

# A Glimpse at the Sixty-Milers of the New South Wales Coast

Commentary by Geoff Walker



What on earth is a “Sixty – Miler” one may ask? For those not familiar with Australian coastal shipping, it is in fact, an informal or slang Australian name, for the fleet of small ships that plied the New South Wales coast carrying coal to Sydney from ports and ocean terminals to the north and south of Sydney. As the name obviously implies the term “Sixty-Miler” is derived from the approximate distance from where most of these coaling points were located, with regards to the Port of Sydney. As a young Deck Officer visiting Australia during the 1960s, I well remember seeing the last of these remarkable little ships, operating along the NSW coast.

The coal these modest little vessels carried, was for both domestic consumption in Sydney and for the bunkering of coal fired steamships, between the late 1800’s through to the 1970’s, when the trade came to an end. Although the earliest “sixty-milers” were sailing vessels, the term was most typically applied to the small coal-fired steamers with reciprocating engines that were used. In the latter years of the coastal coal trade, some of the newer “sixty-milers” were diesel-powered motor vessels.

The main northern coaling points were at Hexham on the Hunter River, Carrington (The Dyke, and The Basin) near Newcastle, on Lake Macquarie, and at the ocean jetty at Catherine Hill Bay. In the fledgling years of the trade, coal was loaded at Newcastle itself on the southern bank of the Hunter River at the river port of Morpeth, and at a wharf at Reid's Mistake at Swansea Heads. Whilst loading of coal at the southern coal fields, was primarily Wollongong Harbor and Port Kembla, including the ocean jetty ports of Bellambi, Coalcliff, Hicks Point at Austinmer, Sandon Point, and Bulli. Port Kembla was originally an exposed ocean jetty port, but two breakwaters were added later to provide shelter from the weather and ocean swells.



Map showing the portion of the New South Wales coast typically covered by the sixty-milers. For the purposes of clarity, Port Kembla is a suburb of Wollongong.

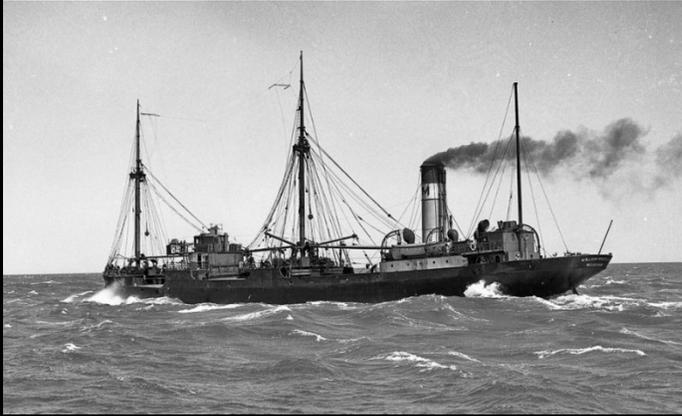
Although there were several privately owned coal jetties at Sydney, the main coal wharves were located at the gasworks (Miller's Point, Mortlake, Neutral Bay, Waverton, and Spring Cove at Manly). Coal was unloaded at the Ball's Head Coal

Loader—for steamship coal bunkering and in later years for export—and at the coal depot at Blackwattle Bay. Before the Ball's Head Coal Loader opened in 1920, coal was manually loaded by “coal lumpers” direct into steamship coal bunkers, from “sixty-milers” hipped alongside.

“Coal Lumpers” were casually employed waterside workers that specialized in handling coal manually, to and from the ships. There were five categories of coal lumping work. The Shovelers, Winch Drivers and Plankmen worked on the collier or hulk that was carrying and discharging the coal, with the Carriers and Trimmers working on the ship that was receiving the coal or being bunkered. The conditions under

which a “Coal Lumper” worked were harsh with extraordinary long working hours. Due to the physically demanding work and arduous working conditions during the early 1920s, Sydney “Coal Lumpers” earned a higher hourly rate, even surpassing that wharf laborers, and may therefore have been the most highly paid casual labor in Australia at that time.

“Sixty-Milers” also carried crushed Basalt (construction aggregate) from the port at Kiama and the ocean jetty at Bass Point (Shellharbour) on the South Coast of New South Wales. This was known as “blue metal” and was unloaded at Blackwattle Bay in Sydney Harbor.



One of the larger colliers used on the NSW coastal coal trade during 1920s was the “SS. William McArthur” belonging to R.W. Miller & Co., of Melbourne.

Built in 1924, 2,393 gross tons. Length 47m x beam 10m. built by J. Lewis & Sons of Aberdeen, Scotland. The ship received the nickname “Millers Weekly” for its regular 5 1/2 days round trip voyage, Newcastle - Sydney. She was holed in 1959, then laid up until scrapped Japan 1961.

