



Groves and Guttridge Marina in Cowes where the pre and post race action is to be found.

Participating in the Cowes-Torquay race in England became a dream when I first grew up enough to learn anything at all about the lore of offshore racing. The stories were legion – waves 20' high in 30' boats (or was it the other way around?), dense fogs that precluded seeing the cleats on the bow of the boat, rigorous attention to detailed inspection for safety violations and compliance with technical specifications for race boats, pump and circumstance, a long gruelling race that knocked out multi-language competitors right and left, truly a test of men and machinery, the most prestigious race in the world, God Save the Queen!

The dream began to become a reality with the discovery that by saving the price of a beer here and there, fixing up a slightly dilapidated 36' Cigarette known in our side of the garage as Kaama I; we would be able to take two weeks out of the U.S. schedule, ship an extra boat to England and least show up at the start line. A part of this economy programme meant doing everything ourselves – no shipping brokers, no shore crew, no truck; just two seats in steage on a 747 when the time came to leave.

The baptism took place at the loading docks in Port Elizabeth, New Jersey. My compadres in U.S. racing who had done all this in other years had given me chapter and verse of the armload of paper work to be done in advance. My English friends had greased the skids for us in England. I put in a neat and tidy appearance early one morning an hour before the race boat was to arrive on the scene to be shipped.

I should have been suspicious when I walked into the loading shed. Card-carrying members of the Teamsters Union had reams of yellow forms (mine were green); the man behind the iron bars kept asking me for forms with numbers that sounded vaguely like either a telephone number or a zip code. In desperation, adding a slight sob to my voice and shedding a tear or two, I finally announced that I was a stupid lady from California who wanted to ship a race boat to Southampton in order to race, and I had never done anything like this before in my life. Grudgingly I was given the proper additional forms to complete and banished to a room down the corridor to fill them out.

I walked into what looked at first like the holding cell for the night's collection of drunks. Stretched out on benches along the walls were perhaps a dozen guys, sleeping, drinking murky coffee, talking in Jerseyesque monotones (if Sanskrit were a spoken language, it would probably sound

with Betty Cook~

from cowes to torquay in a coat and tie

WITH KIND PERMISSION OF POPULAR PERFORMANCE BOAT

like this). In the centre of the room was a high sloping desk with a series of three foot high stools, World War I ashtrays and dry ball point pens. Carved into the top were four-letter Anglo-Saxon terms dating from the turn of the century. The back corner housed yet another bored and sleepy clerk surrounded by at least forty rubber stamps sending out a rhythmic volley of 'thud-thud-thuds'. Suddenly, everyone wanted to be helpful — fill in this, leave that blank, do you need a pen, how do you like your coffee (from Howard Johnson's, please), go see Al about that one, hey, Joe, give the lady another piece of carbon paper, hold down the language will ya, fellas. No wonder I completed the job in half an hour with all that good advice.

Next came a cross-country hike looking for Lefty to sign this, Moe to approve that, and then turn the whole mess over to Whiey at the gate who would let us in. The customs inspector patiently explained which copy of something else I kept, which one he kept, and I think which one I had to send to the Secretary of State. Three hours later, it was out of my hands and consigned to the North Atlantic.

England had had its most miserable summer weather in decades, and our arrival seemed to promise a continuation of this. Since there were to be two English races a week apart, the first at Poole as a warm up for Cowes, we elected to race both races. Testing after the long sea voyage was done during a monsoon, dodging hovercraft, oil tankers, truck ferries and several thousand sail boats. The tide drop in this region is 14' so you are either in the shipping channel or on the mud flats.

Three American boats without tow trucks had to be hauled some forty miles to Poole from our maintenance base at Port Hamble. The tow truck belonged to one of the English boats housed some fifty miles further on toward London. The entire procedure consumed a day of commuting, ever conscious of the fact that Great Britain remains one of the last bastions of driving on the left hand side of the road. Except for motorways (freeways, parkways or toll roads to us) roads are narrow, hedges grow to 20' in height at their edges, and speed limits are whatever the highest number on your speedometer is. Having mastered this, the English Channel was going to look like Joel Halpern's swimming pool! The streets of Poole are narrow (patterned no doubt after their showerless bathtubs), store fronts are built within 2' of the roadway (this 2' is for the convenience of pedestrians, 'roundabouts' describe an arc that never made allowances for a 40 foot trailer, and bicycles have as much right to be there as you have. But the joy of all this is that everyone in town knows about you, they have followed the race for years, they are delighted that you have come, fascinated by your boat, curious

your boat, friendly, curious and helpful, gracious and hospitable.

