

Yacht *Elegance*, A Durable Classic

By Etienne de Kock

How does a boat get to be 80 years old? The main requirement is that she be sailed and loved her whole life; that she is maintained in a way that keeps her, if not pristine, then seaworthy and limber, and that she never be neglected to such an extent that she becomes a liability.

Elegance has a history full of such owners who loved and cared for her, and becoming the last in a long line of owners I decided to research the history of *Elegance* and her ownership, to preserve the story of this rare piece of our South African yachting heritage and the people who have looked after her.

Elegance is well-named - she is a classic timber boat, 43 feet on deck; a gaff-rigged ketch of considerable charm and seaworthiness. Her tan sails and traditional gaff topsail rig hark back to the working boats of a century ago.

Conceived as a 'gentleman's fishing yacht' for CSD Hare, the owner of the farm which would later become Cape Point nature reserve, *Elegance's* lines, with its long straight keel, deep forefoot and powerful quarters reflect the design practices of the late 19th and early 20th century. She was probably modelled after the hull form of the North Sea fishing boats of a type that are dubbed 'Zulu', as they became popular in 1879 at the time Britain was fighting the 'Zulu War' in South Africa. She was used by the Hare family to fish for tuna and other game-fish out of Kalk Bay, and was designed and built to take the Cape Point conditions.



What a grand old lady - and under full sail too.

Amateur film footage of the time shows the building of *Elegance*. She is surrounded by timber staging and the workers all wear dungarees. Almost 80 years later she stands as testament to the skill and knowledge of those craftsmen who built her, and she is still sailing,

still sound, still seaworthy and strong.

Elegance is arguably the oldest South African built boat still sailing. Her keel was laid in 1932, and she was launched in 1934 by the well known firm of Louw and Halverson, working out of Woodstock and later Quay 4

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in the Victoria and Alfred Basin in Cape Town. This yard was responsible for the building of many of the timber boats in the fishing fleet of the early 1900s, and some famous sailing vessels such as the *Howard Davis* which served as a merchant navy sail training vessel for 25 years, and now charters out of Cape Town. Many Louw and Halverson fishing boats are still found working out of the traditional Cape fishing ports Laaiplek, Saldanha, Lamberts Bay and Port Nolloth, where it is still possible to find a craftsman to caulk your seams or steam a plank. Louw and Halverson closed down in about 1967 and this event pretty much heralded the end of the wooden boat building industry in South Africa, and the transition to fibreglass manufacture.

Her construction scantlings are heavy by any standards, using 32 mm pitch pine planking on heavy sawn frames two-feet apart, and with copper clenched steamed oak ribbands between the frames. Her displacement is about 18 metric tons.

The original main mast, which was taken from Tokai forest, still stands, and her rig is unchanged, but for the addition of a bowsprit which was added soon after her launch to ease the weather helm. She is fitted with bronze belaying pins in the pin rail around her mast, and on deck the only concession to modernity are two bronze sheet winches fitted in 1975.

Elegance has a rich history which is woven into the history of South African yachting, and it is this story I set out to uncover when I bought her in 2008.

The Hares, a prominent Kalk Bay family who built her, sailed her out of that fishing harbour from her launch in 1932. At the



This grand old lady was the vessel on board which many South Africans learnt to sail.

outbreak of the war in 1939, she became a harbour patrol vessel for the Navy operating out of Granger Bay. A gap exists here in her ownership history, but it is possible that the Hares still owned her and she was seconded to the Navy. A practice that was common at the time.

By 1952 she is found under the ownership of 'Sonny' Taylor. Pictures of the time show *Elegance* off Cape Point hauling tuna over the side. One of the teenagers on board hauling the

fish is Brian James, long time Bosun of FBYC, who allowed me to copy the pictures from his album. Brian, who is now retired, is one of the many white-haired individuals who have helped me reconstruct this history.

