

The First Cherub Fleet in Australia.

by Gordon Wright - the first Cherub National Champion 1963/64

I became involved in sailing at a fairly young age, sailing Pelicans, firstly at Perth Flying Squadron and then later at Mounts Bay Sailing Club in the late 1950s.

The First Cherub Fleet

Mounts Bay was then sailing 16ft Skiffs and Sharpies, which were big boats and the hunt was on for a class to suit a bunch of 14 year old kids, too big for Pelicans, but not big enough to go into the four man Skiffs and three man Sharpies. At the time there were some boats in existence on the Swan River, like 12ft Cadets, Gwen 12s and V-Jays, all of which sort of had problems with them. Then came along my father Basil Eugene Wright, who decided he would look for a more up-to-date and modern boat to take the younger generation of sailors into the 1960s. Through his business contacts he knew and met John Spencer who was the New Zealand designer of the Cherub class. In New Zealand this boat was then outperforming anything else 12ft and under, and it was being hailed as the “in-boat”.

Basil Wright got together six Mounts Bay people, all of who had sons to within a year of each other. The group decided they would build six boats to be launched and raced as a class in the 1960-61 season at Mounts Bay Sailing Club. That was the birth of the Cherub class in Australia. The six boats were built and the first four launched within a few days of each other. One of the first four was my own boat called *Cupid* (sail number 420), others included *Dazz*, *Satan*, and *O'Johnny*. Two others followed several months later to make up the original fleet of six boats that started racing at Mounts Bay.

O'Jonny was sailed by Johnny Hurrion, *Dazz* was sailed by Darryl Kilburn, *Satan* was Dave Cuthburton. Quite quickly after this a boat called *Skeemer* was built which was sailed by Errol Kilburn, the cousin of Darryl Kilburn. One of the other boats was called *Didjeredoo*, sailed by Frank Nathan, whose father was a famous dentist in Perth, living in Dalkeith.



Opening Day at Mounts Bay Sailing Club, Perth October 1961. The first Cherub fleet in Australia prepares to hit the water for its second season. (Photo: Gordon Wright)

Three-up Sailing

The first Cherub sailors came straight out of Pelicans at the tender age of 14. There was no way we could hold one of the new Cherubs in the water, they were just too fast and too quick. So, in the first year, the 1960-61 season, we all sailed three-up. As we grew, by the 1961-62 season, it was a combination of 2-ups and 3-ups. Knowing we had to go to 2-up at some point we used to sail Saturdays with three and then on Sundays we would drop out the sheet hand and the skipper held the sheet and you had the for'wd hand and the trapeze that would hang over the side. By the 1962-63 season all the boats were sailing 2-up. You now had boats, which were now sailed by 17 year olds in full flight.

First Australian Championships

By 1962-63 Cherub fleets had started in Victoria and Queensland. To encourage other States, it was decided to hold the first ever Australian Yachting Championship for Cherubs in 1963-64. The first Australian titles were held the Newhaven Yacht Squadron on Philip Island, Victoria. The venue was chosen because it was easier access for the east-coast fleets. The Championship allowed us to show Victorian, South Australian, Queensland and New South Wales people, just how these things could perform. Western Australia did very very well, they filled five of the first six in the championships. Gary Bisdee and I, sailing *Cupid III* then won these first national titles, winning the Cadet, Junior and Open Divisions.

The next Australian titles were held the following year in the 1964-65 year on the Swan, the year after that they went to Queensland, the year after that to Sydney Harbour and they have been going in a rotation basis ever since.



Left to right: Gordon Wright, Bob McCarthy, and at right Garry Bisdee rigging their Cherub at Mounts Bay in 1960. In the first season crews sailed three-up. (Photo: Gordon Wright)



Gordon Wright with the 1963/64 Cherub Australian Championship trophies. The trophies have since been remodelled to create space for the names of all the subsequent winners. The Junior Trophy is now known as the "Basil Wright Trophy" and the Cadet Trophy bears the name of its first winner "Gordon Wright". The Open Championship trophy is named after the host club for the first championship the Newhaven Yacht Squadron. (Photo: Gordon Wright)

OUR SUCCESSFUL CHERUB TEAM		
1964		
BOAT	SKIPPER	CREW
CUPID III	G. WRIGHT	G. BISDEE
O'JOHNNY	J. HURREN	L. OLOHAM
SCHEMER	E. KILBURN	T. JOLLY
SATAN	D. CUTHBERTSON	R. MAHON
DIJERIDU	F. NATHAN	B. BENNETT

Mounts Bay Sailing Club celebrated the achievements of their team at the first Cherub Nationals. (Photo: Gordon Wright)

The First Flying Ants

At the time Basil Wright had another young son, Brian Wright, coming through the junior ranks at Mounts Bay. He didn't want to go through the problem he had with the transition to the Cherub sailing 3-up. He again looked at what training dinghy could now be used as a step-up into the Cherub, replacing the out-dated, snub nosed Pelican. He felt the need for a more exciting boat, one "with a pointy bow" that would have a trapeze and appear to be more like a Cherub. By then John Spencer had developed a 10ft 6in look-alike version of the Cherub design called the Flying Ant. A Flying Ant was built in Perth mid way through 1963 and when we went to the first Cherub National Championships in 1963-64, we not only took a Cherub, but we also took the first ever Flying Ant, built and sailed in Australia. It was called *Bri-Ant*. Brian Wright sailed it with the Cherubs at the Championships. It performed so well, beating some of the Cherubs home in an actual race, that it sparked the interest for the Flying Ant class both in the Eastern States and back home in Western Australia.

