

CHAPTER SIX
Foundation of a Dinghy Career
by BEECHER MOORE

I was living beside the river at Hampton in the late Twenties. I swam, punted and potted about in a rowing dinghy with a sail, but without rudder or centreboard.

After university, the next step was racing. The Thames Sailing Club only had four "A" raters in the water at the time and was keen to get more. So I became the owner of *Vagabond* and the usually cumbersome wheels of election to the club were oiled somewhat, though I didn't exactly conform to the skipper image of that era. I was 22 and very hard up. I kept *Vagabond* at Hampton, sailing to and from Surbiton for each race. Often I never put a foot ashore at all; I could not afford the round of drinks the skippers traditionally had to buy. Many of my eccentricities, like sailing single-handed when racing was cancelled because of strong wind, or taking 23 people out on the boat to beat the 'no bathing from the hard' rule, were tolerated as 'crazy American' characteristics. More fundamental rules I had to observe—'gentlemen always wear sleeves; and earn money in monthly salary not weekly pay packets.' This latter involved my crew Bessie Ellison in urgent discussion with her employer so that she could avoid the stigma of weekly money and be eligible to crew!

Rater seasons were short, the week before Easter until Ascot, with the Queen's Cup race at Bourne End coinciding with the slack day at the races. Then nothing till the autumn, with the social round of Henley, Cowes, holidays, etc. taking over.

Vagabond had been sailed for some 20 years and had never won a cup, so I started on a round of improvements. I was greatly helped by my crew Bill Milestone who was working in a technical college in mineralogy and made many light fittings for the boat, saving some 16 lbs. on mast fittings. I put in a centre horse; did away with the pull-round jib and the jib haliard; had a three-part purchase on the runners which I kept permanently done up; and tied my flag to the mast head, doing away with 90' of flag haliard.

My mast was originally 36' and I have cause to remember the height. To save the costs of towing to Bourne End I sailed all the way, taking down telephone wires en route which were supposed to be 40' high by Thames Conservancy Regulations, but weren't. Commodore Scott Freeman of Upper Thames S.C. rather drily remarked to me on arrival that he had been following my progress up-river by reports of my incidents! This did not prevent him giving me permission to camp on the club grounds, a generous gesture to the impoverished owner of a Rater. (The term Rater had by now

become almost synonymous with the description Thames "A" rater.)

I later added 9' to the mast height, making 45' overall. This was 2' 6" higher than the Commodore's and 5' higher than most.

My mainsail had a 40' hoist with foot of 10', one of the narrowest in Europe at the time. I designed a spinnaker to set on the mast head 45' up and in place of my jib which had to be lowered. It was 4' wide at the bottom and gave an extra area of 200 sq. ft., though under the SBA rules for measuring from corner to corner, it measured only 100 sq. ft. I used this in four races. In three I got into an uncontrollable roll which finished in disaster. In the fourth I found the boat went no faster than those without this enormous sail area. It was a good idea that went wrong!

During the summer I got crewing jobs in International 14's. I was fortunate enough in three different years to crew John Winter, Stewart Morris and Peter Scott in three Prince of Wales races. My experience on the sea made me realise that I needed an aid to help me hold in the jib. After a hard race with Stewart Morris I requested that jamb cleats be fitted. We consulted Uffa Fox who pretended to be horrified at the idea of a tough man wanting such



Central Press Photos

The bell rope, 1934, on Vagabond.

assistance, but eventually produced from his pocket just the thing. He said he used it himself once out of sight of land!

Having fitted *Vagabond* with a tall narrow rig, my next problem was to keep it upright. I used a loose wire which went to the hounds, the lower half of which was of rope with big knots in it which we called a 'bell rope'. Bill Milestone was my first crew to hang out over the side on this with his feet on the gunwale, and it gave us great success. It was used by the forward hand who walked round in front of the mast, while the mid hand played the jib. My first visit to Bourne End with the bell rope was in 1934. One day my regular crew mutinied because of my 'unreasonable demands', so I took out instead Peter Scott and John Winter. Their experience with the bell rope caused them to fix a similar contraption for the Prince of Wales race which they won a few weeks later. Alas, this aid to the crew was straightaway banned from the International 14' Class.

