6. Stokes Hill Wharf

The port area of Darwin had two hills and the two existing wharfs are named after those hills.

Fort Hill was the location for the flagpole above Goyder’s survey camp. Today only Stokes Hill remains because Fort Hill was removed in 1965 to make way for new iron ore loading facilities serving the Mount Bundy mine.

In 1865, a surveyor, W.P. Auld, exploring Port Darwin named Stokes Hill after the Commander of the Beagle, who had visited and named the port in 1839. There have been three wharves constructed that have backed on to Stokes Hill.

The first, Port Darwin Jetty or Railway Jetty, was built in 1885-86 specifically to service the North Australia Railway. With an eight metre tidal range in Darwin Harbour, the jetty stood high on timber piles. The little Sandfly steam railway engine shunted trucks carrying cargo along the length of the jetty. Cyclone damage in 1897 and worm infestation weakened the structure and a temporary wharf was hastily constructed at the end of Stokes Hill point.

The second, Town Wharf, was completed in 1903, and stood on cast iron and concrete piers with wooden decking and a distinctive L-shape. Cargo handling was by rail. The stone embankment, extending along the edge of the road leading to the wharf, was probably built at this time and was constructed of locally quarried porcellanite stone. The Town Wharf was
severely damaged in the first Japanese bombing raid. The remains of the ships destroyed in that first raid remained visible at low tide until 1959, when the salvage rights were sold—ironically to the Japanese Fujita Salvage Company—and the wrecks were cut up and removed.

The third, Stokes Hill Wharf that you can see today, was not officially completed until the end of 1956. It was built of steel and concrete with timber decking and served as the main port of Darwin until facilities were transferred to the new Darwin Port at East Arm in 2000. East Arm became the terminus of the north-south transcontinental rail freight link.
History—Port Darwin Jetty

Before the North Australia Railway could be tackled, it was necessary to have a proper jetty at Port Darwin to facilitate freight operations. The idea was for railway infrastructure to be shipped to Port Darwin and taken overland to various construction camps.

The tender for the jetty was awarded in late 1884 but not before something of a bureaucratic nightmare whereby the intervention of the South Australian Commissioners of Audit required that the tender be re-advertised after a tender by McNeil and Bath was deemed the lowest. Precisely what happened is not clear, but it may have been related to an outcry from one of the original tenderers, Mr Pizey, who lived in Port Darwin and was less than enamoured of the Public Works Department and its Minister, Thomas Playford.

Ultimately, Wishart and Davies from Adelaide were the successful tenderers. They comprised John Wishart (1835-1906) and Maurice Coleman Davies (1835-1913) who were experienced in the construction of wharves and jetties and who had timber interests in Western Australia. Their successful tender price was £39,817 which was ‘considerably lower than their previous price’.

Wishart assumed control of the project and recruited skilled men from Sydney. He, together with a number of recruits, arrived aboard the steam ship Airlie on 2 March 1885. Also aboard were several horses, a dray and building materials. Wishart was granted:

...liberty to form a camp on a portion of the Crown Lands near Stokes' Hill. The cause of this was principally the fact that there were no houses to be obtained in town for private residences for his men, some of whom are married and have brought their wives with them.

Whilst the workers had a camp, Wishart had a cottage on the Esplanade which was later taken over by the Railway Department.

Not everything went smoothly. Construction was set back by three months when, in late April 1885, Wishart received bad news. The first ship in his fleet, the barque Bittern, was shipwrecked en route to Port Darwin:

The Bittern was the first of a fleet of sailing vessels chartered by Mr Wishart to convey jarrah timber from Western Australia for jetty purposes here, and was daily expected up to the time that her loss was made known. She left Hamelin Harbour on the 5th March and made a very good run up to the 14th, when she struck on a reef off Browse Island and became a hopeless wreck. Fortunately, all hands escaped to the Island safely, and, after remaining there for some days, they were taken across to King Sound. The Bittern was a vessel of 400 tons burden, and had at the time of her wreck a full cargo of timber, consisting of 383 loads, 1,110 pieces altogether, the most important part of which was a large number of piles. She had also about £200 worth of plant on board. The value of the timber is about £2,500, but this loss is, we are happy to state, covered by insurance, the plant being the only loss that Mr. Wishart will sustain, if we set aside all indirect considerations. The vessel was a new boat, a couple of years old, and was an excellent sailer [sic].

Unfortunately, Mr Wishart’s steam-powered winch, or donkey engine, was also aboard the Bittern.

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1 This history is reproduced from Fact Sheet 5, Friends of the North Australia Railway with permission of the author. See http://topendheritage.wixsite.com/ntrailwayheritage
2 NT Times & Gazette, 5 December 1884
3 NT Times & Gazette, 6 March 1885
4 NT Times and Gazette, 1 May 1885.
The second ship in the fleet was the *Silver Stream* which was, at that time, 32 days out of Hamelin Harbour but not expected for a further 20 days. Third in the fleet was the *Boisterol*, which was loading at the time. A fourth vessel would join the fleet after it had discharged its cargo of coal from Newcastle.

