Merlin Rocket History The First Six Years **From Merlin to Merlin Rocket** By Robert Harris

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This lovely shot by legendary photographer Eileen Ramsey of winter sailing at Ranelagh captures those days perfectly

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Merlin Rocket History **The First Six Years.** By Robert Harris

As a nine year old in early 1946 I had been fascinated by the plans and photographs of 'The Yachting World 14ft Restricted Class' published in the January 1946 edition of Yachting World. Four feet six inches wide and a towering 25ft mast.Wow! We saw and sailed in 'real' Merlins when Dad, Mum, John and I joined Minima Y.C. at Kingston-upon-Thames in the spring of 1952. Then at least six or seven of the Minima boats were early original Merlins from 1946/7.

The founding Syndicate of eight dinghy sailors with a good deal of experience in 14ft Internationals and 12ft Nationals first met some three years earlier during World War II. They were E. Wagner, Capt. Richmond Stopford, Bill Lawrence. Jack Holt, Beecher Moore, Charles Leafe, Bernard Leigh and Noel Jordan, From January 1946 they called themselves the Caretaker Committee and

the editor of Yachting World, Group Capt. E.F. Haylock, was invited to become permanent Chairman. They were mostly but not all from Ranelagh S.C. By March of 1946 Ranelagh 12 ft National helmsman Tony Howard had also joined the Committee.

Mention should be made of the vital part the Yachting World played in the birth and development of the class during it's early years. In 1947 it did the same for the YW Cadet which introduced John and me and countless other youngsters to dinghy racing

> The Syndicate wanted a lighter stiffer boat that would cost less than the current 14ft Internationals which weighed up to 340 lbs with their heavy metal centreplates. Also the 14s were completely open without decking so they flexed and tended to leak. Jack Holt said he could build a fully decked boat 14ft boat of an advanced design weighing 180lbs and costing little more than a 12ft National. The length of 14ft was chosen as being the smallest hull which could be designed for the required displacement of 600 pounds including the crew. They suggested that anything larger could not be handled conveniently out of the water or towed behind a private car, this was felt important because the ability to convey Merlins easily to any part of the country would open up great possibilities for the keen dinghy helmsman. With everyone suffering postwar hardships including petrol rationing which continued until 1953 this was a far sighted policy.



The prototype 'Kate' and 'Merlin' must have been built during 1945 because the photographs of 'Merlin' no.2 sailing in the Solent, Portsmouth Harbour and on the Thames were published in January 1946 (see the Yachting World photos in the vintage photo section). The following statement in the same edition of Yachting World suggests that the first boat or boats might even have been built before the end of World War II.

"Mr. Jack Holt was commissioned to design and build an experimental boat. After tests lasting for many months, a second boat, also designed by Mr. Holt, was built etc."

Could they have been built during the wartime government's strict control of timber usage? It was no coincidence perhaps that one of the syndicate members was a timber merchant. Some early Merlins (e.g. 'Ballerina' no 5 at Minima) had odd looking striped plywood decks which was reputed to have been intended for De Havilland Mosquito fighter bombers.

As early as March 1946 the Caretaker Committee discussed the possibility of becoming a National Class and the following policy was decided upon. "In the event of any offer being received to adopt the class as a National or International class, the Committee would look with favour on such an offer provided no alteration in the rules or management of the class was involved". Approximately 144 Merlins were built during 1946 and 1947 and continued at that sort of rate despite the Attlee years of austerity, postwar rationing and shortages of just about everything. That

Caretaker Committee meetings up to the end of June 1946 but after looking at a number of unsatisfactory suppliers the Committee clearly became frustrated. As early as January 1946 they had agreed "to discourage potential owners from waiting for the moulded hull and that individual

the energy and foresight of Caretaker Committee member Beecher Moore who was a large and ebullient Canadian lawyer and businessman and also a partner in Jack Holt's Putney based boat building company. He was a top class crew and helmsman and in 1934 he was among the amateur crew that nearly snatched the America's Cup from the Americans in Tom Sopwith's 'Endeavour'. He owned 'Gently' no.16 with Jack Holt and helmed or crewed her to first place in four of the first five championships. Beecher took 'Gently' to sailing clubs all over the country and encouraged members to sail her against other

happened because of



boats on their waters. The performance and appearance of the sleek Merlin with her lofty sailplan must have been electrifying to sailors more used to heavy local one-designs.

