



Dr. Barry Hutchins at Yallingup. Photo Clay Bryce.

Peter Kidman recalls riding bellyboards around North Cottesloe in the late 1950s. These boards were inspired by a shape made by Don Bancroft who was making a shape of a woman out of ply and used the torso for a bellyboard. Kidman and friends added handlebars and had the boards painted in the colours of their favourite board clubs. Kidman believed his boards would have been known to Don Vidler, through Ken Vidler who he swam with. Tony Wegener from Scarborough and later City Beach recalls the introduction of flippers “reinvented” body surfing: “At first the purist body surfers looked down on the use of swim fins. Not manly enough. But then the magic started.” The first “chest boards” were fabricated out of plywood, slightly upturned at the front. They were about the size of the first foam plastic boogy boards and looked like some of Jon Wegener’s models. Some of the early chest boards had handles attached to the top front. Surfers at City Beach started making plywood hand paddles thinking that it would improve their take-off. They soon discovered that the hand paddles could be “hand planes”. Using swim fins and two hand planes an expert body surfer could make incredible three point rides with the body stiff and only feet and hand planes in the water” (Wegener 2015). Niel Chappel is reported to have also ridden a chestboard.



Unknown 1967 at Cottesloe Beach. Greg Woodward photo courtesy Jim King (<https://surfingdownsouth.com.au>)

Rodney's Hounslow's nephew David, stated that his father Peter and friends, John Julian and Clive Jarrott rode ply bellyboards at Cottesloe Beach, which "was full of them late 50's early 60's". David recalled surfing them as a child on holidays at Margaret River and Yallingup. He also recalled his father's board not having handles (2016).

Around 1956 Barry Jarrott recalls a rough sketch was given to Ward boat builders to make two boards, for him and his brother Clive. Barry said "we didn't want the board to be too thick and buoyant as to get under the broken wave fairly deep when going out and a little flexible we made them a bit longer than normal and tapering at the end. So that we could cut left or right easier and the extra length was to enable us to pull ourselves up on the board kneeling in a crouch kinda position so the legs and feet weren't dragging in the water by being just that bit more flexible than the norm we seemed to have a bit more control". Barry said that "at times, we could be just about as fast as the guys standing up". Barry advised the boards were made "a tad longer as on a decent wave we were able to pull ourselves up on to the board in a kneeling position using those chrome handles using one hand to hang on with, and the other to put into the face of the wave to get the angle" It was noted by Barry that at times these boards couldn't get down the face quick enough. In addition to surfing round Perth, they surfed around Yallingup. Before wetsuits, Barry recalled "The one thing Clive and I couldn't make our mind up was either to wear a woollen jumper or a rugby jumper or none at all wool was warm to a point, and heavy, the rugby kinder warm and clinging, none at all was good, but a bit chilly, but we used to say, at least the cotton was better than bare skin so let's get cracking". Barry also recalls ". . . I took off on one and went down the mine kneeling up and I felt the board creak, so that was the start of it the long cottons over the shoulders were good cause they wouldn't come off"? He noted "We had club long cottons over the shoulder bathers, and Cottesloe Rugby league jumpers which were Balmain's Tigers jumpers from the previous years before as Balmain was our sister club back then". Barry was 16-17 at the time and Clive 10 years older. Barry also advised "Flippers weren't around then for us, so we used to swim with one hand hang onto the board with the other and kick like blades the boards performed well" (Jarrott 2016).



Barry Jarrot's board.

Peter Collell was an apprentice at Stewie Ward's boat shed (Seaward Marine) in 1969. Bellyboards were made from left over scrap marine ply. Peter's recollection was that they were approximately 4' by 18" wide and 3/8" thick. The boards didn't have wooden handles but a piece of timber across the nose. Peter wrote: "I am pretty sure we

also did a keel; like fin on the underneath which ran the length of the board and also had a curve in it to give the nose some kick up”. He recalled the tails had more of a scallop out of the bottom, than a photo of a 1940s version (Collell 2017). He believed the boards were sold from the office.

