

REDWING nostalgia

A reminiscing F.D. owner pleads for at least one class of "self-reliant, seaworthy, dinghy" . . . like the good old Linton Hope Redwing.

BY

I A N B E Y N O N

Open-sea sailing in Table Bay (with jaunts to Robben Island) was once the delight of Redwing sailers, as this animated shot of Sonny Thomas and Eric Budd shows. Photo: Robin Jameson.

AS I was browsing round the yard at the Zeekoe Vlei Yacht Club the other day, watching others work (with that certain smug contentment of knowing that one's own fitting-out was well advanced), I met an old-timer, whose sturdy build was in marked contrast to the slim moulded ply and fibre-glass hulls of the modern racing craft—a Redwing Dinghy.

My eyes followed her proud sheer, just a trifle flattened by 30 years of service—and in latter years, of abuse—and my mind went back to the days when in the company of her kind, her bows lifted to the seas beyond the break-water. I studied anew the strength and the beauty of her lines, so cunningly contrived to produce that ease and grace with which she swung to the crests of the long Cape rollers—an embodiment of self-reliance and purpose.

Did I detect a certain aloofness, a disdain for the company in which she found herself, or was it just a longing for the tang of the sea and the keen wind blowing across the leagues of the restless main? Certainly both in distance and in time, she was far removed from her natural element, and her breed could have but little in common with the synthetic products of this plastic age.

My thoughts ran on, and my mind went back to the men who had handled that oaken tiller, fashioned a generation ago, and I wondered whether those helmsmen would be content in this year of grace to submit to the follies of rig and design which so often condemn us to the end of a rope and the crowning indignity of a tow to the shore!

No, somehow I doubt it. I cannot believe that the honesty and the integrity of purpose, innate in that still-proud hull, would not contrive to impart a dignity and a pride to the man at the helm, which would spurn any reflection on his independence and his self-reliance.

Not for him would be the meek subservience so customary in these enlightened days, so taken for granted that no shame or stigma of defeat is felt by the man who fails to measure up to the exacting demands of the sea and the challenge of the wind on his cheek!

It seemed to me what a pity it was that no one had written of the many virtues and sterling qualities of the dinghy which had given a generation of small boat sailors such immense fun and enjoyment.

Before I aspired to owning one myself, I was the proud owner of a small clinker-built double-ended dinghy, 9 ft. long and 3 ft. beam. There was no nonsense about planing

hulls in those days; that somewhat doubtful virtue was left entirely to the very inferior skimming dishes or scows—they were thought to be rather indelicate and not quite nice to know. Incidentally, there is nothing much new under our summer sun, we had even discovered that a minimum weight boat would skim faster than its heavier sister—most elementary—which the genius of the F.D. designer has just rediscovered, though we can still only sail at about 45 degrees to the wind!

My little ship could slice its way to windward and run easily and steadily with the minimum of fuss and disturbance of the water, owing to its clean lines and pointed stern. It cost me £5 complete! This boat, the *Little Margaret* was her name, was my first love and, you must forgive me for becoming somewhat lyrical about her.

Soon after I left school and with some difficulty obtained a job—it was a time of depression in the Union—I acquired a Redwing, secondhand but only six months old, from two partners, one of whom had unfortunately lost his job. The other had committed the indiscretion of getting married.

His wife thought that sailing was far too dangerous a sport, besides which she sensed a rival for her affections in the offing, so the sooner that rival was disposed of, the better. The price of this dinghy, which was to give me and hundreds of others immense pleasure during the time I owned her, 1926-1944, some 18 years, was £35. Finally I sold her during the last war and the proceeds went to the Red Cross. Papa Bongers bought her and in her little Bobby took his first steps in sailing.

The Redwing was designed by Linton Hope round about the time of the first world war. The designer was commissioned by the R.C.Y.C. and well briefed in the conditions in which she would sail on Table Bay. In the lean years which followed, there were few who could afford to build and maintain a keel yacht of any size and the Redwings virtually kept the sport of sailing alive during that period.

