

# Rousing the Ponrabbel

writer and photographer *Fiona Stocker*



*top* The Ponrabbel II dredge at Launceston, 1962  
Image courtesy of the Low Head Pilot Station Maritime Museum

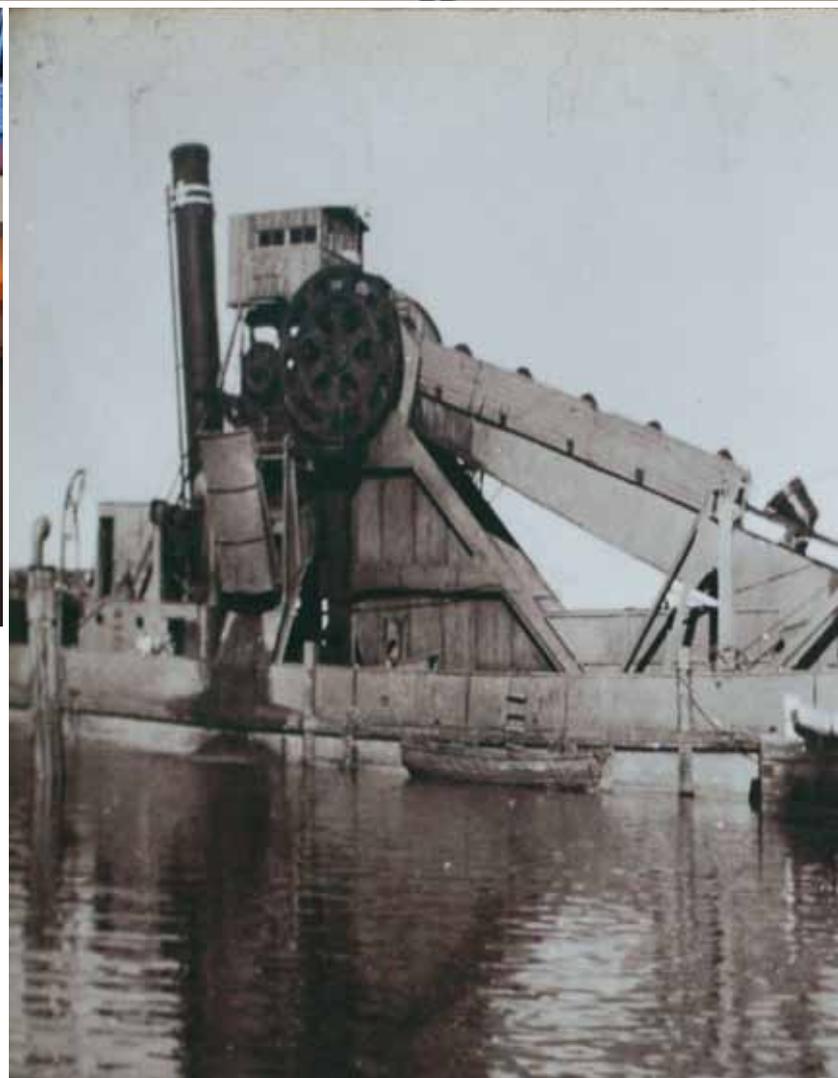
*above* Don Heather works on the Ponrabbel II port engine

Crouched on the shore at Low Head Pilot Station, its windows facing the estuary, is a handsome brick and stone building. Erected by convicts in 1835, it was built as accommodation for the families of the four pilots whose job it was to guide ships into the Tamar Estuary. Today, it houses the Low Head Pilot Station Maritime Museum, run by volunteers and maritime enthusiasts.

Near the museum's entrance is an unassuming outbuilding, once a garage, now a tall, smartly painted weatherboard shed. On the side, a set of double doors occasionally open onto a somewhat unexpected sight. The shed houses a steam engine, the port engine of Ponrabbel II, a dredger that worked the Tamar Estuary for the greater part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Get there on the right day and you will find museum volunteer Don Heather working on the engine, armed with little more than a spanner, a fireman's cap, strong hands and ingenuity. Heather was chief fireman on the Ponrabbel II for a time in the 1950s, and over the past five years has restored the port engine to magnificent working condition. It is clearly a labour of love, and now bears testimony to the age of steel and fire, when engineering was built to last.

In the office of the museum, Don Heather and curator Des Wootton guided me through the story of the restoration, and the preserving of a piece of Tasmania's maritime history.



*top The museum's model of the Ponrabbel II  
above The cooling system pump restored by John Allum  
right Historical image of the Ponrabbel II dredge, as  
seen on display signage for one of the dredge's engines*

The Ponrabbel dredge was built by Ferguson Brothers, Shipbuilders & Engineers, of Glasgow, in about 1916. It was commissioned by the Launceston Marine Board (later the Port of Launceston Authority, and now Tas Ports), and was named Ponrabbel after the 19<sup>th</sup> century Aboriginal name for the Tamar Estuary. Powered by double-expansion steam engines, its maiden voyage was also its delivery voyage – from Scotland to Launceston. It was the middle of World War I. Ponrabbel passed through the Suez Canal and was crossing the Indian Ocean when it was sighted and sunk by the German warship Emden.

