

PUNTING IN THE SIXTIES

The first punt I ever saw was Gerald Sambrooke Sturgess's beautiful, unbeatable Swallow II on the grass at Wroxham after the War. The contribution Gerald and Betty have made to the Club (not to mention yachting world-wide) over the years has been immense: as publicists for the Class in the 1950s (there is a fine picture of Gerald in the October 1951 issue of Yachting World), as owners, as unfailing supporters and, in Gerald's case, as the NPC's "Ultimate Deterrent". In the days when we manned the line on the Friday of Wroxham Week it took a brave sailor to lodge a protest as nothing escaped Gerald's watchful, bespectacled gaze from the Race Officers' box, and more than one over-confident NBYC helmsman discovered what it meant to come up against yachting's equivalent of the Lord Chancellor. They were talking, not only to a world authority on the Yacht Racing Rules, but to someone who had won the Gun Cup four years in succession, the NBYC President's Points Cup in 1951 against all the "local" opposition (eg. Jim Clabburn!) and the Challenge Cup at the Open Regatta when there were eighty-three starters. As Yachting World said in 1952, Gerald was "no mere 'pen and ink' yachtsman but a helmsman of credit and renown in his home waters". Aspiring punt champions in the 1990s have a lot to prove.

I owe my introduction to punt sailing to Tony Faulkner and Alan Hilliard, the pilot and co-pilot of the first hard chine punt, Scoter, with whom I shared a house in The Cathedral Close in Norwich in 1961. "Forkers" as we called Tony (the first of a long still healthy line of web-footed architects addicted to punts) in turn introduced me to Basil Tracey, then building Wild Goose at Tim Whelpton's yard at Upton and- continuing the chain reaction- Basil sold me Melanitta, I think for a hundred pounds. Melanitta and Leslie Landamore's punt Shark were the last of the open Wyche and Coppock punts: the next five, Tom Harmer's immaculately home built Plamer and 51-54, built by Tim Whelpton for John Place, Billy de Quincey, Basil and Angwin Eddy had the same hull shape but were fitted with buoyancy compartments which changed capsizing from being a terminal illness into a minor irritation, encouraging timid members out of the woodwork and heralding a building boom. Like the Church of England (where you never know what the bishops are going to come up with next), the Punt Club owes its undiminished vigour and youthful attraction to its ability to develop and change, hair-raising though that can be for the traditionalists and weary trophy-laden veterans. The Club was after all founded in 1926 "to preserve the traditional local type of punt and to encourage the building, improvement and sailing of them." I am sure Stewart Morris, the crack International 14 helmsman in the 1950s who learned to sail in a punt (Shrimp) on Heigham Sound, would support the recent dramatic changes in the shape of punt hulls and rigs.

Basil and Kitty Tracey and their fearless wire terrier Ginger were a unique trio, or perhaps it would be better to say "quartet" because it was not long before everyone the Traceys befriended (and how easy they made it!) was invited aboard their motor cruiser Elizabeth for a picnic lunch and a tow out to the rafts, finishing up at the end of the day with a kitchen supper at the big house in Cotman Road against a backdrop of punt sails hanging down to dry in the well of the back staircase. As Philharmonic concert-goers in the 1950s and 60s will recall, Basil (still hale and hearty at 91) had a fine voice he could put to good use when the need arose, not only in lusty renditions of Handel's Messiah but also when scorching across Barton Broad in Wild Goose towards a start line which, to his crew and everyone else, looked impenetrable. Basil's attitude to his fellow competitors, when it

