

AMERICA'S CUP 1958 CHALLENGER

# Sceptre's second syndicate

Britain's 1958 America's Cup challenger enjoys an active second life cruising with her preservation society owners, and offering some charter dates as well. *Nigel Sharp* took a sail







BEKEN OF COWES

**F**ifty-three years to the day after she sailed out of Dun Laoghaire harbour during her maiden voyage from the Clyde to the Solent, *Sceptre* left Fleetwood Marina just before the evening high water. I was one of four guests aboard, along with seven members of the Sceptre Preservation Society, the syndicate which has owned the 1958 America's Cup 12-Metre challenger for the last 25 years.

Her winter refit was complete – including the fitting of some new fairleads that very afternoon to reduce the likelihood of riding turns on the original winch drums – and we were bound for Oban, from where she would start her summer cruising and racing programme.

Our skipper for this voyage was Chris Ball, who is also secretary of the syndicate. He first sailed on *Sceptre* (having never sailed on anything else) on a corporate charter in 2005. At that time, Chris's main interest was motor sport, but he and his wife Jenny decided that *Sceptre* would provide better family opportunities, and so they both joined the syndicate. Chris thinks that Jenny, whom he describes as "the secretary's secretary", possibly gets even more out of it than he does.

OPENING SPREAD PETER MUMSFORD BEKEN OF COWES

After we went through Fleetwood Marina's lock gates we received some welcome advice over the VHF radio from the marina manager regarding the deepest route out to the main channel. We were pleased to find there was a better breeze than forecast and so we hoisted the sails as we got clear of Fleetwood. There then followed a delightful sail to Bangor through a cloudless night as our slightly meandering course around the wind farms off Barrow-in-Furness, and then past the Isle of Man, gave us a variety of easy reaching angles.

#### ROYAL CONNECTION

As various members of the crew surfaced the following morning, a few passing comments were made about the Royal wedding which would take that place that day. We were too absorbed in our own sailing to pay it too much attention but a reference was made to *Sceptre's* tenuous Royal wedding connection – the boat in which Graham Mann, her 1958 America's Cup helmsman, had previously won a bronze medal at the Melbourne Olympic Games was the Dragon *Bluebottle*, a wedding present for Prince Philip and Princess Elizabeth in 1947!



Left: *Sceptre* off Cowes. Below: In trials with *Evaine* off Cowes, 1958



BEKEN OF COWES

## The 1958 America's Cup: Columbia v Sceptre (3-1)

After the Second World War, it was clear that the economic climate would not allow boats as large as the J Class of the 1930s to be used again for the America's Cup. Discussions began between the British and Americans as early as 1946 with a view to a future Cup in smaller boats and, in 1956, the Deed of Gift was modified. This allowed a Royal Yacht Squadron syndicate to make an official challenge in a 12-Metre and, as considerably more Twelves had been built in Britain than America at that time, it was hoped that this might give the challenger an advantage.

It would seem that the Squadron syndicate took heed of Charles E Nicholson who had said, after his *Endeavour II* was defeated in the 1937 Cup, that it would be a waste of time challenging again without tank testing. They asked four leading designers of the time - Nicholson's nephew 'Young' Charlie, Arthur Robb, David Boyd and George McGruer - to produce two designs each, one conventional and one innovative. Souters built 1:12 scale models of these - as well as one of *Flica II*, which was considered to be the fastest pre-war Twelve - and the tank testing was then carried out in Cowes. As a result of this, the design selected was the

