

BOYD'S BOATS

or

THE SEVENTEEN SEVENTEENS

A History of the World's Oldest Surviving
One-design Keel Boat Class of Racing Yachts

Over sixty years ago, shortly after having begun to sail back to Howth from Clontarf, the skipper stepped over the side of his yacht onto the rocks of the North Bull Wall and finished his voyage by tram. On arrival he went down the pier to McConkey's shed. "Willy", he said, "I've left Leila on the North Bull; please go and fetch her home." About a quarter of a century later that same Leila had a much shorter but quite sharp encounter with the rocks in Barnageera Bay off Skerries. After the lapse of yet another quarter of a century the same unconquerable veteran got ten winning guns out of fourteen in Club races with a fleet of eight yachts at Howth and three first places out of eleven open races for her class which that year had an effective strength of eleven yachts.

A successful type of yacht shares with a well designed steam locomotive the characteristic of longevity. Both these examples of man's handiwork may have their active lives prolonged almost indefinitely given sufficiently affectionate, skilled and enthusiastic owners. Could anything illustrate the truth of that more clearly than the above story?

Much has been made recently of the claim of the Dublin Bay 21-Footer Class to be "the oldest intact one-design class of keel boat in the world." It is unquestionably not the oldest class and the validity

of the rest of its claim depends on a very strict interpretation of the adjective "intact". The Howth 17-Footer one-design class is some five or six years the senior of the 21-Footers and dates back to the nineteenth century. It is also more than twice as numerous. Except for one of them which was irreparably wrecked on the hard over 55 years ago all the remaining sixteen yachts are still seaworthy, all were in the water in 1966 and all have raced at some time during the last five years, the oldest among them being now 74 years old and the youngest nearly 60. Is the class therefore any less "intact" than its Dublin Bay neighbour?

Over the years, successive regatta programmes have advertised races for the "Howth and Dublin Bay 17-Footer Class." Even in 1963 one Club's programme announced a race for "Dublin Bay 17-Footers" although they had not raced as a class in Dublin Bay for the past three years! Let there be no mistake about it; there is no such yacht as a "Dublin Bay 17-Footer". The class was designed by the Commodore of the Howth Sailing Club for that Club: plans were later given free by the designer to the Dublin Bay Sailing Club when it decided on the adoption of the design as one of its official racing classes. That the designer never sought publicity nor wished to claim any kind of even unofficial "copyright" in his design does not alter the fact that its correct description is the "Howth Sailing Club 17-Footer One-design Class."

It will surely be of interest to recall some details of the origin and history of the world's oldest one-design keeled yachts still actively racing as a class. They might be said to belong to the class of Eminent Victorians. With the passage of time some have had to undergo fairly heavy repairs, such as the fitting of a new deck, and probably all have had one new mast, if not more, for which, until recently, timber scaffold poles provided a cheap and effective replacement. They still however, unlike the 21-Footers, cross the starting line rigged, except for minor modifications, as they were designed almost 75 years ago.

THE ORIGINAL HOWTH FLEET

The birth of the class is closely linked with the formation of the Howth Sailing Club. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, competitive sailing at Howth had reached the stage at which those participating felt the need for a permanent organisation to manage it. So, in 1895, the H S C was founded with 43 original members. Prominent among them was the Boyd family some of whom used as a summer residence that solid, grey granite house on the corner of Abbey Street, Howth, built in the early years of the century for the engineer in charge of the construction of the harbour. Its coach house made an excellent boat house.

Mr Justice Boyd became Patron of the new Club; his eldest son Herbert, another lawyer, was elected its first Commodore, an office which he held until his death 52 years later, and the second son, Cecil, became the first Honorary Secretary. Unfortunately no trace of the Club minute books earlier than 1900 has been found, so that no official evidence remains of what must have been most interesting discussions relative to the formation of the 17-Footer class or of later comment on the boats' influence on Club affairs. The only known original Club documents still extant are an address book listing the foundation members and the first printed Rule Book, dated 1896.

Now the Commodore, Herbert (later Sir Walter) Boyd, had a remarkable flair for the design and construction of yachts. In his own boat house, he designed and built inter alia the 18-foot gaff rigged cutter Eithne. Although launched over 75 years ago she is still to be seen sailing at Howth each season, though some years ago her rig was altered to that of a Bermudan sloop. When first built she was a most successful competitor in local sailing events and, inspired by her performance, it is believed that the Club members, in their search for a one-design yacht to supersede an existing

class of half-raters, invited Boyd to produce a design for Club use. It was to be slightly smaller than Eithne, to be raced with a crew of three but capable, if necessary, of being sailed single-handed.

The oldest surviving record of any discussions preliminary to the launching of the class is found in press reports of a General Meeting of the Club held on October 22, 1897. It was there proposed and decided to introduce a new one-design class to supersede the existing class of 18-foot half-raters. It would consist of 17-foot LWL keel boats, half-decked and roomy, rigged with jib, mainsail and topsail. It was believed that the boats would be comfortable cruisers, have a good turn of speed and be moderate in price. At that meeting the Committee was instructed to meet the probable builders to discuss the specification and price.

There is no surviving account of any actual proposal inviting Mr Boyd to prepare a design; that he did so is now historical fact. The decision taken at that meeting, with its clear references to size, type, probable performance and price level, alludes also to the specification. It must surely have been the endorsement of a recommendation from a committee which had discussed the matter previously and had either invited or accepted an offer from its Commodore to prepare a design.

