



Postwar Sailing

Nigel Sharp

During the Second World War regulations limited the opportunities for leisure boating. Soon after the Dunkirk evacuation, coastal sailing for recreational purposes was banned altogether, and it was not until the very end of the war in Europe that the rules began to be relaxed.

In 1945 leisure sailors were unsurprisingly keen to get back afloat as soon as they could. Few could have done so as quickly as the crew of the Dragon *Lalun*, who had somehow managed to get permission to sail from Dover to Whitstable in early May 1945, a few days before the German surrender. 'None of us had been near a sailing boat since 1939,' wrote one of them in *Yachting World*, 'and wild was the confusion on getting under way, as thumbs jammed in cleats, and tangled jib sheets wound themselves round our legs.' As they were only allowed to sail in daylight hours they had to call into Ramsgate, where they purchased a newspaper which reported the death of Hitler and the crumbling of the German army.

Adlard Coles, who had been the editor of *The Yachtsman* magazine before the war and would return to this post, was not far behind them. He had bought the *Tumlare Zara* in 1944, and

on 9 May 1945, the day after VE Day, he set sail from Itchenor bound for the Hamble. On the way he anchored for the night in Wootton Creek from where, he later wrote, he could 'look across the Solent to Portsmouth, where fireworks and rockets were being discharged, and a distant sound of music carried over the sea. In the nearer distance the warships were making patterns with their searchlights, and shooting flares into the sky.'

The main difficulty at this time was the poor availability of boats, most of which had been laid up for over five years. Many had fallen into disrepair, and the yards would remain busy with Admiralty work for some time. Some owners and their friends got round this by fitting out dinghies and small keelboats themselves.

Several clubs were able to organise races that May 1945. 'It is marvellous to see how quickly arrangements were made,' *Yachting Monthly* reported. 'It is abundantly evident that the sport of yachting still holds almost a magic spell for many people.'

But it wasn't all about racing. On 18 August Lieut A. Menhinick RNVR and his crew set off from Hamble in his 55-foot ketch *Lucrezia*, bound for Scilly. On the way there were constant reminders that the war was barely over. 'Clear of the Mewstone we were involved in some target practice from the shore batteries, and although they held their fire when the towed target passed between us and the guns, we heard several shells whistle past too close (we thought) for our peace of mind. Off Plymouth we were treated to a display of flying by hordes of Mosquitoes and Spitfires. The Navy was also present in force and made a fine sight.' The naval presence continued off the Dodman, where they passed close to 'three minesweepers sweeping in perfect line abreast formation'. They were only able to stay one night at Scilly, as their leave was running out. Most of the return trip was in an easterly near-gale and they arrived back in Hamble in heavy rain. 'We were soaked to the skin but we didn't mind . . . we had thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.'

On 1 September the Lymington L-Boat *Shaheen* arrived in the wreckage of Cherbourg harbour having sailed across the Channel from the Solent. *Shaheen's* owner, Colonel H G Grace, and his crew were welcomed aboard the US military vessel Q170 by its captain, officers and crew who provided 'board and lodging par excellence as well as most entertaining company'.

On the same day as *Shaheen's* arrival in Cherbourg, one of the first keelboat races to take place in open water – from Cowes to Christchurch Ledge and back, a total distance of forty miles – was organised by the Island Sailing Club. There were eighteen starters. The winner was the Teal One Design *Content*, and in sixth place was Uffa Fox, sailing *Airborne*, one of the airborne lifeboats he had designed and built for war service. The RORC's first postwar race – in which there were eight starters and just three finishers – was from Cowes to Dinard, starting on 13 September with a gale warning in force.[†]

Meanwhile, Allied occupation forces discovered the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine sail training boats, many of which had been laid up for the duration in the Cuxhaven, Kiel and Schleswig areas. These were officially classified as warships, and as such became the property of the Allies as war prizes.

The German boats, which soon become known as the Windfall Yachts, were sailed in the Baltic that summer by Allied servicemen, many of them new to sailing. One of them was *Nordwind*, the Kriegsmarine's 60-ton yawl which had won line honours in the 1939 Fastnet Race. She was allocated to 30 Assault Unit, whose Commander Aylen later wrote: 'Every weekend we set off into the Baltic exploring Jutland and Schleswig-Holstein coasts, and buying butter and ham in Denmark such as we had not seen in years. It was simply superb sailing.'

Initially each of the three British services disagreed as to how the boats should be allocated. The RAF thought they should get all the Luftwaffe boats, the Royal Navy thought they should have

† For the full story of this epic, see MQ13

‘anything that floated’, and it looked as if the Army wouldn’t get anything at all. In October, fifty RAF officers were flown out to Germany to bring nine Luftwaffe boats home. They took them through the Kiel Canal, but as soon as they set off into the North Sea, bad weather, seasickness and gear failure took their toll, and eight boats turned straight back again. The only boat that made it back to the UK that year was the 85-foot steel schooner *Duhnen*, and she was immediately impounded by the Admiralty, as it had just been discovered that she had been privately owned was not therefore a legitimate prize.

