

A CENTURY UNDER SAIL

Launched in 1906, the 48ft yawl *Thalassa* is as old as *Yachting Monthly*. Kieran Flatt sets sail aboard a substantial chunk of yachting history



Skipper Richard Sewell: 'a man of great kindness and infinite patience'



How do you dress when you're invited aboard a piece of living history? We fretted over the lack of suitable outfits in our wardrobe. Where does one find proper old-style yachting flannels and reefer jackets at short notice? My fiancée Rachel and I had been invited aboard a yacht so special that it seemed sacrilege to turn up in our

usual oil-and-salt-stained plastic oilskins.

Thalassa is a 14.6m (48ft) yawl, designed by Charles Sibbick and built by Fays of Southampton (which subsequently became Camper & Nicholson) in 1906. She has carried many luminaries in her cockpit, not least yacht designer John Illingworth and author Ralph Hammond Innes. She's a familiar sight to all who sail in the Solent.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

We eventually decided to go casual – but we shouldn't have worried. When we boarded *Thalassa* on her mooring in Portsmouth Harbour her owner, Richard Sewell (73), was wearing a thoroughly practical, no-nonsense sweatshirt and pink canvas trousers of antediluvian vintage, topped off with a baseball cap bearing the legend 'Ancient

Mariner'. Also on board were David Waddell (62), a long-serving crewmember and Bobby Teague (60), Richard's sister-in-law, who has sailed aboard *Thalassa* for as long as she can remember.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Thalassa has been owned by the same family for 70 years. Bobby's father, Alan Baker, bought her in 1936 and established what Richard describes as 'the *Thalassa* tradition of outwardly mutinous crews being tolerated with good humour'. She was raced hard until the end of the 1950s and has cruised the Channel, Irish Sea and Biscay ever since. When Alan hung up his sea-boots in 1966, ownership of *Thalassa* passed to the third of his five daughters, Vivian, and her husband Richard, who took on Alan's mantle as skipper and custodian.

Bobby and her sisters were regular passengers on *Thalassa* for years before they actually learned to sail. 'My father was a wonderful man but he was not a good teacher,' she recalls. 'We were allowed to steer, but we were never encouraged to pull any ropes. There were always six men on board and he didn't let us girls get too involved with handling the boat. What I did learn about sailing, I learned from his crew. As a matter of fact, we all married the crew. There's a grain of truth in the old myth that he wouldn't let them marry us until they had completed an ocean race with him, to prove their worth.'

Richard made his offshore debut in the 1956 Hook Race, under the quizzical eye of his future father-in-law. Prior to this, the

sum total of his sailing experience was in a 14ft dinghy.

'CREW'S UNION'

Most yachts are sailed by a small nucleus of regular crew, but *Thalassa* has a crew list of about 100. Richard has a mission to share the privilege of sailing her with as many people as possible. Some crew are drawn from his local church, some come from disadvantaged backgrounds and many would never have experienced sailing at all were it not for this most generous skipper.

It was the crew that organised *Thalassa*'s centenary celebrations in 2006: lunch for 156 people, all of whom had sailed *Thalassa* at some stage, at the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club in Cowes.

ON DECK

Glimpsed from afar, *Thalassa*'s fine lines and low freeboard make her look delicate and fragile. Close-up, however, she has an aura of immense strength. Her topsides are the tip of the proverbial iceberg - the long keel draws 2.2m (7ft 3in) and she tips the scales at just under 20 tonnes. By all accounts, she's as tough as old boots.

How has she lasted so well? Diligent maintenance and glassfibre sheathing have a lot to do with it, but virtually all her timber is original - no mean feat after more than a century on the water. The secret of her longevity is her construction: she has oak frames, but is otherwise built entirely out of pitch pine, whose high resin content makes it almost impervious to rot. It is often said that the older pitch pine gets, the stronger it becomes.