Jim King (2024a) has documented the use of bellyboards by two groups, in Western Australia in the 1960s: **Bodysurfing Down South**. A circle of families and friends, bodysurfing at Trigg Point progressed to homemade plywood hand boards and later bellyboards. Jo Felton recalled that members of this circle would holiday at Yallingup and included the “... the families of Brian Felton, Ron Fussell, Ray Fussell, Alan Minty, Laurie Roach, Alan Rich, Harry Kimber, Ernst, John Leggoe, Kenny Gimm, Ron Watts, Rod Baker, Ross Thomsett, Andy Carlin, George Tocas, Lance Twomey and later Murray d’Almeida and Barry Fehlberg”. The bellyboards lasted for only a few years before they started riding surf skis.

The second group in this era were the Bombora Surfriders Assoc, from Cottesloe surfers Beach. The group who regularly travelled south, rode a range of surfcraft, including bellyboards. A member of this group was Malcolm (Mick) Henryn who tragically drowned surfing at Yallingup (King 2024b). More of this incident can be found here: **Malcolm ‘Mick’ Henryn 1948-1967**



The late Malcolm Henryn’s board. Photo courtesy WA Surf Gallery ( <https://aravinaestate.com/pages/wa-surf-gallery>).



Plywood body boards - deck



Plywood body boards - bottom

Source: Photo by Ron Edwards Yalls, courtesy Jim King.



Brian Felton body/kneeboard; Ray Funnell and Harry Kimber with handboards. Photo courtesy Jim King.



Harry Kimber and Ray Fussell, 1975. Photos courtesy Janet James & Felton family.



Brian Felton, Ron Fussell and Harry Kimber, Gracetown. Photos courtesy Felton family.



1965 Bombora boys on Gallows track. Photo courtesy the late Nick Thomas and Jim King L-R Boyd Warrilow, Alan Briety, Nick Thomas & Roger Shields.



1965 Cottesloe Beach. Nick Thomas with kneeboard



1966 Scarborough: Peter Allen, Peter Sorenson and Nick Thomas.

Source: Photos courtesy Suzanne Thomas and Jim King.



1966 Esperance surf trip. Bruce Cresswell & Harry Grisk.



1965 -From left, Nick, Boyd Warrilow & Roger Shields at St Lennards Pool Cottesloe, after a competition. Roger won first place, followed by Boyd.

Source: Photos courtesy Suzanne Thomas and Jim King.



Cottesloe Main break. Artie Shaw and others - 1966. Photo courtesy Jim King.

Two existing Vidler boards, which are likely to have been ridden as bellyboards (due to their thinness) suggest an experimental approach to surfcraft. Colin Vidler (2010) advised that Neville Kenyon and Don Vidler initially made the boards before Ron Vidler replaced Neville. The boards were described by Vidler as transition boards between rocker-less bellyboards of the time and later kneeboards. These boards were made in Scarborough, soaked in a swimming pool built by their father in 1957. Colin advises that the boards were ‘Made of marine ply, cut to shape, including a V cutout at front of board. The ply was then submerged in water for a couple of days (parents swimming pool) and then clamped to one half of a plough disk to obtain the “spoon” and left clamped a few days. The V was then filled in with, I think, foam and was then glassed so as to retain the spoon. Boards then sanded and sprayed with Estapol. They were heavy but they used to go pretty good and fast”. The boards were manufactured over a four-five year period, from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Colin noted the boards were made “so they could buy a Kombi (of course) deck it out and do the East coast surf trip, before getting regular jobs. Ken, Colin and Jeff Vidler won Australian lifesaving titles in ski events while Ken was a 1980 Moscow Olympian (Galton 1984)



Vidler bellyboard.



Vidler bellyboard profile.

Source: Currumbin Surfworld museum. Carl Tanner collection..



Vidler-Kenyon bellyboard.



Vidler-Kenyon bellyboard.

Source: Henry Marfleet photo and collection.