The first boats were built by Whites of Southampton and imported at a cost of £35 complete with all gear and sails. This compares rather favourably with the price of an aluminium spar for a Flying Dutchman which, complete with rigging, may cost up to £65 in this country! They were rigged with a gunter-lug and jib, a short and solid mast with single shrouds aside, terminating with lanyards

to the chain-plates. Simplicity itself. In anything of a breeze they sailed best three up, and were virtually uncapsizable.

I often wonder whether we have better sport to-day in our complicated racing machines, cluttered up with winches, Highfield levers, rigging screws and a multiplicity of stainless steel fittings, than we had in the sturdy Redwing which was guaranteed to bring you home—if not dry—at the end of a hard race in a blow which now scatters the fleet along the shores of the lake.

It seems to me now that a race in anything of a breeze, resolves itself into a wild scurry of white water in close company, shepherded by the ever-watchful rescue craft. Certainly we have lost that self-reliance which was the hall-mark of the sailor a generation ago. This is not the fault of the crews, but of our ships on which we cannot place the same reliance.

It may not be generally known that when George Goodricke of Durban, owner of *Jean*, a six metre in which he raced successfully in the Solent during the 1920's, presented a trophy for 16-footers, a Redwing crewed by Rogers and van Buren represented the R.C.Y.C. at Zwartkops in 1925. I think I am correct as to the date. The R.C.Y.C. was given special permission to enter this 14-footer on a time allowance, which, as it blew a gale during the regatta, was hardly needed.

I can think of few greater contrasts in boats than the Redwing of Linton Hope, and the Spearhead, inspired by the Merlin design and developed by Papa Bongers and Frank Spears, which is the mainstay of the Goodricke class to-day. As I heard it once remarked "George would turn in his grave if he could see what type of dinghy his trophy had fostered".

So far have we come in the development of the small boat, via that "Zany Genius" Uffa Fox, that the designers bid fair to outstrip the crews who sail their creations. This applies more at the coast, and especially to Zeekoe Vlei, which, judging by past records would seem to have the

Here is the well-loved Redwing dinghy No. 11, once owned by Ian Beynon, in her hey-day. The able lines of the hull are well displayed. Not a sign of a house of the Zeekoevlei Peninsula. Photo: R. F. du Toit.

And this is No. 12, R. van Reenen at the helm, showing the familiar well-set turkey-red cotton sails and the gunter rig whose main fault was that the mast was stepped rather too far into the bows. Photo: J. A. Cartwright.

unique capacity of generating its own wind supply—not for us the gentle zephyrs and thermals of the inland waters! How often, after a season of blustering South Easters, have I longed to trail my fingers in the water-lilies as one glides tranquilly along—what an idyllic thought—far from the madding crowd and the infernal combustion engine!

I have often thought that many of the modern designs are far less fitted for our local conditions than my old love No. 11, for that was my Redwing's number. It is much too common a sight to see a score or more of the racing fleet bottoms up, with Alan Philips, his wife Kien and their team of rescuers hauling them to safety—"once round the forestay and twice round the mast" is her cry when she heaves the towing line, and the launch has another casualty in tow.

A design is necessarily a compromise between various factors, speed, safety and stability, and far too often the latter two are sacrificed for the first. Speed is relative, and for those who wish to progress in one of the slowest, wettest and most uncomfortable manners known to man I can heartily recommend a sailing dinghy! I should like to submit a plea for a really sane design in which some speed is sacrificed for an ability to bring home its crew safely. How much more satisfactory, than to finish the day ignominiously at the end of a rope! No fun would be lost and the competition would be just as keen as long as the principle of the one design was maintained.

Come on, you designers, can you not rise to a Zeekoe Vlei Special!

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Open-water sailing without anxiety is Ian Benyon's plea . . . in seaworthy boats (not sailing machines) that last for years and require a minimum of maintenance.

