

Minima Yacht Club in the 50s and 60s – Happy Days

Robert Harris looks back on the heydays of Minima

John and I had sailed on the Norfolk Broads with our Dad and Grandad since 1946 and we knew about Cadets because we hired them for 2/6 an hour on a park lake in Barking. In June 1951 I wrote to Yachting World to ask if they knew of any helmsman who needed a crew for the second Yachting World Cadet Week at Burnham on Crouch that August. The magazine teamed me with John Hole from Bristol. We finished well down the list at Cadet Week but it was a very exciting experience for me. The week was won by Ralph Ellis from Broxbourne S. C. crewed by his brother Brian, who later won two Merlin Rocket Championships before emigrating to New South Wales with his family.



The Cadets from Minima yacht Club also had some good results. They all slept in the old lifeboat house at the back of the main Royal Corinthian Y.C. clubhouse and water fights between them and rest of us were nightly events. I vividly remember one evening when Tim Eiloart's crew David Cammell stuck his arm out through the boathouse letterbox and sprayed a bottle of water around, someone grabbed his arm and we spent the next few minutes pouring water down the sleeve of his jacket. In those days even we kids wore jackets and ties in the evenings.

After sailing against eighty other children at Burnham I was hooked on dinghy racing and so were John and Dad who were also there. We lived in Essex, Broxbourne Sailing Club was also in Essex, but the lively Minima crowd I met at Burnham were infectious and soon after that Cadet Week we joined them at Kingston upon Thames. We had strong family connections with the Thames, as both my grandfather and my uncle Bob were tug skippers on the tidal river. Also our Dad drove thirty miles to work every day from Ilford to West Molesey, so John and I had lifts to Kingston during school holidays.

Our perception of what a Yacht Club should be like was based on the multi-story block of the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club at Burnham-on-Crouch, so the instruction to reach Minima Yacht Club by going down the alleyway between British Home Stores and W.H. Smiths was disconcerting. In an earlier age the site was Nuttall's Tea Garden, many of whose customers arrived by boat and climbed a flight of stone steps to reach the tea tables. Another novel feature was wooden gazebos on each side of the steps; the upstream one contained the ladies' changing room below the starting box; the men were in the downstream one. Between each of the gazebos and the steps were elegant stone balustrades overlooking the river, ideal spots for drinks and a chat after the day's sailing, plus a couple of parked dinghies.

Minima's clubhouse, a simple green painted corrugated iron shed, was also markedly different from the Royal Corinthian's palatial Burnham clubhouse. We had no security of tenure, as our landlord British Home Stores only had to give us three months notice, page 30

so maintenance work was kept to a minimum and the clubhouse had a distinctly shabby look. There was a minute kitchen at the river end, a small clubroom in the middle and a cosy bar (i.e. tiny) with bench seats at the other end. I believe the ladies had an Elsan in their changing room but there was no men's toilet. The club was next to the Kingston tannery so we used the

tannery wall, the foul stink of the tannery overwhelming any other odours!

Minima Y. C. was one of the earliest clubs to adopt the Merlin class and there were several early Jack Holt designed Merlins sailing there when we joined. The original deck stepped 25 foot wooden masts had been cut down to the new maximum height of 22ft. 6 ins. but they were still very heavy. The most famous of these old boats was 'Clare', no. 3. which Jimmy Ledwith sailed to a championship win in 1948. Other Merlins built by Jack Holt in 1946 and still sailing at Minima in 1952 were 'Ballerina', no. 5, sailed by Tony Coppin, no. 21 owned by Bob Maynard, 'Spray', no. 22, Graham Farrington, and 'Gail', no. 28, sailed by Brian Appleton who subsequently bought the famous 'banana boat' 'Lucky', no. 177. There was also no.55, sailed by Peter and Thelma Hall, and 'Fay', no. 33, built in 1946 by Woottens at Cookham and sailed by Alan Philips.

Racing dinghies were narrower then, so forty odd Merlins, National Twelves, Solos and Y. W. Cadets were crammed into the small gravelled area behind the Kingston British Home Stores. The humble boat trolley hadn't been invented, so boats were parked with their bows on whatever was handy and held steady with wooden chocks. To reach the water we had to carry

our boats down the steps to the wooden landing stage. Fortunately Jack Holt must have had Minima in mind when he designed Merlins and Cadets with lifting handles.