Part of Beechers's plan was to have Merlins available for immediate sale. 'Kate' and 'Merlin' were both clinker built but the Committee had intended that future Merlin hulls would be moulded to facilitate speedy delivery. There is no indication from the Committee's minutes whether they expected owners or boat builders to complete the hulls. The Committee investigated the production of moulded plywood hulls and it is obvious from the minutes of their meetings that their main problem "was in finding an experienced manufacturer with sufficient enthusiasm". Moulded hulls were discussed at several members of the committee should encourage the clinker hull"

The problem of having boats available for immediate sale was apparently solved when on the 9th of May 1946 Mr. J White of J.P. White and Sons. Bedford told the Committee "that he was in position to supply 25 clench built boats for delivery in August". Mr.White's price without sails was £130. The syndicate agreed to go ahead but for some reason it did not happen in 1946 however he did build 24 Merlins in 1947. In the end Jack Holt built over half the 51 Merlins produced in 1946, most of the rest were built by Wootens of Cookham, with one in Ireland and a couple each by Anderson, Rigden and Perkins and Wyche and Coppock. Half a dozen boats built in the first four

'Gently' no.16 with Jack Holt and Beecher Moore, 3 times Champions stsrting in 1947. Beecher Moore and Ian Proctor won in her at Burnham in 1950. years are listed in the current Year Book as Owner Built. George O'Brien Kennedy of Christchurch S.C. built at least two ribless boats including 'Mercury' no. 75 in which he was 2nd in the 1947 Championship and 'Mercury' II no. 197. These were probably the first non-Jack Holt designed Merlins. One boat 'Hazard' no. 64 is listed in the 1947 Year Book as

was that those later plates had a slot at the front that went over the bolt and was held down by a radius wire making it easier to unship and ship.

Owner Built 'Experimental Plywood Boat', I have no other information about her

'Merlin's'

construction was conventional and similar to National 12s but with lighter scantlings because the extensive decking contributed a good deal to the boat's strength. Planks of mahogany or spruce were held together along their lands with copper rivets. The ash timbers or ribs were steam bent and riveted to the shell through the lands (see the photograph of 'Gannet's' interior in the vintage section of the Merlin Rocket website). Floorboards were added to spread the load in the cockpit area. 'Merlin's' unique curved side decks were supported by formers and stringers. An unusual feature was the centreboard case. The slot in the keel was two feet long and was sealed by two strips of rubber. The plate went up and down



on rollers. It was pulled down by grasping the protruding trailing edge and pushing it backwards and tilting it down. The ballasted plate then overbalanced and was lowered with a tackle. It was pulled up with the tackle, first it tilted forward and then slid forwards into the plate case which extended under the foredeck.

Photographs of 'Merlin' no.2 in the vintage section show that her plate case has been converted to a conventional one. Maybe the original plate sliding forward was not such a good idea and I would guess that by 1948 all boats were built with conventional plate cases. A slight difference from today



spreaders

were

usually

angled

struts to support the top of the mast. The mast could rotate on a ball fitting on the foot of the mast, many owners put a sixpence into the deck mounted cup to act as a bearing. These masts were incredibly heavy compared with today's carbon sticks. They tended to rotate the wrong way so some owners used fixed goosenecks. Eventually most owners pinned them in the middle and quite soon new boats had fixed mast steps like the 12ft Nationals. I am aware of only one boat, 'Excusez Moi' No. 195, on which the rotating mast was effective, she had a clever device that allowed the mast to always rotate the right way and slightly more than the boom supposedly to create an aerofoil effect.