(Unknown Photographer)

The steam-powered “sixty-milers” were relatively small vessels typically ranging between 200 and 1500 gross tons— seldom did they exceed 1500 gross tons—but some were even smaller. The smallest of the sixty-milers—ships like the “Novelty” and “Commonwealth” — which were suited for use in the shallow Swansea Channel at the entrance to Lake Macquarie. In the earlier years, some “sixty-milers” were constructed of timber, however, most were iron or steel vessels. Ships larger than the “sixty-milers” were used for interstate and export coal carrying operations. Some earlier vessels were paddle-steamers, but most were screw steamers. The iron and steel vessels followed the British collier design of the era, and most were built in the United Kingdom, then sailed to Australia.

When laden, the ships had a low freeboard and relied upon the hatch combings, wooden hatch covers and canvas tarpaulins over the hatches to maintain their seaworthiness, when the sea water broke over the well decks. There was a high casualty rate amongst these small ships, mostly due to adverse weather, a common factor in many of the losses of “sixty milers”. In some losses, a common element seemed to be a haste to put to sea once loaded and get the cargo to Sydney. “Sixty-milers” sometimes departed without completing all the preparations that were prudent for the safety of ship and crew, such as properly securing and battening down hatches, prior to sailing, to prevent the ingress of seawater. There was also no safety inspection of any recently loaded ship at jetty ports, such as checking the trimming of cargo, and frequently ships departed with a noticeable list, or in fact overloaded.

One sad loss was that of the “sixty-miler”, “Birchgrove Park”, built in Scotland in 1930 she arrived in Sydney the same year. Being 640 gross tons, approximately 47 meters long, she was engaged in the east coast coal trade, her main run being north from Sydney to Newcastle.

Between 1941-1945 she was requisitioned by the Admiralty but upon the cessation of hostilities was returned to her owners for commercial service, and resumed her coal carrying trade.

In 1956 – under the command of Captain Lynch, upon completion of loading, she hurriedly departed from Newcastle in mild sea conditions, which were wrongly assumed to remain the same for the entire voyage. The “Birchgrove Park’s” hatch covers were scantily covered only by light tarpaulins, despite concerns over the vessel’s seaworthiness, expressed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mate. Expecting good weather for the voyage, she sailed from Newcastle. After only a half hour into the voyage she met a strong southeast change and in a short time the sea’s character had changed dramatically with the rapid onset of rising and boisterous seas associated with an imminent “Southerly Buster”.

With her decks awash with water, entering her inadequately covered hatches, and despite repeated attempts to address the situation she began to list badly to port. With water rising fast in the cargo hold the crew realized the collier was doomed. The captain ordered all the crew on deck and directed attempts be made to prepare the lifeboats for launching, but due to the list, this was unsuccessful. In addition, the ship's radio calls for help were never received ashore, as the radio aerial had not been hoisted and erected before leaving Newcastle, because of the vessel’s haste in departing.

The ship’s crew mustered on deck trying to avoid being washed overboard by the rising seas. The captain maintained his station on the bridge sending an SOS to South Head Signal Station by signal lamp, until the ship rolled over and started to sink. At 2.45 am on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, the “Birchgrove Park” capsized and sank. Rescue vessels rushed to the scene of the disaster and picked up 4 survivors, 10 drowned including Captain Laurence Lynch and second mate Thomas Kelly who reportedly had earlier made those fateful remarks as to the vessel’s seaworthiness and preparedness to sail, just prior to her departure.



(Unknown photographer)

The ill-fated “Birchgrove Park”, a sixty-miler used mainly to service the Sydney-Newcastle route.



A typical "Sixty – Miler", in ballast, entering the Port of Newcastle in 1923.

(Unknown photographer)

There were many incidents, some of which caused the loss of several "sixty-milers", such as stress of weather, groundings, collisions, foundering, and frequent damage sustained whilst loading alongside at some of the more exposed ocean jetties. The six-month period from December 1918 to May 1919 saw the loss of three sixty-milers, the **Tuggerah** (owned by Wallarah Colliery), the **Undola** (owned by Coalcliff Colliery), and the **Myola** (owned by Howard Smith Limited). There were survivors from the **Tuggerah** and **Myola**. The **Undola** had been lost with all hands, her fate unknown. In preceding years another three "sixty-milers" had been lost—the **Walarah** (in 1914), the **Commonwealth** (in 1916) and the **Yambacoona** (in 1917). Pressure from the Seamen's Union and others led to the establishment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry.

The Royal Commission of enquiry into the vessel losses sat for 29-days in 1919-1920 and called 123 witnesses. The Commissioners also inspected eighteen ships—including two under 80-tons—and the loading facilities at Catherine Hill Bay, Hexham, The Dyke (Newcastle), Bulli, Bellambi, Wollongong, and Port Kembla. Evidence was given at the Royal Commission that confirmed "sixty-milers" a common culture on board of sometimes going to sea without properly trimming the coal first, with the ship listing, and with the hatches off or not properly secured with tarpaulins. The Royal Commission found that both the **Tuggerah** and the **Undola** had departed, with all hatch-covers unshipped, to allow the coal to be trimmed by the crew whilst underway.

