Well Rowed University

Melbourne University Boat Club
The First 150 Years

Judith Buckrich
The Club now had its eye on international competition and Harvey Nicholson’s son Peter, the Assistant Secretary-Treasurer of the Club in July 1966, proposed ‘a broad plan to ensure that some MUBC members are selected for the Mexico City Olympics.’ Interestingly, his first suggestion was to encourage postgraduate members to keep rowing, and that a senior eight be selected immediately after intervarsity and continue to train every day—one or two days a week in small boats, one or two days a week as a crew and three or four days a week weight training. The motion was passed.

Peter Nicholson had already started to achieve some success in club rowing by stroking MUBC’s maiden eight, which won at several regattas during January and February of 1966. In the end, his proposed winter training program was overly ambitious, but Peter eventually organised a small core of rowers to begin weight training at the Oasis Gymnasium in the city, under the supervision of Stan Nicholes. Stan was a pioneer of weight training. He had made a name for himself training champions in several sports, including tennis players Frank Sedgman and Margaret Court. This began a long and fruitful association between Stan and both MUBC and MULRC rowers that would eventually make a significant contribution to the Club’s outstanding record, particularly in international lightweight rowing. Nicholes felt that his training methods for rowers were the most influential: ‘In 2000 metre river races good technique depends on muscular endurance—rowing is 2000 metres of muscle endurance; nothing else.’ For forty years he trained rowers to build on their strength. The first Club from which members went to Nicholes for training was MUBC. The best known of Nicholes’ trainees is present MUBC President and Olympic gold medallist, Peter Antonie, who has had one of the longest careers as an international competitor.

Efforts to forge close ties with other universities in Melbourne also went forward and Ormond representative Peter Martin proposed that the Monash eight be allowed to boat from the MUBC boatshed in the 1967 season. This motion was also passed, pending approval from the Sports Union.

The 107th annual meeting held on 21 October 1966 was dominated by the Nicholsons (Harvey and Peter), the Keon-Cohens (Russell, Bryan senior and Chester), David Salmon, Ron Jelbart, Lloyd Williams and Jim Gobbo. Peter Nicholson was elected Captain of Boats for the 1966–7 season. Harvey Nicholson took up the presidency again and David Salmon continued as Treasurer. The constitution had been altered to allow for eight vice-presidents instead of six, and stipulated that two vice-presidents had to have graduated ‘not more than five years prior to election as vice-presidents.’ Harvey Nicholson reported to the meeting that, despite coming only third, the 1966 intervarsity team was the most enthusiastic he had ever known. That year, there had been ten universities competing in the men’s eight event and Tasmania had a fine win—its first for forty-one years.

Harvey Nicholson had, since 1957, produced a newsletter called MUBC that came out intermittently at first, but by 1967 it was produced regularly, about every two or three months. The newsletter enabled him to impart much more information to all Club members on a regular basis. Several interesting trends began in 1967 when the January issue featured articles about international developments in which MUBC members were taking part. Past Captains, Bill Stukes, for example, wrote about rowing at Waseda University in Japan.
Rowing styles

From this time, the Club became conscious of trying to keep up with changes in national and international rowing styles and training. Cheaper air travel meant that many more individuals were able to travel to observe global events. Harvey Nicholson was himself an accredited FISA official and officiated at various world championship events.

Over the 1966–7 summer three members of Mercantile, David Palfreyman, Dick Garrard and George Xouris—who had competed in the Australian coxless four at the 1966 Bled (now Slovenia, then part of Yugoslavia) World Championships—had a go at coaching from various positions in the MUBC eight, ‘and thanks to them, the crews got a better idea of the true Ratzeburg style.’5 ‘The German eight that won the gold medal at the 1960 Olympic Games had trained at Ratzeburg and, by comparison with other crews up to that time, placed much more emphasis on the ‘catch’ as opposed to the ‘finish’ and on an even ‘run forward up the slide’ as opposed to slowing down as one approached the ‘catch.’’6 The main crew that boated in the 1966–7 summer rowing season was a junior eight, which rowed an exaggerated version of what they imagined the Ratzeburg style was.

The eight performed disastrously in the state championships and in subsequent seasons, the Club went back to rowing with a more conventional rhythm. However, the long, hard season was good preparation for those who rowed right through it.

1967 intervarsity

At intervarsity at Penrith in 1967, the Club had a fantastic year. The eight was coached jointly by Harvey Nicholson and Terry Davies (Harvey taking the first four weeks and, after he went overseas, Terry taking the last three weeks) and the lightweight four by Mark Schapper. The eights race was very significant, although nobody knew it at the time, for it turned out to be the last occasion that the Oxford and Cambridge Cup would be competed for over a distance of three miles. According to Harvey Nicholson, a longer period of training (he aimed at 100 miles per week including numerous sessions of the ‘bridges’, that is, a time trial from Princes Bridge to Chapel Street and almost immediate return, all at race pace) and the experience gained, as well as ‘the modern outlook of our coaches and oarsmen helped. The Italian mould of our eight, regarded at the time of purchase as radical for a three-mile race, contributed towards the eight’s win.’ Harvey’s disciplined approach to training and fitness, combined with Terry Davies’ good eye for individual technique, produced an eight that raced and won comfortably over the three-mile Nepean River course, defeating the titleholders Tasmania, with the rating not dropping below 38. The stroke, Bryan Keon-Cohen, became the fourth member of the Keon-Cohen family to stroke a winning intervarsity eight. Harvey’s son, Peter, stroked the lightweight four to victory at the same intervarsity regatta. According to Harvey Nicholson ‘Each crew rowed a smooth European looking style … fast entry of blade into the water, noticeable in both our crews, is a feature of European rowing.’

A resurgence gathers pace

It was from 1967 on—after a hiatus of a number of years during which the Club had been in the wilderness in terms of lack of success at a senior level at Victorian Rowing
Hubert Frederico (coach), David Douglas, Graham Boykett, John Harry (MUBC), Tom Duffy (cox) and Stephen Gillon, after winning at Canadian Henley

Photograph courtesy of John Peck

Peter Nicholson sculling

John Harry collection

The years from 1967 to 1970 saw the Club emerging from many lean years of Club rowing. (oars were shorter in those days), and passed the post half a length ahead of Adelaide. Indeed, success at intervarsity was used as a launching pad for success in club rowing.