It is also not known on what basis the "probable builders" had been selected; whether tenders were invited or likely builders asked if they were interested. All that is known for certain is contained in a press report of the next General Meeting of the Club held six months later, on April 29, 1898, which stated that "a number of special rules for the new one-design class were passed. A vote of thanks was passed to the Commodore for his gift to the Club of the design of Class II. This class, which was started this year to take the place of the old half-raters, will be a very interesting addition to the Club. The boats have been built from the design of Mr W H Boyd by John Hilditch of

Carrickfergus. Five boats were ordered. . . . The owners arranged to sail the boats down to Howth at Easter time and after a very rough passage they arrived safely. Although the weather was anything but suitable for such small boats they behaved splendidly when put to the test." An extract from the diary of the late B J Newcombe, later to be an owner of Hera, provides an addendum to the above report by recording that, owing to bad weather, the fleet took shelter on the way. Four of them arrived in Howth on April 15, telling Judge Boyd, who was on the pier to meet them, that they had lost touch with Rita"(R N Guinness). "Oh", replied the judge, "she arrived yesterday morning!"

The first race for the new class had been planned for Saturday, April 30, the day after the General Meeting, but "owing to inclement weather" was postponed to Wednesday, May 4. A report of that race records that "the race started at 5.45 p.m. Three rounds of the course were sailed in a light N W breeze." In those days the course lay in the northern part of Howth Sound between Ireland's Eye and the Burrow Strand, the starting and finishing line being between the pier heads. The report continued, "Aura led at the end of the first round but was overtaken early in the second by Leila who retained her lead and became the winner, the finishing times being as follows:-

Leila	C A V Yeo	7 44 58
Aura	C A Boyd	7 45 15
Hera	W P McNeight	7 46 17
Rita	R N Guinness	7 49 35
Silver Moon	W B Dyer	7 50 08

The winner's lead at the end of that two-hour race was therefore about three to four boat lengths.

Thus was born the Howth 17-Footer Class whose yachts are still in active service three quarters of a century later. Its number was to rise to 17 and over 150 persons have been either sole or part owner of one or other of the yachts; several have successively owned more than one. With one major exception and a few small gaps a complete list of

the owners of each boat in the class from the date of launching has been compiled. They cost under £90 all found with mainsail, topsail, reaching, working and storm jibs and spinnaker, so fulfilling the requirement that they should be "moderate in price"; and it will hardly be denied that they had, at the time and for their size, "a good turn of speed". Those were the two most important characteristics mentioned at the meeting which decided to adopt the class. In later years the boats have changed hands for sums varying between £1 and well over £200.

Two years later the fleet was increased in size. A report of the autumn General Meeting of the Club held on October 20, 1899, stated that "the 17 foot class, which has a strength of five boats, will be increased by three or four during the coming winter,, Already Clancy of Kingstown has an order for three which will be commenced at once. The existing boats, which have proved satisfactory in every way, have iron keels, but there is some talk of making lead keels universal in the class." The boats referred to in fact numbered three and were launched in time for the 1900 season under the names of Pauline, Zaida and Anita, having been built by J Clancy. As forecast, they were equipped with lead keels and the original five boats were similarly modified. The size of the fleet, then eight yachts, remained unaltered for the next seven years.

THE DUBLIN BAY FLEET

Ease of communication, in all senses of the word, between even far distant places is now so widespread that it is difficult to realise that, 65 years ago, the Dublin Bay and Howth Sailing Clubs were almost a world apart. Judging by the pother that went on in the former Club over the problem of choosing a new racing class, one is driven to the conclusion that the latter Club had never even been heard of!

In February 1906 the D B S C proposed that "a new class should be introduced in 1907 to take the place

of the present no.3 class (the Colleens); to be in size between the present no.2 (21-Footers) and no. 4 (Water Wags); to be deep-keeled, iron ballasted, one-design sea-going boats about 18 to 19 feet on the water line; the cost with sails not to exceed £100." A sub-committee was appointed to deal with the matter but even three months afterwards had got no further than suggesting that a prize might be offered for the best design. A major difficulty seems to have concerned the problem of getting the boats, when the design had been chosen, built, because it was stated at a committee meeting in June 1906 that "Mr Doyle would probably refuse to build except to his own designs and specifications." It appears as though the committee had chosen its builder before it had chosen its boat. Dr W M A Wright advised making a rough sketch of what was required and obviously felt that the best hope of success, if not indeed the only hope, lay in the Club's persuading Mr Doyle to design a suitable yacht within the framework laid down. At that stage, Mr J B Boyd remarked, one infers rather caustically, that "what was wanted was an able boat and not a miniature yacht." Reading the specification adopted in February, One wonders how its similarity to that of the Howth 17-Footer class had escaped the notice of the Dublin Bay Club and how the proven ability of those boats had been so successfully concealed from its members for eight whole years. It is astonishing that it never seems to have occurred to anyone during that summer to take a tram out to Howth and have a look at the boats there. It is even more surprising when the end of the story is reached.

At the end of that June meeting, Messrs D M Turner and A Richardson were each asked to prepare rough sketches and "Mr Doyle was asked to meet the committee later to discuss the design." Two more months passed without further developments. Then the Howth Sailing Club stepped in to rescue its friends from the thraldom of Mr Doyle. How that came about is not mentioned but it seems clear that, if Dublin Bay didn't know what Howth had done, the latter must have got wind of what Dublin Bay wanted to do. At all

events, at a meeting on September 4, 1906, that is no less than seven months after the matter of a new class had first been proposed, "a letter was read from Mr J Stuttard (Hon. Secretary, H S C) suggesting the advisability of adopting the Howth 17-Footer class." That letter brought a request for further information about costs and, within nine days of the Intervention of the H S C, the decision was made! At a committee meeting on September 13 two important events occurred. First, that "eminence grise" Mr Doyle appeared for the first time before the committee and exhibited drawings and plans of his proposed boat. Secondly, letters were read "from Mr Herbert Boyd and Clancy relative to the Howth Class. Mr Boyd's designs were shown and the whole matter was fully discussed. It was decided to recommend at the General Meeting in October the adoption of this design".