Minima's sailing water was far from ideal with buildings all along the Surrey shore and mature Home Park trees lining the Middlesex bank except for a three hundred yard gap upriver of the club. The good thing about the Minima reach was that it was straight for nearly a mile. If the wind was north or south the sailing was excellent with predictable windshifts bouncing off the buildings. If it was from any other direction it could be frustrating but there were some 'tricks of the trade' used by the experts. For example in a westerly it was essential after the usual upriver start to sail as close as possible to the Middlesex bank to take advantage of what we

called 'the bank crawl' using the part of the breeze that came under the trees. To reach the right spot as soon as possible a good start was essential; perhaps that's how my brother John perfected his starting technique because in those conditions he often came out best

Another Minima trick in very light breezes was to tack a Merlin or a Twelve up the narrow channel between a trot of moored boats and the Surrey shore just upstream of the starting line. An expert helmsman like Brian Appleton with a well practised crew could roll tack his 'banana boat' 'Lucky' up that two hundred yard channel in a couple of minutes even in a flat calm. There was occasional talk about protesting Brian but nothing ever came of it and we always claimed we invented roll tacking. There were rarely planing conditions at Minima but in a strong northerly or southerly we would spurt back and forth across the river; it was only seventy yards wide so it wasn't like Bristol Corinthian or Hamble. In strong westerlies we could plane for a couple of hundred yards or more in 'The Gap'. That was more like it!

Minima was the first club to adopt the Yachting World Cadet and by the middle and late fifties many Cadets and ex-Cadets were making their mark. Prominent amongst them in National Twelves was future Burton



Members of Minima Y C at Tamesis Easter Regatta 1954 including Robert Harris, Robin Fowler, Brian Appleton, John Nichols, Diala Mayne, John Armstrong, Tony Cooper, Thelma Hall and Peter Halls

Trophy winner Barry Perry. David Thorpe was winner of the first Y W Cadet Week, winning lots of races in his beautiful Holt boat 'Wraith', no 925. David Mayne was another big winner in another Holt boat. Robin Fowler came 3rd in the 1951 Cadet Week in his homebuilt Cadet 'Flounce', no. 841, before becoming a frequent winner on the river in his Merlin 'Wogs', no. 206. Brian Appleton won Cadet Week in 1952 in a borrowed boat, by which time he owned Merlin 'Gail'. And my brother was still sailing our Cadet 'Punch', no. 1047, when he began surprising the establishment by helming Dad's Merlin Rocket 'Dizzy', no. 490, at neighbouring clubs.

Minima's Commodore for many years was a smooth, urbane and thoroughly nice vet called Clive Holliday-Pott. I remember asking him once if he had ever sailed on the River Lee at Broxbourne. He thought for a moment and replied, "No but I've jumped across a couple of times". Other

senior members were David Mayne's father Guy, Joe Askew, Don Warner and Don Porter. Later our Dad became treasurer. They all sailed regularly and were the core of the committee for many years. I was one of the younger members elected onto the committee and Mum soon joined the ladies making the Sunday teas. Committee meetings tended to meander on well into the night with the bar remaining open and serving drinks throughout. On one such occasion the door opened without warning to reveal two police constables. Fortunately Clive was a prominent local JP, so one of the constables muttered an apologetic, "Sorry sir didn't know you were here", and they departed rapidly.

The eccentricity of the place, the after hours drinking, and maybe the attractive girls sailing there attracted young sailors to Minima from other local sailing clubs. This was fortunate for John and me as Clive Curtis from Ranelagh had a van, and he and his old school friend Colin Stokes lived in Ilford near us. John Stokes and Peter Clayton from Ranelagh also lived fairly close, so late night journeys home were assured. Tucked discreetly out of sight, Minima became a major part of many people's social lives on Wednesday evenings and at weekends. Many of us were getting married in the late fifties and early sixties and Minima became THE place for riotous bachelor parties; no Prague or Budapest trips in those days. The club's casual attitude to the drinking laws caused some problems for the committee when a policeman wanted to join, but he always left before the end of the legal drinking hours. Then there was Robert the vicar who sailed Merlin Rocket no. 1290 who might have raised moral questions about young people and illegal drinking. But all he seemed interested in was persuading the Merlin Rocket Association to hold Silver Tiller meetings on Saturdays!

From the early days many of us sailed in open meetings at the nearby river clubs. To get to Tamesis downriver of Minima you could half capsize a rolled deck Merlin to get under Kingston's road and railway bridges, while Cadet masts were short enough to sail

through unhindered. Thames SC was only a fifteen to twenty minute sail upriver from Minima. The biggest event in Minima's season was the End of Season Regatta when the magnificent Thames 'A' Raters came down from Thames S.C. to race.

