History of the Thomas Boatshed at Evans Bay
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Boatshed Number 152 on Evans Bay Parade was owned by the Thomas family from the early 1940s until it was sold in 1980. For several family members, the boatshed is associated with significant activities and events. During the period of Thomas ownership, three boats were built in the shed, Almero, launched in October 1952, Gazelle launched in September 1958 and Westwind launched in June 1969. This account was written by David Thomas who visited the boatshed many times from around 1950 until he left Wellington to live in Brisbane in January 1969.

Roydon Thomas used the boatshed extensively from the time of starting the building of Almero in 1949. Following his separation from his wife Norma in 1966, he lived there much of the time until his death in July 1971. The boatshed was his ‘office’ for the design of multiple yachts and launches and had a drawing space set up beside the kitchen sink. After Roydon’s death, the boatshed was inherited by Roydon’s daughters, Rose Thomas and Bronwen Bleakley. They sold it in 1980.

During the 1950s and 1960s there were often rumours that the City Council was planning on demolishing the boatsheds, located between the Hataitai Swimming Club and the Evans Bay Yacht Club slipway, to widen the road and tidy up the area. This never happened. Since the 1990s the boatsheds have been spruced up – perhaps due to Council pressure - and are now frequently photographed and painted as iconic images of Wellington. There are multiple photos and paintings of Boatshed 152 available online. These can be located with a browser search using the keywords ‘Evans Bay boatsheds.’

Boatshed 152, Oct 2014
Early History of the Evans Bay Boatsheds

Not much information is available on the internet about the origins of the Evans Bay boatsheds. At various times from the 1930s, the Wellington City Council threatened to demolish the boatsheds because they were seen as untidy and they prevented widening Evans Bay Parade, the road alongside the boatsheds.\(^1\) In 1938 some of the boatsheds were moved seawards to allow road widening for the planned Centennial Exhibition at Rongotai in 1940. The photo in the 1938 clipping below seems to show the boatshed just south of the large Sea Scouts Boatshed on the bend which juts out into the Bay.

The boatsheds appear to have spread north from the Evans bay yacht club slipway during the 1930s and early 1940s. The photo at left, taken around 1938-1940, shows the boatsheds up to the corner. Three more boatsheds were built after this photo. The original version of Boatshed 152 was probably constructed between 1943 and 1945.

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\(^1\) See 1930s items in Papers Past (Evening Post) using search terms 'Boatsheds Evans Bay'
View of the northern Boatsheds before the TEAL Flying Boat Base reclamation commenced in 1951. Photo is probably taken about 1949-1950. Panel van just below Swimming Club Building is likely to be the one belonging to Norman W Thomas.

History of the Thomas Boatshed
The northernmost boatshed, numbered 152, was probably built by Norman W. Thomas (NWT) in the early 1940s, most likely around the time he bought the yacht Arawa in 1943. Arawa was wrecked on rocks just south of Shelly Bay in January 1944 after a shackle on her mooring chain broke during a southerly gale. In April 1944 NWT bought the yacht Ilex which was moored in the Clyde Quay boat harbour most of the time he owned her, between April 1944 and May 1947.

Roydon Thomas, NWT’s oldest son, started sailing the P class yacht Houdini Jnr about 1946 and continued until 1948. While Roydon sailed at the Worser Bay Yacht Club he is also likely to have sailed his P class at Evans Bay and kept it in the boatshed there.

2 Family members referred to Norman W Thomas as ‘NWT’ to distinguish him from his son Norman A Thomas, so this convention is used here.
The first photo we have of the boatshed was taken in April 1949 when Norman W Thomas (NWT) owned the yacht Typee. There are photos of Roydon at the boatshed in 1950 and 1951. In these photos several extensions are evident between 1949 and the time Almero was launched in October 1952.

**Building of Almero**

The first substantial yacht built at the boatshed was the Almero a 25-foot keeler designed by Athol Burns. Construction of Almero probably started around 1949 and she was launched in October 1952. The extensions to the seaward end of the boatshed around 1949-1950 would have been to allow the framing for Almero to be set up. At 25 feet long she would have filled much of the interior space when the framing was constructed. Roydon built Almero with Mervyn and Alan Benge.

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*Image: April 1949, Norman Thomas at back of Boatshed, before full width extensions started*

*Image: Framing for Almero: Inside boatshed c1950*

*Image: Mervyn & Roydon, Back door of boatshed c1951-52*

*Image: To Be Launched Today – KEELER YACHT Almero, built by three Wellington boys on the shores of Evans Bay, and which is to be launched this afternoon. R. H. Thomas and S. M. Benge, two of the builders, are seen giving the final touches. The other builder was Alan Benge. Evening Post 18 Oct 1952*

Evans Bay Boatshed
David’s memories are from around 1950. He remembers sailing a tin yacht from the skids (ramp) around this time until the family shifted to Devonport, Auckland in December 1950. After the Thomas family shifted to Lower Hutt in August 1952, NWT regularly went to the boatshed on Sunday afternoons. Roydon sold Almero to his father (NWT) in early 1953. Norman renamed her Mary Jean and did some trips to the Marlborough Sounds from her mooring in Evans Bay. The Mary Jean was sold to Eric Wright, who lived in Whangarei, in 1954.

Roydon started building Gazelle around 1954 and she was launched in September 1958. During that period the boatshed was part of a local network connected to other people interested in boats in Evans Bay.

Coongoola, owned by NWT, was moored at Evans Bay between January 1955 and early 1962 and he used the boatshed occasionally while Coongoola was there. When NWT migrated to Australia in 1962 to live at Clareville Beach near Sydney, Roydon inherited the boatshed.