Time is assigned for launching and inspection and half the town and those on holiday are there to see the spectacle. The inspectors give us a bill of health as clean as their white shop coats. Drivers' meeting is conducted by a Race Chairman surrounded by his committee (all clad in navy blue blazers and yacht club ties), shades of Eton and Harrow!

The race itself was indeed a warm up for Cowes — a chance to get to know the waters of the English Channel, look for landmarks in common with the next race, sort out all those funny looking bird cages that pass for sea buoys, and break in a new navigator (who even pointed with an English accent). But for me, if this was the warm up, I had best make my surge next year. We broke in the first 12 miles! On to Cowes.

Cowes is situated on the Isle of Wight about five miles across a stretch of water known as 'the solent' from Southampton. Since all race festivities, meetings and inspections take place there, one is now faced with a water commute. We are assigned an inspection time, so we schedule a launch time from Port Hamble. The operator of the towing tractor (in a necktie) hauls us to the travel lift (operator clad in a necktie), and we make it to the Royal Yacht Squadron in Cowes. This is an imposing looking stone edifice with battlements, slit windows that surely must harbour cross bows and paladins in mesh chest protectors. Our white coated inspectors (necktie in navy blue, as I recall) carefully go over the boat following our registration. For the first time we learned that the required radar reflector is really a three dimensional circle, housed in a three dimensional circle, housed in a plastic bag, that must be assembled like a child game of giant cards. It only took ten or fifteen minutes of fumbling around to accomplish this and run it up the radio antenna.

Drivers' meeting was conducted in large tent on the lawn of the Royal Yacht Squadron since no non-member is allowed into the fortress itself. Upon approaching the front entrance (bracketed by two beautifully polished brass cannons which discouraged any curiosity I might have had as to what the inside looked like), I noticed a small discrete sign which said Ladies Entrance underlined by an arrow. If you followed this around to the rear of the building there was a narrow doorway which gave into a room about the size of the master bath in your suburban split level. That's it — that's as far as you can go, Lady!

But take away all this flippancy. The Cowes-Torquay-Cowes race does live up to its billing. The race is known officially as the Embassy-Daily Express Powerboat Race. Its course is from Cowes to Torquay and back again, a distance of some 230 miles. Thirty-two boats in all classes started through a

start-finish slot following the transom of a vessel that looked to be the size and configuration of a navy patrol boat but had a speed enviable to some of our production boats. English weather had done a turn about and while the visibility was not great, the waters were calm and winds were light.

The first leg of the race involved a lap around the Solent. Check point one was two miles down the course. If you have ever been in a taxi in Rome at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, you have a fair idea of what that first lap was like. Looking off the starboard rubrail, I began counting the rivets in Senor Niccoli's *Dry Martini*. After the race, I learned that Michael Doxford's *Limit Up* was between us!

Every check point in the Solent became a slight-of-hand trick to get to the inside on the turns. I had meant to count them off as I went by, but when it became a case of mere survival, t'hell with it. The two English boats were fast and fast they stayed until both broke down. The water was eerily calm; the visibility down to a mile or less. Our English navigator knew the course well and no check point was ever far off once we reached the neighbourhood. I would look up as we passed cliffs to see thousands of people watching and waving. After the 'round about' at Torquay, the long ride home was a matter of staying on course. I knew we were in the lead, but I had no notion of who was behind or how far.

We had won and set a new course record with an old, out-dated, patched, untried (we hadn't raced it for over a year), non-competitive boat. Somehow the magic touch of the Crew Chief had given the lie to this. And I hadn't believed either — so it never occurred to me to listen to the instructions given us prior to the race regarding what to do with the winning boat. I was hopelessly lost in a sea of spectator craft. Eventually a patrol boat came alongside and escorted us to the proper place.

How fantastic it is to win — but to win when you think it is a hopeless dream, and then to win a race that has been not so much a race as a place in history. To be invited to play at Wimbledon is enough in itself. To win, is beyond belief. This was Wimbledon.

Sir Maxwell Aiken, a man now in his sixties, has been the prime mover in this race, not only as a sponsor but as a driver. The son of Lord Beaverbrook, his newspaper, *The Daily Express*, has long supported and promoted the race to a point where all of Britain knows of it and follows it. Thanks to him, offshore racing has lived and thrived in England. He and Lady Aiken graciously opened their fantastic home at Cowes, greeted us as old friends and later congratulated us with misty eyes when a lady had the timidity to win. For all he has done, for all that he will do, when the annuals of offshore racing are written, Sir Maxwell Aiken will have a berth with the angels.