The General Meeting of the DBSC on October 27, 1906, unanimously adopted the design and specification with a small modification providing optionally for a longer cockpit. It decreed also that the class was to remain an official Club class for a minimum period of 5 years. That "official" status was formally renewed at the appropriate intervals for the next half century and was not lost until the year 1961. It is noteworthy that no fee was asked by the designer for the use of his plans, though the D B S C extracted 10/6 per boat for their use. Some years later, "a letter was received from Mr E J Julian on behalf of Mr Peard who wished to build a 17-Footer, asking what would be the fee for the use of the designs: the Hon. Secretary was instructed to write and inform Mr Peard that if he became a member of the Club the fee would be 10/6, but if not it would be one guinea."

The momentous decision having at last been made and Mr Doyle finally unshackled, tenders for building the boats were invited. Six were received:-

Atkinson (Bullock)	£130
J Clancy (Kingstown)	£105 for one; £95 each for three.
Dublin Dockyard	£130 for one; £95 each for three.
J Hilditch (Carrickfergus)	£82½ per boat carriage extra
J Kelly (Portrush)	£90 carriage paid to Dublin; 2½% discount for multiple order.
P Jones (Gourock)	£132 plus £5 carriage.

It is noteworthy that Mr J C Doyle did not submit a tender; the opinion expressed at the Committee meeting in June seems to have been justified.

Kelly got the job with orders from Mr J B Boyd and Dr W M A Wright, followed very soon afterwards by those from Messrs C H Maffett, H M Leask and C J Moore, the five boats being launched in 1907 under the names respectively of Sylvia, Deilginis, Rosemary, Gladys and Bobolink, Within a couple of months Leask had sold Gladys to A N Sumerling who renamed her Elf: she was definitely one of those having the alternative larger cockpit. From the absence of any special reference to their arrival, it is assumed that, unlike their older sisters, they came to Dublin by rail, not sail.

The maiden race for the Dublin Bay fleet was sailed on June 1, 1907, and resulted in a win for Deilginis from Sylvia, Gladys and Bobolink: Rosemary does not appear to have competed. Seven weeks later the first combined race for the whole class was one of the events at Howth Regatta on July 20, 1907. Deilginis was the only absentee, so that there were 12 starters. With several years' experience behind them, one might have expected the Howth boats to do well but would hardly have supposed that they would rout their Dublin Bay rivals to the extent of taking the first seven places!

Meanwhile, at the General Meeting of the D B S C in March 1907 it had been reported that six boats

were on order. The sixth was presumably a boat whose name had been announced as Oriole, to be built to the order of Col C J McCartie. However, he apparently changed his mind and ordered the 21-Footer Geraldine instead. As a 17-Footer, therefore, Oriole was never any more substantial than a name on paper.

Next year another boat, Eileen, was launched for Mr J E Mills. She was built by M Mahony in Kingstown who, it will have been noticed, had not tendered in 1906. Then, after a further year, Kelly got another order, this time from Dr J T Wigham, for the yacht originally, and for at least the next 15 years, named Nautilus but now known as Oona. For the time being the combined class remained 15 in number.

THE THREE AFTERTHOUGHTS

After Nautilus was launched no further additions were made to the class until 1913. There were still eight yachts at Howth and there were now seven in Dublin Bay. Then, in 1912, Mr H Peard announced that he was ordering a new boat from Mahony's yard. She was launched in 1913 and named Mimosa. There seems to be some doubt about which section of the class she was intended to join because there are entries in the minute books of both Howth and Dublin Bay Clubs recording Mr Peard's application for a racing number and of the boat having been allotted a different number by each! No account has been found of her actually having raced with either Club before the outbreak of the first Great War put a temporary stop to organised Club competitions.

The last member of the class to be launched was Echo, built by G Hollway in Dublin, which took the water apparently in 1914. For the reason just mentioned she had no opportunity to race for some years and her original ownership is therefore in doubt. In 1919 and 1920 she appears in Lloyd's Register as "Eco" and owned by A J Wansbrough. Next year a new owner, R Hall, applied to the Howth S C

for an official number and for several years she raced with that Club, at first being actually stationed at Malahide along with, at that time, Zaida and Deilginis.

Echo was the last of the fleet to be built and had brought the total number of yachts in the class up to 17. The effects of the Great War and of the subsequent political events in Ireland delayed any expansion in yachting activities. Later, the rapid development and popular appeal of the motor car possibly diverted the interest and the money of potential sailors landwards. When, in the thirties and still more in the fifties, interest turned once more towards the water, the emphasis was increasingly on smaller, faster and more cheaply built boats, able themselves to be transported overland to different yachting centres by those selfsame motor cars. By that time too, the more easily handled Bermudan type of rig had superseded the less convenient gaff mainsail and jockey topsail of the old design.

A final flicker of excitement flashed in the late forties when it was learned that WJ Macken had begun to build a new boat to the same design. Full-size profiles had been cut in plywood, an oak keelson made and timbers acquired from which to fashion the frames, but there, alas, the project died and the eighteenth 17 Footer was still-born.

Until the Great War, each section of the class, one in Howth the other in Dublin Bay, kept itself very much to itself. Interchange of yachts between the two centres began only after 1919 and, for a few years in the early twenties, three of Howth contingent were stationed at Malahide. From then until the late fifties the Dublin Bay fleet always outnumbered the Howth section on paper though the former's effective racing strength was less predictable. As time went on, the tremendous expansion of interest in dinghy sailing and the increasing desire to spend money on an ever widening variety of yachts to new designs led to a loss of interest by the members of the D B S C in the old veterans and they ceased to be an official racing

class after 1960. Every member of the fleet has now returned to the port which first gave the class anchorage in the Spring of 1898.