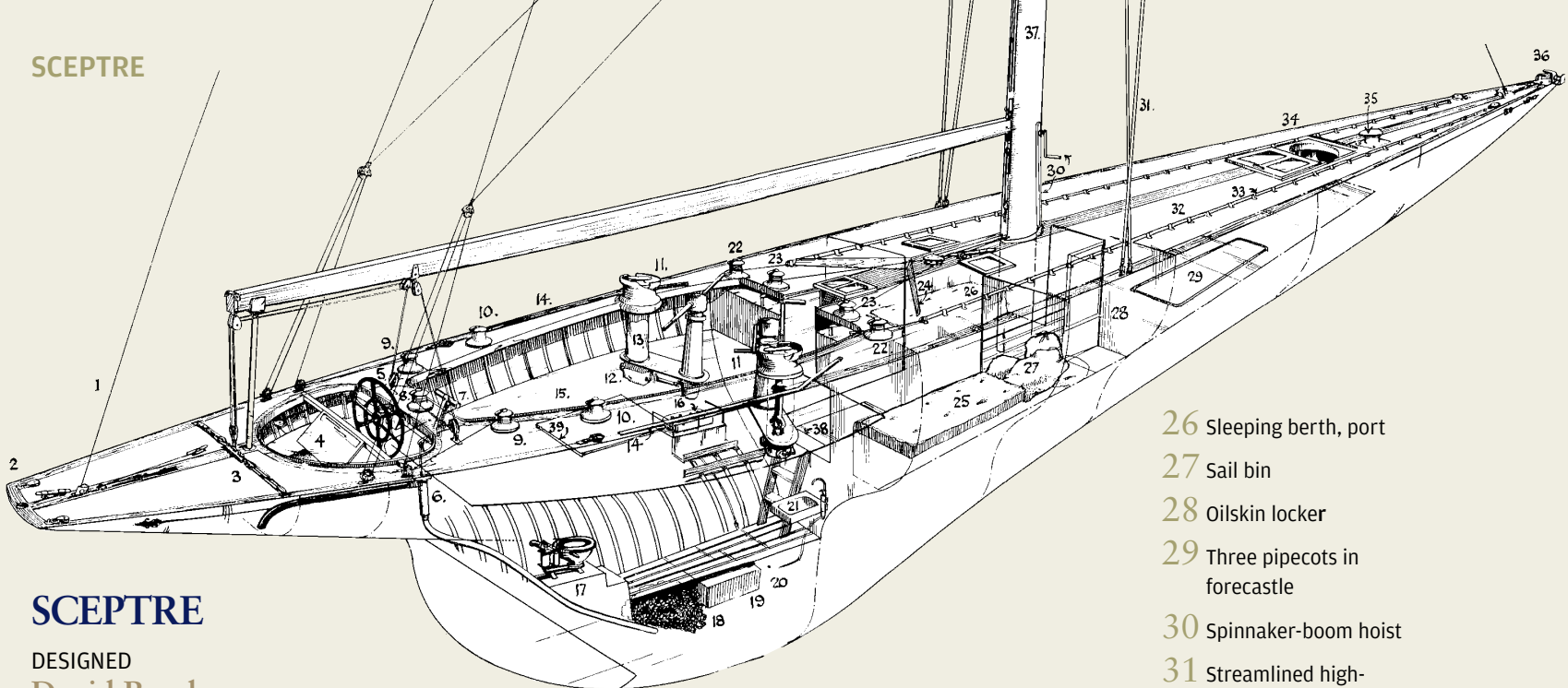
innovative one from David Boyd. Significantly, no further tank testing was carried out which might have optimised the chosen design.

*Sceptre* was built at Alexander Robertson's yard on the Clyde and, following her launch in April 1958, *Yachting World* reported that "David Boyd has produced a yacht which it would be difficult to out-design". Olympic bronze medallist Graham Mann was appointed skipper and the crew was selected from 70 members of the armed forces after they had been trialled on the pre-war 12-Metre *Evaine*. *Sceptre* was shipped to the States, and the crew arrived there brimming with confidence, even taking with them a special box in which the Cup could be brought home.

The American defender was *Columbia*, selected after exhaustive trials against three other boats, two of them new. It was reported that she had already raced a total of 692 miles whereas *Sceptre*, although she had sailed against her 'trial horse' *Evaine* in the Solent, had yet to compete in any official race. After the challenger was soundly beaten (3-1) in four races in the best of seven series, *Yachting World* reported that "the members of her crew had done magnificently, but the weapon with which they had gone into battle was blunt".



## SCEPTRE



## SCEPTRE

DESIGNED  
David Boyd

BUILT  
Robertsons, 1958

LOA  
47ft 8in (21m)

LWL  
36ft (15.6m)

BEAM  
10ft 8in (3.6m)

DRAUGHT  
7ft 6in (3m)

DISPLACEMENT  
36 tonnes

SAIL AREA (MAIN + No 1 JIB)  
2,368sqft (220m<sup>2</sup>)