A ‘Takapuna’ (Z class) yacht named Ranger was built by David, with Roydon’s help, in the boatshed between May and October 1959. During the 1959 winter Gazelle was stored in the boatshed, having being hauled up the skids.
1960s

Roydon’s daughters Rose and Bronwen remember visiting the boatshed in the early 1960s. During this time Roydon was racing Gazelle at the Evans Bay yacht Club.

Rose recalled that:

*I used to sail my P class out the back, Dad tied it to the back of the boatshed I suspect he thought I might not know how to sail back!*

After Roydon separated from his wife Norma in 1966, he lived at the boatshed regularly over the next few years. The boatshed for a period was the location for a regular social drinking network (known as ‘Choir Practice’). People in this network were given nicknames like Ray the Cray, Gannet Guts, Barnacle Bill, Pegleg Pete, Pedro, Strongarm, Harry Heavingline, Otis T Driftwood, Gannet Guts, and the Short fat one.

Max Thomas, Norm’s son, remembers visiting the boatshed when he was young.

*I remember as a kid fishing at night out the back of the shed while no doubt Norm was helping Roy clean up the full bottles so the empties could be gathered up later. Gave up the rod briefly with catching a fish with my hand they were so thick in the boat shed light...the next grab after had a quick withdrawal when my hand did not go around the fish...*

Malaguena and Cyclone Giselle

Malaguena, a 26-foot sloop designed by Roydon for David Thomas, was built in Governors Bay, Lyttelton during 1967. After launching, David and Evan sailed her from Lyttelton to Wellington in December 1967. She was moored in Evans Bay just out from the boatshed.

In mid-1967 David laid a new mooring, near the boatshed, for Malaguena. The previous family mooring had become lost. He used the heavy metal trolley (weighing about half a ton) on the skids for the mooring weight as he assumed that it would no longer be used for launching or hauling boats out. After loosening the four steel trolley wheels which had rusted onto on the metal rails, he slid the trolley halfway down the rails, and tied on two 44 gallon drums, one at each end of the trolley. At high tide he floated the trolley off the rails and towed it out to the mooring location with a dinghy, which also contained the mooring chain. On cutting the first drum free from the trolley, it sank into the water and the weight pulled the second drum under the water. After some difficulty reaching under the water, he managed to cut the second drum free. It shot out up into the air like a cork out of a bottle and the trolley sank rapidly pulling the heavy chain out of the dinghy and nearly

Evans Bay Boatshed
sinking the dinghy. Amazingly it all worked out and the mooring was ready. Some months later, Roy asked where the trolley was. I pointed out to the mooring.

During the Cyclone Giselle storm on 10 April 1968 that sank the Wahine, the sea level in Wellington Harbour that morning was the highest it had been for many years. It came up over the floorboards in the boatshed by about 2 inches (5 cm). David only remembers that happening once before in a very high spring tide in the mid-1950s. During the 1968 storm several boats dragged or broke their moorings and two ended up aground beside the Patent Slip wharf. David and Roydon were at the boatshed that day and went out in a small launch to search for survivors from the Wahine.

In July 1968 David had purchased the food for a Pacific trip he had been planning. Preparations were nearly complete and the tins and other foodstuffs filled five large cardboard boxes (worth $110, a large sum in those days). One afternoon, as David was unloading the boxes from the car and carrying them into the boatshed, a woman wheeling a baby in a pram stopped to look and made a comment about how much valuable food there was in the boxes. That night, just after midnight, a man attempted to break into the boatshed by wading around to the skids and pushing away a block of timber underneath the seaward door. The timber was used to block a large gap under the door. Roy was sleeping in the shed that night and heard the timber being pushed. He grabbed a length of timber and gave the intruder a heavy whack just as he poked his head and shoulders underneath the door. The intruder took off in a hurry, jumped into the water and swam across the bay at high speed towards to Hataitai Swimming Club jetty. He must have got quite a fright.

Malaguena left on her first Pacific trip in early August 1968. She returned in December 1968 and was moored at Evans Bay until January 1971. That month Malaguena left on her second Pacific trip which finished in Brisbane in November 1971.
Between December 1968 and August 1970 Roydon was on multiple trips (his records show at least 12 trips) as Master or Mate between Wellington, Lyttelton and the Chatham Islands at the height of the crayfish boom in the Chatham Islands.

**Westwind**
In early 1968 Roydon decided he would build a fishing dory in the boatshed. According to a story told by his brother Norm Thomas, Roydon and a mate, both dressed in white overalls, walked aboard a visiting Japanese fishing vessel tied up at a Wellington wharf. They went up to the dory sitting on the deck and took its measurements, carefully writing these in a notebook. The Japanese crew apparently looked on in astonishment at the unusual behaviour of the visitors. They may have assumed the visitors were some officials carrying out a check. Starting with the dimensions taken from the Japanese dory, he drew up the design for a 28-foot fishing dory in June 1968. Westwind was built from these plans in the Evans Bay Boatshed and launched in June 1969. As the metal trolley had gone, Westwind was launched with its wooden cradle, sliding down the skids on greased wooden beams.

Pushing Westwind onto the skids, June 1969:
Norm Thomas (NAT) in check shirt

Flora Thomas naming Westwind, June 1969
1970s

After Roydon’s death in July 1971, the boatshed was inherited by Roydon’s daughters, Rose Thomas and Bronwen Bleakley. They had the boatshed until it was sold in 1980 to the Williams family (of the Williams and Adams car dealers in Wellington).