THE NUMBERING SYSTEM

One would suppose that the most certain method of identifying a yacht would be by noting its sail number. To those unfamiliar with the earlier history of the 17-Footers a great deal of confusion has been caused by the oddity of the system of allocating the racing numbers. As a guide to chronology it is most misleading. At various times two different yachts have successively had the same number and, in one instance, the same yacht acquired no less than three different numbers!

The five original boats were not at first given numbers. Then, in 1899, in anticipation of the arrival in the next year of three more, the Howth S C passed a rule requiring all yachts in one-design classes to be numbered. Because of the absence of any official Club records of that time, it is not now known on what principle the numbers were allotted. It is, however, the fact that the first five yachts in the class received the first five odd numbers - Rita 1, Leila 3, Silver Moon 5, Aura 7 and Hera 9. The second batch got the first three even numbers - Pauline 2, Zaida 4 and Anita 6. It seems inconsistent with the laws of mathematical probability that that peculiar separation of odd and even numbers was entirely fortuitous; it must surely have been deliberate, though why will presumably never be known.

When the first five yachts of the D B S C fleet were about to be launched,, they were allotted consecutive numbers, except for the omission of the allegedly superstitious 13, from 10 upwards - Sylvia 10, Deilginis 11, Rosemary 12, Elf (nee Gladys) 14 and Bobolink 15. In due course the next two were also numbered in correct chronological order - Eileen 16

and Nautilus 17. All that had been done in accordance with a letter, dated March 8, 1907, from the Howth S C "approving the suggestion that the numbers of the D B S C 17-foot boats should commence with the number 10". That gave rise to a belief that a yacht in the class racing under the burgee of the D B S C was required to have a two digit number and so led to further complications. The obvious explanation for the proposal in the letter is surely the simple one that, as there was already a yacht numbered 9, the natural thing to do would be to continue the numerical sequence from 10 onwards.

Then the fun began. When Mimosa was built for Mr Peard, he applied to the Howth S C for a number and, on April 4, 1913, was officially allotted the still unused number 8. Meanwhile the D B S C minutes had recorded, on February 2, 1912, that is over a year earlier, that "Mr H Peard applied for a number for his new 17-Footer and was given the number 18." It looks as though there had been unexpected delay in getting her launched combined with some unexplained reason for deciding to race at Howth instead of in the Bay. There are no records of her having raced before the war, but she appears in the D B S C list of yachts up till 1914 opposite the number 18. Some years after Mr J B Boyd's yacht Sylvia had been irreparably wrecked in a storm in 1915 he bought Mimosa and, apparently without any formal request, just transferred the lost Sylvia's number (10) to Mimosa which has retained it ever since.

Evidence of the "double-figure theory" for Dublin Bay boats is offered by the appearance of Hera in the DBSC list for 1921 opposite the number 18, conveniently abandoned shortly beforehand by Mimosa, though there is no record of her then owner having applied to either the H S C or the D B S C to have her number changed. When she returned to her native Club in 1962 after nearly 45 years' absence, it was suggested to her new owner that she should have her original number restored, to which he agreed with alacrity. So she is once more number 9. Evidence against the "double-figure theory" is provided by the

case of Bobolink. She was brought over to Howth by RN Guinness in 1914, but neither then nor when racing was resumed in 1919 did she relinquish her Dublin Bay number 15, although in the latter year both 8 and 9 would have been available. It was absurd ever to have begun that process of switching numbers. One may have personal reasons for wishing to change a yacht's name, but in a one-design class there should always be one unalterable and certain means of identification of each of its members.

Last of all, Echo became officially a member of the Howth S C fleet in 1921. When her then owner R Hall applied for a number he was allotted 8. As already mentioned, it had been given to Mimosa in 1913 but apparently never used by her and quietly abandoned, along with her other number 18, when she "adopted" her wrecked sister's number 10.

NOMENCLATURE

In noting the names borne by the yachts in the class one peculiarity is immediately obvious. There is a sort of classical austerity about the almost regular pattern of names given to the Howth fleet and a lack of any apparent system in the naming of the Dublin Bay yachts. All but two of the nineteenth century yachts have four or five-letter names ending in "a". In contrast, the range of appellations bestowed on the last nine boats included at least one of a bird, a beast, a fairy, a girl, a shrub and a town.

The few changes in names that have been made have been less illogical than the juggling with numbers. There have been two sets of major alterations and two minor changes. Chronologically the first yacht to be affected was Silver Moon. When she was bought by A McMullen in 1901 his partiality for Wagner in general and Lohengrin in particular led him to rename her Elsa (which incidentally conformed to the normal pattern of nomenclature). A few years later, after an intervening change in ownership, she was

acquired by C Courtney who restored to her the original name by which she has been known ever since.

The next to be affected by change of name was the yacht known for many years as Elf. As already stated she was launched as Gladys, but was re-named Elf within two months. In about 1925 her then owner E D Guinness sold her across to the south of England. She appeared in Lloyd's Register under various ownerships, none of which lasted for more than a year or two, up till 1933, at which time she was owned by N Bartlett of Southampton and had then for some time been known as Lustre. Then she disappeared from the records for many years until, in 1948, her then owner R V MacDonald of Cowes became curious about her origin and wrote to the D B S C to ask for details of her earlier history. On learning about the inception of the still extant and flourishing class of which she was a member, he restored her all-but original name. A year later she was bought by Horsman and Kirwan and was afloat again in Dun Laoghaire in 1950 after approximately a quarter of century's exile. In 1971, her latest owners, R A Somerville and E Baird, completed the cycle by re-commissioning the name under which she was launched and which she had borne for so short a while.

