

The Early History of Almero

David Thomas

February 2020



Almero sailing outside Clyde Quay Harbour in March 1954

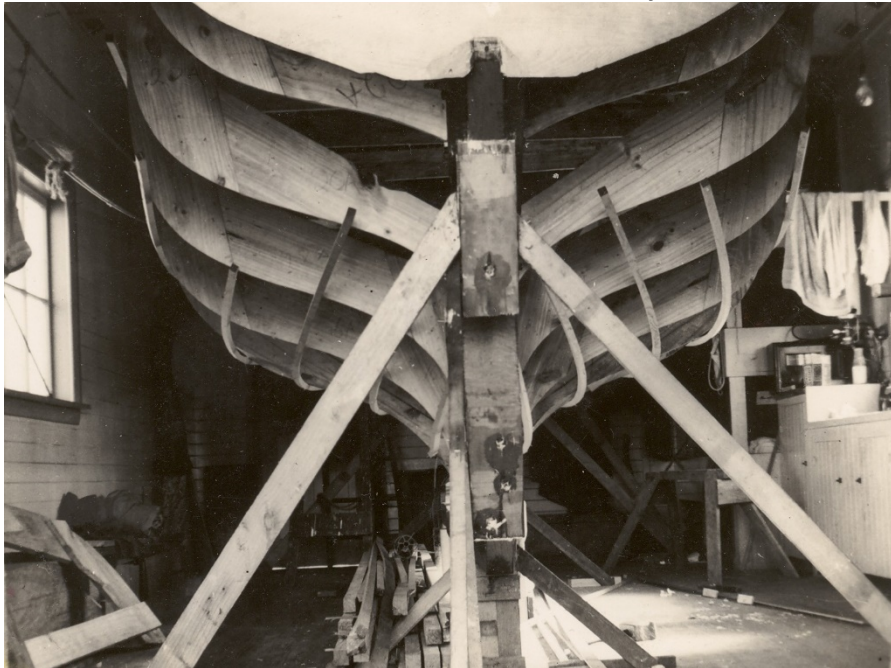
The cutter *Almero* was designed by Athol Burns and built by Roydon Thomas between 1949 and 1952 at the Thomas family's Evans Bay Boatshed. She was launched on 18 October 1952.

The Early History of Almero

Roydon Thomas designed and built several small keelers in Wellington during the 1950s and early 1960s. He started designing yachts while he was a teenager. He worked under the boat designer Athol Burns at Craft Construction during the late 1940s. Roydon completed his apprenticeship in October 1954 in ship building and repairing at the Wellington Patent Slip Company in Evans Bay. The Patent Slip was previously operated by the Wellington Harbour Board. From November 1954 to August 1955 he worked as a drawing assistant at the Union Steamship Company in Wellington. There he learnt draughting skills, which he used in his yacht designs.

Roydon's first keeler was Almero (25ft 6in), a modified version of an Athol Burns design. She was built with his friends Alan and Mervyn Bengé who were neighbours in Seatoun. The building of Almero started in 1949. Roydon's father helped out with the finance and building supplies over the four years Almero was being built at the Evans Bay boatshed. Almero had kauri planking and hardwood ribs. She was launched on 18 October 1952. The name 'Almero' was the first two initials of each of the three builders' names.

1949 Almero Under construction: Evans Bay Boatshed



Roydon sold *Almero* to his father Norman W Thomas in October 1953, Norman Thomas renamed her *Mary Jean* and added a plastic dome over the hatch. *Mary Jean* was sold to Eric Wright in Whangarei in early 1954 and she was moored in Whangarei for many years.

Another yacht named Christina was built to the same Athol Burns design. Christina was built by Bill McQueen and his friends in Wellington and was launched in November 1952.

18.10.51

Boys To Launch Keeler Yacht

Tomorrow will be a happy day for three Wellington boys when their yacht Almero, which they have been building for the past three and a half years, is launched at Evans Bay. The three yachtsmen are Royden Thomas and Mervyn and Alan Bengé.