Thalassa in full racing fettle, 1923



Thalassa loves strong winds. Here, she surges out of the Beaulieu River at 6.5 knots under No2 jib alone



Plenty of water comes aboard in a seaway



A beautiful sheerline



Water tanks are topped up with this rustic funnel



Gas locker between dorade vents on the forepeak

ONE MAN AND HIS BOAT

RICHARD SEWELL AND *THALASSA*

There is little in the way of delicate brightwork and no exposed planking on deck – she had plenty of that back in her racing days, but she leaked like a sieve. Now her deck is sheathed in glassfibre, topped with a tough skin of no-nonsense deck paint, and she's as dry as a bone down below. The hull is painted annually by professionals, but all other maintenance is done by Richard and his 'Crew's Union': a week's hard labour in the spring, fitting her out and touching her up, and another week of ministrations at the onset of winter.

The cockpit is a sensible size – deep enough to feel secure and long enough to seat six at a squeeze, but narrow enough to brace yourself comfortably in a seaway.

Thalassa's yawl rig is bulletproof. Her 19m (63ft) wooden mainmast is thicker than a telegraph pole at the base, and held in place by an impressive array of steel stays, shrouds and runners that look as if they could hold up a fair-sized suspension bridge. The deck hardware is old, but surprisingly easy to use. Her blocks and 30-year-old winches run smoothly and running rigging is cleated rather than belayed and the deck layout cannot be faulted.

UNDER SAIL

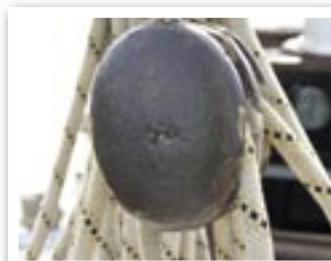
Aboard *Thalassa* you feel involved, an active participant rather than a passive observer. You sail on her, not in her, and the water foams past the cockpit just a couple of feet away. When you walk forward to raise or shorten sail, you can stride confidently along her broad expanse of flat deck, rather than tottering precariously from hand-hold to hand-hold over an exposed, slippery expanse of plastic coachroof. Sailing her is more of a sport than a pastime - she doesn't sail herself; she is sailed by her crew. Whether you are



Traditional deck lights



All sail controls at the mast



Ancient mainsheet blocks



Bobby Teague in *Thalassa's* unusual forepeak galley



Richard is no Luddite: he uses a PC chartplotter and radar

hauling halyards, trimming sheets or tending to the tiller, this yacht demands and rewards your attention.

'I much prefer a tiller to a wheel,' says Richard, guiding *Thalassa* through the narrows at the mouth of Portsmouth Harbour. 'I chartered the J-Class *Velsheda* several times when she was based in the Solent and in one sense I was a bit disappointed. She could easily make 15 knots,

but the wheel felt absolutely dead.'

'Feel' on the helm is all very well but under full canvas, *Thalassa* delivers a bit too much of a good thing. Her tiller is a long and impressively solid lump of ironwork - it has to be. Fully powered up with a decent breeze, she develops a lot of weather helm. She has been known to require two strong men at the helm to keep her on course. Even in a Force 2, you can feel a healthy pull when she heels to a gust. With one reef in the mainsail, the weather helm disappears. In terms of manoeuvrability, she's somewhere around the halfway mark between a Laser dinghy and an oil tanker. It does take a while for her to respond but she does so positively and predictably. She carries her way a lot further than a modern boat, which is an asset in all manoeuvres except an emergency stop!

Three people is pretty much the bare minimum to sail *Thalassa* – one on the helm, one on the sheets and one on runners, halyards and everything else – but six is ideal and certainly more relaxing.

Despite her considerable weight, *Thalassa* is fast and powerful. The Solent could only muster a weak Force 1-2 when I was aboard, but she still made more than 5 knots to windward under full sail. Cracking off onto a beam reach, her optimum point of sail, we got close to 8 knots in a rare puff of wind with the mizzen staysail giving an extra boost. When it does blow up, she ploughs

REEFING, *THALASSA* STYLE



It takes several crew to reef *Thalassa's* huge mainsail - simple enough on a pontoon, but not the easiest undertaking in a seaway





Edwardian yachtsmen dined in style in this saloon - and Richard's crew still enjoy sumptuous feasts here!

