

Ruffian



In the summer of 1969 Dick and I took part in Cowes Week in the Ronnie Wayte's home-built yacht 'Mayro of Skerries'. Mayro was classed as a 'One Tonner'. We had a fairly successful series of races in the Solent and then competed in the Fastnet Race.

This was the start of it all. My brother Hughie had always wanted to have a boat he could call 'The Black Maria', but the idea had not met with parental approval so he decided to build one for himself. That was our first boat. Construction was starkly simple. It consisted of two twelve foot by ten inch planks joined at the ends and held apart by a twenty-one inch stick in the middle. The hull was completed with a tongue and groove bottom. Lots of nails and lots of paint and putty. Total cost just over £2.



Black Maria was a success. A crew of two, if they paddled fast enough, could get to Strangford before she sank. Portaferry Regatta Committee offered a prize in the Annual Regatta if we could produce a fleet of them. So that was what we

did. The Lawson brothers, Peter and David built another but I went into mass production and built two. Perhaps that was the real start of it all.

Dick and I had built a few small boats. In 1938 I built a 'Snipe'. After work each winter night I cycled down to a builders workshop just behind the Crumlin Road Jail and by spring-time the yacht 'Jitterbug' was launched. I can say nothing of her success. In my innocence I built her on oak frames and I think she was the only Snipe in the SLYC fleet to be skinned in full three-quarter inch cedar. Cedar is a beautiful light timber. I had not realized its capacity for absorbing a huge amount of water. My hollow mast was by far the heaviest in the fleet. But I had tremendous fun sailing it, when on leave during the war, not in competition, but just around the Narrows.

We built various small sailing 'punts' after the war. In that we were always guided by Hugh Tweedie, a partially crippled shoe maker whose workshop is now the far end of the restaurant of The Narrows. He had built and sailed a number of successful sixteen foot 'Cruisers'.

Dick followed up with a Flying Fifteen named 'Fan Tan'. She was the second Fan Tan in the family. The first in Strangford Lough had been the fourteen foot 'punt' we had all

learned to sail in. She had been built by Joe Murnin, a classic builder of small boats. He worked in a shed in Kilclief at the beginning of the century. The cost of that first Fan Tan was five pounds, complete. Complete, that is, with oars, rowlocks and bottom boards. It was from Murnin's boats that Hugh Tweedie was inspired in his boat building. Joe Murnin's boats are still to be seen in use and on the shores of the Narrows. They are distinctively beautiful. Dick's Fan Tan was certainly more successful than my 'Jitterbug'.

To continue with what started it. Dick and I persuaded ourselves that we could do better than 'Mayro'. I took on the job of design because I could handle the Mathematics. I got a large drawing board, two set-squares to match, a borrowed set of French Curves and a set of plastic splines and lead ducks to hold them on the drawing board. I read 'Sailing Yacht Design' by Douglas Phillips-Birt AMINA and started drawing. The first effort was dreadful. A thirty five foot racing yacht with eleven foot of beam should have had a displacement of around five tons. Dick looking over my shoulder knew by the look of it that I'd got it wrong. I then did the calculations. Dick was right. The displacement was around about twelve tons. Back to the drawing board. Design followed design not always with improvement.

Light was shed on our efforts when Wally Clarke, who with his identical twin Bob ran the boat yard in Cowes which had built our 'Black Soo', sent us a copy of publicity material for a new design by Cuthbertson and Cassian of Toronto. It was only a mid-ship section and accommodation drawing in plan and profile. By following such features as where the cabin floor and other furniture met the hull I was able to get a rough idea of what amounted to sub water-lines. Eventually I produced what I thought was a reasonably similar hull. We were pleased with this one. But not for long. We studied what we could make out as features of successful designs of the day. C and C had produced a successful Challenger to race against the American Champion in off-shore racing in Lake Ontario. That was part of what changed our minds. At this time Sparkman and Stevens had introduced the idea of 'the bustle' in their off-shore designs. It was a device said to take advantage of the IOR Rule. I was never convinced that this was the case and anyhow the standard of my draughtsmanship would not have enabled me to handle such intricacies. Dick who would often watch over my shoulder as I worked eventually said I'd got it right. And so Ruffian was born, on paper at least.



Dick assembled a Nissen Hut in his garden. We sought advice from various experts. Dick knew almost exactly what he wanted in the way of timber, fittings and so on and I got going with drawing details, offsets for hull sections, sail plan, accommodation, engine installation and, perhaps the hardest bit of all, estimating the IOR rating.