OLD TIMES RECALLED . . .

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To my mind, the planing hull, though giving immense fun on the reaches, has done a certain amount of disservice to the sport of small-boat sailing, in that the accent on the art of sailing to windward has been changed to obtaining the maximum speed off the winds—a not very brilliant achievement, for even haystacks have been known to blow downwind, if it blows hard enough! It is the path of least resistance, and it is a very poor training for life!

To achieve planing speeds in light weather, the dinghy is equipped with oversize spars and sails and the result is very often a lamentable and unseamanlike performance of an over-canvassed boat, lying on its ear, as it struggles to survive the windward leg. All sorts of gadgets and contrivances, all of which go wrong too easily, are pressed into service to enable the boat to survive and stand on its feet. Sliding main sheet tracks allied to bendy masts to flatten the main and a crew dangling outboard on a plank or the end of a wire! Oversize jibs, the huge overlap backing the main, confuse the issue still more.

I know it all, I sail a boat like that myself, which won't prevent me from getting it in the neck from those who have never pulled down a reef pennant—or even know what it is!

My No. 11 Redwing went through a number of vicissitudes during her active life. Every year, after a racing season on Table Bay, she was brought down to Zeekoe Vlei on a wagon. Mr. Koning of Southfield had the contract and we would meet him by appointment at the wood-and-iron shed on the shores of Rogge Bay under the lee of the power station where the R.C.Y.C. had its being.

With the crew sitting in the boat, we would clomp, clomp, clomp up Adderley Street and into Darling Street round Cartwrights corner (a favourite trysting place to meet one's girl friend of the day for coffee on a Saturday morning) and so on down through the suburbs to Grassy Park, where Mr. Koning would disappear into the bush to emerge later with an extra team for the heavy pull through the sand of the last mile to the vlei.

Here Mr. Pyne, a pensioner of the Natal Mounted Police, was the sole inhabitant. He lived alone with his fox-terriers and his favourite mare for company and was only too happy to allow us to rent a room in his bungalow in which to store our gear, while the boat lay on moorings outside the bank of reeds which fringed the shore.

As the years went by, more and more owners were persuaded to bring their boats to the vlei during the summer months and every week end would see a crowd of boys and girls walking along Muizenberg beach before cutting across the veld to the vlei—a distance of some five miles. The alternative was to walk from Diep River or Plumstead, not so attractive a way as it did not provide a swim en route.

To the present generation who arrive at the water's edge by car, this would appear to be doing things the hard way, whereas in fact this walk was not the least enjoyable part of the week-end's activities—as was the return trip, often by moonlight, to catch, or as happened on one occasion,

to miss the last train to the suburbs from Muizenberg. This presented no problem, as with our camping kit on our backs, we were soon able to make ourselves at home on the lower slopes of the mountain.

Cars were comparatively few, so the method of travel obtaining to-day "by rule of thumb" did not apply!

Baron Meydell and his charming wife who farmed ducks on Ronde Vlei, joined our fleet with a beamy dinghy built by Louw & Halvorsen on the lines of a Bombay Tom Tit. This boat was custom-built to accommodate his family, her family and their family, as both parents had been previously widowed and both generously endowed with hostesses to fortune by their previous unions!

Greg. Joyce, later to be a Commodore of the Z.V.Y.C. and Leslie Gray, who now grows orchids at Constantia, owned a Redwing and many were the impromptu races organised in his little thatched cottage on the shore.

The hard road to the vlei was built and civilisation moved in. The wagon at 5 m.p.h. gave place to the trailer, sometimes with the most unexpected results. Regulations for trailers were still but a dream of the Traffic Dept., and trailer, boat and car were more often than not held together with the most hazardous of "lash ups". I well remember a journey which had a most unpremeditated ending, when the lashings failed as the driver took strong evasive action to avoid a car which suddenly appeared out of a side street.

