

The Killara

S.S Killara, Cowes, 1933



Photo Shop Series

S.S. Killara

Cowes

Arriving at Phillip Island's Front Door on the Killara

The Killara, a double-ended vehicular steamer often referred to as a 'horse ferry' owing to its colonial legacy, was constructed in Sydney for the sum of £15,561 by Sydney Ferries Limited. She made her grand debut on August 26, 1909. Setting her apart from her contemporaries, the Killara stretched 14 feet longer, making her the primary vessel on the Milsons Point - Fort Macquarie vehicular route. She measured an impressive 145 feet 6 inches in overall length, boasted a generous beam of 38 feet 6 inches, and a draft of 11 feet.

The Killara was equipped with robust 56hp triple expansion engines, endowing her with a cruising speed of 10 knots. As a testament to her size and capability, this wooden behemoth was the largest and heaviest wooden vessel constructed in Sydney up to that time, with the capacity to ferry 38 vehicles in a single voyage. Her construction featured sturdy steel latticework girders running the vessel's full length, and her hull was ingeniously divided into six watertight compartments. The Killara was not without her share of misadventures during her tenure in Sydney Harbour. She experienced a

harrowing collision with the steamer Burringbar and, a few years later, ran aground on treacherous rocks, causing considerable damage, with water infiltrating two feet above the engine room floor. Her Captain, Edgar Hush, attributed the mishap to the Killara's unwieldy nature, describing her as "the hardest vehicular ferry to handle." However, the Marine Court remained unconvinced, and the captain's certificate was suspended for two months.

“By 1948... the sun had finally set on the days of car ferries in Westernport.”

Following the tradition of the Sydney Ferries company, the Killara was christened with an aboriginal name, signifying “always there.” However, her days cruising Sydney Harbour were numbered. The inauguration of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in March 1933 spelt doom for car ferries like the Killara, as her traffic route became obsolete. In anticipation of this change, the company sold the Killara to A.K.T. Sambell owner of The Phillip Island – Westernport Shipping Company, who recognized the need for a dedicated vehicular ferry in Westernport. Before making her way to Westernport, the Killara underwent a comprehensive £3,000 refurbishment, which included the addition of a glass-covered passenger deck. Apart from accommodating 38 cars on the main deck, the vessel also had space for 500 passengers on the upper deck.

On the morning of March 22, 1933, the Killara made her highly anticipated arrival at Cowes after a turbulent journey from Sydney. She was set to serve the Cowes-Stony Point route. However, due to incomplete modifications to the docks, the cars had to be hoisted onto the vessel for the initial few weeks.

During her first year of service in Westernport, the Killara faced her own misadventure. In December 1933, she ran aground at Stony Point due to an exceptionally low tide. With about 80 passengers and 12 cars onboard, efforts to dislodge her were in vain until all passengers and vehicles were moved to the aft. Eventually, the Killara painstakingly freed herself from the mudbank and docked at the pier’s far end, requiring cars to be lifted off by hoists rather than driving off directly onto the wharf. The incident caused the delay of the train from Stony Point to Melbourne.

However, a far more tragic incident unfolded in 1941, when a passenger’s feet became entangled in a rope on the ship’s deck during the berthing process at Cowes. Regrettably, the woman was fatally dragged against the vessel’s bollard.

In 1940, the opening of the Phillip Island - San Remo bridge marked the beginning of the end for the island’s loyal vehicular ferries. The Killara soldiered on for four more years before being auctioned in Maribyrnong. Her final chapter saw her dismantled in Devonport, Tasmania, cut in half to be ‘reborn’ as two 500-ton cargo vessels built from her hull, drawing to an end the era of car ferries in Westernport.

Among her counterparts, The Reliance and the petite car ferry, The Mildred (another vehicular ferry from Sydney Harbour which was later rebranded as The Westernport), continued for a short time in delivering vehicles to the island’s front door.

By 1948, however, the sun had finally set on the days of car ferries in Westernport.



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