



PENSHURST RSL TRAVEL CLUB

END-OF-YEAR GET-TOGETHER ON THE NEPEAN BELLE, PENRITH THURSDAY 7 DECEMBER 2023



The slightly later start of 8.45 on this fine morning, with 45 of us (just short of a full coachload) after three members called in sick.

Pretty normal peak-hour travelling until we reached our morning tea stop at one of the parks at Chipping Norton Lakes. Great spot with plenty of seats, shelter and an adjacent amenities block, but the lakes themselves didn't appear to be in close proximity. There was an hour here to enjoy Liz's cooking and go for a stroll if wished. Irene O'N, Rick T and Phyllis K were presented with Loyalty Awards (travel vouchers) for participating in the most trips with our club during the past 12 months.

Then came the rather stressful drive to Penrith, firstly with malfunctioning traffic lights causing a huge delay, then we struck every red light from there to our destination on the Nepean River. Fortunately, we just made it by the requested time and Malcolm was able to park our coach alongside the wharf. However, another coach from Lake Macquarie had beaten us to it and they were boarding as we arrived, occupying much of the lower section. This meant that our group was split – with one half downstairs and the other located up a steepish staircase. The bar was situated downstairs too, so those upstairs were given priority to purchase drinks before departure, although the Nepean River wasn't exactly rough!!

A little about the Nepean Belle from their website: *The idea of operating a large paddlewheeler along the Nepean River at Penrith first came to John and Helen Wakeling when they moved into the area in 1976. When the search for a suitable boat to buy proved unsuccessful, they decided to build one themselves. The 60ft/18.2m long aluminium catamaran hulls were built in 1981 by De Havilland Marine at Homebush Bay, along with the paddleboxes and the paddlewheels. This was to be De Havilland's last project before closing their doors. The Nepean Belle Paddlewheeler, or 'the Belle' as she is affectionately known, was launched in October 1982 and run by the Wakeling family for 32 years. Local residents, Chris and Carol Bennett, purchased the Nepean Belle Paddlewheeler in October 2013. Chris had worked on the Belle when she first started operating on the Nepean River and he and Carol were determined to continue and maintain the operation of this wonderful paddlewheeler. The business continues to be a family affair and the Belle enjoys a great reputation for great food that is freshly prepared onboard, hospitality, scenery and charm. Reflecting the grace and charm of yesteryear, the Belle's interiors are beautifully panelled with stained timbers featuring cedar and teak. With seated dining capacity for 110 guests or cocktail function capacity of up to 150 guests the Belle is suited to a range of function styles. The Belle is powered by two Kubota diesel engines and cruises the Nepean River into the Nepean Gorge at a leisurely speed of about 4 knots.*

Taken from Wikipedia: *The Nepean Gorge is administered and protected by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. It is carved through the sandstone typical of the region, Hawkesbury sandstone. There is some speculation as to why it runs through the eastern edge of the Blue Mountains National Park rather than around it. The gorge is popular for water recreation by small watercraft all year. Lookouts above the gorge are accessible by dirt roads on both banks and the area is steeped with Aboriginal history. Evidence of prehistoric volcanic activity in the area also exists in the soil and stone of nearby hills.*



There was some onboard commentary, but having two large talkative groups on board made hearing this impossible. Nevertheless, we very much enjoyed the plentiful and delicious chicken & salad lunch with dessert, tea & coffee. This was followed by a visit from an obviously overheated Mr Snowman who handed out lollies to all. It was a 2.5 hr cruise, so lots of time after our meal to revisit the bar, chat to the Captain, or sit outside on the top deck to admire the pretty scenery on what was a very quiet river, apart from just the one jet-skier.

We reboarded our coach and were on our way by 2.45. We got caught up in the school pick-up traffic though so it was a slow trip, arriving at Penshurst just before 4.15 pm. Heather D and Irene F won the Lucky Seat prizes. It had been a very pleasant, leisurely day and a great idea for a Christmas get-together.