

The LMJ Nostalgia Pages

ANTARCTICA

The Lynx

My earliest memories begin when we were living a dozen miles south of Durban in South Africa. The war had just ended and my father decided to have a boat built for fishing in Durban Bay. From a book of small boat designs he selected one for comfort and safety, with the sturdy build and generous freeboard justifying the name of *Imvubu* (from the Zulu for hippo). The length was about eighteen feet and a small open cabin gave some shelter from wind and rain when necessary.

In the early days, when my parents had three small boys all under ten, trips were often for picnics on Salisbury Island. That place fascinated me. The eastern end was covered with buildings that had seen use during the war but on the west it was barely touched, and as the first settlers would have found it a century earlier. The sparkling sand of the narrow beach seemed somehow to filter the water, so that we were paddling in crystal-clear shallows. And “narrow” was definitely the word for the beach; only a few yards behind the high-water mark the sand gave way to the sticky mud of a tidal mangrove swamp, crawling with fiddler crabs. I kept sneaking back there for another look at them, despite being told that it was a dangerous place.



The Imvubu moored in the Yacht Basin. Slipway visible at far right.

Within a few years our trips had changed, and we seemed to be fishing on the bay every weekend. This story takes place in the early 1960s, on one of our typical outings – probably a Saturday afternoon, with the weather warm and still. As usual we first chugged down to the zone known as The Moorings, a wide area of deep water (about 40 feet) near the harbour entrance. Anchoring or tying up to one of the scattered buoys was prohibited and so our normal routine was drifting. We would allow the wind or current to carry the boat gently along, and it usually moved conveniently sideways. We sat on the downwind side, lines over the upwind

side, and the boat dragged the baited hook along the bottom. There were jerks and pulls on the line as the sinker bounced over the roughness of the bottom but part of the skill of fishing was to distinguish those tugs from the ones made by a fish as it began to eat the bait. It was a leisurely way to pass an afternoon.

Dusk fell, and it was a pleasant evening in the warm subtropical weather as we lit our Tilley lamp. (Even in midsummer it was dark by around eight in that latitude, and this was not midsummer.) Only my father and I were there on that occasion, and we agreed that we would give it another hour or so. Around this time the fish often came on the bite, as we used to say, and in the next hour we might easily double our catch so far.

Then we heard some gentle rhythmic splashing, and our ears placed it as being in the direction of the harbour entrance and approaching us. Soon we saw a small unlit boat moving very slowly, and it came alongside. In it were three or four youths who told us that their outboard motor had broken down. Their boat was about twelve feet long, completely open, and with relatively low sides – the kind of thing that one might use on a pond or small lake, or even around the Yacht Basin, but not on waters where there could be higher waves if the wind rose or a large vessel passed. They had a paddle and they were managing to advance with this but it was hard work and slow. Could we tow them back to the Yacht Basin?

That was indeed where our moorings were, and where we would be heading later, but we weren't going to give up what was potentially the best part of our day's outing. Thus my father told them that we could take them but we were not leaving for an hour. Until then, they could tie up alongside in a position where they didn't obstruct our lines. They were not happy about this, and one pointed out that they had family who would have expected them to return before dark and would now be worrying. My father was sympathetic but saw this as their problem, brought upon themselves by travelling to a distant part of the bay with unreliable equipment. Thus he was not prepared to rush our departure, and his offer was unchanged. They decided to continue paddling their way back.

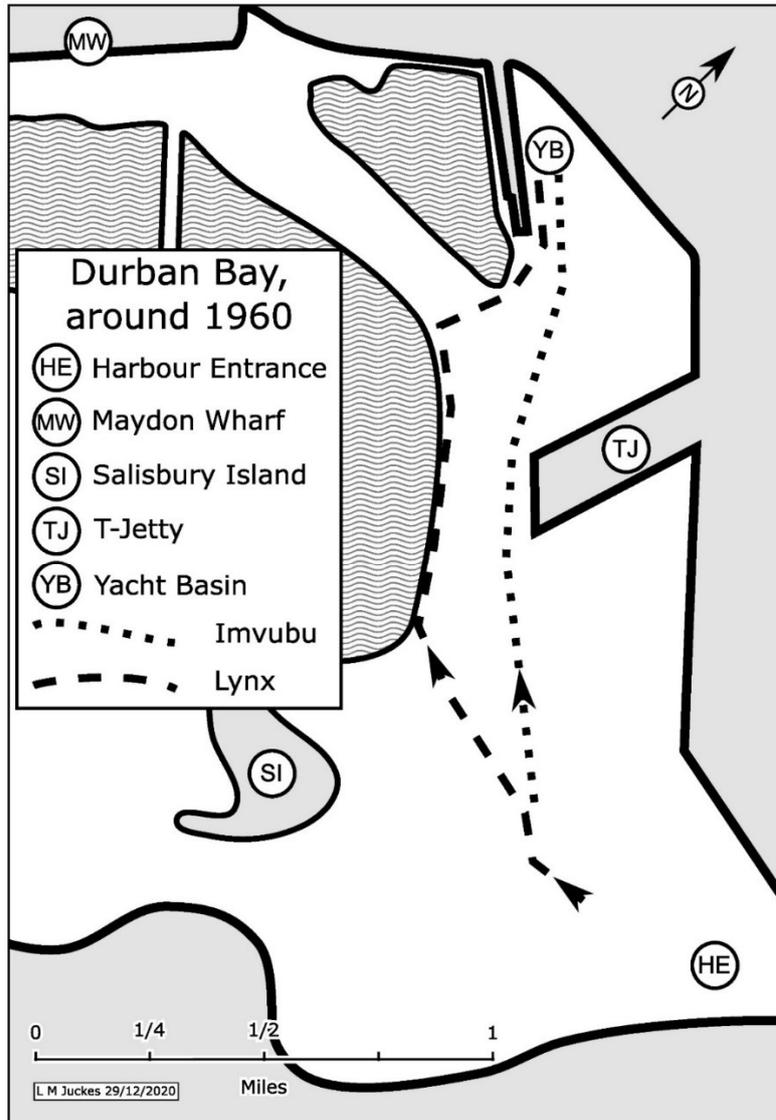
Around this point, one of the lads suddenly called out "Hello, Mr Juckes!"