The next nominal peculiarity was, so to speak, purely nominal. Oriole, it will be remembered, had been announced as the name of the sixth boat to be built for the DBSC fleet but her intended owner changed his mind and ordered another boat instead. As the Club had already allotted her a number along with the other five built by Kelly, it is reasonable to suppose that she also would have come from the same yard. When, however, the sixth boat of the fleet was in fact launched to the order of JE Mills she came from Mahony's yard, was named Eileen and took the number (16) that the phantom Oriole had not needed.

The last series of changes of name concerned the yacht now known as Oona. She was another product of Kelly's yard and was launched in 1909 for Dr J T Wigham under the name Nautilus. The thought obviously

suggests itself that she might have been either on the stocks or even completed as the formerly intended but abandoned Oriole and was thus given a second chance to take the water. However that may have been, she had by then lost her place in the queue for numbers and so became number 17. In the early twenties she belonged to W G Gibson; for how long is not certain as she does not appear among the results of any Club races after 1922. Some years later, in 1928, she was in Wicklow, owned by Dr J T O'Byrne and known as "an Seabhac", the Hawk, a name which invariably misquoted in local sailing records as an Seodach". In 1932 she came back to Dublin Bay in the joint ownership of Dr D H and Miss S Douglas, from whom she got the name Oona for the first time. Enquiry failed to elicit any specific reason for the new name apart from the statement that "it was a nice name". She was damaged in the gale which wrecked Sylvia in 1915, was then bought by Gray and repaired with some of the latter's undamaged frames.

A DIVERSITY OF CREATURES

It would clearly be impossible to give an entire list of those persons, numbering over 150, who have at some time owned part or all of a 17-Footer. Some owners did little more than indulge a passing fancy while others remained faithful to the boat of their choice for many years. Once an owner had, as it were, settled down in his cockpit, records show that many spells of ownership lasted for from 10 to 15 years. A majority of the boats had periods of ownership in either Howth or Dublin Bay though there have been three notable exceptions. Except when competing in open races, Leila and Zaida have never been raced elsewhere than at Howth and, with the exception of a single race, Eileen never elsewhere than in Dublin Bay until the D B S C abolished the class in 1961.

Undoubtedly the most outstanding among owners was R H Guinness. He was sui generis for he owned a 17-Footer for 52 consecutive years - Rita for 16,

followed by Bobolink for the same period; then Mimosa for 9 and finally Pauline for 11 years. Not only did he own them but he raced them every season without a break from 1898 to 1949, except during the four years of the first Great War when there was no Club racing. It was mentioned that one of the requirements of the design of the class was that one should be able to sail the boats single-handed. Noel Guinness probably practiced that art more often and certainly to a far greater age than any other 17-Footer skipper. Times without number he was seen setting sail in Howth Harbour, casting off and departing either for the other side of the Bay to pick up a crew and compete in a regatta or just going for an afternoon's sail; in due course he would be seen returning to his moorings after the event equally unaided.

Second prize for length of ownership goes to A McMullen and covers a period of about 38 years, though with a small intervening gap. Three years of ownership of Silver Moon (called by him Elsa) were followed by over 20 with Anita, first in Howth and later, after the Great War, in Dublin Bay. Then, after a few years' interval, he took over Bobolink from Noel Guinness and brought her back again to Dublin Bay where he kept her for a further nine years.

Two other very faithful owners were J G Franks and HH Poole who between them owned Zaida successively over a period of half a century. The former's keenness for racing was supplanted by a growing interest in gardening and blunted by the inconvenience of the double passage between Malahide, where he kept the boat, and Howth to compete in races. Horace Poole's spell of ownership lasted for 28 years and was the longest continuous period in the ownership of a yacht which was raced regularly every season. His approach to the problem of racing was a combination of calculated caution and sustained efficiency; the enterprise was as much an intellectual exercise as a test of practical skill. He was never known outwardly to lose his

temper with his crew nor ever heard to utter "nautical language". Poole had been Guinness's crew for some time before buying Zaida and becoming a rival helmsman. For some reason he had been called "Muncher" by his family and was always so addressed by his former skipper. The Lambay races have been an annual event in the Howth S C fixture list for at least 50 years, since the early twenties. Until very recently the course was never varied from year to year. One day during the forties 17-Footers were circling round waiting for the starting gun of that race. "Muncher", called out Guinness across the water, "which way do we go round Lambay?" Back went the answer, "the same way as you have been going for the last 25 years."

Aura was first skippered and later owned by Cecil Boyd for no less than 45 years but, with the exception of a single season in 1931 when he returned briefly from Canada, never took the water between 1914 and his death in 1942. During all those years he would not allow her to be sold, although the likelihood of being able to put his ownership to practical use seemed very remote. Happily thirty years in a boathouse did her no harm for she has been raced almost every season for the last thirty years.

Among the more colourful characters associated with the class might be mentioned Toby Miller, Buddy Thompson and Mr Justice Samuels, the first being remembered for his genial and happy nature, the second for his eccentricity of apparel and the last for his almost frightening unpredictability at the helm. Buddy Thompson owned Rosemary for many years and was noted for his addiction to a bowler hat when racing: was it for protection from an unruly main boom? His last visit to Howth resulted in an unorthodox encounter between Rosemary and the rocks off the East Pier. Toby Millar had a spell of ownership covering 27 years, about two thirds of it with Anita mostly at Howth and the balance with Oona mainly in Dublin Bay. It used to be said of him that he knew every rock and sandbank within a mile of

Howth by personal contact.

