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Ulladulla's Fishing Industry

The fishing industry of Ulladulla is as old as time itself, with Aboriginals using the harbour as a source of food. In the early 1900s there are newspaper reports of local fisherman selling their catch at Milton and fishing licences being approved. The harbour played an important role in the development of Ulladulla. The Illawarra and South Coast Steam navigational company brought weekly cargo supplies to Ulladulla until the mid 1950s.

Some of the fishermen from early this century include many aboriginal families, were James Barker, George Mellshimer, Thomas Butler, Thomas Cooley, Augusta Malafont, Alfred & Henry Moon, William Stephens and John Wilson.

The fishing industry continued to grow in the 1930s with many Italian families moved to Ulladulla from Wollongong in 1937, bring with them three boats - the Tory, San Guiseppe and the Nina, establishing Ulladulla as a major commercial fishing port. The Millard family are now the owners of the Tory, which is moored in Ulladulla, harbour. During the 30s and 40s in order to get the catch to Sydney markets, the local saw mills came to the aid of the fishermen by provided them with sawdust.

Fishing methods used prior to the arrival of Italian fisherman were hand or set line fishing on the undersea reefs or net fishing on the beaches.

During WW2 the authorities requisition all the Italian owned fishing vessels, reselling them back after the war. Italians from Ulladulla during the war were forced to report to the local police once a week. After the war, other Italian migrated to Australia settling at Ulladulla establishing Ulladulla as the largest commercial port in New South Wales.

It was during the war when Ken McLeod starting shipbuilding at Ulladulla harbour for the American Navy. Shipbuilding was not new to the Ulladulla foreshores, as it was one of our first industries back in 1840s when shipwrights David Warden and Robert Gee who also owned land on the foreshores of Ulladulla Harbour started shipbuilding and were later join by David's younger brother James Warden.



The building of many brigantines and schooners continued for two decades at Ulladulla, using local cedar and timbers from the surrounding woods. The timber transported to the harbour by bullock dray was also shipped to Sydney for trade. Shipbuilding was an activity seen at most ports and coastal rivers along the New South Wales coastline.

McLeod's shipbuilding went into liquidation in 1955, with its assets being bought by the newly formed Fishermen's Co-Op. Nineteen trawlers owners had formed the Co-op in March 1956. They include members of the Greco, Puglisi, Salafia, Canon, Costa, Lavalle and Dunn families, with Reg Adams was appointed manager. One of their first tasks was the building of the timber jetty that was completed in 1957.

Plant later acquire including refrigeration, slipways, engineering workshop, ice making facilities, cool rooms and blast freezing. One of Ulladulla's freshwater springs was used as the water supply for ice making in the early years of the Co-op operations.



The 1957 timber jetty was replaced with a concrete jetty on steel pipes in 1971 - 1978. These allowing providing better facilities to the ever-growing fishing industry needs of the time. Joe Greco was appointed manager of the Fisherman Co-op in 1971, as position he held for over 25 years. By the mid 1970s Ulladulla harbour was one of the post important ports in the Australian fishing industry along with Port Lincoln in South Australia.

The first Blessing of the Fleet was staged in 1956 when the Catholic Parish Priest Father Weatherall suggested to the boat owners and crews that they should follow the old and revered tradition of blessing the boats.

The fishermen decorated their boats for the ceremony and family picnic day and presented a life-size statue of St Peter the Patron Saint of fisherman. Due to each province in Italy having its own Patron Saint, the Ulladulla Italian fishing families chose St Peter as the Patron Saint so as not to cause any favouritism.

The ceremony was to ensure that the fisherman would return to port and have a bountiful catch. From these early beginnings in 1956 when teenager Josi Greco was named the first Princess of the Fleet, the festival has now developed into a significant event for the whole district.

The Blessing of the Fleet is an old and revered tradition which has been passed down from generation to generation originating in Sicily and as ancient as biblical times. This centuries old Italian rite calls on divine providence to safeguard ships and crews from the danger of the seas.

The blessing ceremony was originally held in late December or early January. In 1958 over 20 trawlers participated in the blessing followed by an afternoon of games and parties. The blessing was held yearly until 1960, Father Kenna received the blessing ceremony in 1971 and so the festival has been held at Easter each year since. Today the ceremony is held on Easter Sunday with many other activities all Easter weekend long forming the Blessing of the Fleet Festival.



Fishing methods over the years include Danish seine trawling, tuna poling, otto board trawling, long lining, drop lining, mesh nets, trapping and others. The Ulladulla harbour remains a foundation to our local economy with commercial fishing, fish processing and marketing, recreational boating, seafood for local restaurants as well as the Sydney Fish markets and exporting to Japan, festivals, tourism and such.

