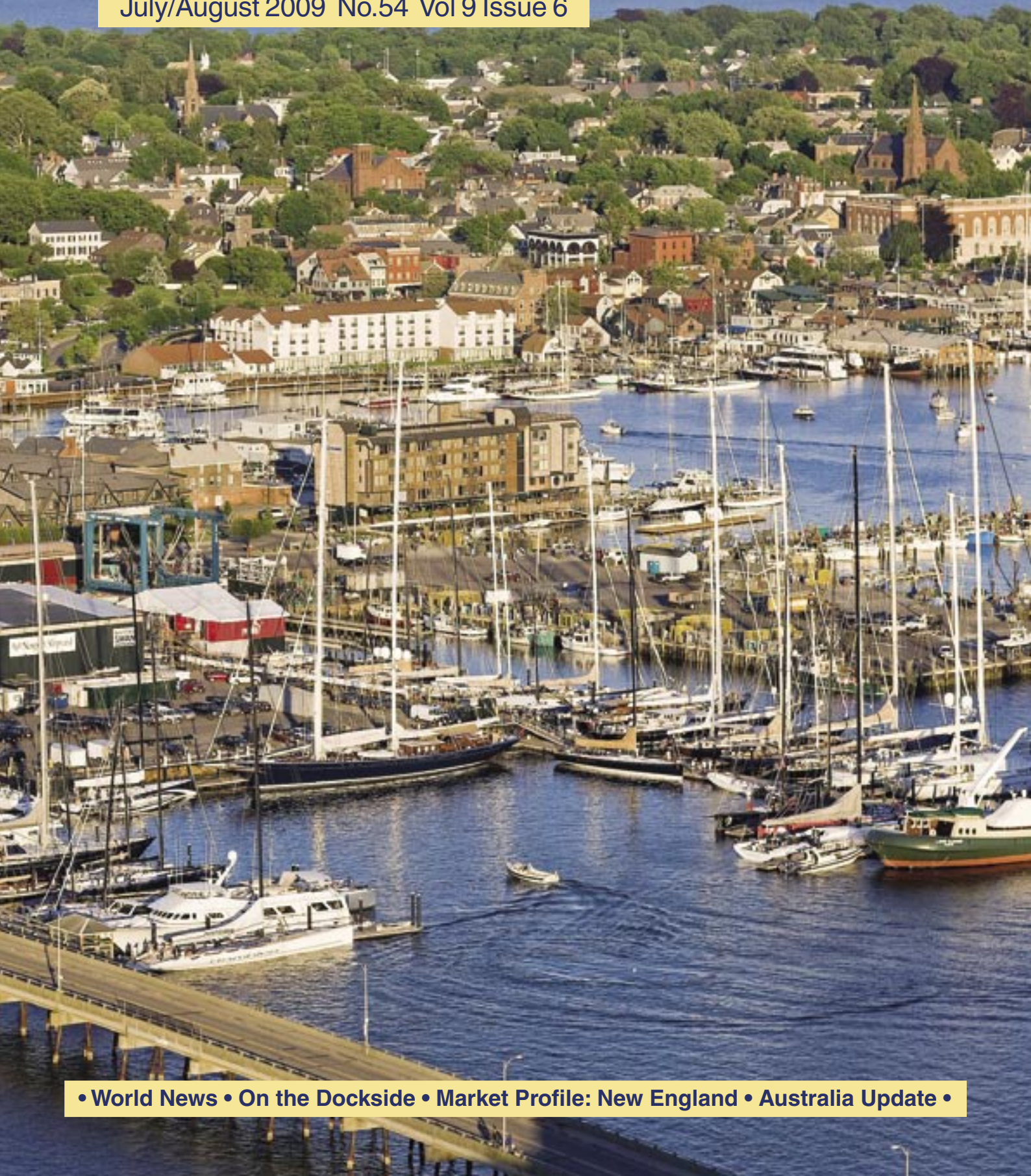


# Marina

World [www.marinaworld.com](http://www.marinaworld.com)

July/August 2009 No.54 Vol 9 Issue 6



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A passion for boating: Stephen Smith (left) and Darren Vaux.

widening pedestrian access through the marina and pushing it closer to the water's edge. A Bobbin Head Discovery Trail was created exposing Aboriginal engravings on the vertical rock face in the car park and taking hikers right past the boatyard. "All is very open," says Smith. "The public watches what we do and we have to do it right because they are always the experts!"

Environmental best practice is key. "There is a benefit in not being in a residential neighbourhood and we engaged very early on with the Environmental Protection Agency," Vaux confirms. "We've ended up doing more than is actually required. For example, instead of capturing water just from the washdown bay, we capture all the water from the hardstand. All water goes through around five stages of purification before it even goes through the purifier!" Both the shed and hardstand have full environmental containment and the water treatment plant discharges directly into a Sydney Water sewer, one of the highest sewerage lifts in Australia.

A pump-out facility is offered at the fuel dock along with waste oil containment for customer use. The marina also uses a power factor corrector for all electricity. "It reduces our costs by up to 30% and we've calculated a two-year pay-back," Vaux reveals.