One of Minima's top sailors was my Kingston dentist Mike Goffe

who won the National 12's Burton Trophy in 1947. We met by chance a couple of years ago at some history classes and I discovered that he had crewed for another Minima sailor Jimmy Ledwith in the very first Championship at Hayling Island in September 1946. I asked Mike what it was like sailing an original Merlin with the 25ft mast. He said that the mast rising to 25ft above the gunwhale was so heavy that once a boat heeled to about 45degrees a capsize was almost inevitable. The wide decks prevented boats from filling during a capsize on smooth water but they sometimes filled when they capsized in rough water, it was difficult to bail them out because of the narrow cockpit. Mike told me that in the early days Merlins often reefed in

Jimmy Ledwith crewed by T Wood-Robinson, sailing 'Clare' no. 3. They won the 1948 Champs at Poole



in the year. In July they agreed the details of the event. The Beecher Cup, Founders Cup and Hayling Island S.C. Cup would be awarded to the winners of the three races with tankards to helms and crews. One unusual decision was that "in the event of a tie the result to be determined as a result of a race between the tieing boats of about 2 miles". The entry fee was to be £1 for all three races! Eventually the first Championship was held at Hayling Island S.C. in September 1946. Nobody is certain how many boats were entered, one website I read in my research suggests 40 but that number of boats were probably not even built by September. A photograph in the November 1946 Yachting World suggests it was around 13 - 15, (see Yachting World pages

strong winds by rolling the mainsail round the boom. The kicking strap was attatched to a clawring on the boom with a tube that engaged with a fitting on the mast to hold it in position on the boom. By 1949 it was obvious that the heavy 25ft masts caused capsizes and shorter masts were allowed with a small increase in sail area to compensate for the less efficient rig. Many owners cut the tops off their 25ft masts but as I know from sailing in 1952 with Brian Appleton in 'Gail' no. 28 the cut down masts were still heavy.

In March 1946 the Committee decided that an Annual Championships should be held over four days with one day held in reserve. Unlike the International 14s whose high spot of the season is the Prince of Wales Cup and similarly the National 12s with the Burton Trophy the Merlin Championship was to be decided over three races of equal importance with each boat's best two races to count. The Yachting World presented a Championship Cup as a perpetual trophy and the host club Hayling Island S.C. also offered a cup. In May the Committee decided that in view of the small number of boats completed the Championship should be held later John and Diana, Lord and Lady Avebury, sailing 'Dilly' No.175 to 2nd place at the 1948 Championship. It was eleven years before another lady crew finished in the first six.



This is the prototype Merlin 'Kate' sailing at Ranelagh in 2001 after having been found in a barn in Kent and lovingly restored by Mervyn Allen

Her 24ft 6in mast is the original and the cotton sails are probably the originals too.

She has no triangle symbol as the class wasn't named when she was built in 1945 and, strictly speaking, she doesn't measure as a Merlin as some small changes were made before the Caretaker Committee drew up the rules.

Mervyn has a replica rig for her and sails her regularly in the DeMay Trophy and other vintage events - she still goes fast.

Number 2 'Merlin' which is the first boat built to the rules is on display at the National Maritime Museum at Falmouth.



in vintage photos). Inevitably perhaps Jack and Beecher won in 'Gently'. Jimmy Ledwith and Mike Goffe were second in 'Clare'

no. 3 and lan Proctor and Geoff Budden were third in 'Terrapin' no. 36. Mike Goffe remembers Geoff Budden as a popular ex-Navy man who sadly died young.

Interestingly at an informal meeting held during the Championship Jimmy Ledwith suggested that the Merlin should have a bigger spinnaker and a shorter mast but any discussion of his suggestion was not minuted. At the same meeting Miss Joan Moody, who later



joined the Committee, suggested that 'Merlin' be incorporated in the name of the class e.g. 'Yachting World Merlin Class'. At a subsequent Committee meeting Miss Moody's proposal was carried unanimously.