The intervarsity eight that rowed in Perth in 1968 was a very successful crew. Early in training it showed its potential by defeating Mercantile and winning the VRA State Champion Junior Eight title, the first time the Club had ever won this event. Harvey Nicholson then concentrated on moulding the eight into a superbly fit combination. In Perth, the crew had to face the unbeatable favourites, and winners of the Grand Challenge Cup at that year’s Henley Regatta, Adelaide University. The Adelaide University eight were so determined to win their first I-V for 34 years that members gave up their chance to row in the S.A. King’s Cup crew to stay together.9

Perth intervarsity turned out to be the last intervarsity eights race to be held over a greater distance than 2000 metres, on the two-mile course on the Canning River. MUBC was rowing in the racer which had one of the Club’s most distinguished racing careers, the Clive Disher III. Both Adelaide and MUBC had easy wins on the day before the final. On the following day: ‘[they] staged one of the great I-V Boat Races (comparable with the 1951 and 1973 races). Adelaide led from the start and to within 200 metres from the finish. Melbourne increased its rating to 42 and finally 44 (oars were shorter in those days), and passed the post half a length ahead of Adelaide.

The 1968 Olympic team Captain was past MUBC member, Paul Guest, who was a member of the coxless pair with David Ramage from the Corio Bay Rowing Club. It was the first Olympic Games ever held in Latin America, and Mexico had been the only country willing to take on the expense and difficulty of organising an Olympiad. Paul Guest wrote movingly for the Australian Olympic Committee about Mexico’s massive effort at housing and moving the teams around, as well as the fantastic arenas they had built for the Games. He described the rowing course at Xochimilco as ‘an overgrown swimming pool’ about 2080 metres long with lanes 12.5 metres apart and buoyed at 20 metre intervals.8

Guest had previously rowed in coxed pairs at the Rome Olympics with Neville Howell. Both Adelaide and MUBC had easy wins on the day before the final. On the following day: ‘[they] staged one of the great I-V Boat Races (comparable with the 1951 and 1973 races). Adelaide led from the start and to within 200 metres from the finish. Melbourne increased its rating to 42 and finally 44 (oars were shorter in those days), and passed the post half a length ahead of Adelaide.
Rise of the lightweights

Perhaps of particular interest was the rise of MUBC in lightweight rowing. Melbourne University crews came to dominate lightweight rowing in Victoria and Australia throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. The foundation for this domination was laid through success at intervarsity level. In the first twenty-five years of the lightweight fours event at the intervarsity regatta, from the success of the four stroked by Geoff Park in the inaugural race in 1965, Melbourne University won an amazing nineteen times. The first lightweight scullers from MUBC to gain state selection in the Penrith Cup were Peter McCabe Doyle (1964), Geoff Park and McCabe Doyle (1965) and Brian Clarke and Bill Elbridge in 1969. They were to be followed by many others over the next twenty years.

An important part of this development came from the coaching of Mark Schapper, who had coxed the winning intervarsity eight in 1965, and first coached the intervarsity lightweight four in 1966. Crews under his guidance were victorious in 1967, 1969 and 1970 and came very close second in 1968. He also coached the Club’s senior lightweight four during the period from 1969 through until 1972, culminating in the Club’s first ever national championship win with a victory in the lightweight eights on Lake Kurwongbah in Queensland. Success in winning state lightweight four titles in 1970 and 1971 were followed by Mark being markedly appointed coach of the Victorian Penrith Cup crew (the interstate race for lightweight fours) in 1970 and 1971 (which produced the first win by a Victorian crew in that event since 1966).

Success in lightweight events had only come after many defeats in Club rowing. It was greatly facilitated by combining MUBC’sarsmen in state crews with such champions as George Xouris and Jeff Sykes from Corio Bay. Mark Schapper worked hard on increasing the efficiency of his crews, primarily by concentrating on accelerating the oar through the stroke to the finish. This assisted the crew to learn how to race effectively and was not driven by ‘style’ so much as by Mark’s understanding of the physics involved. At the same time, he realised it was important to make training more enjoyable by introducing as much variation into training sessions as possible, thereby enabling the crew ‘to enjoy the training more, and actually work harder without realising it.’

For Mark, the critical breakthrough was the 1971 Penrith Cup crew. As he recalls: ‘By the standards of the day this combination was seriously fast ... By the time we went to Perth for the race, this crew, at 6:24.8 average and with a cox on board, could repeatedly hold the winning King’s Cup eight from a standing start to 250–300 metres ... By 1972 our 1LMW was pretty strong—and the best of the group very nearly ready to take on the World—which they did in 1974.’

1969, a pivotal year

1969 proved another year of developments and victories. Melbourne dominated intervarsity at Ballarat, winning the men’s eight, the lightweight four and the newly introduced event for coxless pairs for the Carlton & United Goblets. It was the first time that the Oxford and Cambridge Cup for eights was rowed over 2000 metres. Melbourne easily accounted for Sydney and Adelaide in cold and blustery conditions on Lake Wendouree. This was a particularly satisfying victory for MUBC as it demonstrated ‘that a well-trained crew can win over any distance.’

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The nucleus of that winning 1968 intervarsity eight then formed the basis of the first MUBC senior eight to defeat a Mercantile senior eight in nine years during the summer of 1968–9, beating the old foe on three occasions in the process. Although not a win, one of the senior eight’s memorable performances was in the 1969 Henley Grand Challenge Cup, in which it led narrowly until the 1500 metre mark, but was finally rowed down by the heavier and more experienced New South Wales King’s Cup crew, rowing as Sydney Rowing Club, comprising five silver medallists from the previous year’s Mexico Olympics. Peter Nicholson, having recovered from illness, brilliantly stroked this crew. In addition to himself, the eight also contained two other lightweight oarsmen, Cam Johnston and Mike Dalling, together with the remaining members of the MUBC heavyweight senior eight, after losing Will Liley and John Harry to King’s Cup selection. Cam went on to become a world lightweight champion. These lightweight successes proved that talented lightweight rowers could test the mettle of even the top heavyweights.

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Invitation from Japan

A most exciting development was an invitation in 1969 from the Japan Amateur Rowing Association to send an eight to compete in the All Japan Rowing Championships on the Toda Olympic Course. The only crews previously invited had been Cambridge in 1954 and Oxford in 1959. Neither had won the Championship.