Judge Samuels, at the helm of Leila for the best part of 20 years, had the reputation of striking terror into the hearts of his racing rivals. It was he who deposited his yacht on the North Bull Wall and left her there while he went home to Howth by tram. One blustery day, while attempting to pick up his moorings in the harbour, he was flailing round with his mainsheet adrift to the extreme consternation of the rest of the fleet. Finally he brought up all standing on the mud which even in those far off days was not far below the surface. "Thank God!" came the heartfelt cry of Noel Guinness; "thank God he's safe at last!"

That the boats of the class could so well survive such turbulent tactics is made abundantly clear by the subsequent record of Leila, fortunate to have passed successively into the hands of two outstandingly competent skippers, Billy MacBride and Norman Wilkinson, who have cherished her and raced her to the very limit of her performance, the former for 20 and the latter for the last 25 years.

On the whole, ownership of boats has changed more often and at shorter intervals in Dublin Bay than in Howth. The former fleet found one of its outstanding helmsmen in Terry Roche. He had a ten year tenure of Eileen's helm during which he was probably the most successful of the Dublin Bay owners and towards the end of which he carried out an experiment with her to which reference is made later.

J B Boyd was the one unlucky owner. It will be remembered that it was he who had said in 1906 that what his Club required was "an able boat and not a miniature yacht." He was one of the first to order a 17-Footer when his Club adopted the design as an official Club class. Eight years later, on November 12, 1915, his boat Sylvia was totally wrecked on the slip of the R.I.Y.C. by a gale of exceptional ferocity. Many boats in the harbour were damaged. The day mail boat was unable to leave and the incoming boat was sent back to Holyhead because of the state of the harbour. The East Pier suffered

considerable damage; so did the inshore end of the Carlisle Pier. Services on the railway line and on the Dalkey and Howth tram routes were interrupted owing to flooding and, for good measure, the Kingstown Pavilion was burned down. When racing was resumed after the Great War, Boyd bought Mimosa which he owned and raced until 1927, so it is to be presumed that he considered the design to meet his interpretation of "an able boat".

FROM SEA TO SEA

Than seafaring men there are none other better at creating a mythology of their own and who will stick to their beliefs with tenacity as great as that accorded to religious faith. That X was a light weather boat and Y no use except in half a gale would be maintained immutably even in face of any amount of statistics to the contrary. To quote only two examples, Leila was always credited with the reputation of being a heavy weather boat and Zaida with that of a light weather boat. Again, Mimosa was always alleged to be slow in any circumstances. Yet, over a period of 18 consecutive years, the largest number of winning guns in each successive season's racing, with a fleet varying from five up to a dozen, was credited to one or other of those three yachts. In 1942, out of 16 Club races, Zaida got 9 winning guns; in 1950 Mimosa got the same number out of 14 races; and in 1960 Leila got 10 winning guns out of 14 races. It is beyond reasonable belief that the weather over a continuous period of four months should have been consistently either particularly mild or unduly stormy and so especially to have favoured one of those yachts rather than another.

It is not the boat that matters; it is the man who drives it. Some are more than ordinarily well blessed with nautical green fingers. How often has not one seen such an one sailing by invitation a yacht with a rather indifferent record and putting

the rest of the fleet to shame?

Another example of that kind of mythology is the case of Deilginis. One of the five original boats of the Dublin Bay fleet, she was later always dismissed as a bit of a dead loss. On June 1, 1907, she was the winner of the maiden race for those five boats. In the analysis of Club races for the two seasons 1907 and 1908, she came second overall to Sylvia and Bobolink respectively and, in the latter year got no less than 5 winning guns out of 11 races. During the past 30 years she has been raced but seldom and for a great part of that time has not even been in the water: in more recent years she has reputedly suffered various kinds of indignity. Though treated with indifference for so long, she was brought to Howth in 1971 as she was found and sailed in two races: she got second place in the later race before being hauled out for proper repairs.

Yet again, under her original name of Nautilus, Oona appears only once before the first Great War to have had a good Club record. Over thirty years later, with Toby Millar at the helm in competition with such acknowledged masters as Horace Poole and Noel Guinness, she won 7 Club races out of 16 in a single season.

For some fifty years the 17-Footers were in the happy position of having been divided into the two main fleets, based in Howth and Dun Laoghaire, and so of being able to join battle with each other at the annual regattas of the various local Clubs, an exercise denied, for example, to the 21-Footers who had to hunt as a single pack wherever they went. Though for most of that half century the paper strength of the Dublin Bay contingent outnumbered that in Howth, cold statistics reveal that, year by year, the bulk of the rewards for success have gone to the latter. Though there have been helmsmen in Dublin Bay the equal of any in Howth, there appears also to have been, proportionate to the number of yachts on the station, more what one might call dilettante owners in the Bay than at Howth. Was it the balmier nature of the southern sea that inhibited

its helmsmen from training for battle with the same dedicated concentration as their rivals in the more vigorous northern waters? Or was it anything to do with the attraction of well-appointed yacht club premises, with all that could be had therein, compared with a couple of rooms near the end of a windswept pier and devoid of all "mod cons"? Whatever the reason, it is an undoubted fact that to come bask to Howth from a regatta in another place and to have to admit defeat at the hands of a Dublin Bay helmsman was a confession no Howth 17-Footer owner cared to have to make.

