

Man of Steel? My introduction to kayaking – by John Duffy – June 2020

[John Duffy takes us back to where it all started....]

I would not have been 10 years old when my Dad built a canoe for myself and my brothers out of a sheet of corrugated iron. It was nailed around a piece of wood for the bow and the stern nailed around the square end of a wooden fruit box. The corrugations were hammered out where we knelt and tar in the joins kept most of the water out. Its name was proudly written on the side ... The Ugly Duckling. We had a creek behind our house and I spent hours and hours hand paddling this thing around what seemed a big pond. Although that pond was no more than 10 metres x 5 metres, it might as well have been the Pacific ocean for the adventures I created. The flame was lit. What a shame we never took any photos of it and I gather it went to the local dump years later.

Year 8 saw me make my own fibre glass single. It was a pet project for me and I vividly remember slumping when I took it out of the mould and realised I had not applied enough resin to sections of the deck and dry fibreglass was exposed. It meant putting unsightly patches in place but it was certainly paddle worthy. My first trip was weeks later down the Herbert River in North Qld which was close to home. No PFDs in sight with all the beginners and I took my first swim after the first corner when I careened into a tree and the boat was sucked under. Another patch was applied to the deck after that - the local farmer who rescued the boat pushed down on it with his legs to manoeuvre the boat out of the suction. Many trips down that river ensued over the years. Unfortunately these days it is a no-go zone due to the expanding saltwater crocodile population.

Year 11 saw me in the same boat on the same river but it was flowing about 20km/hour because it was in full flood. Why wouldn't we paddle it for fun? One PFD among 10 paddlers didn't seem a problem at the time. My parents, waiting at the bridge 10km downstream were understandably concerned when paddles, tubes and upturned boats appeared but no paddlers. The cause was the world's biggest whitewater which resulted from a big rock that was normally 5 meters out of the water now being 5 metres under water from the flood. All paddlers were thrown out except my brother and I as we had an inkling from the noise it created and avoided it. We corralled all swimmers, shared the one PFD with the local priest who kept saying "I'm gone" and got everyone to shore. It was my first foray into taking a calculated kayaking risk. There would be more to come.

Kayaks took a back seat for 15 years as motorbikes, horses and university took over. I longingly looked at Sydney Harbour when I moved here in 1992 and actively sought out a kayak to explore the world's most beautiful harbour. I bought a rudderless 28kg Estuary and went out every chance I could. Going solo out the heads and down to Bondi was a thrill I kept on repeating in some way or another over the years. I sold that boat at Easter this year with a tear in my eye to a young guy who wanted to explore the harbour and Parramatta river. How history repeats.

I had heard of LCRK but was reluctant to join because they were a racing club and I was definitely not interested in that. But I ultimately joined because I thought it a good place to find someone to paddle Bass Strait with. I didn't have to wait long – cue Richard Barnes. That 2013 experience remains a highlight of my life and its significance to me grows as the years go by. Maybe another similar adventure one day. In the meantime Lane Cove River, the Club and umpteen Hawkesbury Classics provide immense satisfaction. I came last every Wednesday night for the first 2 years (on handicap and actual results) but I still went to bed with a smile on my face and when my heart rate is max'ing out with 2km to go on a Wednesday timetrial I sometimes wonder how much longer I can keep this going for. The answer is quite a while yet.

To think it all started with a sheet of corrugated iron.