After the success of the intervarsity eight in Perth in 1968, Harvey Nicholson requested Desmond McSweeney, who was Australia’s Minister Commercial at the Australian Embassy in Tokyo and whose son Paul had rowed in the Perth eight, to approach the Japanese universities, eight, as Australian Universities champions, to compete in that year’s All Japan Championships. JARA replied that there was insufficient time to arrange such an invitation for that year, but agreed to extend one for the All Japan Championships Regatta to be held in August of the following year. This meant of course that it became even more imperative to retain the Oxford and Cambridge Cup in May 1969, so that the crew could go to Japan later in the year as the Australian Universities champions.

Gus Ferguson and Bill Christophersen from the intervarsity eight, as well as Richard Kendall the cox, were unavailable to go to Japan. Rob Zahara and Jim McMeckan replaced them and went to Japan later in the year as the Australian Universities champions.

The All Japan Championship was the turning point from the traditional to the modern MUBC. Until the mid 1960s, the Club had been primarily devoted to college or intervarsity competition, and participated in club regatta rowing with intermittent enthusiasm. Individual MUBC members had competed in state, national and international competitions throughout the history of the Club, but these had always been dependent on the enthusiasm of individual coaches, captains or presidents; but from the time of the All Japan Championships, the Club was continually involved with all levels of rowing—club, intervarsity, state, national and international. A significant part of the credit for initiating this change must go to Peter Nicholson who reinvigorated the Club during his short time there. This was the start of Bill’s very successful international rowing career for Australia.

The 1969 trip to Japan was an unforgettable experience for all members of the team who participated and was a milestone in the history of the Club in that, apart from the coxed four which rowed at Henley Royal Regatta in 1963 and which was steered by an Oxford cox who had been made a member of MUBC, it was the first time that a Club crew had competed outside Australia.

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The team trained strenuously from the end of intervarsity in May 1969, including a weights program designed by Stan Nicholes at Oasis Gymnasium, through until they departed for Japan in July 1969. The eight was a sectionalised boat made by Sargent & Burton, was crated up by Jeff Sykes, the Geelong boat builder, and transported to Tokyo courtesy of the Japanese shipping line NYK. The pair rowed in a borrowed boat which had been left behind by one of the foreign crews in the Tokyo 1964 Olympics.

Training commenced from the day of arrival in Tokyo on the Olympic course at Toda and continued for three weeks until the day of the regatta on August 1969. During this time there was an opportunity for competition at a lead-up regatta and sightseeing at Japan’s ancient capital of Kyoto, which the team travelled to on the famous bullet train. The eight performed well in lead-up regattas, but the competition from Doshisha University and Keio University, in particular, was extremely good. Doshisha had the same crew that had been selected to represent Japan at the previous year’s Mexico City Olympics. After winning by large margins in the heat and the semi-final, Melbourne drew an unfavourable station in the final, which was held in a strong cross headwind. In the final Doshisha won by one and a half lengths from Keio with Melbourne, a further canvas behind in third place.

In the coxed pairs event, Bill Magennis and Rob Benson, coxed by Michael Nicholson, won the All Japan Championship. They then came second in the coxless pairs event (using the same boat and cox weight) weighting the bow down with a bag of sand to correct the trim). This was the start of Bill’s very successful international rowing career for Australia.

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role, as did the technical skills improvement brought about by the outstanding coaching of Mark Schapper with the lightweight squads.

Poignantly, the era’s end was marked by the death of (Uncle) Russell Keon-Cohen. Much loved and admired, he and his brother and nephews represented the great continuity of the Club. He moved the acceptance of the annual report at the 19 September 1969 annual meeting. At the next committee meeting on 2 December everyone stood in silent respect for his memory. Born in 1901, ‘Uncle Russell’ had been one of the Club’s most colourful, passionate and loyal members. He had stroked the Henley Grand Challenge for the Club in 1924 as well as many intervarsity and college crews. He was one of only three honorary life members alive at this time. A new four was named after him.

The centenary intervarsity and the first win for women
In 1970, intervarsity competition began its second century. On 21–23 May, the regatta was held for the first time at Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra in near perfect conditions. The Australian National University was the host. It provided real satisfaction to the Club in that it won the men’s pair, lightweight four and the men’s eight events, beating Sydney University Boat Club. They had won 100 years before in 1870 when there had been only one event—coxed fours—and two universities, Melbourne and Sydney. It was in 1970 also that Melbourne won its first intervarsity women’s event—the coxed four. The men’s victories were all the more satisfying as many crew members had not previously competed in intervarsity races.

The eight were Field Rickards Jnr (bow), Tony Oakley (2), John Paterson (3), Rob Zahara (4), Bill Magennis (5), Peter Wilson (6), Lachie Payne (7), Ian Farran (stroke), Peter Hyslop (cox) and Harvey Nicholson (coach). The coxless pair was John Paton (bow) and David Bainbridge (stroke) and Harvey Nicholson (coach). The lightweight four were Andy McKinley (bow), Kim Abbott (2), Brian Clarke (3), Cam Johnston (stroke), Tony Richards (cox) and Mark Schapper (coach).

Training had begun soon after the intercollegiate events on 23–25 March. As well, the eight and pair went to Mildura and Wentworth regattas for training during Easter. Many of the lightweight four trained at Ballarat where most of the crew had represented Victoria in the Penrith Cup (finishing a somewhat disappointing third). This was the first occasion on which a whole MUBC crew had been selected for the Penrith Cup. Peter Nicholson stroked the crew with Cam Johnston, Andy McKinley and Brian Clarke behind him. As Peter was no longer studying at Melbourne University, he did not compete in the intervarsity event and was replaced by Kim Abbott.

As part of the training for intervarsity, long rows were undertaken at weekends and the crews were introduced to parts of the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers they were unfamiliar with. The crews rowed beyond Riverview Tea Gardens (on the Maribyrnong), to Footscray and the Bay in one direction and as far as Dight’s Falls in the other. Harvey Nicholson’s notes reveal his philosophy on training: ‘Heavy rain on many nights made training unpleasant but helped to weld a determined crew which was encouraged by the resulting fast times, one 2000 metre course being done in 5mins 35secs, and two others in 5.55.8 and 5.48.5’.
In 1968, the first year that a women’s four event was held at intervarsity, a group of women from University Women's College, Janet Clarke Hall and St Hilda's, colleges which had competed previously in social intercollegiate events, decided to set up a women's rowing club. The women, Margaret Cortigan and Elaine Skinner, both in their last year of studies, were joined by Robyn Lyons and Vicky Richards, both in their first year. The Sports Union obtained a tub four for the women, from the YWCA, that was housed in the MUBC boatshed. The first club Captain was Robyn Lyons.

