

JOHN CHITTY

The Alan Betteridge Story

Offshore powerboat racing is an extremely exciting but also a very expensive sport, particularly at the top end of the field. Racing is divided into four classes by—in very simple terms—size of boat and power of engines. The smallest boats, from 12 ft in overall length upward, compete in Class IV. This class of racing is within the financial compass of the 'two-car family man' who is content to manage with one vehicle and to operate his race boat in lieu of the second car. Class III is for slightly larger and more powerful outfits and (to be competitive) demands an original investment of £2000–£3000, plus a financial commitment of around £500–£1000 a year to cover operating costs. Classes III and IV are British national classes. Classes I and II, which normally race together, are internationally recognised and represent the larger and more expensive craft from 20 to 45 ft in overall length with engines up to around 16 litres (petrol) or 32 litres (diesel). Competitors who achieve renown and success in this class of offshore racing can usually be assumed to be in command of at least a reasonably high five-figure income. But there can be exceptions and one of the most prominent 'financial non-conformists' at the present time is Alan Betteridge.

Betteridge—he is 45 years old and looks at least 5 years younger—owns a small garage business in Southampton and, like most small garage owners (as distinct from the large multiple businesses), he 'makes a living', but by no stretch of the imagination can he be described as a rich man. This tall, slim, dark—and yes, handsome—man with the soft Hampshire burr has, like King David of old, had his struggle with a giant and, although he cannot be said to have brought the Goliath of powerboat racing to its knees, he has certainly forced the sport to come to terms with him. With a comparatively modest outlay of capital he has made a name for himself, and is treated with respect and high regard, in a field where he is surrounded by



Alan Betteridge, the 'David' who attacked the 'Goliath' of big boat offshore racing
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evidence of wealth and where many, if not most, of his fellow competitors could 'buy him up and eat him for breakfast!'

What kind of man is Alan Betteridge? Perhaps his most obvious quality is his modesty and, like most unassuming people, he is so softly-spoken that it is almost impossible to conduct a conversation with him in a crowded room. In appearance, he conveys the impression of an artist (I use the term in the broadest sense) rather than a man who is in love with machinery. What, then, gives him his 'giant-killing' quality. I suspect the answer is that under the gentle exterior there lies a streak of steely determination and that this, combined with an excellent engineering mind, a capacity for sustained hard work, and a genuine love of the sea has taken Alan Betteridge into the leading ranks of his chosen sport.

He has not always been an 'offshore' man. He first started powerboat racing in 1956, taking part in just one event a year, as a hydroplane driver at the Southampton Regatta. Four years later, in 1960, he 'graduated' to driving a runabout, but still in just the one local event a year. Gradually, however, the Southampton Regatta became invaded by very experienced visiting drivers using large and expensive engines and the local 'once-a-year' boys like Betteridge were no match for the 'foreigners', so the event began to lose its appeal and Alan found himself looking around for pastures new.

At this time (1961) the *Daily Express* introduced their first Cowes to Torquay race, which was the first serious offshore race to be held in Great Britain (or Europe, for that matter) and Alan Betteridge found himself watching the 'new sport' with great interest. A year later he became a competitor in this classic event. His mount was *Alphabet*, a one-off cabin cruiser with twin 50 h.p. Mercury outboards which he bought second-hand from Owen Aisher. It was not an auspicious start to his offshore career as *Alphabet* sank in the early stages of the race (just off the Nab Tower) and Betteridge and his crew were left floundering with their upturned craft from eleven in the morning until four o'clock in the afternoon, when a passing boat

picked them up and took them ashore at Bembridge. 'We let off all our flares', says Alan, 'but nobody saw us. The rescue arrangements were a bit sketchy in those early days and while we were in the water most of the rescue boat people were drinking gin in Torquay. It's better now because there are safety check points all along the route.' *Alphabet* managed to stay afloat by the bows, sufficient positive buoyancy being provided by her Anson aircraft fuel tanks, and was subsequently salvaged. 'I was a bit worried about this at the time', Betteridge admits, 'as I had heard the Bembridge boatmen talking over the radio about 'a valuable racing boat', and I was afraid that their salvage figure might be higher than the value I put on the craft.' Apparently, all ended well, however, for he got the boat back, re-engined her with twin 75 h.p. Alpine engines (one of the Mercurys had been lost in the sinking) and, undeterred by his early experience, had her entered in the *Daily Express* race the following year.

