.

On 24 November 1952, the youthful crew laid off a course for Lord Howe Island and, after a stormy passage, arrived 12 days later. The little yacht from Waitara spent two weeks anchored near the moorings which were used by TEAL Trans-Tasman flying boats on their thrice weekly flights from Sydney.

But the bright lights further west beckoned so *Pleiades* set sail, arriving in Sydney on 21 December.

None of the boys had left New Zealand before and their only contact was Malcolm Campbell's boatyard at Rose Bay which was the terminal for the Tasman Empire Airways Ltd (TEAL) flying boats which flew to Auckland and Wellington.

For the first – and last – time in her life, *Pleiades* was hauled out of the water for cleaning and anti-fouling. After that she was always careened (grounded on a beach to be cleaned and painted between tides).

And meanwhile her crew enjoyed the allures of city life in downtown Sydney.

Robertson, who'd found his BNZ tellers' job in Waitara altogether too dull by comparison, rejoined the ship).

But the bright lights of Sydney started to pall in favour of the open sea, so *Pleiades* set out again at Easter 1953 and travelled about 130km up the Hawkesbury River to a town called Windsor, her mainmast accidentally taking out power lines on the way.

Two weeks later they sailed downriver again and on to Gosford where her crew found work and stayed for four months.

A letter soon arrived at the *Pleiades* mail drop: "It has come to the attention of the Collector of Customs that the yacht *Pleiades* has moved from Sydney Harbour without permission," it said, and demanded that future movements of the yacht be notified. Priar kept the original letter and, handwritten across the foot of it is: "and he can go and jump in the river".

Try getting away with that these days.

Next port of call was Gladstone and for this leg they were joined by a local couple, Lance and Ellen Ellis, and their kelpie dog, Prince. The couple disembarked in Townsville to travel onto a job in New Guinea, but Prince stayed on as *Pleiades'* mascot.

By now funds were dwindling again and there were no offers of work to replenish them, so the crew of *Pleiades* reluctantly turned her bows southwards and east towards Waitara. Crew dog Prince was signed off in Gosport and, 14 days later, the yacht coasted into Port Taranaki after a calm Tasman transit.

Back up the Waitara River after 14 months away, *Pleiades* was due for a total refit. The trusty Kermath was replaced by a 60hp Ford diesel and her rig changed from gaff to Bermudan ketch. She hosted Miss Waitara, on board for the annual Waitara River Regatta and was used to raise funds to build a town swimming pool – among other civic duties – then on Boxing Day 1960 *Pleiades* set sail for the open sea again.



Pleiades setting full sail off the Waitara River bar.

PHOTO/SUPPLIED

This time a circumnavigation of New Zealand was on the agenda, and, in quick succession, the crew sailed for and from: New Plymouth, Nelson, Westport, Greymouth, Fiordland, Bluff, Rakiura, Stewart Island. Then north again to Dunedin, Oamaru and Timaru, followed by Lyttelton, Akaroa and Wellington. Pressing on north, they visited Napier, Gisborne, Tauranga, Whitianga, Great Barrier Island, Auckland and Kawau island. Onwards *Pleiades* pressed; Whangarei and Whangaruru, Russell and Whangaroa and on around North Cape, Cape Reinga and home to Waitara.

All in all, the doughty little yacht covered 3,000nm in a little over three months, but work called for Mallet to finish his electrical apprenticeship and Priar as a telephone exchange operator.

For the next 11 years, *Pleiades* lay at her mooring in the Waitara River, but she was well used. Coastal voyages to Kawhia, Raglan and Whanganui, or New Plymouth, were a regular outings. Many Waitara people learned to sail in the yacht, and she became the pride of the town. A local marching team bears her name, and a street is named after her.

No town festivity was held without *Pleiades* parading in the river, her decks awash with people under the rustle of fluttering signal flags.

But on the night of 24 February 1971, all this changed. The worst floods ever recorded dumped 352mm of water on the area within 24 hours. When

dawn had broken, the storm battered people of Waitara came out to start cleaning up their town.

But something was missing.

Pleiades, the pride of Waitara, was gone. Turbid brown water raged over the spot where the yacht had been moored but she was nowhere to be seen.

Later that day her holed hull, both masts broken, was found thrown onto a rocky beach about 2 ½ km from the river mouth. *Pleiades* was no more, broken beyond repair and Waitara mourned.

There was no shortage of volunteers to help with the salvage and the steering wheel and ships bell were recovered. Other wreckage washed up about 250km northwards, two weeks later.

Her mangled prop was straightened and used by another Waitara yacht, *Return*, which retraced *Pleiades*' course across the Tasman, years later.

The pride of Waitara was gone – but a replacement was planned. *Pleiades II*, a strip planked centre boarder built to an Orams design, rose from the original boat's building site and took on some of her predecessors' duties.

But there could only be one *Pleiades*, the pride of Waitara, and the new boat was eventually sold.

So, if you drive into Waitara from the north and see the street named Pleiades, it's got nothing to do with stars or heavenly bodies and a lot to do with sailing and adventure, determination and sheer grit.