In a report in the 11 July 1969 Herald, Lyons said they were out to win the state junior and lightweight fours championships as well as the University Women's Four championships of 1970. Training for this had begun in March of 1969. The club received encouragement from Kath Sturh (now Bennett), a mainstay of women's rowing. She and

The women have arrived

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the secretary of the Victorian Ladies' Rowing Association met with Bill Tickner on the women’s behalf and convinced him that women's rowing was viable. They were initially coached by Bob Mann of Yarra Yarra Boat Club, but Richard Burn came on board to become their first official coach. The intervarsity crew comprised Peta Brewster (bow), Robyn Lyons, Betty Gawthorne, Pat Oddie (stroke) and Vicki Richards (cox).

At this time these Melbourne University Ladies' Rowing Club members were the only women rowing out of a shed on the Yarra. Other women’s crews used Albert Park Lake. It was a great advantage that MULRC were able to train with the men’s lightweight four. However, there were difficulties with rowing out of the shed as there were no women’s showers or changing rooms, so the women used the caretaker’s flat. Other than that, they were by and large ignored.

In 1970 MULRC was officially established as a club affiliated with the Melbourne University Sports Union. The MULRC crew travelled to Lake Kurwongbah in Queensland for the Club’s first intervarsity. By this time the women had acquired a brand new racing four which would be called Kooboora. They easily won the event over 1000 metres in Brisbane by two lengths from Sydney, Queensland and Newcastle. The emergencies Denise Widner and Sandra Kousal were taught how to row by Field Richards Snt and Rob Mann. They came second in the heat of the pairs race to eventual winners Queensland. The intervarsity four were awarded Blues without the usual probation period new clubs needed to qualify.

In 1971 the Melbourne University Junior Four won the National Title in the Australian championships. The crew were Pat Oddie, Sandy Bonsaat, Denise Waldner, Betty Gawthorne and Vicki Richards.

1971–73

In 1971, for the first time in four years, MUBC lost the men’s eight event at intervarsity, though it did win the lightweight four and men’s pair. The eights race was won for the first time by Monash in an extremely close race. Monash went on to retain the Cup in the following two years. The Club led the Victorian lightweight premiership with 60 points. They also did well in the junior premiership which covered all junior, maiden and novice events, where the Club earned 100 points compared to their old rival Mercantile, which had 92.

The senior premiership was dominated by Monash University with 120 points, double that of Mercantile. MUBC had only 16 points in this season.22

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The first MULRC crew to compete (and win) at intervarsity in 1970 on Lake Kurwongbah, Queensland (Richard Burn, coach): Peta Brewster (bow), Robyn Lyons (2), Betty Gawthorne (3), Pat Oddie (stroke), Vicki Richards (cox.)

The winning 1970 crew and the traditional dunking of the cox

Michael Nicholson aged 15 practicing in Japan for later glory in the Herald Shield sculling competition, which he won twice Michael Nicholson collection

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The women have arrived

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Mercantile. He coxed many MUBC crews, including the 1969 Tokyo crew, and also occasionally rowed in a lightweight pair. Michael also went on to coach many successful MULRC women’s intervarsity crews.

With a strong committee and an excellent program of year round rowing, the Club had finally taken itself beyond the problems that had plagued it for the previous 100 years. Old members remained to coach or administrate or fundraise and the line-up of Vice-Presidents bore out the force of the Club. In 1972, they were Arthur Adams, Chester Keon-Cohen, Tony Oakley, Field Rickards Jnr, David Salmon, Rob Stewart, Bill Stokes and Mark Schapper. Harvey Nicholson was again President, Rob Zahara, Captain and David Salmon, Treasurer. The Club had two Patrons, Dr Clive Disher and W Balcombe Griffiths. Throughout the season the Club had gained four Victorian titles and one NSW title for senior coxed pairs, senior sprint pairs and senior lightweight fours. There were two MUBC members in the Victorian King’s Cup eight and one in the ‘A’ coxless pair, the whole of the Victorian Penrith Cup crew, including the coach and all the equipment, were...
The President announced that the Club now had a regular veteran eight. It was stroked by Field Rickards Snr.

The Club then achieved a major milestone in 1972 by winning its first national title, the Championship Lightweight Eight, the intervarsity lightweight four, the Grand Challenge Championship Lightweight Eight, the Intervarsity Lightweight Four and the Junior Championship Lightweight Eight.

The new Coxswain’s Trophy was won by Victor Ronai ‘in an overall performance that well rowed Clive Disher IV, another four well rowed William Stokes, another four well rowed Robert Zahara and a pair Alf Lazer.

The new Coxswain’s Trophy was won by Victor Ronai ‘in an overall performance that beggars [sic] description.’ At the time Ronai was in Form 3 (Year 9) at Kew High School. He was the University’s senior cox and also occasionally rowed in a pair with fellow MUBC eights and fours. Ronai’s mother had lived in Germany before the Second World War and his sister was a member of the MULRC.

Dave Elder successfully paired with Tom Yuncken in the junior pair events at this time. Elder had returned from the Vietnam War where he had served as an Army Captain at the Australian Hospital in Vang Tau. He had resumed study to complete his surgeon’s exams.

Heavy rowers were now called the Moomba Henley—at which the MUBC senior eight defeated their old rivals Mercantile by 2½ lengths. Xavier came third. The crew were Lachie Payne (bow), Ian Farran, Gus Ferguson, Paul McSweeney, Cam Johnston, Peter Nicholson, Phil Norman, Will Liley, Bill Magennis, Lachie Payne, Field Rickards Snr, and Bill Yuncken (cox). Peter Nicholson and Will Liley were also voted University men’s rowers of the year.

One of the highlights of the 1972 season was the Club’s victory at Henley-on-Yarra—now called the Moomba Henley—at which the MUBC senior eight defeated their old rivals Mercantile by 2½ lengths. Xavier came third. The crew were Lachie Payne (bow), Ian Farran, Gus Ferguson, Paul McSweeney, Cam Johnston, Peter Nicholson, Phil Norman, Will Liley, Bill Magennis, Lachie Payne, Field Rickards Snr, and Bill Yuncken (cox). Peter Nicholson and Will Liley were also voted University men’s rowers of the year.