The *Silver Stream* arrived on 17 May 1885, Captain Briggs reporting to have seen the *Bittern* high and dry at low tide on Browse Island as he passed. The *Bittern's* timber cargo was being unloaded and cut into smaller pieces ready for transport to Port Darwin. Captain Briggs was of the view that the *Bittern* could be saved once she had been jettisoned of her cargo.

Preliminary concrete work commenced in late May 1885 and pile driving in June following the arrival of the donkey engine. Casualties of the venture included several horses Wishart had brought to Port Darwin, which were probably worked too hard in the climate. One horse became entangled in its harness and, panicked, backed away over the side of the jetty and drowned in February 1886.

By August 1885, tenders had been called for a railway stacking ground on the approach to the jetty. Wishart tendered for that work but was unsuccessful, the tender being awarded to Mr. Daley, an Alberton contractor whose:

> ...price for the work was the lowest, though from what we can hear but very little below Mr. Wishart. We can learn nothing definite about the figures, but if it is true that Mr. Daley's tender is only between £4,000 and £5,000, we fail to see where the profit on the transaction comes in, and we think that the Government would have acted with better judgment had they given the work to the lowest local tenderer. ⁵

Work progressed at a pace and Wishart was invariably described in the local media as ‘the energetic contractor’. In October 1885, Wishart discovered:

> ...by soundings taken at dead low water...there will be a depth of 24 feet at the commencement of the wide portion of the Jetty, 32 feet at the centre of the wide portion, and 38 feet at the extreme end. This should allow accommodation for six or eight of the largest ocean going steamers alongside the Jetty at low tide. ⁶

By February 1886, completion was in sight:

> The piles have been driven at a distance of 83 feet from shore, and the whole length is planked to within about 60 feet of the end. There is now only a further distance of 300 feet to be constructed. Where piles are being driven now, the bottom is very irregular, as illustrated by the fact that almost every other pile refuses to penetrate to the same depth as its neighbour and consequently has to be sawn to a level but this will have no evil influence on the lasting qualities of the structure, and the work as it is being done promises that this jetty will be as faithfully constructed from every point of view as anyone could wish. ⁷

By now, the favourite Sunday pursuit of townsfolk was the novelty of taking a walk on the jetty. The last two vessels carrying timber were being loaded in Hamelin Bay. They were the *Nebo* and *Nordensjöld*, both of which arrived in March 1886. In May, a distance of only 45 feet remained to be accomplished, and in June:

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⁵ *NT Times and Gazette*, 21 August 1885
⁶ *NT Times and Gazette*, 3 October 1885
⁷ *NT Times and Gazette*, 5 February 1886
Mr. Wishart drove his last pile, in the length, of the ship jetty on Saturday last, and has now only the fender piles and braces to do to complete the work; a diver is at work putting in the braces below low water mark.8

By September, Mr Wishart was expected to have completed the jetty and the Tannadice was expected to berth at the jetty to unload the first of the Millar Brothers’ freight for the North Australia Railway. Sadly in the same month, a worker tarring the piles, Thomas Williams, drowned when the hanging stage on which he was working gave way sending he and two colleagues went into the water. Williams could not swim. His body was retrieved by Wishart’s diver.9

The jetty wasn’t completed until October and Wishart prepared to leave Port Darwin:

The auction sale of contractor’s stores last Saturday attracted a large attendance, but very few buyers. Mr. Wishart will have to ship the bulk of his surplus material to southern ports, there being no market in Port Darwin.10

Wishart and his wife Caroline left Port Darwin aboard the Changsa in January 1887.

An opinion piece in the local newspaper lamented the lack of development in Port Darwin:

There are few improvements to note in the town of Palmerston, and the business of the settlement has not as yet received any impetus from the commencement of the Pine Creek Railway works. We, of course, expect to see a vast improvement when the works are really started fairly next, dry season, but unless European labour is employed the Territory will reap little benefit from the expenditure of the million borrowed for railway construction. The ship jetty just completed by the contractor, Mr. Wishart, at a cost of about £40,000 is a most creditable work, capable of accommodating the largest vessels afloat.11

The paper also complained about the route to the jetty from the town carved out by Wishart had been left to the ravages of nature, and poorly planned development of the town left no easily accessible route to and from the jetty:

Not only have the rights of private people been ignored in this case, but the land which could have been used as an approach to the ship jetty, has been blocked up, and it is now impossible to take goods from the town to the jetty, except by a very roundabout track through the stacking yard. While the jetty was in course of construction, Mr. Wishart, the contractor, had a good dray road down the hill, passing the present site of Mr. James' house, and that road could have been made extremely useful to our townspeople at a very small cost. As it is now, the jetty is useless to anyone except the railway contractors, and until a town station is built in Cavenagh Square, the site recommended by the Government Resident and Resident Engineer some six months ago, there is no chance of business people either receiving or forwarding merchandise over the ship jetty.12