The result of the maiden regatta for the boats of the two combined fleets, sailed at Howth on July 20, 1907, has already been mentioned. Howth Regatta was interrupted by the Great War and not revived until September 4, 1926. It was extensively reported in The Irish Times two days later, from which the following extracts are taken. "A truly remarkable revival it proved to be on that afternoon. Indeed the scene off Howth was striking and reminiscent of the best days of the fixture, even if that comparison brings us back fourteen or fifteen years, memorable mostly for nothing having been done." (What an acid comment). With reference to the race for 17-Footers it was stated that "four of the Dublin Bay class sailed against three of the home fleet and were defeated, but not badly by any means. Indeed, the D B S C boats did better than usual against their Howth rivals." In actual fact, the three Howth boats finished 1st, 2nd and 3rd! Could charitable reporting have gone further?

Still on the subject of performance, two other matters are of interest. When the class was first introduced to Dublin Bay as successor to the Colleen class, it was noted that the new boats "were no match for the Colleens in light weather." There is however no doubt that they were a far more stable proposition in a fresh breeze. The other comment concerns not the class as such but the type of craft of which it was one of the smaller representatives.

It illustrates how opinions so often die hard. In 1932 it was proposed to sail races in Dublin Bay on Thursday evenings. The then Commodore of the D B S C opposed the suggestion because, he said, "it would tend to promote harbour racing in sea-going yachts." For all that, the resolution to authorise the races was carried, only the Commodore dissenting.

One curious proposal affecting the class was made in 1928 when Dr G Nesbitt (Hera) "outlined a scheme for combining the 17-Footer fleets of the H S C and D B S C, half of the season being spent at each port and two races to be sailed each week while the fleet was in Dublin Bay." (There had been bi-weekly races at Howth for some years). Dr Nesbitt's proposal was to be considered by the Committee and brought up at the next annual General Meeting of the D B S C. There was, however, no further reference to it in the minutes and nothing came of it. Perhaps that was just as well, for it would largely have done away with that indefinable and recurrent sense of adventure when the two fleets set out to do battle with each other at the various local regattas.

LIMITS AND RENEWALS

Unlike the case of most other one-design classes whose boats are not confined to a single club, there has never, until quite recently, been a "17-Footers' Association" to legislate for class racing and preserve uniformity of design. Paradoxically, now that the boats race as a class only at Howth, such an Association has at last come into being, having been officially inaugurated in December, 1967, just 70 years after the design was put onto the drawing board. How then has the purity of the design been maintained? When the Dublin Bay fleet had become an accomplished fact, letters were read to a D B S C committee meeting in February 1908 from J B Boyd of D B S C and J G Franks of H S C on the subject of uniformity. The latter proposed a conference to discuss the rules of the class, but the matter was

postponed pending a meeting of the owners. A month later it was reported that a meeting of D B S C owners had sent a deputation of three to meet three H S C owners. They had agreed to recommend to both Clubs that the boats in each Club should all be measured by one member from each Club. There is, however, no actual record of that having been done.

The next reference to uniformity comes with the receipt of a letter in 1920 from W G Gibson, stating that he had bought Nautilus, that "Gray had repaired her and had guaranteed that she would pass the official measurements and specification of the class." Apart from the effort made in 1908, there is no record of any other formal procedure having been proposed to ensure uniformity. The Howth S C had its own set of regulations which were ultimately incorporated as an official appendix to the Club Rules.

As already mentioned, the first departure from the original design was the substitution of a lead keel for the iron keel of the first five boats, but that, of course, occurred before any of the Dublin Bay fleet was built. After about twenty-five years minor changes began to be made; for example, the replacement of the iron tiller by a wooden one and the addition of a balance weight, and the raising of the position of the jib halliard block. The former was a Howth modification, was duly reported to the Club and entered in the official appendix of class regulations. The latter is believed to have been a Dublin Bay alteration and was apparently made without the knowledge of the Howth owners. A few years ago, there was some dissatisfaction about the accuracy of sail dimensions and some formal measuring was undertaken. Also there has been the alteration from cotton to terylene sails, though no attempt was made either to present or to compel such a departure from the specification. For the most part, therefore, small variations on an original theme were initiated quite informally by discussion between the owners concerned and to their mutual satisfaction.

Inevitably, with the passage of time, there were

suggestions that the complexity of the gaff mainsail and jackyard topsail rig should be abandoned in favour of a Bermudan mainsail. The first recorded proposal for such a change, surprisingly enough, was made by R N Guinness at a General Meeting of the Howth S C as long ago as 1925. It was forwarded to the D B S C for comment. Its Committee minuted "the suggested change to Bermuda rig for the 17-Footers which had been put forward at a General Meeting of the H S C was discussed. From enquiries made by the Hon. Secretary it was estimated that the change would cost from £25 to £30." No further action appears to have been taken about that proposal. Nine years later, in November 1934, Capt. O'Brien Twohig, then owner of Deilginis, wrote a letter to the D B S C advocating an optional Bermudan rig for the class. The matter was referred to the Class Captain with a request to consult the owners and the Howth S C. Again no more was heard of the proposal.

Finally, just before the second World War, Eileen was fitted by T H Roche with a Bermudan mainsail as an experiment. As there was no certainty that owners generally would agree to permanent alteration to the rig, he did not feel justified in doing a proper job by arranging for the consequential moving of the position of the mast. The mere changing of the size and shape of the mainsail and jib achieved little other than simplicity in setting sail. Speed was not improved and handling became more difficult, the most undesirable factor being the amount of lee helm necessary, not surprising with the mast left so far forward. The war then intervened and the times were not propitious for further experimentation. So, today the boats still race in the picturesque rig in which they first appeared before the end of the nineteenth century.