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1974 World Championship gold-medal-winning and 1975 World Championship bronze-medal-winning lightweight coxless four: Colin Smith (bow), Geoff Rees (2), Andrew Michelmore (3), Cam Johnston (stroke) with Peter Philp (coach), David England (con), Andy McKinley (emergency) and Peter Philp (coach). This outstanding crew convincingly won the Penrith Cup (having previously won the Victorian and NSW state titles) and was selected to represent Australia at the World Championship in Lucerne, Switzerland in September. This was the first time that lightweight events were to be included on the program for a World Championship. The 1974 annual meeting was the Club’s 115th. It was a great year for the Club. Harvey Nicholson made special mention of the Club winning the senior premiership for the first time ever. Rob Stewart discussed the expansion and improvement of the Club. ‘The club six years ago had no wins, no annual dinner, no amenities or a refrigerator, no representation on the VRA apart from club delegates.’

In fact this year was a watershed for the Club and for rowing in Australia. The lightweight four became the first Australian crew to win a gold medal at World Rowing Championships or Olympic Games. One hundred and nineteen donors assisted the crew with their expenses. The appeal had raised enough money to cover all costs including the special racing four built for the crew by Jeff Sykes named ‘Well rowed’ with their expenses. The appeal had raised enough money to cover all costs including the special racing four built for the crew by Jeff Sykes named ‘Well rowed’.

Though the extension was not completed until about 1979, this was the beginning of real recognition of MULRC and the acceptance of the permanence of women’s rowing. Apart from intervarsity, when they tended to use either the Ormond or Trinity eights, the women had few boats. However, by the late 1970s they did take over some of the men’s surplus equipment, usually the men’s lightweight crews’ boats. After this the women’s events continued with irregularity and from 1975, the women’s intervarsity regatta was held at the same time and place as the men’s, though MULRC was not always represented. They did not win again until, with much better organisation in 1978, they won the pair, coxed four, lightweight four and (unofficial) eight events. That team included Barbara Griffiths who did particularly well in the championships.

The team arrived in Amsterdam, picked up their bus and went to Duisberg to participate in the West German National Championships. They didn’t win but the crew began to combine much better. They returned to Amsterdam and did plenty of long, hard rows on the Bosbaan, the Dutch man-made course. They then left for the next regatta at Hanover, West Germany, feeling very weary, but only managed to come third. After a break in Interlaken where they drank a lot of beer and did no rowing, they sang a lot of bawdy songs on the bus on the way to Lucerne. The team’s final destination was the Grand Final with other heat winner Holland. ‘… On the Sunday morning, in near perfect rowing conditions with a very slight headwind, Australia led soon after the start and increased their lead to win by nearly two lengths from Holland in 6mins 38.12secs. With USA 3rd, West Germany 4th, Sweden 5th and Norway 6th. The actual margin of 5.12 secs was the second largest margin of all the Grand Finals.’

Harvey Nicholson was there for the victory. Bill Stokes, Tony Oakley, Lachie Payne and Rob Stewart also witnessed the event. In addition, the Club was represented at the World Championship.

1974, a watershed year

The Club was well represented in the Victorian team to contest the 1974 King’s Cup and Penrith Cup. David Slessar, Bill Magennis and Roger Atkinson were selected for the King’s Cup crew in bow, 3 and 5 seats respectively, and a MUBC lightweight four was selected as a whole to represent Victoria for the second year running. The 1974 crew were Colin Smith (bow), Geoff Rees (2), Andrew Michelmore (3), Cam Johnston (stroke), David England (con), Andy McKinley (emergency) and Peter Philp (coach).

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1975 winning MULRC intervarsity lightweight four (Huon River) (left to right): Frank Saccardo (bow), Jeremy McGregor (3), Robin Brownlee (cox), Norman O'Bryan (stroke) with Peter Philp (coach) and Ted Bawden (right hand). Sydney Morning Herald 1975. Library of Australia

On 6 February 1975, Bill Pearson, died. He was found in his flat by MUBC oarsman, Bill Liley. His military funeral was held at Fawkner Cemetery and Field Rickards Src delivered the Oration. Pearson’s life may seem unusual to us now, but during the middle of the twentieth century, there were many men who lived alone and took on jobs that required them to reside on site and be on call six days a week. Many buildings had caretakers, and these men were often also the handyman on the job. Some were married, but more often they were single men who had no apparent close ties.
Despite the Club’s advances there were some problems that were perpetual. The selection of men who rowed for other clubs in intervarsity crews was one such dilemma. During a March 1975 committee meeting, one of the important items was the appointment of coaches for the intervarsity crews. Three nominations were received: Christopher Dane (from Monash University Rowing Club) for the eight, Harvey Nicholson for the eight or four, and Bill Stokes for the eight, ‘with the proviso that he was free to select the best oarsmen available at Melbourne University.’

This was Bill Stokes’ second attempt at selecting someone from outside the Club. In 1974 he had tried to select an active member of the Mercantile Rowing Club to the eight, and had had the rules read to him. He demurred, saying he thought this was a very bad rule, but was forced to concede. In the same year Harvey Nicholson had selected a member of the lightweight four from the Corio Bay Rowing Club. He had been permitted to do so because he came within the Club rule which allowed men to be selected for intervarsity, if they were members of a club outside a twenty kilometre radius of Melbourne. When the committee discussed
Men's intervarsity pairs
Among the successful crews for the Club in the sixties and seventies in the Carlton & United Clubs boat races for men's intervarsity pairs were Rob Bimson and David Magnien in 1965; Ian Patton and David Banbridge in 1970; John Reid and David Banbridge in 1971 and 1972; Geoff Rees and Ag Michelmore in 1973; John Reid and Bill Magennis in 1969; Jon Paton and Geoff Rees in the stroke seat—a formidable crew. Tim McCoy was cox. Stokes was a formidable member of the Club as a rower and official. In 1975 he was elected as a member of the VRA.47

Other old problems were evident in the state of the Club's finances. Hon. Treasurer, Bill Stokes, 'gave a critical analysis of the club's finances' which he emphasised were 'on a very low [sic] state. Subscriptions had not been collected for two or three years. Stokes was adamant that once the back subscriptions were collected, no member of a crew should be allowed to row unless he was financial. Membership cost just $5; very low when compared to the years before Melbourne University Sports Union support. Stokes also thought that life members who used the Club's equipment should also pay the $5. Stokes was a formidable member of the Club as a rower and official. In 1975 he was elected as a member of the VRA.46

A ‘personnel rejuvenation’ subcommittee had been established. Murray Ross, who was then in charge, reported at the 20 November 1975 meeting, ‘that an enormous amount of stock could not be accounted for.’ The missing stock included forty-two dozen bottles of beer.48

The intervarsity lightweight four continued to bring the Club success, and in 1976 the lightweight four included two new recruits, Paul van Veenendaal and Peter Antonie. Despite previous objections the women's races were also conducted at the same regatta, but there were no representatives from MULRC.