My father peered at them in their unlit boat and the fellow turned out to be from a family we knew distantly, in the next village. The lad shifted closer, and as he did so their boat lurched frighteningly (to me, at least). It was obvious that there was a lot of water in the bottom, and that when the balance changed it could surge to the other side. Most likely the boat was leaking. It was not unusual for the timbers of boats stored out of the water (as most smaller boats were) to dry out and shrink. The result was that boards would no longer meet as tightly as they should, and a boat that had seemed quite sound on some earlier outing could later let the water in at a surprising rate. The normal procedure was to throw a bucket of water into the bottom of the boat a day or so before it was to be used, so that the boards could absorb the water, swell, and close any cracks. These sailors didn't seem knowledgeable about such matters.

That was when they asked us whether we had a bucket, or anything else suitable for bailing. We emptied what remained of our bait into something smaller and gave them the bait tin. I was sorry to see it handed over – it was from a catering-size batch of jam, with a home-made wire handle, and it had served us for years. They took it and began bailing out the water they had taken in.

They were still insistent that they could not wait, and so my father gave them some advice for the trip back to the Yacht Basin. Most important, without a light, was to keep out of the main channel and not to take the shortest route as they passed the T-Jetty. There were several light buoys, and smaller buoys and poles in between, indicating the edge of the sandbank on the other side of the channel. It was essential for them to head for that and then to continue along the edge of the sandbank until they were opposite the mole. (The mole was a long, slender pier reaching out from the shore and sheltering the Yacht Basin.) Then they should check that no large vessels were on the move nearby before cutting across the channel and following the length of the mole to the slipway and jetties.

In particular, it was approaching eight o'clock. Around that time each evening a tug would do a patrol starting from its normal berth near the harbour entrance, cruising past the T-jetty, and along to Maydon Wharf before returning an hour or so later. The crew of that tug either had a cavalier attitude to small boats or kept a poor watch because they had given us some close misses over the years even though we always had a bright lamp, and indeed sometimes waved it frantically as they steamed very close past us. Even a miss was alarming because the speed at which they travelled threw up some quite large waves. They would never have seen that little boat with no light, and even at some distance when the waves had weakened they could still have been enough to swamp its ridiculously small freeboard.



So off they went, with us shaking our heads at the fools that one could find in boats. When the tug passed we watched as it rounded the T-jetty and were relieved that this evening it kept well in the centre of the channel. If our friends were creeping along the edge of the sandbank they should be well clear of his wake.

Around that time we noticed a launch of about thirty feet approaching us, and as it drew close we saw that it was the Water Police. They hailed us and asked whether we had seen a boat named the *Lynx*. We knew the names of most boats that regularly fished the same times and places as we did, and none of them had that name. Then my father asked “Were there several lads in it?”

Indeed that was the boat they were seeking. Parents on shore had spent several hours fretting while they were overdue, and then phoned the harbour authority when night fell. My father told the police crew of the route he had advised them to take, and the condition of their

craft. They cruised off in that direction and we decided to call it a day. We wound in our lines and my father started the outboard motor, setting off along a more direct course while I packed up the fishing gear.

At the Yacht Basin we followed our normal routine, tying up and yelling for the Nicolls ferry which soon arrived. Sometimes the ferryman dropped us off at one of the sets of steps on the wooden jetty and sometimes by the slipway alongside it. On this occasion it was the latter, and there we found the *Lynx* with the lads trying to manoeuvre it on to a trailer and haul it out. We gathered that they had covered most of the distance back by paddling but the Water Police had towed them for the last stretch.

Directing them now was an adult, presumably the father of one, and he had obviously been told the tale of our indifference to their plight. He was furious but said nothing directly to us. Instead he chattered away angrily, ostensibly talking to himself but loud enough to make it clear that we were intended to hear it. As we carried our various items from the edge of the slipway to the road above, where we would be able to load them into the car, we passed him each time and caught a bit more of it.

“I thought we were put on this Earth to help one another!”

“It seems I was wrong there!”

“There are some folks who just don’t care about their fellow humans at all!”

“I just can’t believe that anyone would be that selfish!”

My father ignored it all and kept a straight face. I knew what he thought, I agreed, and I struggled to hide my sniggers. If the man was so concerned about helping his fellow humans, a good way to start would be by keeping a closer eye on his offspring and putting a veto on hare-brained ideas like heading far out into busy waters with an inadequate vessel, an unreliable motor and no knowledge of water or boats.

(Don’t get me wrong. I am not disapproving of their desire to go out and have an adventure. In my time I set out on quite a few escapades that were just as daft, both before this incident and after it. On some occasions I got hurt, and on others I had narrow escapes from consequences that could have been much worse. However, when things went wrong I knew whose fault it was. I did not blame others for the outcome and nor did my parents.)

Finally, they never did return our bait tin. There’s gratitude for you.