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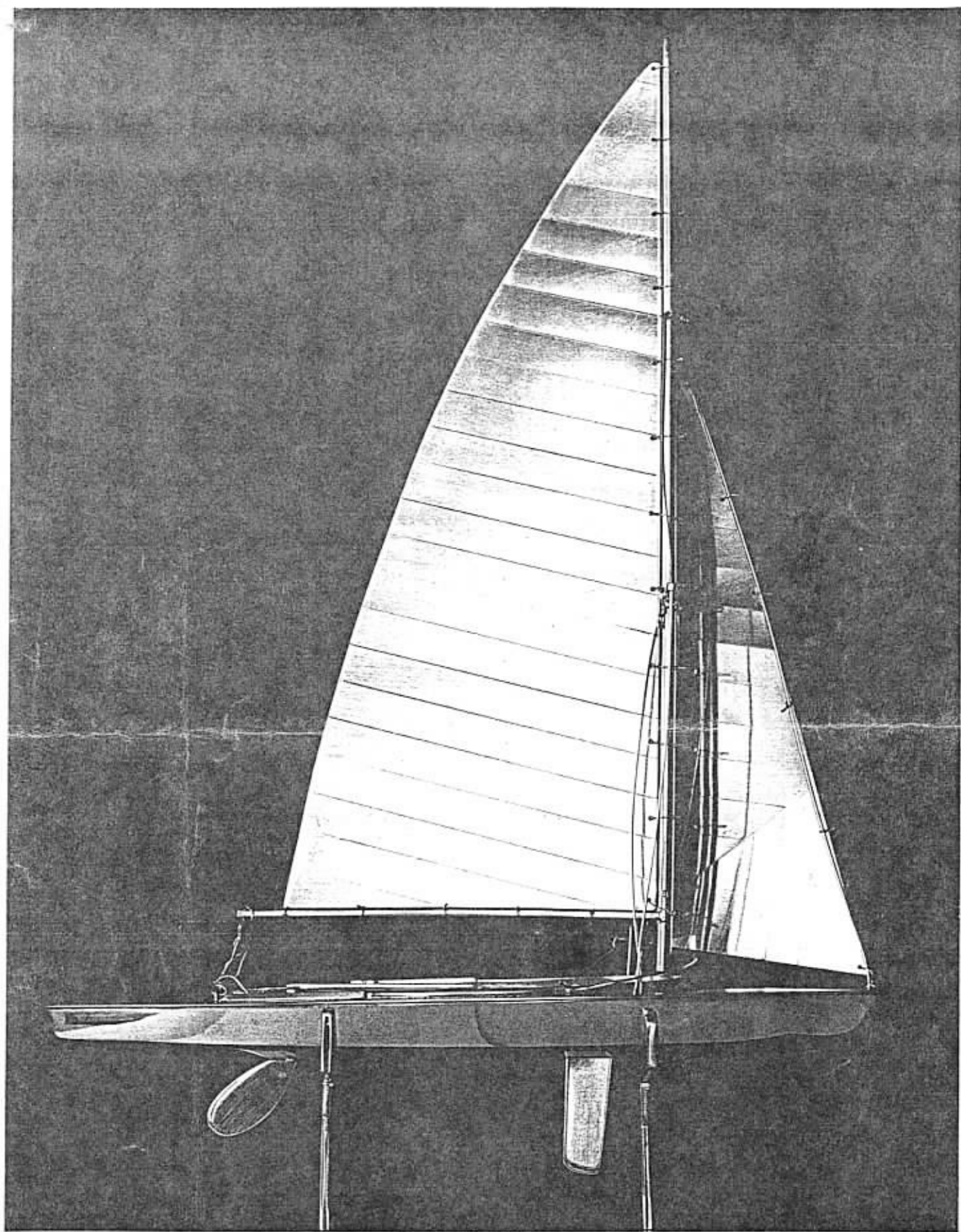
looked likely that a change in Wild Goose's direction was immediately necessary, was based on Darwin's Theory of the Survival of the Fittest or, in his case, the Loudest i.e. if you generate enough nautical abuse you are bound to escape the looming carnage. He would be a knowledgeable contributor to the "Racing Yachtsman's Phrase Book" (sub-titled "How to Sink the Opposition with the Minimum of Hull Damage") I am planning to write one day. Basil (complete with the famous sun hat) was a much better helmsman than he would admit and was the first- in commissioning Martin- to give a lead to punt building after the War, when numbers had dropped to about a dozen.

With Elizabeth as tug and mother hen, punts raced every year at Wroxham and Hickling and, at the end of every season, after the Athene Cup, Wild Goose and Melanitta would be towed up river to Allen's yard at Coltishall and back again the following spring: there is no finer way today of seeing the Broads, in April and October, at their best. Clifford Allen, who housed and varnished Melanitta at a price which today would barely buy a buoyancy aid, was a delightful character, his Roman nose and Sherlock Holmes pipe a study (like punt sails on a summer afternoon) in graceful curves.

There were many other unforgettable people on the rafts in the 1960s: Billy de Quincey who was in the crew of Endeavour in the (nearly successful) 1934 America's Cup challenge and for whom Uffa Fox designed the International Canoe "Gallant" before the War, and a sculling boat with a transom they tried to get to plane; the Tubbs; the Arnolds with their characterful punt Shuck (surely one of the best matched cases of man and machine); the Eddys; Justin Scott, another home builder with Avocet; Tony Ede; Tony Sword and his red International 14 "Flame"; and Donald Howell who had a Wayfarer with an unprouncable name he could never persuade anyone to crew. Donald was the Club fettler and Chief Engineer of the rescue boat Boy William who invented the corks on the raft hut keys, cutting down the amount of metal archaeologists will have to excavate in 5000 years time when they sift through the dried mud of Barton Broad.

Other memories are of Jane de Quincey sailing her Lymington Scow "Dover", clear of the fray, and Edward and Roger Pollitt flying up and down the Broad in their Dutch 30 square metre Swealtsje. Celia Scott and David Adler have reminded me of the afternoon in the year Edward Pollitt was Commodore when an applicant for membership decided that Swealtsje's stern was two feet too long and resolved to take immediate remedial action. Swealtsje got back to the Staithes thanks to every available Pollitt and Scott standing on the foredeck: the result of the membership election isn't recorded.

After Melanitta and a few years as Club Treasurer I am ashamed to admit I bought a Dragon and drifted off to Lowestoft, but we hope to have our old 1950s river launch back in the water this summer complete with a 1930s engine and more new planks on the bottom than I dare to think about. In the meantime, to celebrate our Silver Wedding anniversary last summer, Peter Tillett made a lovely silver model of Melanitta which I gaze at wistfully every day. Who knows? The "For Sale" column of the Punt Owners' Newsletter might one day catch my eye when the flood of school and university bills recedes. I see from this year's Newsletter that Matthew Thwaites is advertising Rhode Island Red at a knock-down price- intriguingly "hull only" and (presumably after Grafham) minus at least two rudders. Surely confiscating the mast and sails isn't the only way to slow the new boats down to survivable speeds. Punt sailing in the Sixties was the sport of husbands and wives.



Melanitta made by Peter Tillett 1990 Length 145 mm (5½ ins)