

THE REBIRTH OF A BARGE

BY KEITH INGRAM



ABOVE: The traditional bridge remains unchanged

BELOW: The *Seamaster* (left) and the *Seacat* at Half Moon Bay



Auckland's Hauraki Gulf barging services originally evolved as we saw the demise of the old scows of yesteryear. From 1870 until the 1920s Auckland's phantom fleet consisted of no fewer than 125 little ketch or schooner-rigged deck and hold scows which played such an important part in building a great city. Only a small handful of all these little ships are still afloat, dieselised travesties of their former glory.

Yet these little ships opened up the gulf islands. They brought the important building materials of logs, timber, shingle and sand to build a city. They were the catalyst to populate our offshore islands after the timber was milled and farming started. Slowly motor towboats and dumb barges overtook these once proud ships that ghosted our waterways, and it would not be long before these became the motorised landing craft we know today.

Half Moon Bay's sea link with Waiheke Island started when Bert and Mona Subritzky founded the Subritzky Shipping Company in 1960 when they bought the licence from Sir Robert Kerridge. They had previously operated on the Hokianga, and their early fleet consisted of the scow *Jane Gifford*, the towboats *Romo* and *Awaroa*, and the barge *Ruru*. Bert would commission the building of their first new purpose-built motorised barge, the *Port Kennedy*, in 1965, as the service to Waiheke Island grew.

Today Waiheke can no longer be regarded as an island in the Hauraki Gulf. Rather, it is commonly regarded as a seaside suburb, serviced daily by fast passenger and freight ferries. So times have changed as we have moved into the 21st century.

This August saw the launching and commissioning of the *Seamaster*, owned and operated by SeaLink on the Waiheke heavy transport service from Half Moon Bay to Port Kennedy. And this is where the current story begins.

Seamaster, or part of her, started life as the *MN Subritzky*, which Basil Subritzky built in 1986 by on the tidal papa shelf at Half Moon Bay. She in turn was constructed from the modified dumb barge *Wakakiri*, built in 1956 for the Parry brothers. After many tonnes of 10mm mild steel plate was cut, bent, shaped and welded,



The fully refurbished saloon faces forward with televisions in the corners



The upper sundeck includes a café and bar

the *MN* took on her earlier shape.

Her original dimensions were length 31.9m, beam 8.54m and gross tonnage 169 tonnes. The addition of an aft raised wheelhouse and twin Detroit 671 diesels and she was in action. In 1996 the *MN*, as she was affectionately known, was lengthened by Culham Engineering in Northland to 41.38m and widened to 10.5m by the addition of port and starboard sponsons, utilising a secondhand tank and approximately 5m of new construction.

Around this time the engines were replaced with two 8V92 Detroit, then a third 8V71 Detroit was installed as a new, central engine, giving 3 x 350hp and a service speed of nine knots.

The *MN* was quickly back on her daily service to Waiheke Island. As the service continued to grow, passengers wanted more comfort and on-board services, so in May 2002 the passenger cabin was enlarged and a top deck café built.

But age was starting to show in the hull, and in November 2004 the steering compartment and the rear engineroom was rebuilt, and new propeller shafts and stern tubes fitted. New sewage tanks were constructed to meet new Auckland Regional Council bylaws.

Yes, by now you are starting to understand the manner in which Kiwi ingenuity can stretch to get a job done or, as in this case, build a ship as cheaply as possible for the job. Parts of this ship dated back to 1956 as a dumb barge designed to last no more than 30 years.

The *MN Subritzky* required major repair work due to corrosion, to put it mildly, as she had outlasted the patience of even the friendliest surveyor, and the company was becoming concerned with potential unknowns. Major replating was required, but the bones were shaky as well. Things were not looking good, and the company considered just how long they could continue with patch-up jobs.

Clearly there had to be some hard decisions made, decisions which included pensioning her off for scrap, selling her into the Pacific Islands, where she would ultimately die, or doing something with her that would extend her life for another 30 years.

SeaLink's management looked at the options of buying a



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