- |   |   |  |   |
|---|---|--|---|
| 1 Preventer backstay                        | 10 Spinnaker sheet and brace winches      | 17 Lightweight toilet                  | 26 Sleeping berth, port                             |
| 2 Spinnaker sheet and brace blocks          | 11 Two-speed genoa sheet winches          | 18 Chain                               | 27 Sail bin   |
| 3 Main sheet traveller                      | 12 Winch gear-boxes beneath cockpit floor | 19 Fresh water tank cabin floor        | 28 Oilskin locker                                   |
| 4 Navigator's table                         | 13 Canvas sleeve over winch drive shafts  | 20 Cooker gas cylinder                 | 29 Three pipecoats in forecabin                     |
| 5 Laminated plastic steering wheel          | 14 Genoa tracks                           | 21 Wash-basin                          | 30 Spinnaker-boom hoist                             |
| 6 Glass-fibre and aluminium alloy bilgepump | 15 Aluminium and balsawood laminate floor | 22 Spinnaker tack winches              | 31 Streamlined high-tensile steel rigging           |
| 7 Removable bilge pump handle               | 16 Cooker (gas)                           | 23 Spinnaker and jib halyard winches   | 32 Spruce laid deck with marlille plywood underlay  |
| 8 Main sheet winch                          |   | 24 Breakwater                          | 33 Tubular footrail with spinnaker fore guys inside |
| 9 Runner winches                            |   | 25 Sleeping berths, port and starboard | 34 Fore hatch                                       |
|   |   |  | 35 Removable mooring bollard                        |
|   |   |  | 36 Removable stem-head fitting                      |
|   |   |  | 37 Aluminium alloy mast                             |
|   |   |  | 38 Saloon stows flush in                            |
|   |   |  | 39 Sail hatch                                       |



Sceptre's crew visit the Royal Ulster Yacht Club

We arrived in Bangor in the early afternoon and tidied the boat, and the conversation then turned to the "new" mast position. Although it was moved aft by 29in (0.75m) a couple of years after the 1958 America's Cup, no corresponding structural alterations were made until four years ago when the issue was dealt with by Tom Smith, the syndicate's longest serving member, and Neil Blair. They used an Acrow prop to push the sides of the boat out and get rid of what had become known as a 'waspy waist', and then fitted a new steel ring frame.

Allen Bradley, a syndicate member and also a keen dinghy racer, told me that before this work was done they could "see things opening up" and feel the boat "wobbling like a jelly" when slamming into waves, but that the hull is now considerably stiffer. The fabricated Duralamin mast itself, incidentally, is original.

### LIPTON ROOM

After dinner that evening, several of us visited the Royal Ulster Yacht Club, where we were made particularly welcome by former rear commodore Myles Lindsay. He knew *Sceptre* well and earlier that day had seen us

arriving from his home, prompting him to phone the Yacht Club and ask for the ensign to be dipped. He gave us a tour of the impressive club, the highlight of which was the Lipton Room where the many historic photos are dominated by Sir Thomas Lipton's five *Shamrocks* which challenged for the America's Cup through the RUYC. It's hard to imagine there can often be such strong connections to six America's Cup challenges in one place at one time as there were that evening.

When we set off from Bangor the next morning, the wind was on the nose and there was a lumpy sea. We motor-sailed for some time but as we approached the Mull of Kintyre the wind veered and we got the easterly wind which had been forecast. We then had an hour or so of glorious reaching in increasingly flat water as we reached the shelter of the magnificent headland.

However, soon after that the wind built quite quickly to gale force. We put in a second reef but still had the number 2 genoa up which made *Sceptre* seem overpowered for a while, although it soon became apparent that she was handling it beautifully. The wind gauge wasn't working but Tom mentioned that a better

“Owning a yacht such as *Sceptre* would be too much for one man. Thus the Sceptre Preservation Society was born”



PETER MUMSFORD, BEKEN OF COWES

## The Sceptre Preservation Society and the missing counter

In 1960, *Sceptre* was bought by Eric Maxwell, who owned her for about 12 years. He removed 18in (45cm) of the counter – supposedly to make her look more modern – and moved the mast aft by 29in (0.75m), enjoying considerable racing success in her, most notably against *American Eagle* in the States in 1967. Maxwell sold her to Edward King, who died in 1973. Her next owner was Tony Walker, who took her to Lytham and spent the next 10 years converting her to a cruising boat, relaunched in Glasson Dock in 1986. It had become apparent that maintaining a yacht such as *Sceptre* would be too much for one man, so some members of the Fleetwood and Blackpool Yacht Club proposed a syndicate.