Other old problems remained throughout a quiet, generous and humble supporter of the Club.55

Roes, mother of Geoff Rees. The occasion was witnessed by 100 friends and supporters on a sunny Sunday morning. A handicap race was held for the occasion with refreshments afterwards. The sheds which had been cleaned and spruced up by members of the Club had never looked so good. The refreshments, which included champagne, beer, fruit juice, sandwiches and pies inspired Arthur Adams to say ‘This is the stuff of which oarsmen are made’, with beer in one hand and pie in the other.51

Another auspicious moment in 1975 was the intercollegiate victory by Newman College for the second time in two years; this despite five members of the crew leaving and having to be replaced in 1976. Newman had not won for ten years before this. The crews in both 1975 and 1976 were coached by Adrian Maginn.52 Peter Antone struck the 1976 Newman crew which won by five and a half lengths.46

Vale Clive Disher, the end of an era
Sadly Dr Clive Disher died on March 13. Harvey Nicholson wrote a tribute to him in the 24 March 1976 Mubc. Disher’s interest in the Club had never waned; his correspondence with Nicholson lasted for 23 years from January 1953 to February 1976. His first letter began thus: ‘I fear I am a very bad Patron as I rarely put in an attendance, but I am more interested in the Club than any other outside body that I have been connected with, and I do appreciate some connection with it however slender.’ His contribution included the Clive Disher Fund and he often donated extra money for boats and oars—especially the latter so that winners of the intervarsity eights could keep their oars as trophies. He gave generously when the Club was invited to row in the All Japan Championships in 1969, and toward the expenses of the MUBC lightweight coxless fours in 1974 and 1975. He remained throughout a quiet, generous and humble supporter of the Club.56

1975 winning MUBC intervarsity coxless pair (Lake Wendouree): Andrew Rigby (bow) and Norman O’Byran (stroke). Courtesy Ken Toleman

1976 Royal Vase Eight (all MUBC members) coach, Bill Stokes: Mark Nolan (bow), Tim McCoy (2), Roger Atkinson (3), Tim Ross-Edwards (4), Murray Ross (5), Dallas English (6), Bruce Longden (7), Greg Longden (stroke), Peter Gorne (cox) out of picture. Courtesy Ken Toleman

1975 Victorian Eight (all MUBC members) coach, Bill Stokes: Mark Nolan (bow), John Cumper (2), Roger Atkinson (3), Tim Ross-Edwards (4), Murray Ross (5), Dallas English (6), Bruce Longden (7), Greg Longden (stroke), Peter Gorne (cox) out of picture. Courtesy Ken Toleman

1974 Victorian Colts Eight (all MUBC members) coach, Bill Stokes: Mark Nolan (bow) and Norman O’Byran (stroke) out of picture. Courtesy Ken Toleman

1974 winning MUBC intervarsity coxless pair (Lake Wendouree): Andrew Rigby (bow) and Norman O’Byran (stroke). Courtesy Ken Toleman

John Michelmore collection
Brigadier Harold Clive Disher
CBE, ED, MD, DA (RCP & S), O ST J
1891–1976

One of the best loved and most respected members of MUBC, Clive Disher was born at Rosedale, Victoria, and attended Rosedale State School, Gippsland College, Sale and Scotch College where he rowed in the 1910 and 1911 Head of the River crews. He entered Ormond College in 1912, rowed for Ormond, and stroked the winning MUBC intervarsity eights of 1913 and 1914. He also rowed in the 1914 Victorian eight. On completing his medical degree he was appointed Captain, Australian Medical Corps, served in France with the 5th Field Ambulance with distinction, and was recommended for the Military Cross.

Between the wars Clive worked mainly as an anaesthetist but joined the AIF again in December 1939. During 1940 and 1941 he had responsibility for medical services in North Africa. He was then appointed CBE and took part in the Greek campaign. In November 1941 he was promoted to temporary Brigadier and sent to Port Moresby. After the Second World War he lived at ‘Strathfieldsaye’ in Gippsland, a property his grandfather had acquired in 1869. His wife predeceased him and he had no descendants. At his death in 1976, he bequeathed the property to the University of Melbourne.

He was Patron of MUBC, in Harvey Nicholson’s words, ‘for as long as we can remember’, and remained so until his death. In his tribute to Clive in the Mubc newsletter of March 1976, Harvey Nicholson said:

… two of the many qualities of this great man [were] his quiet modesty and his great loyalty to the M.U.B.C. These never wavered … Undoubtedly his greatest rowing achievement was in 1919 when, as Captain H. C. Disher of Melbourne University Boat Club, he stroked the No. 1 A.I.F. Crew at the Henley Royal Peace Regatta …

Many years later Clive Disher was named as ‘Athlete of the Year’ for the Australasian Section of the Worldwide Helms Trophy … Clive was one of three living honorary life members of the M.U.B.C. … in particular, I will remember the humility, generosity and loyalty of this great man.
1976 MUBC senior eight, winners of the VRA Centenary Regatta (Bill Stokes, coach): Bruce Longden (bow), John Cumper (2), Ewen Kilpatrick (3), Lachie Payne (4), Tim Ross-Edwards (5), Jim Lowe (6), Murray Ross (7), Greg Longden (stroke), Adrian Maginn (cox). Courtesy Ken Toleman

1977 winning MUBC intervarsity eight (West Lakes) Cam Johnston and Mark Schapper, coaches: Brad Fenner (bow), Sandy Cameron (5), Andrew Rigby (2), Bruce Longden (3), George Fulford (4), Julian Bailey (6), Andrew Cassidy (7), Sandy Hutton (stroke), Tim McCoy (cox). Courtesy Ken Toleman

1978 MUBC Victorian and Australian Champion Lightweight Eight (Peter Philp, coach): Michael Quinn (bow), Vaughan Bollen (2), Paul Van Wermenadal (Don Cooper for Australian Championships) (3), Rob Stewart (4), Colin Smith (5), Peter Antova (6), Simon Gillet (7), Geoff Rees (stroke), Adrian Maginn (cox). Courtesy Ken Toleman

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Moving into the world, 1966–1979
As a result of Harvey Nicholson’s long friendship with Sir William Dargie, a wartime army comrade of Harvey’s, the Club raised funds from members and commissioned a portrait of Clive by Sir William. Although it was rare for Sir William to agree to undertake posthumous portraits, he agreed to do so in this case, and the magnificent painting of Clive in the garden of his homestead ‘Strathfieldaye’ remains one of the Club’s most treasured and valuable possessions.