First came the Plug, a mock-up based on ten cross-sections of the hull shape. This included a laminated stem and keel both of which would be part of the finished boat. Rough lathes about two inches by five eighths were then fastened to the framework. It began to look like a boat. The plug was covered in polythene sheet and the first skin was applied in finished 70 x 5 mm. mahogany strips, fastened to the plug by stapled plywood tabs. Two staple guns and an air compressor helped in that task. That was the first of five alternating diagonal skins. The tabs held each mahogany strip in place until the glue (Aerodux) had hardened. After each skin had been applied the tabs and staples were removed. The floor of the shed was a mass, or mess of tabs and staples. We reckon we must have used over a million staples.

At last the shell was complete. It was obviously a boat, but as yet we'd not been able to think of a suitable name for it. Good names came and went, but never the 'right' name.

The plug was pulled out into the open air where the hull was released and turned right way up. It looked even more like a boat. We moved her into the Nissen hut again for finishing. The first item to be done was to fit permanent ribs to replace the sections. These were again laminated in to fit the hull, heavy ones in the way of the mast and lighter towards the ends. We considered the possibility of laying up the laminated frames with a piece of polythene between frame and hull. That way we could have removed the complete fitted frame and cleaned up untidy overlapping edges before fitting and gluing the frame to the hull. In the interest of structural integrity we decided against this and fitted and glued each laminate, the first to the hull and each subsequent one to its predecessor. It also turned out to be easier to lay the frames along the geodesic lines of the hull, so that those forward leaned aft and those aft leaned forward. It was also a structurally sound idea. The ribs lay naturally over the keel and provided us with another good idea. We laid a laminated keelson over the top of the ribs from bow to stern thus forming a really stiff box girder as backbone for the hull. With the sections removed she was now a thoroughly integrated hull. That was to be proved later – unfortunately.

Slowly the hull turned into being a boat. The deck went on, the engine was fitted. The mast was ordered from Proctors after considerable consultation. That was interesting. I went over to Cowes and had a consultation with Owen Parker of Montague Smith, Ben Bradley of Spencers and I think it was Colin Turner of Proctors. The main point of discussion was the relative weights of the various parts of the rigging, the lowers, cap shrouds, forestay and backstay. Three world experts in their fields. There was no agreement among them in the relative weights they recommended. I settled for what had been our own view, lowers the heaviest, cap shrouds, fore- and back-stay a size lighter. I think each of the experts had got one bit right and it proved to be so when it came to performance. Each got their reward, Montague Smith the deck fittings, Spencers the rigging and Proctor the mast, boom and spinnaker poles.

One part of her construction worried me. The configuration of the cockpit was such that I was forced into designing a rudder tube that was much shorter than I would have wished. I was right to be worried.

One morning Dick said 'Ruffian'. That was it. Everyone agreed. She was 'Ruffian'.

In the first week of May 1971 Ruffian took to the sea in a lovely coat of deep royal blue paint. She was in her element. She floated to her water lines to an extent I could only have hoped for. I steered her out to a moorings under engine and was amazed at how responsive she was to the tiller. So much so that I almost threw Jimmy Boyd over the bow by executing a quick manoeuvre. We fitted mast and sails and had her sailing in a fresh to strong breeze that same evening. Straight away she had the chance of proving herself. 'Helen' the eight metre was out sailing and we sailed towards her for a bit of competition. I dare say 'Helen' did not see it as competition to the extent that we did. There was no competition. We out-pointed and out-sailed her. Coming back from about Chapel Island to the Narrows against the flood tide on a very close reach she burst the Walter Rock tide with an ease that amazed me. She was magic.

As she lay alongside Portaferry Quay that evening Dick and I sat down at the edge of the Wee Quay and looked across the dock with satisfaction. Winkie Nixon, in his article in Ireland Afloat wrote "Billy and Dick lit their millionth cigarette".



Competition in the Irish Sea was no different. 'Round the Isle of Man Race' was the big event in our calendar. In those days it was a main event in the Irish Sea. We had won it in 'Black Soo' and a number of times in 'Juffra' with Robin Davis and with David Lynas. That was before other clubs poached the date, the last weekend of May, for their own events. There would be up to two hundred boats of all shapes and sizes in those days. Tre Sang, Grey Seal and Salidi, lots of keen competition. There was an early start on Sunday morning from Ramsay Harbour where many of the boats had rested for the night. Literally rested against the quay walls and against each other and not always so restfully. With a good start and a close fetch up to Point of Ayre we were among the leaders of the fleet. We had included in our complement of sails a second Number One Genoa of light cloth and with no jib hanks. Dick was prepared for the opportunity. As we rounded the point and payed off down the north west coast he had the light Genoa hoisted in the lee of the heavy number one which was then dropped and Ruffian took off. I don't think many knew what had happened. I don't recall much of the detail of the rest of the race. I do recall speaking to a race spectator who had followed us round the island by car. We were doing thirteen knots going up the east

coast. He lost us while he drove through Douglas and didn't pick us up again until he was at Maughold Head. Ruffian picked up the record for time round the Island and held it for years.