Mike Goffe told me that because of petrol rationing several double trailers were constructed. Some were excellent, some just about useable, some were downright dangerous! The 50mm ball joint had not been invented in the 1940s, most people used a hefty bolt and nut to join trailer to car. The snag was that vibration caused by poorly maintained roads tended to undo nuts so that bolts jumped out if they were not split pinned. I remember in the 1950s Joe Niven telling us in the Minima bar how he watched Brian Appleton's boat and trailer overtake them on the way home from a Championship. Fortunately with little traffic on the roads they got away with it.



During a meeting on the 31st October 1946 the Committee decided to approach Brixham Y.C. about holding the 1947 Championship there. That did not happen and the Championship returned to Hayling Island S.C. in that September. A total of 42 boats sailed during the week although not all of them raced every day. Ian Proctor borrowed the prototype Y.W. Cadet and followed the racing by cutting off the corners. The wind strengthened during the week and by the time the race for the Beecher Moore Cup was sailed on the last day several boats reefed, indeed a photograph by Ian Proctor in an annual I borrowed from Mike Goffe shows that five out of the six Merlins in the picture were reefed in that race. Except in one important respect the 'old guard' of Jack Holt/Beecher More, Tony Howard, Jimmy Ledwith and Peter Cooke took the main prizes. The exception was George O'Brien Kennedy,

> as mentioned earlier he was 2nd overall in 'Mercury' no. 75 which he had designed and built himself. She won the Founder's Trophy and was second in the Hayling Island S.C. Trophy. Her lack of ribs seemed of doubtful benefit to lan Proctor because it did not appear difficult to build a clinker Merlin down to weight. She also had a flatter floor than the Jack Holt design and a bridge deck between the helm and crew. This was a feature that several Minima sailors added to their Merlins so they could fit a sideways mounted snubbing winch for the

foresail sheets in the days before cam cleats. O'Brien Kennedy designed the popular Yachting World Dayboat in 1949.

The 1948 Merlin Championship in early July attracted 32 entries, 10 fewer than the previous year. Maybe the Olympic yachting regatta in Torbay four weeks later was partly responsible for the lower number. Jack Holt qualified for the Olympic trials in single handed Fireflies but they were by won by National 12 helmsman Arthur MacDonald. Poole Harbour was the venue for the Championship and Parkstone Y.C. the host club. Class Chairman Jimmy Ledwith of Minima crewed by T. Wood-Robinson won the first two races in 'Clare' no. 3. Second overall were Lord and Lady Avebury, John and Diana in 'Dilly' no.175. Mike Goffe says "They were guite good sailors if their boat held together" 'Dilly' was a new more powerful Jack Holt design with a flatter floor, perhaps influenced by O'Brien's Kennedy's 'Mercury'. 'Dilly' won the last heavy weather race at Poole and was clearly more suitable for a lightweight crew than the original Merlin design. Third overall were the Jack Holt/Beecher Moore team.

Another new Jack Holt design in 1948 was 'Lucky' no. 177. 'Lucky' resulted from Tony Howard's suggestion to Jack Holt that National 12s tacked quicker than Merlins and were sometimes faster in light airs so perhaps Jack should build a Nat. 12 to Merlin rules with a Merlin rig. Jack built 'Lucky' instead. Although she was a one off a number of similar 'Banana Boats' were built during the following two years. Their heavily rockered hulls lifted their ends out of

the water and their rounded sections gave them a low wetted surface. They could spin rapidly from tack to tack and accelerated quicker than conventional boats. 'Lucky' came to fore in 1949 when she beat all the International 14s in the Henley Jubilee Bowl sailed by Tony Howard and Jack Holt. Some years later she did it again sailed by Brian Appleton. 'Lucky' was a river and inland boat and was never meant for Championship racing. Nevertheless Brian crewed by Joe Niven finished 5th in 'Lucky' at the 1955 Championship at Plymouth.

Jack Holt and Beecher Moore won the 1949 Championship at Cowes under the flag of the Royal Corinthian Y.C.