A zenith

The Club was at a zenith in the summer season of 1976–7. At the VRA Centenary Regatta, the Club’s senior eight won the main event and were presented with their medals by the Governor of Victoria, The Hon Sir Henry Winneke. An outstanding No. 1 lightweight four crew won both senior fours and senior lightweight fours and were presented with their medals by Harvey Nicholson as Vice-President of the VRA. The No. 2 lightweight four also won junior four, junior pair and novice four events. The lightweight eight defeated the Mercantile lightweight eight, which had been undefeated in Australia for three years at the Henley and Barwon Regattas and the Victorian Lightweight Eights Championship. Murray Ross and Tim Ross-Edwards were selected in the King’s Cup crew along with Adrian Maginn as cox. A composite MUBC-Mercantile crew won at the Barwon and Ballarat Regattas and the Grand Challenge at Henley. The Club was leading the senior premiership in March 1977 with 81 points to Mercantile’s 47.6 The Annual Report which was published on 14 June 1977 declared the year to be one of the most successful in MUBC’s 118 years. The Club did win the senior premiership. The highlight of the year was the outstanding performance of the No. 1 lightweight four. From the time of its final selection it won every lightweight four event (as well as many senior four events), was selected as the Victorian Penrith Cup crew, and won both coxed and coxless...
Australian lightweight championships by large margins. The crew were Geoffrey Rees (stroke), Simon Gillett (3), Peter Antomie (2) and Colin Smith (bow), coached by Peter Philp. They won gold at the Copenhagen International Regatta at the end of July and silver at the World Rowing Championships in Amsterdam in August.

In England, MUBC oarsman and 1976 Rhodes Scholar, Ag Michelmore, stroked the Oxford crew to victory over Cambridge in the 1977 Boat Race.

The 1977 intervarsity regatta, held at West Lakes in South Australia, saw a young MUBC eight win the Oxford and Cambridge Cup. The crew were Brad Fennner (bow), Alexander (Sandy) Cameron (2), Andrew Rigby (3), Bruce Longden (4), George Pulford (5), Julian Bailey (6), Andrew Cassidy (7), Sandy Hutton (stroke) and Tim McCoy (cox); coaches were Mark Schapper and Cam Johnston. The lightweight four crew consisting of Chris Piesse (bow), Stephen O‘Bryan (2), Paul Van Veenendaal (3), Glenn Robertson-Smith (stroke), John Bishop (cox), coached by Rob Stewart, came second in their event. Tony Chenco (bow) and Andrew Griffiths (stroke), came third in the men’s pair event.

After five years of regular Friday night training, there were now two veteran crews called the ‘Darks’ and ‘Lights’. The ‘Darks’ were George Raymond (bow), Julian Zahara (2), Bill Stokes (3), Ian Blair (4), Ian Bult (5), Jim Robson (6), Arthur Adams (7), Field Rickardts Sr (stroke) and John Henry (cox). The ‘Lights’ were Peter Bubb (bow), Peter Foster (2), Don Handley (3), David Were (4), Peter Lateville (5), Patrick Moore (6), Peter Williams (7) and Christopher Hazard (stroke).

Further extensions were underway at the boatshed with changing rooms for women and new showers, toilets and boat racks. The building works did not go smoothly and the entrance had to be redone because it was made too narrow for the boats.

The 1978 Intervarsity Report boasted the results of women’s rowing for the first time. The Captain, Bruce Longden, reported that the New South Wales Rowing Association had presented the Centenary Cup for competition between competing universities to be held by the university with the highest aggregate points on the following basis:

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Melbourne won the Cup for this year with 75 points. Points were not awarded for the Women’s Invitation Eight.

Women’s rowing takes off

For the first time in the history of intervarsity rowing, women’s events made up over half of the 1978 intervarsity programme. MAlc no. 63 of June 1978 reported that MULRC lightweight fours and heavyweight fours combined in the eight, with the lightweight four in the bow and the heavyweight four in the stern, coxed by Alison Inglis. The members of the eight were the lightweight four—Mary Johnston, Gini Skinner, Janet Johnston and Margaret Campbell, whose cox had been Clare Warburton and coach, Michael Nicholson.
and the heavyweight four—Jenni Donaldson, Margot Foster, Lynn Matheson and Jacqui Marshall, whose cox was Alison Inglis and coach, Brad Fenner. Barbara Griffiths and Marguerite Liddington, who had rowed in the MULRC women’s coxed four which won the Australian Championships during Easter on the Franklin in Tasmania.59

Fundraising issues

Discussion took place in May 1978 on ‘the urgent financial position to get our Australian teams overseas for the world rowing championships. On budget costs, the estimated life members were asked to support this again.62 Following teams overseas for the world rowing championships. On budget costs, the estimated...
After the New Zealand championships, the Club welcomed the President of FISA, Thomas Keller, at a formal cocktail party held at Harvey and Joyce Nicholson’s home. All the Australian team members wore their Australian blazers and the AARC international tie. The evening was a great success.

Financial troubles with the University

The problem of funding the Club’s many activities remained and was exacerbated by a lack of clarity about membership fees for MUBC and the Sports Union. The Treasurer’s report revealed that the Club was $654 in debt. This was partly because the Recreation and Grounds Committee refused to refund claims of $500 because the Club had overspent an agreed budget. To try and resolve this, Cheryl Chirnside, Director of Sports and Physical Education, Alf Lazer, Chairman RGC, Harvey Nicholson, President of MUBC and Bill Stokes, Treasurer of MUBC, met and agreed that the deficit for 1979 would be carried forward to 1980, but only if expenses for the two-year period did not exceed the budget.

