

Eric Willis

1916 - 2011

Eric was born in Canada in August 1916 and at the age of 8 moved with his family to the UK.

Eric's life had been surrounded by boats, sailor, naval architect and later as a skilled and innovative boat builder. His company, Classcraft, was based at Turks Boatyard in Kingston upon Thames and produced a variety of craft including two Merlin Rockets (MR) - 951 and 1114 owned by Josephine Bentley and Alan Porter respectively - and National 12 dinghies one of which was owned and sailed by his wife Rosemary.

It must have been exciting for him to have been involved in the combining of the Merlin and the Rocket craft to produce the Merlin Rocket. He owned MR number 8, named Delight, from new and won trophies at Christchurch Sailing Club in 1946, 1947, 1948, and in MR Elusive the 1949, and 1950 Sat/ Sun Series. However in 1938 in a boat called Hilary he won the Class B trophy which was not thought to be a MR. The current whereabouts of the above is unknown and may well be lost.

One of his many claims to fame, it is understood, was the production of the first plastic Moth in 1958. In this he won the Nationals and after selling it it won a number more; the last being in 1970. It is generally considered to be the boat from which all the current British moths shapes have evolved. A few years ago, circa 2010, the person who bought it off Eric gave it back to his family. Amazingly it is still down to weight and competitive.

He also took on the challenge of successfully encasing the vintage Thames A Rater 'Kingfisher'. This was the first of these craft to receive, at the time, such modern and exciting preservation measures.

He joined Thames Sailing Club (TSC) in Surbiton, Surrey in 1953 and retained his membership and a strong interest throughout his life. In his later years, after moving from Esher down to the South Coast, he was made an Honorary Life member. As recently as 2011, he wrote to TSC making constructive suggestions on the proposed new Rules then being considered.

Eric's involvement with the A Raters was more than just preserving them. As an accomplished helm he won many cups and trophies including the Clayton cup in 1963 and the Yates Cup again whilst sailing an A Rater at nearby Tamesis Club at Teddington. In his early years at Thames he helmed Ulver for Charles Stowell and when Sidney Leman retired as a helm Eric steered Caprice IV to victory on many occasions. Quite a number of the Bourne End tows were run behind his works launch "Vision". Besides A Raters he sailed his own National 12 and was a familiar sight in keelboats.

In the sixties he took part in the Single Handed Transatlantic Yacht Race in his boat Coila. The following is taken from The Trans Atlantic Race - History

Before the storm British sailor Eric Willis on board Coila had picked up a bacterial infection leaving him only semi-conscious. He had no real recollection of what happened but was able to piece it all together from what he's

been told since. He initially called up Halifax radio with an estimated position. However, while Halifax told him to stay on the line, Willis retired to his bunk and ceased communications. A full-scale search was then launched. Two paramedics with the Apollo Space Programme were flown in through thick fog, sighting only the orange fluorescent paint on Coila's deck from 60ft up. They jumped straight through the fog into the sea and were able to climb aboard the yacht and administer emergency medical treatment to the skipper. A submarine recovery vessel towed the trimaran on a 600ft line back to Portland, Maine with a crew on board who, according to Willis, "tidied up my boat and didn't even drink my whisky."

The following is from The Glasgow Herald in 1968

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Clyde-built challenger in Atlantic race

FROM A CORRESPONDENT

The 50-foot trimaran Coila has an excellent chance in the single-handed transatlantic race, which starts to-morrow.

This modern yacht, owned by Mr Mungo Campbell, was built by Gutter Slip Dock. She has a highly adaptable fully battened ketch rig, which is one of the specialities of her designers, A. Mylne and Company, of Glasgow.

Being a multi-huller she has a very high top speed. She should be able to achieve and hold 14 knots for long periods given good weather. With this sort of wind she could build up a lead which conventional yachts could not regain even if conditions favour them.

Coila has £1000 worth of winches and sail handling equipment, all of the latest type. Any flat dweller would covet her galley, and the chart table is surrounded with electronic instruments showing such things as the yacht's speed and the wind speed.

Perhaps most important of all, there is a small central heating cabinet, which will warm the saloon and also dry clothes in what will at times be a cold race. Some of the competitors could be within sight of icebergs for several days.

Eric Willis, who is sailing Coila, is experienced in the relatively new art of racing trimarans. But he could have a tough time keeping the yacht going at her best speed. The genoa alone is more than 600 sq. ft., which is normally reckoned to be substantially bigger than one man can handle.

At least Willis will have the consolation of knowing that his craft is the most comfortable in the fleet. She is also considered by the knowledgeable crowd of spectators and supporters gathering at Plymouth for the start to be the best finished contender, which is just as it should be, as she is the sole Clyde-built boat.

Why Coila?