The following year, after the inter-service wrangling had been fixed by the formation of the Association of Service Yacht Clubs, scores more boats were brought back to the UK – the big ones on their own bottoms, and the smaller ones in landing craft.

For several years after hostilities ended yachtsmen everywhere had to be extremely wary of the hazards of war debris. In November 1945 the yachting press published some useful Admiralty advice with regard to the areas in which mines might still be prevalent; it was thought that ten times the number that had been swept during the war still remained to be cleared. (The hazard was real. Some four years later the passenger steamer *Princess Astrid* was sunk by a mine three miles off Dunkirk with the loss of five lives.) In June 1946, having recently visited the Beaulieu River, a *Yachting World* correspondent wrote: ‘Having been in occupancy of the Admiralty the river is not at present in a fit state for use . . . it is almost impossible to drop an anchor with any degree of certainty in recovering it.’ It was not until 1948 that yachtsmen were able to land on the beaches of Studland Bay, just outside Poole Harbour, which had been used for D-Day landing rehearsals. According to *Yachting Monthly*, ‘84,000 missiles of various types’ had to be removed from the area.

During the postwar period foreign cruising was made difficult by physical hazards, currency restrictions and petrol rationing,

which continued until May 1950. On the positive side, war brings about advances in technology at a considerably faster rate than in peacetime. These included radar, Decca navigators, engines, propellers, Danforth anchors, rubber dinghies, seasickness pills and weather forecasting.

There were also construction methods – hot moulding, which had been used in aircraft construction, and new glues used in plywood. Soon after the war ended, Fairey Aviation formed a subsidiary company, Fairey Marine, which over the next seventeen years built some 11,000 small boats. The best known of these was the hot-moulded Uffa Fox-designed Firefly, the first nationally-established one-design class. Meanwhile, plywood made with marine-quality glues allowed professional and amateur dinghy building on a scale not seen before.

When the war ended, a vast amount of equipment, vessels, buildings and other facilities which had accumulated during the course of the hostilities was now surplus to requirements. Torpoint Mosquito sc's premises had been destroyed by the Luftwaffe during the war. Soon after the peace they acquired three Nissen huts previously used by the Torpoint Barrage Balloon Unit and erected them on the derelict site of the Western Counties Manure Works. Members of Stokes Bay sc were able to move into a substantial two-storey building which had been built as part of a base for the development, testing and building of the component parts of the Mulberry Harbours; they are still there today.

Other clubs adopted former military vessels as clubhouses. In 1946, Richmond Canoe Club acquired a Mark IV 350-ton LCT (Landing Craft Tank). Twelve club members – 'not one of whom had ever served in such a craft before, and with an amateur engine-room staff whose diesel experience stopped short at 9HP!' according to a later report in *Motor Boat and Yachting* – were on board for the delivery voyage from Lowestoft to Isleworth on the Thames. During the voyage both engines (which were still the property of the Admiralty, to be removed and returned to them

after the LCT reached her destination) gave trouble – the port one cutting out three times, the starboard one twice, and finally both at the same time off Southend, when the anchor had to be dropped in a hurry. There were also navigational problems including ‘landmarks such as Orfordness identified some ten miles farther north than they actually are’; and there was a near collision with a pleasure steamer under Southwark Bridge. ‘Now there she lies, quietly awaiting her conversion into our floating clubhouse,’ a Canoe Club member concluded. ‘Perhaps it is absurd, but the crew who fetched her round for that specific purpose have now become so sentimental about her that they are hating the idea of stripping the gear with which they wrestled. Ah well!’

There were also more exotic items. Bunk cushions, bunk fittings and table tops were removed from surrendered German U-boats before they were scuttled, and were then used to refurbish Minima YC’s clubhouse. Ex-RAF drop tanks were used as racing marks at Broadstairs SC, while others were converted into sailing rafts by children at Pennington Flash. An aerial photograph of Bembridge Harbour, discovered in Germany soon after the war and possibly part of Germany’s 1940 invasion plans, has adorned the walls of Bembridge SC ever since.

For all the difficulties that yachtsmen experienced in getting back on the water, the words of Ranelagh SC’s annual report, issued at the end of 1945, put things into perspective. ‘The end of the war has come and with it a variety of emotions . . . any sacrifices we might make now are small indeed compared with those made in the past for us.’ Still, ‘the old magic of it all came back to me,’ wrote the crew of *Lalun* on his way to Whitstable, ‘and my elation at being under way once more in a quietly driving sailing boat knew no bounds.’

Nigel Sharp’s book *Troubled Waters: Leisure Boating and the Second World War* is published by Amberley Publishing.