Merlin veteran Peter Cooke was second crewed by National 12 ace John Smith. There was a triple tie for third. 'Dilly' sailed by Ken Mollart and Tommy Nisbet., 'Excalibur' no. 182 sailed by Richard Collinson and 'Marionette' no. 170 sailed by Hal Rapp, the latter two both had female crews. O'Brien Kennedy sailed his new gluedup ribless boat 'Mercury II' which had a self draining cockpit. Another new design was John William's 'Gurgle' no. 165, she had a home built glued-up carvel hull which was still allowed by the construction rules but not for much longer.

The Championship at Burnham in 1950 was a pivotal one for the

class. In 1948/9 Wyche and Coppock designed and built a 14ft. boat with narrow side decks which was thought to be more suitable for open sea sailing than Merlins. In 1950 they built a Rocket complying with the Merlin rules and called her 'Rocketoo' no. 227, she was beamier and more stable than the Merlin design. Bruce Banks who won both the National 12's Burton Trophy and the International 14's Prince of Wales Cup that year came close to winning the Merlin Championship in 'Rocketoo'. He won the first Championship race. capsized whilst lying 3rd in the last race and eventually finished 6th overall.. Beecher Moore crewed by Ian Proctor won in 'Gently's' last Championship outing, Don Cook and A.F. Tunbridge were 2nd in 'banana boat' 'Tiptoes' no. 221. Jimmy Ledwith and John Smith were 3rd in Clare'. 4th were Ken Mollart and Tom Nisbet in a new Jack Holt boat 'Dally' no. 230. Jack Holt was 5th in 'banana boat' 'Charm' no. 201, he was crewed by John Westell who later designed the 5-0-5.



Merlins and Rockets were similar in size and 'Rocketoo's' performance in the Championship and the preceeding open meeting at Hayling Island demonstrated that their performance was similar. When the Merlin class approached the Yacht Racing Association (now the RYA) for national recognition the outcome was that the two classes were combined in the National Merlin/Rocket 14ft restricted Class. Jimmv Ledwith was the first Chairman of the combined class, he achieved his earlier desire for masts to be shortened. The maximum height became 22ft 6ins with the existing Merlin sliding scale to increase sail area slightly on shorter masts. Both the Merlin's rolled side decks and the Rocket's narrow decks were allowed.

With the existing Rockets joining the class, sail numbers increased by one hundred in 1951 so that year's Championship at Torquay promised to be the most interesting yet. In the event with 59 entries the results were evenly divided between the Rocket and Merlin types. The race for the Founder's cup started in 25-30 mph of wind and at times it gusted to 40 mph. There were many capsizes and broken masts, Ken Mollart and Tommy Nisbet from Minima won in a Holt Merlin 'Dally' no. 230. Bruce banks in 'Windflower' no. 268, a Rocket, finished third after two capsizes. The race for the Beecher Cup was a fiasco with incorrectly signalled rounding marks. Jack Holt who broke his mast on the

first day won the Torquay Corinthian Y.C. Trophy in 'Riant' no.247, Bruce Banks posted another good result with a 2nd in 'Windflower'. Sadly for him the resailed race for the Beecher Cup was abandoned because of lack of wind. 'Dally' won overall, 'Windflower', was second, Howard Williams and Patrick Kelly were 3rd in 'Rocketoo', Merlins nos. 180 Jimmy Gardner and 292 Robin Judah were 4th and 5th. Sixth was 'Mayfly' no.322 designed and sailed by J.V.Kelly of Exmouth, she was probably a Rocket type.

I am indebted to Michael Goffe and Mervyn Allen for their assistance. I had access to minutes of the 1946 Caretaker Committee and the 1947 Year Book. I obtained details of early Championships from reports by Ian Proctor in several editions of the Yachtsman's and Yachting World Annuals. Some details of the early days come from an Ian Proctor article in the Yachting World Annual I believe of 1959.

Robert Harris

