

## Dayboat Week 2018

### Poole Harbour Cruise report of Merganser DB136 Great-grandchildren's first experience

#### Family history

Oswald Sykes (known as "Bill" to his friends), twenty nine years old and father of three, joined the army on the outbreak of the Second World War.

He was evacuated from Dunkirk: I never heard him speak of the Operation itself, but he once told me of the momentary temptation he resisted to desert when the train carrying him and hundreds of other survivors from Dover stopped briefly at our home town of Tonbridge, knowing that his family was less than a mile away. Many years later he commented that if our YW Dayboat had existed at the time she would have attempted the Channel crossing and tried to save lives getting men off the beach.

After the War he was introduced to a very different sailing experience. His childhood friend Tony Knight raced a Six Metre named "Fane" and invited Oswald to crew. Fane's mooring was at Upnor on the Medway, hard by TS Arethusa, opposite RN Dockyard Chatham. He was immediately "hooked" and wanted to inspire his family to share his new-found love of sailing. There were now four children as I was born in 1946.

When my Dad Oswald read the Yachting World magazine article in October 1949 announcing the new 14 foot Dayboat design he determined to put his practical talents to learning the new skill of boatbuilding, so he bought the plans, purchased a Honduran mahogany log and had it milled into sheets by the Baltic Sawmill whose yard was on the river bank at Tonbridge. He laid the keel of Merganser in 1952 and enlisted the whole family to help the construction. By this time I was five years old and could climb inside the hull and push the rove punch with all my might while my Dad deftly hammered the rivets in.

Merganser was launched at Upnor, and to begin with she was regularly road-trailed there from Tonbridge. We all loved sailing; we had some big tents so spent longer periods living under canvas, at first on Medway YC land, and later much further downstream on Chetney Marsh. For a number of years we spent the whole summer school holidays in the grand wilderness of the Medway estuary exploring every creek and mudflat and salting. We were miles from other human habitation. We had a car so my Dad could put on his suit and commute from our encampment via Swale Halt railway station to his office job in London.

In 1959 we moved house to Lower Halstow where our field was protected by the sea wall built after the 1953 floods, so Merganser was permanently moored and we could get afloat at High Water plus or minus an hour or two.

After my Mum died, my elder brother Guy and his young family moved back to the

Lower Halstow house. Thus three of Oswald's grandchildren have happy memories of growing up with Merganser. They moved to Ullapool and Merganser was taken there and sailed on Loch Broom for a number of years.

In 1988 Guy had cancer and knew he would not sail Merganser again. He asked me to look after her so I took my wife and sons aged 8 and 10 to Scotland and brought Merganser back to Bexhill where we lived. I'm ashamed to say I neglected her for a couple of decades. She sat in our garden with particularly her deck and deck beams gently decaying. My excuse is that work and other activities always took priority. So my two sons have grown up seeing the boat sitting forlornly in the garden, and tolerating? my occasional reminiscences of my own happy childhood and youthful memories of Merganser. Eventually however I did tackle the huge restoration project and I made her seaworthy again in 2015.

My elder son Adam lives in Jersey and has come over for a couple of short breaks when we have sailed Merganser together both in Poole and the Walton Backwaters. Thus another of the builder's grandchildren sailed in her for the first time when he was 37, 48 years after his cousins had had that joyful experience as little children.

### Dayboat Weeks

It has been a joy to rejoin YWDBA, make new friends and take part in the gatherings at Salcombe, Brixham, Falmouth and now Poole.

My younger son Nathan and his young family have been living in New Zealand for four years, so had never seen the restored Merganser until they returned to U.K. (permanently) two months ago. So now in 2018 is the first opportunity for Oswald's great-grandchildren to step aboard in the haven, hoist sail and nose out into Poole harbour. Would they feel the thrill as she came alive responding to the power of the wind? Would this first voyage of a couple of cables be too much for the six- and eighty-year-olds, or would they want to do it again and perhaps begin a fourth generation of Dayboaters?



Well, we got the "thumbs up", so on Tuesday the five of us gathered life jackets, waterproofs, picnic hamper (and National Trust membership cards) and piled aboard.

That's myself, Nathan and his wife Michelle, Marley aged eight, and Tilly (Matilda), six. Plenty of room really, specially remembering my childhood when we were "six persons on board". The little ones could either sit or kneel up as look-outs or shelter under the foredeck hearing that unforgettable sound of the waves against the planking.

Tilly asked me not to let the boat be too "tippy" so we spilt a bit of wind and were not very close-hauled as we headed upwind. We found the Wych Channel and rounded Pottery Pier into Blood Alley Lake.

National Trust had told me they were happy for us to land on the South shore of Brownsea Island. This was a lee shore today so I needed to drop anchor an appropriate distance off then drop back on our long warp. A little work with the oars enabled Nathan to step ashore with a few inches of water under the skeg, and he took a long stern line so we could allow Merganser to lie a little way off and haul her in when required.



We climbed a few steps and found a picnic spot sheltered from the breeze in the bracken

under old pines. There was glorious sunshine, we looked out across to Furzey Island and beyond, while Merganser rode contentedly at anchor below us.

After lunch we played in the woods then some of us had a pleasant walk round to the ferry quay and the NT Reception office where we showed our NT cards and had a chat with the staff. We took a different path back to the South shore so we had brief views of the old church and the site of the outdoor theatre, we saw some peacocks and the collection of Victorian agricultural equipment.



The children were thrilled to be emulating their heroes and heroines from “Swallows and Amazons” and then it was time to resume the cruise. “All Aboard” - “Slip the stern line” - “Hoist the sails” - “Anchor’s Aweigh” then we were off again on starboard tack, keeping Brownsea Island on our port side. We pointed out the navigation marks to the children as we headed up the boat channel. It must have seemed to them quite a long haul back to the Poole Yacht Club haven, but when safely moored on the pontoon they were tired, satisfied, proud of their achievement and, I think, “hooked”.

The weather forecast for the following day was of stronger winds, so Michelle and Tilly planned a day ashore. Marley was a little more intrepid and he wanted to do some fishing from the boat (I had dug a couple of score rag worms over the morning’s low water).

I planned a voyage to Upper Wych Channel where the sea surface would be calmer. The menfolk set out (with iron rations and fishing gear) once again upwind. The waves were quite substantial, but Marley bravely managed to overcome his initial misgivings. As we crossed the harbour the waves got smaller and smaller, so by the time we reached Long Island and Round Island the conditions were very pleasant.

We saw a seal then anchored and cast out our baited fishing lines. We enjoyed a leisurely lunch aboard, but the fish did not seem so keen on tucking into the worms so laboriously prepared for their delectation.

Eventually it was time to set sail for home. Nathan took the helm while I weighed and began to stow the anchor: we swung round and started to run home. Suddenly disaster struck (or at least near disaster). The mainsheet was fully eased, and as a strong gust caught the sail we heard an ominous CRACK and Nathan shouted “the mast has broken”. He had the presence of mind to helm hard down, and we were able to drop

the main immediately. The doomed mast was however still upright, and the jib flying properly. I judged that we had a dead run back to the haven and a direct course would probably miss the oyster beds especially as we wouldn't need much centreplate. I was optimistic that the mast, now relieved of the force of the mainsail, would still be strong enough to carry the headsail, so we ran before the wind at a spanking rate, faster indeed under jib alone than the windward part of the voyage under full sail.

As we made the haven and gently glided to our pontoon berth our pulse and breathing rates returned to normal, we thanked the trusty Dayboat, and I had a strong sense of my Dad's vision for the family's love of sailing, though I am sure he never dreamt this would be flourishing sixty six years later.

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