At the time, the port of Launceston was in its heyday. Trading vessels carried out goods, including the wool clip, and brought supplies in, and passenger steamers from Melbourne were increasing in size. Faced with the challenge of maintaining deep-water access, the Marine Board commissioned a second dredge. In 1922 the Ponrabbel II was launched and made its way south, this time via the Cape of Good Hope. It reached Launceston six months later.

It was set to work immediately. A dredging section with chute and buckets was added, and it began dredging the estuary between the Port of Launceston and Tamar Island. Occasionally it worked further north. When reefs were blasted to remove submerged dangers, the Ponrabbel was used to clear the immense rock debris. At Bell Bay, it cleared debris from alongside the wharves when they were upgraded for the aluminium smelter.

Don Heather first encountered the Ponrabbel II in late 1955. He joined the Marine Board in November of that year as a dock hand on the dry dock. It was known he had previously as a railways fireman, and for this reason he was called upon one morning by the harbour master when the Ponrabbel's two usual firemen failed to turn up for work.

A workboat took him out to the dredge, which was stationed that day near the site of the current Australian Maritime College campus at

Mowbray. Heather was asked to get steam up so that it could return to base at Alexandra Wharf.

With his previous experience of fire-hungry locomotive engines, Don got up so much steam that he popped the safety valve – the mechanism allowing excess steam to escape. “I was used to heavier firing,” he said. Within the day, he had been appointed senior fireman on the Ponrabbel II.

The dredge worked weekdays only, its noise prohibiting it from working at weekends. Heather began work at 6.30am with the engineer, getting steam up for 7.30am when a team of about 15 men would be on board, including engineer and greaser, firemen, dredge master and deck hands.

It was a time before workplace health and safety legislation as we know it, and the crew learned to take their own safety measures. To go from one boiler room to another, said Heather, you had to climb the external stairs and across the chute and buckets “trying not to get your trousers caught on the way”.

Mud from the river bed was dredged up and loaded onto barges which came alongside. It was deposited on the flats alongside Invermay, which now house sporting ovals, and Riverside. Tanks on the barges pumped water into the mud, diluting it so that it could be pumped.

A curious effect of the newly created soil flats was that seeds, which had passed first through human digestive systems and then through the city's sewerage system, germinated there. “As far as you could see on those flats there were pumpkins, marrows and tomatoes,” Des Wootton told me.

Don Heather worked on the dredge for three years, returning to the docks in December 1958. He never returned to the Ponrabbel II.

The dredge was retired in 1976. It was brought by tug to Bell Bay and gradually dismantled for scrap. The hull was taken to Launceston, where it can still be seen at Kings Wharf. The two steam engines were craned onto the wharves at Bell Bay, where they sat rusting and forgotten.

About 1997, coxswain Wayne Shipp and his crew at the pilot station started a maritime museum there, sourcing artefacts and donations locally. Des Wootton believes it was they who brought the port engine from Bell Bay to Low Head and lowered it by crane into the shed, first removing the roof. Once it was there, a cohort of dedicated individuals set about preserving and restoring it.

Retired engineer John Allum restored the cooling system pump to working order. Another engineer, John Aveyard, stripped the engine and cleaned the components, greasing and wrapping them and creating an inventory of each one, with sketches to enable correct reassembly.

Robert Gunn and John Tyson increased the height of the shed and added side doors for ease of access to the engine.

In 2012, Don Heather was asked to give a talk about the Ponrabbel II at the museum. Finding the port engine in the shed and restoration work begun, he volunteered to assist in completing it.

Rust had set in while the engine had sat at Bell Bay, and moisture had affected the parts in storage. Don set about cleaning every component, finding that manufacturers Ferguson Brothers had stamped all the bearings LPP or HPP, for low or high pressure port. This and Aveyard's inventory facilitated the reassembly.

Section by section, Heather ground the whole machine back to the bare steel, undercoated and painted it. Working one to two days a week, it took him five years.

A major challenge was the "eccentric gear" used to reverse the engine. Don and Des were able to visit the starboard engine, which had been installed at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, to compare and check their reassembly was correct.

Now fully restored, the engine can be turned over by hand, using a spanner the size of an

oar. There are ambitions to turn it over using an electric motor, but for this and displaying properly to the public, further safety precautions will need to be in place.

Displayed alongside the engine are several other Ponrabbel II components such as the deck telegraph, used for signalling between the boiler room and the bridge, and the evaporator, which converted salt water to fresh. The museum's Ponrabbel room houses the pump, a model of the dredge, and the steering gear with its magnificent, steam-powered wheel.

Around the back in the shed, Don shows me the components which made such engines the workhorses of their day – the shafts, levers and pressure cylinder driving the pistons, complete with water cooling system. "If you didn't have cold water circulating through it, eventually it would turn into steam and blow the thing up." All this was seized up, but Don kept applying oil, and wedged a piece of timber underneath the assembly arm until, after about three weeks, he tried turning the mechanism over, "And up she came!"

The museum now houses an extensive collection showing the maritime history of the station. One room displays a research centre, stacked with leather-bound volumes, and Des shows me a further cavernous room, accessed via a tiny side passage, crammed with racks of charts, books, files and pictures.

The main goal now is to keep the engine lubricated and in top condition, until arrangements can be made for opening the shed for viewing – all in good time. 

*Fiona Stocker is a writer based in the Tamar Valley. More of her writing can be found at [fionastocker.com](http://fionastocker.com).*

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