Trevor Pocock's Albany surf museum has several bellyboards in their collection. The fibreglass board was described on the Albany Museum of Surfing, Western Australia Facebook page as: '... very rare Innovator belly board on loan to A.M.o.S. from Neil Thomas. Neil used this board before he got his next board custom made by John "Jacko" Jacovich in 1973, a Greenough style spoon kneeboard which he has also loaned to the museum. Check out the compression on the top & bottom of the nose from where Neil has gripped it!. How many waves does that take? Despite a patch here & there, a post production leash plug and being over 50 years old this is a beautiful board & a true piece of W.A. gold. It was shaped by the late Greg "Thunderpants" Laurenson at Osborne Park, W.A.'



2'10" plywood single fin and 3'4" Innovator belly-board.

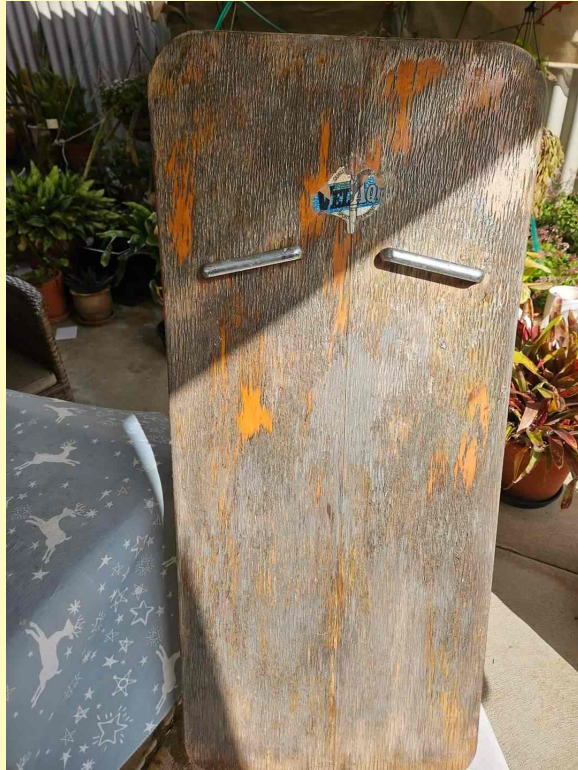


Note drawer handle on the ply board and post production leash plug on the Innovator.

Source: Photos courtesy Albany Surf Museum.



Note the keel fin set up. Photo courtesy Albany Surf Museum.

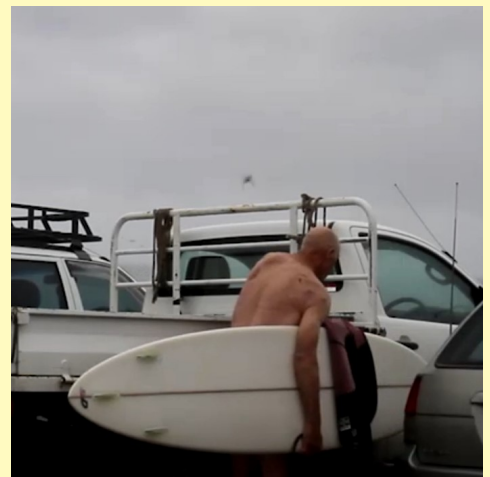


c.1968 VelAqua bellyboard used by Brian Rocke at Yallingup and Perth.  
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=194833769779590>

In more recent times, Len Dibben (2010) a long time surfboard manufacturer in the Western Australia reports making approximately 6 -10 single fin bellyboards, from both balsa and polyurethane foam. Dr. Barry Hutchins (Hutchins 2009b) moved to Western Australia in 1972 and surfed around Margaret River and Yallingup from 1972-1974, while Steve Bredemeyer rode a bellybogger around Scarborough and Trigg Island around 1994. Around the same time Kev McManus from Victoria surfed both the south-west and north-west coast on fibreglass bellyboards. Pete Leahy is reported to have surfed around Margaret River on a longer style bellyboard. In his 80s Kevin Merifield continued to surf big waves at Margate River, prone.



Kevin on a left



Kevin's board.

Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-18/kevin-merifield-80-year-old-wa-surfer/9336298>.