As our racing performances improved and we or our crews obtained cars, we started venturing further afield to Cookham and Upper Thames and then to Aldenham, Bristol Corinthian, Banbury and Hamble. The competition was tougher but the biggest test was



Some of Minima's attractive girls plus a teenage John Harris relaxing by the balustrade

racing on the open sea. Brian Appleton was fifth in 'Lucky' with crew Joe Niven at the fluky 1955 Championships, but it wasn't until the 1960s that Minima's young Merlin Rocket sailors consistently succeeded in major events. David Child finished in the first six in several Merlin Rocket Championships between 1964 and 1970 and was Minima's most successful Championship sailor, as well as winning the Silver Tiller four times in succession during that period. My brother John won the Silver Tiller once, Salcombe Week six times and came the closest of all of us to winning a Championship at Weymouth in 1975, only falling at the last hurdle when he was judged over the line in the final race.

In the mid fifties Minima's keenest National Twelve and Merlin Rocket sailors migrated to Ranelagh S. C.

on the tidal Thames at Putney for that club's very competitive winter series. I crewed for David Mayne in his Twelve for a winter season and then for Barry Perry, also in a Twelve. There were no wetsuits or dry suits then, just layers of sweaters, shorts over trousers and a simple waterproof top. On the

coldest days slushy ice covered the floorboards and frozen foresail sheets were a problem in gusty winter breezes. I don't recall ever wearing a lifejacket. With few mature trees on the Surrey bank in those days we had our first experiences of flat out planing in winter westerlies. In 1957 I joined the Ranelagh Merlin Rocket winter fleet with my first boat 'Genevieve' no. 838. By the early 1960s forty or more Merlin Rockets were starting in Ranelagh winter club races and over ninety boats in open meetings - see Ranelagh's 1960s photos on the website. After the Ranelagh racing many of us would return to Minima by car or 65 bus for parties and evening sessions in the bar.

Minima had a strong club spirit and we became good at team racing. In 1958 a Minima team comprising Barry Perry, David Mayne, John and Jeremy Vines, John Nichols and I won the prestigious Wilson Trophy team racing event in Fireflies at West Kirby beating the host club in the final. Robin, John and I won the inaugural Merlin Rocket Topmast event in 1964 and the first

London Pirates Team Trophy at about the same time. These events were all three boat team match events. We also won several of the mass start team race at Ranelagh, Aldenham and other clubs. David Child was undoubtedly one of Minima's best helmsman and he became increasingly disgruntled because we had a settled Merlin Rocket team and he was rarely chosen. Understandably David subsequently sailed in the Tamesis Club team and the record shows that Tamesis won the Topmast Trophy for the next two years!

Until the end of the 50s the majority of Merlin Rockets and 12s sailed at Minima were designed by Jack Holt. Ian Proctor had easily won the 1952 Championship at Poole in 'Cirrus', no. 290, which he designed. Later that season Jimmy Ledwith brought her to Minima for a weekend's racing. With her low rig and larger wetted area she performed poorly on the river which probably influenced me and others against Ian's designs despite having seen her superb performance in the Championships. Perhaps we should have moved on to a wider range of boats earlier than we did. Eventually Robin Fowler built himself a Mike Jackson 'Satisfaction' and when she was destroyed in a road accident he bought a Bob Hoare Mk IX. In 1961 he rose from his sickbed to win a championship race at Gorleston. In the early 60s, after sailing Proctor boats for a while, David Child and John bought Nick Truman boats and I bought the first Adur MK 7. We all proved it was not essential to sail a Proctor boat to enjoy success.

Each of the three sailing clubs on the Thames between Teddington Lock and Surbiton had their own very distinct characters. Tamesis Club had two acres of land with lawns for dinghy parking, a smart clubhouse



Lining up to start -615 'Tonge' John Vickery - 490 'Dizzy' Robert Harris - 97 'Buccaneer' Brian Saffery-Cooper - 206 'Wogs' Robin Fowler

and Brian Southcott, perhaps the best dinghy sailor of the 50s and 60s. At Thames Sailing Club the boats were parked right beside the river not so much for the convenience of the owners but because the club is on a narrow piece of land squeezed between the river and the Portsmouth Road. They had and still have the fabulous Thames 'A' Raters; sail one if you have a chance,

they are a delight. All Minima had was the undeserved appellation of 'Yacht Club', the steps and a shack. Nevertheless during the 50s and early 60s there was something special about Minima Y. C. that appealed to young dinghy sailors who congregated there to sail and enjoy the social life that odd little club on a tiny patch of wasteland provided. Friendships made during those happy years half a century ago continue today.



Brian Appleton in 'Lucky' 177 the first 'Banana Boat' during the End of Season Regatta 1955/56