TRIUMPHS AND DISASTERS

The more unorthodox events that have befallen various yachts in the class may be divided into two

categories; the totally unexpected or short-lived calamity and the planned adventure. The wreck of Sylvia on the slip of the R I Y C and the episode of Leila and the North Bull have already been mentioned. Another potentially more disastrous accident befell Rita during a single-handed passage across the Bay to Howth by Noel Guinness in heavy weather. She was dismasted near the Baily but was carried up towards Sutton creek and the skipper was fortunately able to catch hold of and make fast to a yacht which was at anchor off Bellingham's Harbour. The cliffs round Howth Head are not at all pleasant neighbours for a dismasted yacht with only one man aboard.

One day, long ago, a miscalculation put Silver Moon aground on Moldowney Bank where she lay on her side at low water. Which would rise again faster, the incoming tide or the cockpit coaming? The latter one and all was well.

To the onlooker, one of the most horrifying sights was the foundering of Hera off the East Pier at Howth during the regatta on August 2, 1958. She had completed the course and was beating back to the harbour mouth against a fresh N W breeze. She had clearly shipped a great deal of water which for some reason had not been bailed out. Heeling over in a freshening squall she was obviously in great danger and, before the horrified eyes of those on board the Flagship barely a hundred yards away, with her sheets still hard in she sailed her lee coaming under and sank instantly. Her three occupants floated clear and were most fortunately rescued within a couple of minutes by a launch which was returning to harbour after having visited the Flagship. Next morning she was lifted just clear of the bottom and towed back, still submerged, into the harbour and later refloated. She thus has the unique distinction of being the only member of her class to have passed through the harbour mouth under water. She was thoroughly reconditioned by a new owner, D F Ryder, and, four years later, became a most successful competitor in Club races at Howth, still using the same mainsail which had driven her to the

bottom on that unhappy day.

In 1928 the H S C bought Anita from A McMullen and subjected her to the indignity of being raffled. The prize was won by J Stuttard, then Hon. Secretary of the Club, who did not want the boat and sold her to the Keatinge family for the price of his raffle ticket. At £1 that must have been one of the best ever bargains in yachts.

In the field of planned adventure there has already been mentioned the 110-mile maiden voyages of the first five yachts which took the water in 1898. Within the past few years Rita, Pauline and Elf have made the double journey between Howth and the Isle of Man, about 80 miles each way. Such voyages demand "rough living". At the time of their design it was said of the boats that they would be "comfortable cruisers". That must have been meant to refer to day cruising for they were designed solely for inshore racing and have absolutely no residential amenities. The space below decks is just a space, much of which is necessarily filled by the topsail on its yards, the spinnaker on its boom and spare jibs. Headroom is barely sufficient for sitting, let alone standing, upright. In such conditions long cruises in those boats have been rare events.

The longest alleged voyage appears to belong to the Legends of the Mythologists. There is a tale that, in the first year or so of the century, Anita circumnavigated Ireland. It has been impossible to substantiate that story. It was reported to have been done by A H Porter, whose name appears in one of the H S C programmes as the then owner of Anita. Now J F Hudson is given as the original owner of the yacht and she was jointly owned by him and A Bradley in 1903, that was in her fourth season. Questioning the latter about that story in 1949, he stoutly denied that Porter had ever done any such thing or even that he had owned the boat at all. He stated quite categorically that the boat had been owned by himself and Hudson until sold to McMullen in 1906. So the mystery of the longest cruise of a 17-Footer must presumably remain unsolved.

To date, the longest authenticated cruise of any yacht in the class was undertaken by Aura shortly after the war when she was then owned by Mrs J V P Cresswell. The writer was not given full details of the voyage, but was told that she sailed from Dublin to Crosshaven and then back to Dunmore East, a total distance of at least 240 miles. It was not possible to complete the round trip back to Dublin under sail so the mast was unstepped and Aura made the journey home via the Barrow Navigation and the Grand Canal.

CONCLUSION

This account is the first attempt at assembling as much as the writer has been able to discover about the history of the Howth 17-Footer One-design Class within one pair of covers. It has been compiled as the date approaches on which the five original members of that class hope to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of their maiden race. It is hoped that the story will be of interest not only to past and present owners of those remarkable yachts but also to others who derive pleasure from studying yachting history and who may perhaps be surprised to learn that, with the exception of the one irreparably wrecked, the entire class, built to the design of an amateur yachtsman whose profession was the law and ranging in age from 74 down to no further than 58, still takes the water annually and races twice a week throughout the summer, the boats still rigged as they were when the first five of them sailed away from Carrickfergus in 1898.

The information here presented has been gathered by the writer over many years and it is impossible to acknowledge all the sources. Old programmes of the Howth and Dublin Bay Sailing Clubs, contemporary newspaper reports of Club racing, miscellaneous letters in reply to specific enquiries and personal reminiscences account for most of it. As he has been a member of only the Howth S C, it is possible that references to personal affairs and racing

performance favour that Club unduly and for such almost inevitable partiality apology is offered. The writer is particularly grateful for permission to consult and quote from the minutes of the Dublin Bay S C which shed so much light on the origin of that mysterious creature mistakenly but always known in later years as a "Dublin Bay 17-Footer." It is fair also to admit that the trail which led to the opening of this historical enquiry was blazed not by a local owner but by R V MacDonald of Cowes who, as recorded earlier, wrote to ask for details of the origin and early life of Lustre, formerly Elf and now Gladys again, which he then owned. That prompted the late J A Magauran, for many years Hon. Secretary of the Dublin Bay S C, to delve into the history of the Dublin Bay section of the class and to place the results of his researches at the disposal of the present writer. So MacDonald's was the vital spark which has illuminated this seventy-fifth anniversary tribute to the world's oldest surviving one-design class of deep keeled and still actively racing yachts. Whether or not the class is allowed also to be described as intact is of but minor moment.

Gerald FitzGibbon,
Howth Yacht Club,
April, 1972.