Alas, his second attempt was no more successful than his first, although probably less expensive. One engine had a cracked block and, while still in the neighbourhood of the Isle of Wight, it blew a gasket and, rather than attempt to complete the major part of the course on one engine, Betteridge gave in gracefully and retired. Third time lucky



Alan Betteridge at the helm of Durn Durn

Helen Simpson

proved a true maxim for, with characteristic determination, he once again entered *Alphabet* in the *Daily Express* race in 1964 and eventually succeeded in arriving at Torquay where he narrowly missed winning the 'lowest powered finisher' prize.

Having achieved his first 'offshore' goal of actually arriving at Torquay, Betteridge considered that *Alphabet* had given all that could be asked of her and it was time he gave serious consideration to purchasing a new boat. His search for a replacement for *Alphabet* eventually led him to Bob Kemp's Southampton boatyard where his eye fell on the mould for the standard Senior 31. There was a snag however, in that, according to the rules current at the time, a 31 ft boat would have placed him in Class I, whereas Alan wanted to remain in Class II where the competition was not quite so fierce and prizes were a little more readily obtainable. After considering the 31 ft mould for some time, Alan Betteridge and Bob Kemp both came to the conclusion that a worthwhile racing boat might be produced by using the 'sharp end' of the mould only—and so *Dum Dum* was born. Five feet of the aft section of the mould was blocked off and a 26 ft cabin cruiser was produced from the remainder. 'We were a bit worried at the time', says Kemp, 'particularly about how the weight of the engines might affect the trim of the shorter boat. We weren't sure whether the finished craft would be capable of 8 mile/h or 28 mile/h, but Alan decided to take the risk so we went ahead.' In the end, the risk was justified, for *Dum Dum* turned out to be capable of just over 30 mile/h, which was a good turn of speed for a 26 ft cabin cruiser in 1965. Power was supplied by two 81 h.p. unblown Bedford diesels. Apparently there was some indecision about the steering gear which should be used on *Dum Dum*, but eventually a single rudder was fitted (Kemp's opinion seemed to win the day) and seemed to work perfectly well. Commenting drily on the whole problem of manoeuvrability at slow speed, Betteridge says, 'Everything is all right as long as you don't hit the scrutineers' boat as you come alongside. That does not create a very good impression.'

Betteridge drove *Dum Dum* in the next three *Daily Express* races (1965, 66, 67) with varying degrees of success. In 1966 he super-charged his Bedford engines with CAV blowers, raising the output to 121 h.p. each, and it was in that year that he achieved his best placing of 13th overall. Ownership of *Dum Dum* seemed to encourage Betteridge to spread his wings a little and, in addition to the Cowes-Torquay event, he started entering the Royal Southern Yacht Club's Wills Trophy Race (in which he took a second prize on one occasion), the Royal Motor Yacht Club's Senior Service Trophy Race and various Solent-based events organised by the Offshore Powerboat Club of Great Britain. He did not, however, get the bit between his teeth and follow the example of many other leading British drivers by trying to enter all the British and European offshore races which were springing up at this time—which is another reason why he managed to keep his financial involvement within sensible bounds.

By late 1967 Alan Betteridge was once again becoming

restive for something a little faster beneath his feet and *Dum Dum* was sold to the Dover Harbour Board, who were in need of a fast patrol boat to clear the harbour quickly when the cross-Channel hovercraft operations started. *Dum Dum*, which is being used in full racing trim, less the superchargers, and which was submitted to a strict survey before purchase by the harbour authorities is, some four years later, still in daily use at Dover.