Thus the Sceptre Preservation Society was born. It is based on 20 shares, costing £12,000 each, plus a share of maintenance, and currently has 18 members with two vacancies (contact details p14).

*Sceptre's* normal winter base is Fleetwood as most of the current members live in the north of England. Her normal sailing programme involves staying on the West

Coast of Scotland until August, taking part in events such as the Scottish Peaks Race and the Crinan Classic Boat Festival, and generally enjoying the huge variety of cruising that the area allows; and in the late summer moving down to the South Coast and cruising from a base in Poole. Each year a certain amount of charter is offered – mostly on the South Coast – “to boost the coffers”.

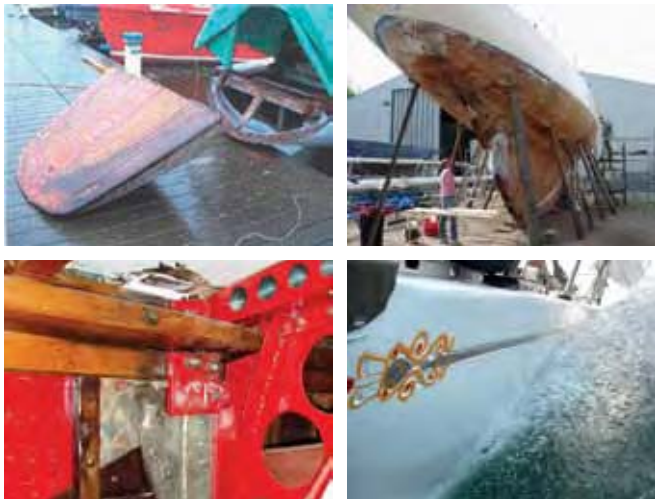
In *Sceptre's* golden jubilee year in 2008, she competed in the Round the Island Race with Sir Robin Knox-Johnston at the helm; and the Royal Yacht Squadron – which has the original Tufnol steering wheel and a model on display in their Pavilion – hosted a birthday party for her during the British Classic Yacht Club Regatta. In 2012 she will compete in the 12-Metre World Championships in the Solent.

About five years ago the syndicate decided to advertise in *Classic Boat* in the vague hope that someone might know if the missing stern section still existed. Before it was published they got four calls saying it was in a Scottish hunting/fishing lodge which had been owned by Maxwell.



Top: Off the Needles  
Above: Sir Robin Knox-Johnston at the helm of *Sceptre* in 2008

“The last day of the voyage was one of the sails of my life – from the bottom of the Sound of Jura onwards it was glorious”



**Above:**  
Maintenance on  
*Sceptre*, including  
the return of the  
missing counter  
**Right:** Sailing off  
Islay

guide to sail selection is that “she likes to have her lee rail in the water.” Soon the wind moderated again and *Sceptre* powered towards Port Ellen on Islay - famous for its eight distilleries – where we moored up alongside a fishing boat in the early evening.

### CONNECTIONS

Many of the crew had been telling me how they often meet people who have some sort of connection with *Sceptre*. Early the next morning I had just such an experience of my own when I walked to the opposite side of the small harbour to take some photos. I got talking to a fisherman called Jim MacFarlane after he greeted me from his front door, and he told me that his son was married to designer David Boyd’s granddaughter Bryony. Amongst the multitude of memorabilia he showed me was a photo of his one-year-old grandson Jamie – and therefore Boyd’s great-grandson – sitting in *Sceptre*’s cockpit in 1987.

The last day of our voyage was one of the sails of my life. There was a short time when the wind proved unreliable and we motor-sailed for a while, but from the

bottom of the Sound of Jura onwards it was glorious. Another cloudless day and a cracking easterly breeze allowed us to almost effortlessly sail through the flat water provided by the shelter of the spectacular landscape around us. Some of the crew said they had rarely been there in such good weather, and one commented that he had never before seen the peaks on Jura! We sailed past Scarba (with tales from the crew of the perils of the whirlpools in Corryvreckan), through the Sounds of Luing and Insh – all within sight of the imposing Mull – and finally into Kerrera Sound where we dropped the sails before going alongside an Ocean Youth Trust yacht in Oban Marina.

It is clear that the history of the America’s Cup could produce no better candidate for a sensible-sized cruising boat than *Sceptre* – in fact the vast majority could not even be considered. And it is also clear that she is very much in safe hands with her syndicate members who are passionate about enjoying her and looking after her. 🌐

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