Coila was the muse of Robert Burns who created her as a poetic device for his poem The Vision.

Eric also gave much back to sailing. His name will be remembered forever not least through two trophies he presented to TSC. The first is the Coila trophy, named after his epic adventure across the Atlantic and the second was the Hilarious trophy named after his National 12. He also inspired his family to enjoy boats and his wife, Rosemary, was a

regular National 12 sailor at TSC and Keith, his son, achieved fame by winning the Wayward Cup in 1973 in a Cadet.

Eric's wife Rosemary played an active role at TSC and sailed a National 12, built by Eric, with Jackie Foster (nee Stowell). Rosemary was also a stalwart in the kitchen preparing many a Tuesday evening supper.

Eulogy for Eric - 21st November 2011 (by Jackie Foster)

First of all I want to thank Rosemary and Keith for giving me the honour of speaking about Eric today.

I have known Eric since I was fourteen – as long as the Queen has been on the throne – I remember that because we met in Coronation Year. Rosemary has kindly helped me fill in some of the details of his earlier years.

He was born in Halifax, Canada on 1st August 1916. His love of sailing and the sea started early, as early as three, when he sailed in blue-nosed schooners off the Halifax coast. His mother was made an honorary member of the Nova Scotia Yacht Club, an unusual honour for a woman in those days, so she obviously encouraged him from the word go, and he must have had access to a number of different boats.

Sadly his parents separated and when he was eight he and his mother came to England for him to be educated here.

Their first home was a houseboat moored opposite Christchurch Sailing Club. I recently showed him an old aerial photograph of Christchurch taken in 1925, and was amazed that he knew the names of all the boats moored there and their owners – mystery solved – they were all his neighbours! From an early age he was afloat for most of the time. His name appears on the honours board at Christchurch Sailing Club several times in the late 1940's for winning races in Merlins, namely Delight (no.8) and Hilarity. He also sailed regularly with his mother in "lanthe" and they won a number of races.

He completed his education at Bournemouth Technical College – specialising in engineering, which led to an apprenticeship at Wellworthy's (piston-ring manufacturers). This led to a job at the Air Ministry where, at the start of the War, he was an Inspector of aero-engines at the Bristol Aircraft Factory.

It was shortly before this, having moved to Burton, that he met Rosemary, then only aged fifteen, at a production of "Tobias and the Angel" at the local Parish Hall.

As he was working in a protected industry at the outbreak of war, he was not called up immediately. However, the Navy was obviously in his sights, and after a visit to someone with great naval influence at Hasler, he entered the Navy as a Lieutenant.

During this time he had asked Rosemary to marry him, but as she was nursing they had to wait three years until 1944, when she became twenty-one, to be married.

At the time of their marriage Eric was working at the Admiralty in London and Rosemary was nursing at Charing Cross Hospital. They were lent a flat in Albert Hall Mansions, and Rosemary tells me that she had the privilege of two sleeping-out passes a week – what a way to start married life!

When the War ended in 1945 they returned to Christchurch and lived for a time on a converted life-boat called “Naomi” on the Little Avon – just downstream from our holiday home of over thirty years. Rosemary nursed in Mudeford and Eric bought a garage in Burton, which was opposite to Rosemary’s family home, Monk’s Revel. They then moved to Lymington to a house called White Rock, as Rosemary was pregnant with their first child, David, who sadly only lived for six weeks.

These were traumatic years for both of them, as six months later Rosemary’s father died of a coronary, she nursed Eric’s mother until she died, and this was closely followed by the death of her own mother in 1953. It was during that year, when Eric was recovering himself from illness and was in the process of taking over Kingston Bridge Boatyard that he met my father at the Thames Sailing Club. Jimmy Ledwith, a fellow Merlin helmsman, had met him on the Queen’s Promenade in Kingston watching the end-of season regatta and invited him back to the Club. To cut a long story short, my father, having heard his story, invited him to stay with us until he found somewhere permanent to live. Rosemary came up from Lymington to join him shortly afterwards.

At that time my father owned an “A” Class Rater “Ulva” and, as he suffered from severe deafness, asked Eric to helm her. His amazing talent result in their winning numerous races and cups both at Thames and Bourne End. I was allowed to be mid-hand from time to time. It was Eric who persuaded my father to buy me my first boat for my fifteenth birthday - a Cadet. Rosemary was sailing “Hilarious” their National 12. at the time.

By this time they had moved to Halidon Cottage in Esher, after much amusing house-hunting with the help, or perhaps hindrance, of my mother. It was on viewing one particular house that my mother uttered the never-to-be-forgotten line “Oo Eric I would love to see you in a pink bath” – I believe they have a pink bath to this very day!