At the end of the '50s or early '60s Sonny Taylor sold *Elegance* to a government printer who, being based in the Witwatersrand, entrusted her to the Nankin brothers, among others, who had her use and provided maintenance and management.

At this time she was used on loan as a sail training vessel by the General Botha Merchant Academy while the *Howard Davis* was being built, also by Louw And Halverson - but she did other work, and the description of the rescue of a fishing boat and crew with Rick Nankin as skipper can be found in the General Botha Old Boys' newsletter 66-70. The details are elusive, but this period included some trips to Lourenco Marques in Mocambique

In 1971 she was campaigned in the first Cape to Rio skippered by Alan Gregory. She was requested to accompany the damaged *Stormkaap*, skippered by Dave Abromowitz, to Saint Helena. (This episode is chronicled in the book *Yachting in Southern Africa* by Anthony Hocking).

In 1972 Lionel Fridjohn bought *Elegance* and used her as a training vessel for the Mainstay Sailing Academy operating from Durban, and many sailors have pleasant memories of their time on board. Lionel Fridjohn's son Robert, on a trip from Durban to Cape Town had one of the most testing experiences in *Elegance*, when in a howling gale she was rolled by a freak wave off the Transkei coast. According to Rob he had only a storm jib up. Suddenly the wind died off completely, blanketed by a huge and steep wave astern. She was broached, and rolled, but came upright all standing, with all her crew still on board. As she righted the storm jib filled and she carried on sailing. There was chaos below, and her skylight had carried away - but in recounting this many years later, Rob gives credit to her being tough enough to recover without damage to her rig. (This story is recounted in the book 'Caterpillar Seas' by Robert Fridjohn).

Elegance then found herself in Saldanha under the co-ownership of the well known salvage tug master, Captain Okkie Grapouw and Henry Schneider, who was then a professor at Stellenbosch University.

Henry Schneider died at the helm on *Elegance*, from a heart attack while sailing single handed in Saldanha bay. Reports of this event vary, but consensus is that *Elegance* sailed all the way through the moorings and grounded herself on the navy slipway next to the yacht club with Henry slumped at the helm.

In the early nineties, Captain Grapouw sold her to Hilton Hawkins, a saturation diver in the diamond industry.

By that time *Elegance* was in need of extensive maintenance and repair. Based in Luderitz, Hawkins was able to carry out a major rebuild using the experienced shipwrights available in that port. This work included complete re-decking in plywood and teak, a brand new motor and gearbox, new keel bolts and floors, and the replacement of a few planks. His intention was to cruise and he gave her a Spartan but practical interior. After the refit Hilton sailed her down to Saldanha.

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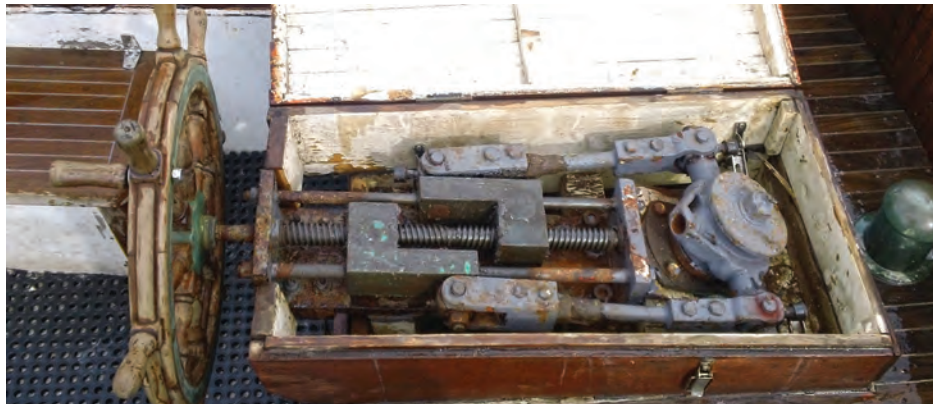
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In 2008 I sailed my 26-foot Wharram to Saldanha Yacht Club and saw *Elegance* for the first time. I sailed around her twice, taking in her sheer and her beautiful lines. I love wooden boats and history both, and she took my breath away. I had sailed with Lionel Fridjohn on a yacht-hand course as a 14-year-old on the yacht *Active*, and loved the wooden spars and rugged bronze fittings, and the thought of all those hundreds of pieces of timber making up a beautifully articulated and perfect vessel. Since sailing on *Active* I had never seen such a beautiful boat. I have no problem with composites, but all you have is hull, deck and bulkheads. Wooden boats have hanging knees lodging knees, beams, mast partners, ribs, ribbands, beam shelves, garboards, sternposts, bits, carlines and bresthooks to name but a few. I was in love. She was for sale and I used every last cent I had to buy her.