Equipment and repair of equipment cost more each year and funds from the University, membership fees and donations just could not keep pace. The association of the Club and the Sports Union remained strained. It is perhaps worth quoting extracts from the minutes of a meeting of the Boat Club Committee and Sports Union held on 19 November 1980, chaired by Cheryl Chirnside and attended by Alf Lazer, Field Rickards Snr, Charlie Bartlett (Secretary, MUBC), Jim Peters (Vice-Captain, MUBC), Dr Anne Chirnside (President, MULRC) and Barbara Griffiths (Captain, MULRC):

A tour of the sheds and YYRC [Yarra Yarra Rowing Club where some MUBC boats were racked] were carried out and the names of all the boats and all their positions noted. In the Committee room a discussion took place regarding the necessity for the Union to pay for racking space at YYRC which was $400 per year. Mr Richards said that they had been given first preference by YYRC and had been informed that if we did not need the spaces then they would be promptly hired to Carey Grammar … if we lost our space there was no way we could ever get it back as racking space along the river bank was extremely tight.

The women’s intercollegiate crews used the boats owned by various student clubs and these were not available for use by MUBC. University College hired a boat from YYRC, for the price of $125 during their rowing season. Mr Nicholson related the story of MULRC’s contract with the University in which the YYRC, for the price of $125 during their rowing season. Mr Nicholson detailed the history of the formal agreement between the University of Melbourne, the Sports Union and MUBC negotiated at the instance of the Curso Committee and MUBC that apart from the best boat in each weight category, the use of which was the responsibility of the MUBC Committee, there should be an amicable inter-change of boats on occasions between MULRC and MUBC.

A revolution commences in the Club and in Australian rowing

Notwithstanding the perennial internal housekeeping issues, a revolution was about to commence in sculling that would have a profound influence on the Club as a whole. David Yates had been a successful lightweight oarsman at national and intervarsity level in the early seventies and had himself been influenced by Mark Schapper as a coach, and by rowing with three champion MUBC oarsmen—Cam Johnston, Ag Michelmore and Geoff Rees. David had a BSc (Hons) and PhD in Chemistry, and this background, coupled with his propensity for exhaustive analysis of all matters technical and bio-mechanical, resulted in the tag ‘the Professor’ by which he was known by many.

While undertaking a research fellowship in the UK in the mid-seventies, he experienced their more extensive sculling programs and studied their latest training ideas. When he returned to Melbourne in 1977, Yates started experimenting and putting these new ideas into practice, which lead to a revolution within MUBC sculling ranks that had a profound impact on the Club for the next twenty years. David describes how it started:

In 1979 Andrew Rigby, then Captain of Boats, Steve Spurling and George Fulford asked me to coach them for an attempt on that year’s national championships in Adelaide. I introduced them to the approach I had learnt from our successful lightweights and to the training ideas I had learnt in England. Broadly that involved competitive training, greater volumes of steady state type aerobic work and systematic training cycles. These training methods are now the basis of most modern training programs but at that time were not being widely used in Australia.

Success was almost immediate and all three scullers had a successful 1979 national regatta. In particular, Andrew won the national junior single scull and Steve came second in the lightweight single and was selected in the national team. A little later in the year Andrew went on to win the intervarsity scull in what was a surprise when he convincingly beat the 1978 intervarsity champion and 1976 Olympian Chris Shinners.

Meanwhile, Australian rowing as a whole was about to undergo a massive change. The end of the seventies was a time when selection processes changed the stage for all rowers. Thomas Keller, at a formal cocktail party held at Harvey and Joyce Nicholson’s home. All the Australian team members wore their Australian blazers and the AARC international tie. The evening was a great success.
well rowed

University

...seeking national selection. From 1980 onwards, prior to nomination to the trial squad, the selectors required... each person seeking selection in an Australian team to compete in three trial regattas and the National Championships in both pairs and fours—or alternatively single and double sculls— to satisfy selection requirements.

The men’s team was put through stringent testing prior to selection as had been done the previous year. The women’s crews were again selected by separate selectors. This was the first season of Reinhold Batschi as the National Director of Coaching and he devised a very tough training program for all crews.

Close of the decade, dawn of a new era

In 1979, the Club fared well with continued success in intervarsity, winning the men’s scull, men’s lightweight four, women’s scull, women’s pair and women’s eight events.

In the Penrith Cup for 1979, the unusual situation arose whereby more than one crew per state was permitted to race in the event. Three Victorian lightweight fours were selected to represent Victoria in the race and eleven of twelve members were from MUBC—something which has never happened before or since. Moreover, two of these crews finished first and second in the Penrith Cup. In another demonstration of the extraordinary strength of lightweight rowing that year at MUBC, the Club boated two eights which finished a length apart from each other in first and second place in the Australian lightweight eight championships.

The decade finished on a high internationally, also with the Club fielding one-third of the Australian team at the 1979 FISA lightweight championships in Bled. Among the Australian men’s lightweight eight crew, the MUBC representatives were David England, Dennis Hatcher, Simon Gillett, Geoff Rees, Ag Michelmore, Phil Gardiner, Vaughan Bollen (who injured his ankle and had to return to Australia) and Peter Antonie. Steve Spurling was the Australian men’s lightweight single sculler. The Australian women’s coxed four at the 1979 World Championships comprised Anne Chirnside, Verna Westwood, Sally Harding and Susie Palfreyman from MULRC and Pam Westendorf from Dimboola Rowing Club. At the same World Championships, Bill Magennis and Jim Lowe were in the heavyweight eight.

At the one hundred and twenty-first annual meeting held on 20 June 1980, Harvey Nicholson: 

expressed his delight at the outstanding year of the club which could hardly be paralleled. Internationally, no less than thirteen of our members were in the Australian rowing team which competed in the World Rowing Championships at Bled but [sic] both heavy weights and light weights rowed their way through to the Grand Final. On the local scene, not only did we win the senior premiership by a substantial margin but won the newly created “Champion Club of Victoria” for the most wins in regattas throughout the season.

At MUBC, the lightweight athletes coached by Peter Philp had led them to be the pre-eminent lightweight club in Australia, if not the world, and had paved the way for other members to follow.