In the case of the **Tuggerah**, at the time that the ship foundered, covers on one hatch were in place but had yet to be secured with tarpaulins and the other hatch was open to allow the coal to be trimmed. The ship had taken a sudden lurch to port—the lee side. A large sea came over the port rail, filling the well deck. This was followed by more seas in quick succession and the ship then turned over and sank. The Royal Commission's finding on the **Tuggerah** was, "The cause of the sinking was undoubtedly water ingress through open hatches".

The Royal Commission could not establish the cause of the loss of the **Undola**. It established that the ship was in seaworthy condition and stable at the time of her departure. The nature of the flotsam washed ashore swayed the Royal Commission to deduce that the ship had struck a German mine. The wrecks of the three ships were not found on the sea floor until many years later. When the wreck of the **Undola** was found, her hull was largely intact, indicating that the **Undola** probably had foundered, rather than having been sunk by a mine.

Another finding of the Royal Commission was that overloading of ships was frequent and the applicable regulations were not fully understood and observed in some cases. It also determined that there had been only two prosecutions for overloading in the previous five years. In its report the Royal Commission made recommendations concerning the ships, the practices at ports, and the legislation applicable to the coastal coal trade.



**MV. Stephen Brown**, captured at a coal loading jetty. Note the single coal-loading chute arrangement, meaning the vessel was required to warp along the quay to facilitate loading.

(Unknown photographer)

One of the most modern of the “sixty-milers”, the “**MV Stephen Brown**”— delivered in 1954—nearly came to grief, when some air-vents that had been closed off and some of the deck hatches lost their covers in stormy seas. She began to fill, with the water gradually entering her holds and developed a list. The hull sides at deck level began to go underwater, a circumstance common to that in the foundering of other “sixty-milers”. The “**MV Stephen Brown**” made it through the heads into Sydney Harbor with Captain Don Turner initially proposing to ground her at Lady Bay Beach just inside South Head. That proved unnecessary. Instead, the ship stood off the beach pumping out some of the seawater. She was then able to discharge her cargo at the CSR wharf at Pyrmont as intended. The “**MV Stephen Brown**” was probably saved only by her positive stability. Her ventilators and hatches were modified to decrease the risk of a recurrence.



“**MV Hexham Bank**” had survived her time carrying coal as a “sixty-miler” but, in June 1978, while preparing to load construction aggregate at Bass Point, she caught fire. All her crew were rescued. Her engine room was destroyed, and the ship was deemed a “constructive total loss” and scrapped. Her hulk was later scuttled off Sydney Heads.

(Unknown Photographer)

With the approach of the 1970s demand for coal in Sydney had dwindled, the coastal coal trade of New South Wales entered a period of rapid demise, thereafter, signaling the end of the “sixty-milers”. The few remaining “sixty-milers” mainly carried coal for export to the reopened Ball's Head Coal Loader, until it too closed in 1993, marking the end of the coal trade to Sydney.



(Unknown photographer)

The last “sixty-miler” to unload at Ball's Head was the “**MV Camira**”, pictured left, she was also the last “sixty-miler” to be built, in 1980. Of 2,792 gross tons, 3453 dwt. Lb: 86 x 14m. Single screw, diesel engine. 12.5 knots. Built at Ube Dockyards, Ube as a coastal cargo vessel with container carrying capability for Coal and Allied Industries Ltd. Managed by Howard Smith Industries Pty Ltd. 1993

sold to Labroy Marine Ltd, Singapore. 1994 converted into a livestock carrier, 3246 gt, 4186dwt. In 1994 she was also renamed **Kerry Express**. The ship became notorious as the “**Ship of Shame**” sheep carrier, when taking livestock from Fremantle to the Persian Gulf.

The sole remaining “sixty-miler” still afloat, the **MV Stephen Brown**, although no longer in use as a collier, she is used as a stationary training vessel by the **Australian Maritime College (AMC)**. This former collier is moored permanently and has been renovated for use as a stationary training ship for students attending the AMC.

Seafaring students learn how to rebuild and maintain engines on board. The ship is also fitted with a damage control unit, comprising three floodable compartments, which is used to train students and Department of Defense personnel. It is also used for conducting courses for the offshore and shipping industries for the crews of vessels that carry a Fast Rescue Craft (FRC).



**MV Stephen Brown** shown in her current capacity as a permanently moored Training Ship for the Australian Maritime College (AMC). Through her, the legacy of the old “Sixty-Milers” lives, as part of Australian maritime history.

(Cynthia Harris MarineTraffic.com)

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References: Sydney Journal - [www.dictionaryofsydney.org](http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org), Wikipedia, MarineTraffic.com, Australian Maritime College, and various data available on the Public Domain, from which some information has been sought.

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