Having sold *Dum Dum*, Betteridge found himself out on a limb, his plans for a new boat being held up because the new Bedford engines were not ready for delivery and could not be homologated in time for the racing season. As a result of these delays he very nearly missed the 1968 *Daily Express* race (it would have been his only absence from this great race, apart from the very first event in 1961) but he managed to get taken on as a co-driver by John Eberhardt in *Paper Tiger*. They were among the early retirements, however, as it was a rough race in 1968.

Translucent, Betteridge's present and, without doubt, his most successful race boat was built especially to take part in the 1969 *Daily Telegraph-BP* Round Britain Powerboat Race. Perkins, who were anxious to have their engines well represented in this great marathon, approached Betteridge to find out whether he proposed to enter and, quite independently, made overtures to Kemp to see if he would be willing to produce a special craft for the event. So it happened that Alan and Bobby were brought together again in another offshore racing enterprise, on this occasion—the first time ever—Alan getting some material help from Perkins Engines Ltd., with the supply of engines.



Translucent complete with the Kemp shelter and the 'honeyhole' cut in the roof by the crew!

Steve Butler & Co. Ltd.

Bobby Kemp designed *Translucent* and a great deal of thought went into the project. When the regulations for the Round Britain Race were studied it became apparent that waterline length was no longer an important factor in design, but the length of the 'actual floating structure' was of great importance. Consequently, the boat was designed with the transom set 2 ft forward from the aft end and a watertight bulkhead was fitted in up forward with some

holes drilled in the forepeak so that it no longer counted as part of the 'floating structure'. The driver and navigator were placed right in the aft end of the boat, and as low down as possible (they were virtually standing on the bottom of the hull), for maximum comfort. The space forward of the drivers—which would have been cockpit area in a conventional craft—was flush decked to provide an engine room, and forward of that came the living accommodation which Kemp has described as 'a cabin within the meaning of the act' which again was covered by flush decking. For the Round Britain Race an aft shelter was thoughtfully provided to protect the crew from the elements. It must be mentioned that Kemp persuaded the crew to accept this refinement rather against their own inclinations and that subsequently they made his foresight largely of no avail by cutting holes in the shelter roof so that they could pop their heads through! In later races the 'Kemp shelter' had disappeared altogether.

A vital factor that had to be decided at the design stage was how heavy the boat was to be as the power/weight ratio would be all important. The craft was to be constructed in G.R.P. and it was thought to be a good idea to



Boatbuilders posed inside the hull of 'Translucent' for this remarkable picture

build her using semi-clear resin so that any hull failures would become immediately obvious and could be speedily rectified before they became serious. This idea gained a lot of publicity, particularly when Betteridge hit on the idea of calling the boat *Translucent*. As an experiment it served a very useful purpose as it gave the designer a lot of useful information and enabled him to assess with a great deal of accuracy the strength that needs to be built into a G.R.P. hull. It also produced a useful side effect. Pigmentation (which has no strength factor) normally accounts for about 4% of the bulk of resin used, and the absence of pigmentation effectively increased the strength of the hull by a similar percentage. Cross-beams fitted to the sides with elbows supported the flush deck and 'held the sides of the hull in position', preventing them from flexing inwards or outwards. Unlike many present-day race boat designers, Kemp also employed bulkheads to gain additional rigidity and strength.

Perhaps one of the most interesting, and most important, aspects in the design of *Translucent* was the idea to deliberately make the 'wetted area' greater than usual. The boat was designed to sit down in the sea and to run with a greater length of its hull actually in the water than would be usual for a planing craft of its size. The theory was that in the longer seas which might be anticipated during the journey around Great Britain a long hull would prevent the boat from constantly leaving the water. By designing the boat to plane with more than the usual length of hull in the water it was hoped to obtain the advantages of a 'long' hull without actually increasing the planned length of the boat, i.e. 28 ft—and it worked. In fact, *Translucent* is faster in the rough, than she is in calm water, a factor which told against her in the ultra-smooth Round Britain Race. 'To show her best form she likes a really good popple', says Betteridge.