The house next door, “Halidon”, belonged to old friends of my husband Alan’s parents, Jimmy and Marah Hatrick. It transpired that their son Ian and Alan had bought Eric and Rosemary’s National 12 “Hilarious”, which led to Alan and I being introduced by Rosemary at the Easter Regatta at Tamesis in 1957.

By this time I had grown out of my Cadet and Eric had built a new National 12 for Rosemary and me, which we sailed for a number of years until Alan and I got married in 1960 when, lo and behold, he built us another National as a wedding present.

By then Eric had moved across the Thames to Turk’s Boathouse, where he had set up his own boat-building business called Classcraft. It was here that he repaired endless Rater masts and where he was one of the early pioneers of fibre-glass. He also did trials of polyurethane varnish for International Paints. He went on to fibre-glass most of the Rater hulls, which gave them a new lease of life.

No repair was ever too difficult for Eric, whose skill with wood was as remarkable as his skill with engines. He was also an inventive boat designer as well, but sadly his ideas were often stolen and patented by others. He was a ground-breaking designer and skilled craftsman not a business man.

Keith was born to their great delight in March 1961, despite Rosemary competing pregnant in the 12ft National Championships the previous summer, and having made all my bridesmaids' dresses in the September.

Not content with inland racing, Eric started delivering boats of various shapes and sizes all over the world. Once he was spotted by Radio Caroline in the North Sea on a bare-masted catamaran repairing some rigging and the DJ was heard to say "There's a madman out here, on a multihulled craft up the mast in a gale"!

Having being the first to sail single-handed in a dinghy round the Isle of Wight, and one of the first to sail single-handed round the British Isles, he decided to give the Atlantic a go in a trimaran. He nearly made it, but the water-supply became contaminated and he was taken ill, but not before he had given the American Rescue Service his exact position. Rosemary and I bizarrely came to find out about this whilst reading the headlines of the "Evening Standard" over someone's shoulder at the Wimbledon Tennis. It said "Lone Yachtsman rescued off Canadian Coast". Strangely his destination had been Halifax, the city of his birth, where he ended up safely, but not quite as he had planned.

In 1978 they decided to return to their roots in Lymington. They had remained members of both the Royal and Town Clubs there. It was shortly after this, in 1980, that memories of racing with Rosemary for the Christchurch Kettle led us to buy a holiday home on the Little Avon. This way we saw more of them, especially as Rosemary was nursing in Christchurch Hospital. At this stage they moved from sail to their motor-boat "Sharloe" and enjoyed six months cruising through France as well countless other expeditions. They continued cruising as far as Russia and China – but this time in a larger boat with someone else at the helm. They also bought a time-share in Spain, which all the family enjoyed.

By this time Keith was becoming a keen and accomplished sailor, and he and other members of the Town Club decided to sail in 420's to Alderney. They needed to be accompanied by safety boats and Eric asked if our catamaran "Sally Fifth" could be one of them. We found it hard to keep up with the dinghies, even with Eric helming and the spinnaker up. However, it was during that expedition that Keith and Julie's romance blossomed. This year they repeated the sail to Alderney, but this time with their son Liam on board.

Eric was incredibly proud of Keith's sailing achievements, which have been outstanding in recent years. This pride has been doubled by watching Liam develop into a very competent young helmsman too. No challenge was ever too great for Eric, and Keith seems to be following in his footsteps, to say nothing of Liam.

In my mind he will always be the smiling, kindly sailor, with a wealth of stories gleaned from years of experience – I will miss him very much.

He and Rosemary were married for sixty- seven happy years. When he knew he was dying he accepted it as he accepted every challenge in his life with courage and equanimity. He will be sorely missed, but to quote from a letter of sympathy received by Rosemary "He has put in his last starboard tack and is sailing into the sunset". God bless you Eric.

It was with some sadness that we learnt of the passing of Eric Willis late last year. In the 1950/60's Eric was at the forefront of lightweight dinghy design and construction also pioneering the early metal masts and combi-trailors. One of his many claims to fame, it is understood, was the production of the first plastic Moth. He also took on the challenge of successfully encasing the vintage Thames A Rater "Kingfisher" in fibreglass. This was the first of these craft to receive, at the time, such modern and exciting preservation measures.

In the sixties he took part in the Single Handed Transatlantic yacht Race in his boat Croila. Again Eric established a first but one that was not enviable. During his voyage he developed appendicitis some two thirds the way across the Atlantic and was air lifted off Croila. This was the furthest from land that any such rescue had been undertaken at that time.

His company Classcraft produced a number of British Moths, the most successful of which was *Fundi 289* which won the nationals on four occasions over a period of twenty years. This boat, Eric said, was the finest moth he produced and his son Keith, a keen dinghy sailor, has recently bought it back and asked us to get it into racing trim again, hopefully to take part in the eightieth National Championships. (Picture of Fundi No. 289 Below)