During the autumn of that year I sailed *Brynhilde*, Uffa's famous canoe with two sliding seats. It so impressed me that I experimented with the same on *Vagabond*. I fitted three sliding seats, 6' long, found that I as helmsman could not manage one and the jib hand did not need one, so in practice sailed with only one. Sailing alternately with the bell rope and the sliding seat left me with a conviction I still hold today, that the latter is the better method. It is helpful to have something to grip between the legs, and without a hooking mechanism it is quicker for short tacking and less dangerous in a capsize. But there are crises, as when the American author Paul Gallico, of no mean size and weight, was crewing me and missed his foothold, shooting down to leeward. The result was an immediate capsize with me in the middle of the mainsail!

I drifted away from Raters mainly because I wanted more competition. We had a handicap system at the Thames SC running quite separately but at the same time as the regular races in which time was adjusted by rating. We re-assessed ourselves after every four races, the leading boat's handicap being based on the average time he was ahead of other boats in the previous 4 races. I was at one time giving 45 minutes to the second boat. Some of this success may have been due to natural flair, but a lot was due to the time and thought I put into my racing. My boat was everything that I had, so I took sailing much more seriously than other club members who could afford cars, chartered yachts, played golf, etc.

I won the Queen's Cup in 1936 and then laid the boat up and never put her afloat again. But I helped re-rig and develop *My Lady Dainty* and *Estelle*, in both of which I won the Queen's Cup in succeeding years.

While Sailing Secretary at the Thames SC. I was asked to find a high performance, cheap boat suitable for the club. The average good dinghy in those days cost about £150 with sails, and neither Uffa Fox nor Morgan Giles came up with anything near the purse

of club members. Conyer Cooper of Teignham, Kent, submitted a 14' dinghy with 26' mast which he brought to the Thames SC and offered complete for £45. The club bought 5, but they did not really catch on for they required considerable skill to sail, one of several reasons being that their solid mast made them top heavy.

My first contact with Jack Holt was in the last year before the war when he agreed to build me a boat on a £5 a month basis. He was a cabinet maker who, when he broke his leg in a motor cycle accident, built himself a boat during his convalescence. I kept up my payments; he built me my boat (12' National *Hop Turtle*) in which I won the Burton (12' National Championship). From such a small beginning started our friendship and after the war he asked me to go into partnership with him in boat building.

A syndicate of six people asked Jack to design a compromise



Beecher Moore album

Sliding seat on Vagabond

boat giving the best of the established classes, the International 14' and the 12' National. The result was the Merlin. It had a small sail area and was easy for girls to crew. It was as long as an International 14' and lighter, so it planed very readily. It had a high boom for good visibility and a high aspect ratio of sail area, enabling it to hold its own in river conditions against other 14' boats with 50% more sail. The rules permitted a completely self draining hull, and demanded a substantial foredeck, and side decks so wide that, like a Rater, it could be capsized and righted while an expert crew kept dry the whole time. The only other boat on the river with a deck was the Rater, and from experience I knew how difficult it was to handle when getting out of the water. One of my contributions to the Merlin was the compulsory fitting of 4 handles.

People were not expert at sailing dinghies in those days and the fact that helmsmen found the Merlin difficult to sit up was blamed on the higher than usual mast. Owners were then allowed to reduce mast height by 5', but this proved less efficient so they were permitted to add 2 sq. ft. of sail area for every foot off the mast. This seemed to work well though I still think the high rig was better in all round circumstances and very much better for river sailing.

When the Merlin was accepted by the RYA as a National class, there were several requirements laid down, among them:

1. That the name Rocket be included in the title (There were only two measured Rockets at the time).
2. That the boats should no longer be self-draining.
3. That the maximum height of the mast be reduced to 22'6".

Such is the losing battle for progress!

Many other designs have followed. Basically, Jack sees to the hull and I am allowed to say what goes on top. Jack designed the Hornet which was self draining but fitted with a sliding seat like my Thames "A" rater. The sight of it persuaded continentals that an aid to the crew sitting out was a good thing. Many advanced classes in all countries now have either a bellrope or a sliding seat, both developed at the Thames S.C.

Success such as I have had sailing can directly be contributed to my experience on the Thames. The essential concentration needed to get every inch of forward motion against an unrelenting current, the experience of sailing in confined quarters and alongside other river traffic, has made me feel quite at home in even the most congested start. Equally, many hours of sitting in the rain has taught me a philosophical patience which has helped in long drawn out duels against less well trained competitors on the sea. Sailing an "A" rater on the Thames provides everything a sailing man can want—a challenge to his temperament, his skill and his design ability.