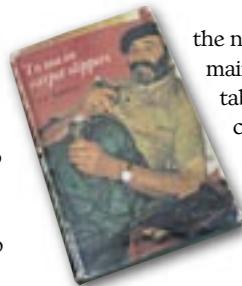
straight through the waves, rather than riding over them. There is a lot of water on deck in rough conditions, but Richard says surprisingly little of it ends up in the cockpit. In gale-force winds she is in her element and remains perfectly balanced under storm jib and reefed mizzen.

UNDER POWER

Thalassa's 52hp Perkins diesel engine delivers plenty of grunt, but she wears her propeller shaft on the quarter, not in the middle of her stern sections. Richard says this arrangement isn't ideal, because the propeller isn't deep enough, but to re-position the shaft would be prohibitively expensive. She makes about 5 knots in a flat calm and maybe just 1 knot against a head sea. There is no prop-wash over the rudder, nor any prop-walk when going astern, so she cannot be steered in reverse. Unsurprisingly, Richard favours anchoring and swinging moorings over marinas. When she does go alongside in a tight space, the crew often warp her in.

DOWN BELOW

Richard has kept the original layout, which owes much to the philosophy of the Victorian era. *Thalassa's* deep, narrow hull shape affords plenty of headroom without



Sandy Sandison's eminently readable book, *To Sea in Carpet Slippers*

the need for a raised coachroof. The main seating area, around a gimballed table, is at the bottom of the companionway, offset slightly to port. Also to port is a generously proportioned chart table. There are secure, traditional fixed berths lining each gunwale, with more bunks further forward. The heads, to starboard, used to house the hanging locker. I was rather fearful of this, having read John Illingworth's autobiography, *Offshore*, in which the great man waxes lyrical about the powerful, seasickness-inducing stench of *Thalassa's* oilskin locker. Fortunately, Richard is no slave to authenticity and the traditional canvas smocks, smeared with rancid whale fat, have long since been replaced with odourless, synthetic foulies.

The most striking feature of *Thalassa's* layout is the galley. Crammed into the forepeak with a narrow pipecot and barely sitting headroom, this was originally the crew quarters, home to two permanent deckhands who gained access to their quarters via the foredeck hatch. Meals were prepared on the cast-iron stove in the forepeak, then taken out of the forehatch and back along the deck, down the main companionway hatch and formally served to the gentlemen ranged around the gimballed table. Under Alan's



ABOVE: Control panel for the trusty Perkins engine, abaft the companionway
RIGHT: Richard takes his refreshment seriously, as this bulkhead-mounted soda stream bears witness!



This clock is as old as the yacht

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Launched: 1906
LOA: 14.6m (48ft)
LWL: 10.7m (35ft)
Beam: 3.1m (10ft 2in)
Draught: 2.2m (7ft 3in)
Sail area: 97m² (1,044sq ft)
Ballast: 6,802kg (14,966lb)
Displacement: 20 tonnes (43,899lb)

ownership, the class divide was breached and the forepeak galley became the lair of Sandy Sandison – a director of the Bank of England, but better known on the ocean racing circuit as a gin-swigging ship's cook and author of one of the funniest sailing books ever published, *To Sea in Carpet Slippers*. On *Thalassa*, he writes: 'as if by adoption, one was admitted into the intimacy of a seafaring family'. Some 70 years on, as we said grace before tucking into a fine lunch (prepared by Bobby in the forepeak but not taken for a walk along the deck), it struck me that Sandison's sentiment encapsulates Richard's philosophy as a skipper. His 'outwardly mutinous', 100-strong crew is an extended family, bound together by one very special old yacht. ▲

For more information on *Thalassa* and a wealth of anecdotes from the Crew's Union, see her website: www.thalassa06.co.uk