That wasn’t the only difficulty. As it happened, Wishart’s jetty was being eaten away by teredo navalis or a salt water clam known as the naval shipworm13. By 1894, things were

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8 NT Times and Gazette, 12 June 1886
9 NT Times and Gazette, 11 September 1886
10 NT Times and Gazette, 30 October 1886
11 NT Times and Gazette, 8 January 1887
12 NT Times and Gazette, 4 June 1887
13 The jetty was closed in 1897 owing to the danger of collapse. It did collapse that year.
becoming dire indeed—to the extent that the Government in South Australia had taken notice:

…it has been arranged to renew the whole jetty with betis wood at a cost of about £37,000, the work to be spread over a period of several years. The amount proposed to be expended on the work during the current financial year is £5,000 and will be provided for in the Northern Territory Estimates for 1894-95.

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1891 – original jetty and railway embankment.  
*Image: State Library of South Australia.*

1895 – the first jetty.  
*Image: Darwin Collection, State Library of South Australia*

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14 *NT Times and Gazette, 2 November 1894*
Steamboat at second jetty.
*Image: Searcy Collection, State Library of South Australia.*

1897 – damage to the jetty after a cyclone.
*Image: State Library of South Australia.*
Circa 1900 – second jetty with Sandfly shunting.  
*Image: State Library of South Australia.*

1912 – Federal Parliamentary delegation inspecting jetty.  
*Image: State Library of South Australia.*

No work of any benefit appears to have been undertaken as set down in the Treasury document. By 1898, following the collapse of the jetty, construction was again underway at the Port Darwin Jetty.

In 1922, a rail track along the bridge section was replaced by a cattle race to facilitate live exports.

During the 1930s, a small side jetty was built and used as a flying boat terminal.
1940s - *Flying Boat Terminal (steam pump house to the left).*
*Image: RN Alford Collection.*

On 19 February 1942, part of the bridge section was destroyed in the first bombing of Darwin after which Army Engineers built a temporary bridge to enable loading to continue, and in 1957, a new concrete wharf replaced the jetty.\(^\text{15}\)

1940s – aerial photo showing jetty, oil storage tanks and railway yards.
*Image: RN Alford Collection.*

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\(^{15}\) ComRails web site.
1940s - Darwin Railway Station. 
*Image: RN Alford Collection.*

1942 – bomb damage to the jetty. 
*Image: RN Alford Collection.*
1942 – jetty burning.
Image: RN Alford Collection.

19 February 1942 – SS Neptuna, Darwin Harbour.
Image: RN Alford Collection.
USS Peary on fire and surrounded by burning oil in Darwin Harbour.  
Image: Australian War Memorial.

1957 – third wharf under construction.  
Image: Heritage Branch Collection.
Biography—John Wishart

John Wishart was born on 11 September 1835 in the Orkney Islands, Scotland, where his parents owned a farm named Langusquea. When he was 16, he took an apprenticeship as a shipbuilder. In 1855 he moved to Liverpool where he worked as a ship’s carpenter until he arrived in Victoria in 1857. In 1860, he married Caroline Susannah Walter; they produced eight children between 1861 and 1879. They left Victoria for South Australia in 1865.

Of Wishart’s life, the Adelaide Advertiser reported that he:

…was widely known and esteemed as a citizen of Adelaide during a period of 40 years. He had carried out many important public works, chiefly for the Government of South Australia. His operations as a contractor had not been confined to South Australia, for as prosperity favored each State in turn, Mr. Wishart was induced to visit them, with the result that in Western Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, and Fiji he has left a record of important works carried out…He went to Fiji for the first time about five years ago. His first work in South Australia in 1865 was the Wallaroo jetty and tramway. Then he built the jetty from Victor Harbor to Granite Island, and several wharfs at Port Adelaide, the Port Germein jetty and wharfs at Port Pirie, the approaches to the swing-bridge over the Port River for the Semaphore railway, Taylors-bridge, the Hindmarsh and Gumeracha bridges over the River Torrens. In conjunction with Mr. M. C. Davies, he erected the City and Frome bridges, and in partnership with Messrs. Baillie & Wishart, the Hackney bridge. The same firm also erected the Morphett-street bridge over the railway, the Robinson swing-bridge at Port Adelaide, the railway from Woodville to the Grange, Largs Bay railway and pier, the section of the inter-State railway from Mount Lofty to Nairne (contract price £150,000), and for the Victorian Government it carried out the contract for the water supply to Melbourne from the Watts’ River, Gippsland. The firm's portion went into £100,000. Mr. Wishart constructed for the Western Australian Government at Broome a water supply and a jetty for the shipment of cattle, also a railway bridge over the Swan River at Guildford, and in conjunction with Mr. Davies, the light-house at Cape Leeuwin and the jetty at Albany.16

Wishart died in Suva, Fiji, on 20 June 1906, where he was checking on works being supervised by two of his sons, John and James. He had suffered a bout of influenza earlier in the year from which he never fully recovered. Caroline Wishart died in Adelaide in 1901.

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16 The Advertiser, 24 July 1906.