Later in the season we sailed in a race from Holyhead. There was little wind at the start and a big lazy sloppy sea outside the breakwater. It was no great start. Sails were slatting from one side to the other on all the boats. As the gun went Dick had the light number one genoa up. Within minutes Ruffian was forging ahead of the fleet with most of the other boats still lopping around getting nowhere. I have a letter from Karl Smith, Honorary Secretary of the Royal Ulster Yacht Club congratulating us "at the great success which Ruffian achieved on the Clyde in coming first in IOR Division A1 class".

She was magic.

The Climax of the year was Cowes week. In that week we took third place in three out of the four Solent races. In each of these races the first and second places were taken by Sparkman and Stevens Swan 37's, complete with bustles, a different pair of boats in each race. Our Channel Race was even better. That race was from East Solent round the Seine Bay Light Vessel and back through West Solent. One Swan 37, 'Easy Rider' took first place, Ruffian was second.

Our Fastnet was not a success. We reached the Rock in good company. I recall how we passed 'Evenlode', a design I had always admired, half way between Lands End and the Rock. Ruffian was going well in fairly easy conditions. Round the Rock in daylight and heading for The Bishops the wind increased. Ruffian was flying on an easy reach. It was such an exciting sail, though with the fair sized seas and on a reach there was rather a lot of rudder work. Half way to the Bishops it happened. That rudder stock had been too short. The working at the rudder head became dangerous. We had to reduce sail and hope that it would last us to Plymouth. The wind eased soon and we were able to sail fairly normally after a while. We reached the Lizard in light winds just as the ebb tide made. It was hopeless. We went to seaward hoping to avoid the full strength of the tide. Some came with us. Others stayed inshore. None of us got through until the tide slackened. We finished half way down the fleet. We still counted it a successful week. Dick reminds me, we were eighth in our class.

However I had not been quite satisfied with our rating. IOR One Ton class had a maximum permitted rating of 28 feet. Ruffian had been rated 27.9 feet. I should point out that the term 'One Tonner' has a historical origin and bears little relationship to the displacement of the boat. Similarly 'Rated Length' is a calculated figure only loosely related to actual length overall or by waterline. During the winter I studied the IOR Rule even more carefully than before. I queried one measurement, just one of over a hundred. I believed it was wrong. In the Spring of '72 we had her re-measured. The rating came down by more than 0.8 feet. On the new rating Ruffian would have been Cowes week champion in her class.

During that winter, in the belief that a smaller boat, similar to Ruffian in shape and rig, could perform well, I got the drawing board out again. The result of that was the Ruffian 23. Today there is a fleet of over forty 23's racing in Dublin Bay and another nineteen in Hong Kong. Carrickfergus comes next, with the formidable Alec



Kirkpatrick and his immaculate emerald green Carrigreen. There is a 23 in Reykjavik. She sailed there from Portaferry Quay.

Work on the 23's interfered with our campaigning that year. Ruffian was sold to Rex Wardman who sailed in the Solent. A letter from Rex shortly after told us that the Chief Measurer had noted an unexpectedly large reduction in Ruffian's rating after re-measurement and felt that he must insist on a further re-measurement. Rex was alarmed. So was I. Ruffian was re-measured and came out a further two points lower.

Ruffian came back to Strangford Lough a few years later. We were in the process of building the third Fan Tan, a Three Quarter Tonner. Our first big race was from Ballyhome to Cork. It was a bad night. Fan Tan, largely I think because of a poor suit of sails was not doing well. It had been a very uncomfortable beat all night in ugly seas. Ruffian was well ahead of us. At four in the morning we were just past Courtown when we saw a red flare go up some five or six miles to the south east. We immediately powered up the engine and headed out through a gap in the Wicklow Banks. An hour later we saw the casualty. It was Ruffian, hard and fast near the south east corner of the Moneywaite Bank. The wind had eased but the big sloppy sea persisted, breaking over the bank and over Ruffian. Three of the crew came off to us, in their rubber dinghy. Three remained on board. They raised the main-sail in the hope of heeling and sailing her off. As the wind caught the sail Ruffian screwed up into and then through the wind. As the main-sail changed tack Ruffian was lifted from heeling to starboard and slammed down on the hard shale bank on her port bilge. I had seen a horse at an Ards Harrier's hunt caught in barbed wire. The image came straight to my mind. We tried steaming south of the shipwreck hoping to float the dinghy on a long painter close to Ruffian. It might just have been possible to tow her off taking advantage of the seas that were running. Unfortunately at that state the flood tide was running north east over the bank and we could not manoeuvre the dinghy into anywhere near Ruffian.