The wind was in the North West, and the sea strong in our nostrils as we approached Table Bay, when No. 11 took off on the starboard tack, to end her wild career through the traffic on the marble slab, alongside the snoek and the haddock of the local fish shop!

Her instincts had not failed her!

The merchant was asleep under the counter and the arrival of the dinghy in a shower of plate glass splinters was too much for his nervous system. I understand that he has never been the same man since! I have always regretted that I did not submit a counter claim for free advertising against his for a shattered window and his shattered nerves.

The next morning, I found my ship in the local pound across the road with a cow ruminatively rubbing its flank on the bumpkin and various signs that the fowls had found a convenient roosting place on her thwarts for the night. The boat was completely undamaged—did I not say that she was a sturdy love?

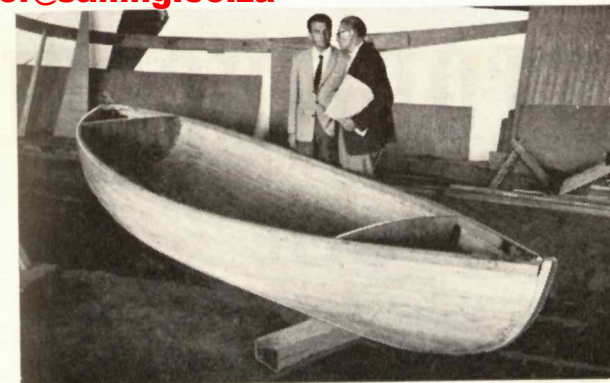
The driver of the car? Who else but our Eric—Eric Budd, whose brilliant but sometimes startling manoeuvres on the road and the sea were soon to be repeated when on Coastal Patrol with the S.A.A.F.

With the coming of the war, Youngsfield was turned into an operational aerodrome, to which end the field was drained and canals constructed to bear the waters to the vlei. The following winter lived up to its reputation and Zeekoe Vlei, the sump of the Cape Flats, received more than its quota, and more rapidly than at any time in its history.

From the mound on which Lord Charles Somerset had his shooting box—now commemorated by the name Governors Walk, the road leading down to the clubhouse—one could survey a continuous chain of lakes, just as it must have been before civilisation and man encroached on the preserves of the coot and the pelican.

The few homes on the shore of the lake were soon flooded—with one exception! Papa Bongers, who had but recently retired from an architect's post in the City Council, waded to dry land and set off to visit his former colleagues. He returned with half-a-dozen heavy vehicle jacks which he placed strategically under his wooden-framed house. As the waters rose, so did the house, until high water level was reached.

Another example of self-reliance—or was it just—Papa! Charles Eglen was not only the acknowledged expert in the class in those early days, but was a polished performer at the club socials and smoking concerts. I was credibly informed that in his earlier years he was a member of the original D'Oyly Carte Opera Company which produced the Savoy operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. His crew, Fred Claum and Norman Ross, made a more than effective team on the water, as they sat like so many graven-faced sphinxes, bringing home No. 9 time after



Ray Hartmen (left), who built *Stormvogel*, examines the *Yachting News* 19 ft. 10 in. sea-worthy dinghy he constructed in Stellenbosch. Virtually a Fairey Swordfish underwater, she has rakish bow and canoe stern. She surfs readily and could probably be made to plane with shingles on the bottom aft; gunter rig, plenty of freeboard and rows like a charm. A mould is available for loan to would-be builders; plans could be printed, too, for other than idly-curious inquirers.

time, at the head of the fleet. Norman is still going strong, his dry wit and emphatic views—"races are won by seamanship and not by fittings"—are a great joy, but perhaps not appreciated to their full extent by those who know so much better—the younger generation!

Dr. Burn Wood, now in his 80's and still an energetic follower of the fortunes of the racing fleet and my kind and ever-courteous friend H. J. Terlien, are but a few of those whom I can call to mind who have passed on their skill to their sons and who made those earlier days on Table Bay so memorable to me. To all of them, I realise now, I owe a debt of gratitude.



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