### Site specifics

Located on Cowan Creek some 24km from Sydney's Central Business District (CBD), Empire Marina Bobbin Head has access to

# The sound of silence

**The weather at Empire Marina Bobbin Head on Saturday 30th May wasn't on our side but even with the incessant drumbeat of a Hawkesbury Basin 'monsoon', the silence was almost palpable. Although such stillness comes when the tourist season wanes and fewer hikers take to the trails of the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, the location is as tranquil as it is beautiful. The forest fringe stands sentinel around crystal clear waters, and marina owners, Empire Marinas, ensure that man makes but a small footprint on the landscape. Carol Fulford reports**

There have been boats at Bobbin Head since the mid 1890s courtesy of Mr Shaw, Mr & Mrs Sainty and, most famously, Mr Halvorsen. In 1945, boatbuilding company Lars Halvorsen & Sons bought the lease of Sainty's Bobbin Head Boatshed for £300 and proceeded to run a fleet of its own boats as a charter business. By the 1960s, it was one of the largest private hire fleets in the world and Bobbin Head was a favoured recreational spot for Sydneysiders. As part of an overall vision for the future development of the site, Halvorsen introduced a 140-berth floating marina before selling its lease to Empire Marinas in June 2006.

Empire Marinas directors, Darren Vaux and Stephen Smith, think back. "There was a quayside and originally about 190 swing moorings. It was an old and tired facility that the family was starting to refurbish at the time of sale," says Vaux. "We modified the concept, reconfigured some of the marina arms, refurbished the buildings, constructed hard stand and expanded the car park," Smith adds, summing up three years' effort in a few heartbeats.

Changing anything, however, in a highly sensitive national park environment is never going to be a breeze. Vaux and Smith succeeded because their plans were deemed

to be of 'public benefit' and their development in tune with the natural surroundings. "We welcomed the public in. Their perception is crucial as, at the end of the day, the public is the customer," Vaux explains. This approach involved opening up the waterfront by



# AUSTRALIA (MIAA) MARINA OF THE YEAR 2009

600 nautical miles of cruising coastline from Pittwater to the Hawkesbury. Such cruising skirts islands, dips into creeks, laps against coves and beaches, and essentially – as Smith affirms – means that “the majority of the boats here never get to sea – although they could”. The marina waters are salty and very deep – up to 20m.

One of the largest privately owned marinas in New South Wales, Bobbin Head has 199 berths at newly built Bellingham Marine Australia docks and ten swing moorings for vessels up to 27m in length. Most berths are leased out on monthly packages but up to 50 could be sold on 25-year leases. “As the site is Crown land, no title can be issued. We worked with National Parks to create a plan of first title to provide the opportunity to plan for lease sub-division,” Vaux confirms. “We have consent to sub-lease 50 berths but we only really want to sell 25.”

A total of 15 have been sold to date including the most expensive yet in Australia – a 30m berth for AU\$950,000. Berths of such size are very rare and others come with more moderate price tags: 20m (\$450,000); 15m (\$320,000); and 11m (\$210,000). “It’s a low key campaign. Over the past two months we’ve sold two berths. It’s just ticking away with word of mouth promotion.” The policy is to position ‘sold’ berths throughout the marina to avoid enclaves.

The management plan for the park limits boat numbers. “We would’ve built more berths but couldn’t. The restrictions here are a double edged sword – it limits us but it also limits others,” says Vaux. The result is healthy demand. “We’ve a waiting list of 40 boats despite the fact that we put fees up 10% over the past two months. It’s still cheaper than Sydney and there is a shortage of berths in the area. We’re one of only two significant marina developments in Sydney over the past ten years,” Smith explains. “Actually we’ve experienced negative growth as sites have been lost,” Vaux adds.



## Service and maintenance

Berth holders and visitors have access to an air conditioned members’ lounge complete with kitchenette and plasma TV, spotless shower and toilet facilities, and a full laundry with washer, dryer and ironing area. An onsite café offers a varied menu seven days a week and a general store sells most basic last-minute provisions. The company is currently applying for permission for a bottle shop and chandlery and has also set aside a room alongside the members’ lounge for use by the Bobbin Head Cruising Club.

Security is good with a guard working at night and electronic systems in place for the marina basin and car parking zone.

Significant thought and effort went into planning the 1600 sq m boat maintenance hardstand, which extends into previous waterspace and replaces the redundant slipway system. Hardstand piles are drilled to avoid linking them to the ‘moving’ rock walls and are pre-cast to ‘last for ever’. A 50 tonne Crib Point boat hoist and a three tonne crane are

installed. The covered refit and paint shed is large enough to accommodate two 60ft flybridge cruisers. All shipwright, mechanical, painting, rigging, boat trimming and electrical work is undertaken and over 1,000 boats can be serviced per annum.

## Preserving heritage

Anyone talking to Darren Vaux and Stephen Smith about Bobbin Head cannot fail to detect their passion for boating. “We’ve got to think harder to encourage people to use their boats more,” Vaux enthuses. To this end, the marina has entered into a reciprocal berthing arrangement with Soldiers Point Marina in Port Stephens and has reintroduced hire boats to encourage newcomers and reaffirm the marina’s nautical heritage. Mark Halvorsen set up a boat brokerage and sales operation at the marina in 2006 thus maintaining the Halvorsen connection – five generations on – and a couple of Halvorsen boats could well join the marina fleet.

Bobbin Head is a heritage site in many ways. The whole park area is a geological treasure trove and an open air art gallery with hundreds of engravings crafted by the Aboriginal Guringai who roamed the forests long before Europeans arrived. The Guringai (which the Europeans translated as Ku-ring-gai) named it Bobbin, which means ‘place of smoke’ in their language. If you arrive early in the morning, as the sun rises over the ridges, we’re told you will see long trails of ‘radiation fog’ like white mist floating above the water.

Empire Marinas shares the guardianship of this environment, and its commitment to such responsibility is part of the reason it was awarded the 2009 Marina of the Year Award in the 85+ berth category. Awards judge, Tom Chapman, was full of praise. “The marina infrastructure has been developed with the highest level of consideration for, and integration with, the natural environment. The presentation of the marina is a credit to those involved,” he said. For Darren Vaux, the award is a “magnificent honour that only motivates us to try harder.”

No surprise there.