Now some of the best known Perth yachtsmen have come through the Flying Ants into Cherubs and on to other senior classes. Names like Gordon Lucas, Rod Beurteaux and John Cassidy all went through Flying Ants into Cherubs.

The First Javelins

As the first Cherub sailors grew from 17 year olds to 20 year olds, getting bigger and heftier, they started to outgrow the Cherub and they also started looking for more excitement and more speed. At this point another John Spencer design became available in the 1966-67 season. It was the 14 ft Javelin, which was just a bigger blown-up version of the Cherub, possessing all the exciting features of speed and using new technology. It became the third of the John Spencer designs to hit Australia

Basil Wright – Father of Cherub Sailing in Australia

When, as a kid, I sailed as crew for my father Basil Wright, he had never actually ever sailed before, but it was probably his love of the water that got me involved in sailing. During World War II, age 20 years, while serving in the British Navy, he was put in charge of a mine-sweeper named *Fairmile* which was doing exercises up and down the Burma coast. He told me that, he had been made Captain of the boat because he had good academic powers, even though he had very little sea going experience. The first time he took the crew out, he said he didn't know what sort of a Captain he was because he spent all the time below decks violently ill with the rest of the crew doing all the work. He overcame those early setbacks and developed a love of the ocean and the sea that stayed with him.



Proud parents Basil and Violet Wright with their son Gordon in 1964 following his championship win. (Photo: Gordon Wright)

When the war ended he was based in India, in Calcutta, waiting to be demobbed from the British Navy. With the British rule in India fast growing to an end, and he needed to decide where was he going to raise his children and looked to Australia. He came straight to Perth and, on arrival, carried on with his love for the water. He found, to his great delight, this wonderful stretch of water we have which is the Swan River. He immediately went into

business, earned a few dollars, enough to put a craft onto the Swan River. Because we never had much money in those days, I can tell you the boats were literally held together with chewing gum, Araldite hadn't been invented then. I wish it had been.

My father and I were inseparable, you couldn't separate us with a crow-bar. I therefore spent most of my time on the slips down at Perth Flying Squadron where we used to continually slip this boat trying to find all the leaks, scraping it down and putting it up, re-antifouling and putting back into the water. Sailing was just a spin-off from there.

Basil Wright became Commodore of Mounts Bay Sailing Club in 1964 and remained in that position until 1974.

Early Cherub Boatbuilders

In the early 60s, we had a retired boat-builder, a guy called Jerry Eaton, who built the first Flying Ant, *Bri-Ant*. The boat is now in the Western Australian. Jerry was such a gorgeous man. That first Flying Ant could still be put in the water today and sailed, and it won't leak.

Jerry was a dear old soul, we met him because he was a yachting fanatic, and a bit of a name around in Perth circles in yachting. He had retired, having been a wonderful cabinet maker by trade, and with his love of yachting. We could see that he could build our boats, all being made out of light-weight ply. While he didn't build any of the original six Cherubs, he certainly built the first ever Flying Ant and most of my later Cherubs including *Cupid III* that won the Australian Title.

Jerry was building my Cherubs at a time when I was building one a year. In the year before the 1970 World Titles I had two racing. All my boats were called *Cupid* and, while I got up to *Cupid VIII*, I actually had 13 hulls. Some I didn't even name because we were playing with design within the tolerances and the rules I would rig them all identically, so I could change the rigs from one to another and sail them just to see how the hulls performed. If they didn't come up to expectations, or weren't as fast as the hull, I was sailing, we would sell off the hull at cost. That way we would get another Cherub in the water and it helped swell the classes.

Early Cherub Design Developments

As we were establishing the Mounts Bay fleet, John Spencer was going through design changes in New Zealand. To construct *Cupid III* my first Championship winning boat, we got a set of plans from Spencer for a "John Spencer Design Cherub Mark VII". The Spencer Mark VII was, at the time, the ultimate. He had worked designs from I-VII trying to find this ultimate shape, which we now had for our new boat in 1963.



Garry Bisdee and Gordon Wright, the first Cherub Australian Champions. (Photo: Gordon Wright)

This article was edited by Rolf Lunsmann on behalf of the Cherub National Council of Australia, in 2011 with the assistance of Gordon Wright. The article is based on Interview Notes held by the Western Australian Museum – Maritime History Department. The original interview having been conducted in 1992 by Sally May, Head of the Maritime History Department Western Australia Museum.