

Classnotes

The Thames A-Rater

BY VANESSA BIRD

There is no mistaking a Thames A-Rater. With their skimming dish hulls and huge, lofty rigs, these boats are very distinctive, and look as extreme today as they did when they were first conceived, more than 100 years ago. Designed to sail on the non-tidal River Thames, the A-Rater's vertiginous 44ft 6in (13.6m) masts, which can set 350sqft (32.5m²) of fully-battened bermudan mainsail, tower over everything, with large roaches designed to pick up as much of the available breeze as possible.

River sailing brings challenges – narrow, cramped channels, trees and buildings to obstruct the wind, and shallow waters – yet despite this, the class has thrived here since the late 1800s. It's unusual, considering they are big boats for river sailing – 27ft to 28ft (8.2m to 8.5m) LOD – yet there are 18 in sailing condition, half of which date from the early 1900s.

The A-Raters were introduced by Thames Sailing Club (TSC). Yachts had been racing under tonnage rules on the river since the 1870s, but 1888 saw the introduction of a new ratings formula by designer Dixon Kemp that allowed huge sail areas on lightweight hulls. Under TSC, a Sailing Boat Association was established which consolidated all the boats developed using this rule into three groups – the A-Raters, B-Raters and Gigs – and it was then that the class really began to develop.

There are three key designers associated with the class: Linton Hope, Alfred Burgoine and FH Jackson. Of these, the most well known, and prolific, was Linton Hope, designer of the Broads One Design and Fairy One Design. His boats, which included *Scamp II*, built in 1906 by Hart, Harden & Co, and *Vagabond*, built in 1907 by Townsend of Bourne End, were long and narrow, while those designed by Burgoine were shorter, but wider in the beam.



MARK LAITY

Interestingly, they were equally competitive, as were the boats by amateur designer FH Jackson. He designed and owned five boats – all called *Caprice* – to great success, but it was *Caprice IV*, built in around 1910, that proved the real champion, taking the coveted Queen's Cup at Bourne End Week six times.

Linton Hope described the A-Raters as, "beautiful bits of workmanship and, for finish of hulls and gear, cannot be surpassed anywhere". For most of the early 1900s, hull shape remained fairly stable with minimal changes. The rig, however, has evolved from a balanced lug of the late 1800s to a gunter sloop, and then bermudan in the early 1920s, with a distinctive tall mast and short boom.

The last of the original wooden fleet, *Dainty Too*, was built in 1922 by Turks of Kingston, but in the 1970s, with a view to revitalising the class, a mould was taken off the oldest A-Rater in existence, the 1898 Burgoine-designed *Ulva*. The first 'plastic' boat, *Spindrift*, was launched shortly after, and GRP boats now make up half the fleet.

The new A-Raters initially cleaned up on the race-course, but following extensive restoration, many of the wooden boats are once again giving their younger siblings stiff competition.

Above: Vagabond (1907) and Scamp II (1906) close racing on the Thames at Bourne End Week

SURBITON LUG

Originally sporting a balanced lug main, the A-Rater's sail plan was nicknamed the "Surbiton lug" by yacht designer Dixon Kemp.

PRIZE RACING

One of the Thames A-Raters most highly coveted prizes is the Queen's Cup. Raced for at the annual Bourne End Week on the River Thames, it was donated by Queen Victoria to the regatta in 1893.

COLLECTIBLE

In the 1930s, many famous racing yachts featured on Players cigarette cards. *Caprice IV*, designed by FH Jackson in around 1911 and built by Townsend's of Bourne End, featured on one.

TESTING TIMES

The 1907 Linton Hope-designed *Vagabond* was the test bed on which several important inventions were trialled, including the sliding seat developed by Beecher Moore. A 'bell rope' used on *Vagabond* also inspired Sir Peter Scott and John Winter to develop the trapeze, which they debuted on an International 14 during the 1938 Prince of Wales Cup.

<http://raters.thamesailingclub.co.uk>

THAMES A-RATER c1900

LOD
28ft 3in (8.6m)

LENGTH EXTREME
30ft 1in
(9.2m)

LWL
17ft 3in
(5.3m)

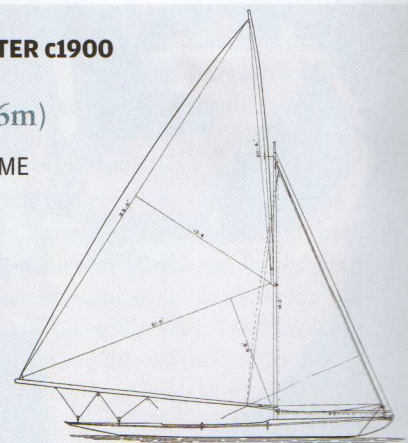
BEAM
6ft 7in (2m)

DRAUGHT C/B DOWN
3ft 4in (1m)

HULL WEIGHT
750lb (340kg)

MAST HEIGHT
44ft 6in (13.6m)

SAIL AREA
350sqft (32.5m²)



Vanessa's book *Classic Classes* is out now:
www.classicboat.co.uk

