

Belly boarding in Australasia



A family tree of boards from 1925, late-1940s to the early 1960s. Photo George Bills.

Tasmania

Bellyboards had been surfed in Tasmania from the 1930s. Gary Cane has been identified as one early surfer (Lawrence 2010) while Cliff Wright (Wright 2010) recalls surfing a ply bellyboard from around 1948-1958 around Park Beach. This board was modelled on a board Cliff's brother, Rex, had seen at Lorne. Wright recalled that his father had the nose of this board steamed at the upholster's business that he worked at. This board was surfed without swim-fins and could be taken out some distance as Park Beach was reported to have a relatively shallow bottom that had a gradual increase in depth. Wright reported not seeing others riding such boards and that at that time there were few people who frequented the surf.



Photo courtesy of Cliff Wright.

Cliff Wright advises that this photo was taken around 1948-1950. From the left: Pat Sharp (became a Carmelite nun), Val Feltham, Mary Allen and Bev Wright. The photo was taken at Dodges Ferry. Cliff's sister, Bev was about 5'4" so the board is approximately 6'. Cliff's father had an upholstery business and the board was made by one of his contacts. Cliff's brother, Rex had been to Lorne for an interstate Commonwealth Bank swimming carnival and seen similar boards. His was the small board on the left (coloured red and cream). The other two boards were coloured blue, with a white boarder and black pinstripe. On each board is the respective owner's name - Bev and Sue. These boards were used at Park Beach in the 1950s.

By the early 1960s there remained few people surfing the cold waters of Tasmania. In 1964 the southern Tasmanian surfing population was estimated to be only 12-15 people while there were small groups of surfers in the Northwest of the state (Lawrence 1994/2005). John Pool was described by Lawrence as riding "bodyboards made of marine ply during his holidays in the mid 1950s". Pool didn't recall these boards other than as being possibly pieces of plywood (Pool 2010). Terry Horton, described as a "pioneer of Tasmanian surfing" (Davey 2005) recalled 'Corky' or 'Corkhead', dressed only in white speedos, riding a balsa bellyboard around 1961. Horton also recalled seeing a local surfer on the West Coast surfing on a wooden board out at Lighthouse on a solid day. This was also around 1961 board and Horton thought the surfer's name was Jeff Taylor.

George Bills began riding a wooden ply board in the 1960s. Both his parents (Nigel and Sue) rode bellyboards. Sue's family were one of the earliest families at Clifton Beach. 87, in 2013 his mother rode bellyboards as a young girl. George continues to ride bellyboards, which he says are perfect for days when the conditions don't suit other boards, such as onshore days. His father made his board and he has made his son a board (Bils 2013).



George and his planing machine. Photo George Bills.



Display of bellyboards
Carnegie Gallery in Hobart, Tasmania

From left: (1) "Dave loves waves," made for George's son, David, ca. 1960s. (2) Nigel Bills ply bellyboard made for his wife, Sue, c. 1960s. (3) Harvie Bellyboard, hoop pine, made for his daughter Sue. This board features two nailed battens on the bottom and a steam curved nose, ca. 1925. (4) Made by Harvie Thompson for his daughter Sue in the late 1940's (5) Harvie Bellyboard made of solid timber, ca. 1940. (6) and (7) are unidentified.

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