Despite her rather unusual appearance *Translucent* has a strong 'production boat' pedigree as she was based 'with modifications' on craft which Bob Kemp already had in production and, at the same time, she herself served as the prototype for a new standard range of Senior Marine hulls. Bob, to some extent, runs against the tide of current design opinion in that he is not 'sold' on the deep-V hull design, at least not for diesel engine boats which can be expected to be rather slower than their petrol-engined sisters and which also (such is the caution displayed by race organisers) are normally going to be used in relatively calm seas. 'What you want', says Bob, 'is a sharp enough forward section for the boat to be able to cut through the water easily, and a flat section aft for it to skid along on. All you have to do then is get the trim right—and this is vitally important. It is no good relying on calculations alone, you've got to experiment!'

Kemp was as good as his word when the time came to trim *Translucent*. A full fuel tank was mounted in the boat (which was up to racing weight) on a long 'railway line'. The tank was moved to and fro along the line until the best boat attitude was achieved, then the railway line was removed and the tank secured into position. 'All highly scientific', comments the irrepressible Betteridge, 'but this is how it was done. We had no gimmicks, no flooding bow tanks, no trim tabs—everything was kept as simple and as basic as possible. After all, unless you can afford really sophisticated equipment that is totally reliable it is better not to have it at all. Nothing is worse than relying on a 'gimmick' which does not work when you want it to!'

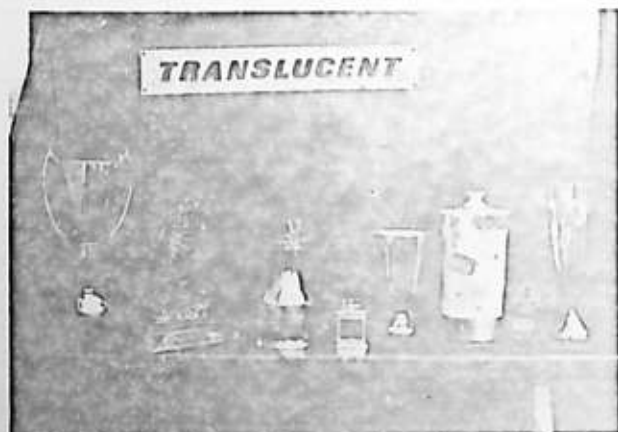
Simplicity was the keynote throughout the whole of the design concept and the fitting out of *Translucent*. 'Because she is so "clean" she is a nice boat to live with', says Betteridge. This uncluttered simplicity is nowhere more apparent than in the engine room. The exhaust pipes take the shortest route—straight out through the side of the hull. A primary and secondary system of air ducts provide good breathing. One system takes fresh air beneath the sumps for oil cooling and another 6 in hose directs air to the turbochargers of the twin Ford diesels (which replaced the twin Perkins at the beginning of the 1970 racing season). 'We

have a good dense supply of oxygen to the blowers at all times', says Alan, 'and this is very important. The air ducting system also provides a very useful bonus in that it keeps the engine room temperature within reasonable bounds'.

Translucent came eleventh in the Round Britain Powerboat Race (the event for which she was designed) against some pretty tough opposition, but the boat really came into its own during the 1970 racing season when it won no less than nine trophies, including the All British Prize and the Restricted Diesel Award in the *Daily Express* race, and the first in Class II prize, the first diesel prize and the first boat under 400 h.p. prize in the Trophées Motonautique de Deauville. She also won Bob Kemp the Designer's Award in the Wills International Powerboat Race.

What are Alan Betteridge's plans for the future? Well, he will certainly carry on racing for a few years yet and will try to perpetuate his David and Goliath act against the moneyed opposition. 'I have never received any financial help', he says, 'except in the last couple of years with engines. So I must continue to keep everything within my limited financial compass. I want to do the 1972 London to Monte Carlo Race—in fact it is a "must" if I can manage to squeeze the necessary cash.' Will he use *Translucent* for this great marathon? 'Well, she would be quite suitable', he says, 'but maybe I ought to go for something new. I'm not sure yet.'

Whatever he decides, all his friends and associates will undoubtedly wish this brave and determined racing man good luck in this great event and hope to see him amongst



The trophies captured by *Translucent* during 1970.

the prize-winners in Monte Carlo—for he richly deserves any success which comes his way.



Translucent in 1970 prize-winning trim