Learning to sail a traditional gaff rigged boat was an education. Modern sailors are used to the mediation of winches, stoppers and other gadgets. Traditional boats use tackles and miles of rope. I was helped in the sail handling by a gaff rig veteran, Robin Ellis of Laaiplek, and by studying Tom Cunliff's book 'Hand, Reef and Steer'. Handling such a heavy vessel was also a challenge after the 700kg Wharram and small keelboats that I was used to sailing.

Gaff rigs are not great to windward or on a dead run, but are incredibly powerful across the wind, requiring no helm input, and track beautifully when the sails are properly balanced. They make for comfortable cruising, provided you never have to go too close to the wind. But gentleman don't sail to windward, as the saying goes. That's why she has a great big



The original steering mechanism is still in use today.

diesel motor. When motor sailing to windward I can get as close to the wind as a racing yacht and achieve a decent VMG while maintaining a comfortable ride with some pressure on the sails.

Since she became mine I have concentrated on improving the interior in keeping with her classic looks. I am a sculptor with a powerful workshop that includes a blacksmith forge, a woodwork shop, metalwork shop and machine tools. On deck I have forged traditional stanchions and changed the bottle screws to deadeyes and lanyards. The interior now has a lot of stowage in the form of teak drawers salvaged from antique desks and period brass lamps using either LED or paraffin. A brass diesel cabin heater makes her cozy. Although the layout was changed from the original during her rebuild, I have tried to make her look her age. I have studied vintage yacht interiors and tried to get the character to match the aesthetic

of the time.

When other yachtsmen speak to me about her I can pretty much divide them into two groups. Those who are entranced by her classic beauty, and those who say "must be a lot of work". Of course I must admit my preference for the first group. To the second group I would say that all boats are a lot of work, but at least the work on *Elegance* doesn't involve itchy powders and snot-like goo. It's done with a paintbrush and a chisel or a blacksmith's hammer.

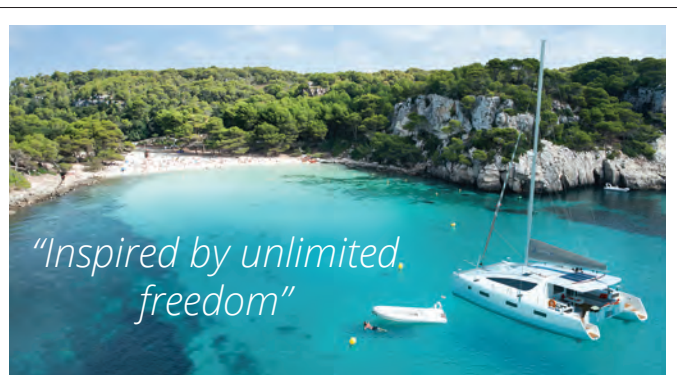
Elegance is a thing of historic beauty that many people have found worth maintaining, and I will not be the last of these. With any luck she will sail for another eighty years.

And anyone who has stood on a teak deck on a classic gaff rig boat thundering along on a broad reach will understand why I am happy to do the work, and why I forsook my beloved young Wharram and fell in love with an octogenarian. ↴



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