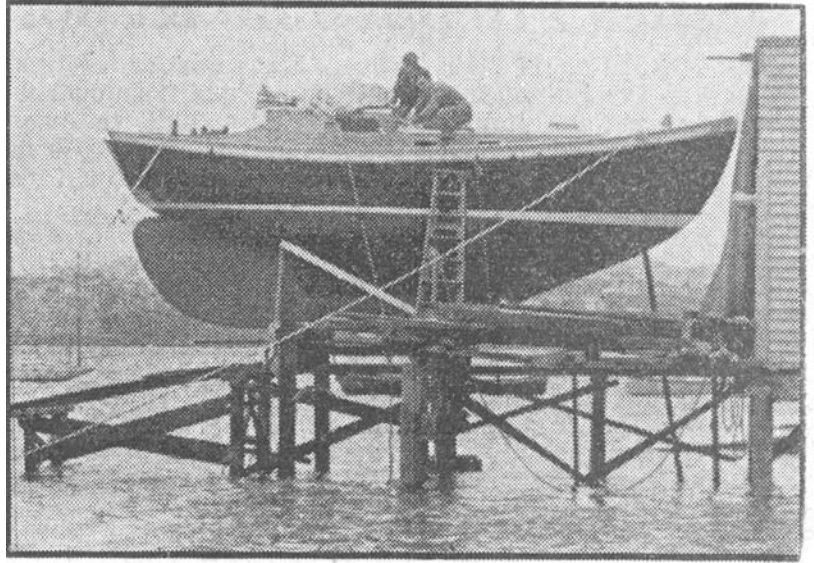
Their yacht is a 25ft 6in keeler built from plans drawn up by the well-known designer, Athol Burns. Another boat, the Christina, has also been built by three Breaker Bay boys, and she will be launched on November 1. The Christina is built from the same plans.

Roy Thomas has been in charge of the building of the Almero. He is the son of Mr. N. W. Thomas, former owner of the keeler Ilex, which was well known in local yachting circles a few years ago.

Roy accompanied his father in the Ilex from Wellington to Sydney and in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race in 1946. He began his yachting, as did many other local yachtsmen, in the seven-footer P class. Mervyn and Alan Bengé have had only limited yachting experience.

Mervyn will be a regular member of the crew of the Almera and Alan will join his two co-builders when he has finished his apprenticeship. It is hoped that after a shakedown cruise round both islands the Almero will do some ocean cruising.

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. Bengé, two of the builders, are seen giving the final touches. The other builder was Alan Bengé.



October 1952 Roydon with friends at the launching of Almero
Roydon is second from left at front. Mervyn and Alan Benge are behind Roydon



1952 December Almero in Tennyson Inlet



**March 1954: Mary Jean (ex Almero) sailing outside Clyde Quay Harbour
Norman Thomas at helm**



1956 Christina, built from same design as Almero

Royal Port Nicholson Yacht Club
One Hundred Years 1883-1983. J B Cronin

CHRISTINA

Bill MacQueen rode his push-bike from Roseneath to Breaker Bay almost every weekend from Easter 1948 until November 1952.

The reason was the building of *Christina*, a 26-foot Bermuda cutter designed by Athol Burns and built of kauri, with a 1½ inch single skin.

At sixteen years of age Bill, along with Allan Brazendale and Frank Jacobson, had decided to build their own boat. With no money and their only power tool an electric drill, the building of *Christina* was a hard slog.

But four years after the launching Bill MacQueen, Englishman David Beard and fellow Wellingtonian Dick Nicol set sail on a year-long voyage in the cutter which captured the occasional limelight in newspapers and magazines on both sides of the Tasman. *Christina* was the smallest boat to have made the trans-Tasman trip.

In Australia her crew were greeted by one magazine as "three eligible young bachelors". And *Christina* was described as a cutter "whose brasswork gleams, whose deck is spotless, and whose cabin would delight the most fastidious housewife".

After ten months of cruising and working along the Australian coast *Christina* and her crew made for home again, this time via Norfolk Island.

But with only thirteen shillings and fourpence in his pocket, Bill MacQueen, now aged twenty-five, was forced to sell the boat — setting her on a course which took her to owners in Wellington, Lyttelton, back to Wellington, to Nelson where it changed hands three times, to Picton and then back home to Wellington.

Christina now lies at moorings in Evans Bay, owned by Patrick Robinson and used for family cruising.



'Christina' about to set sail for Australia on December 12, 1956. The crew (left to right) are David Beard, Bill MacQueen and Dick Nicol.