

# THE NEW ZEALAND CLASSIC YACHT JOURNAL



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*A modern 26ft 6in couta boat in Tim Phillips' yard at Sorrento, much deeper and slacker in the bilges than a 26ft mullet boat*

## Hopes that coutas could revive mulletts



*Words and photos by  
Harold Kidd*

At the time of writing, Tony Blake, our Chairman, and his henchman Bruce Tantrum, neither exactly unknown within the Squadron's portals, are taking off for Melbourne for its Classic Regatta (and the Melbourne Cup).

Both are keen to get a contingent of the famed Victorian couta boats over to Auckland to try conclusions with our mullet boats. How do the two visually similar

types compare, and which would be the faster around the track?

Let's start with a brief canter through their parallel histories. Auckland mullet boats developed from the 1860s into a shoal draft centreboarder, quite hard in the bilges, of around 24ft overall, crewed by two men, who netted about a ton of grey mullet in our shoal estuaries and got them home to market as quick as they could to keep them fresh and get the best prices. They were usually carvel built on frames, gaff

sloop or cutter rigged and had a broad transom for paying out the net.

Victorian couta boats developed around the same time, about the same length and similarly built, but as rather deeper clinker-built centreboarders, with much slacker bilges. Two men took them out into Bass Strait and trolled for the barracouta with lures on unbarbed hooks. When a school was found, the boats would sail through, trailing as many as five lines with five hooks on each. Catches were sometimes

large and, like the Auckland boats, the first boat home got the best prices. Needless to say, it was a tough life for the Aussie fishermen.

Whereas grey mullet have always been a delicacy in New Zealand, barracouta have never been popular, but in Victoria they were the preferred fish for fish and chips for many years. The trade blossomed after the late 1870s when the railway was put through to many of the small ports of southern Victoria. The best couta boats seem to have



*Left: The fabulous clubhouse of the Sorrento Sailing Couta Boat Club*

*Below: The business end of a couta boat against the jetty at Sorrento. Note the sheer on the deck, the bowsed down, off-centre bowsprit, the open cockpit.*

been built at Queenscliff, at the western entrance to Port Phillip Bay where they were developed into lithe and sea-kindly open 20 to 28 footers. The Queenscliff fleet often railed 70 tons a day of couta to markets in Geelong, Melbourne and beyond.

A major difference in the history of mullet boats and couta boats is that the Auckland boats became popular with yachtsmen from the 1880's, especially after Chas. Bailey Sr. built the 'yacht style' 24 footer Manola for William Holder in 1885. By 1904 there were three recognized classes of racing mullet boats, 22, 24 and 26 footers.

The Ponsonby Regatta Committee introduced 'Restrictions' to preserve their wholesome fishing boat

characteristics and prevent them from becoming 'freaks'. Of course, the rest is well-known; the mullet boat classes became closely-contested and the 'name' builders and designers all had a go, James Clare, Arch Logan, Chas. Bailey Jr., Walter Bailey, Tom Le Huquet and Charles Collings. They became the training ground for Auckland yachtsmen and got hundreds of young fellows out on the water racing, and cruising the northern coastline in summer, while playing rugby and league in the winter. When racing mulletties fell off the perch, they were snapped up by fishermen, fitted with auxiliaries, and were out fishing in the Gulf.

On the other hand couta boats were discouraged from racing by the yachting

establishment in Victoria after early successes, especially in the Centennial Regatta in Melbourne in 1888. As a result, each boat was different in accordance with the practice of its builder and the whim of its fisherman owner. There was port racing, of course, but competitive sailing played little part in shaping the couta boat as it did the mullet boat.

The Victorian couta boats kept fishing in quantity until the Second World War after which they shifted to shark ('flake') fishing and crayfishing. They were designed with auxiliaries early on and were almost universally fitted with engines by 1914. Eventually they became largely motorised. This affected their design and made them

fuller in section amidships. Even so, compared with the mullet boat, they remained very slack in the bilge, had more drag in the keel and, indeed, had more of the characteristics of a shallow keel yacht like the H28 than of the mullet boat.

It must be said again that each couta boat was individual, and there were wide variances in the type. However, the couta boat of the fishing heyday was typically 26-28ft in length, was three-quarter decked with an open cockpit, had sheer on the kingplank, a wine-glass transom, a modest lug or gaff sloop rig, often in a tabernacle, and a rounded stem. Construction had become single-skin carvel. All sorts of timbers were used, but mainly kauri or Huon pine for the planking.

Couta boats were 'discovered' as fine recreational craft in the 1970s. Tim Phillips, who is now the gaffer of the Wooden Boat Shop at Sorrento, was one of the leaders in the movement which has had enormous success. There are now no less than 220 couta boats in its register, with big fleets at Williamstown at the top of Port Phillip Bay and Queenscliff and Sorrento at either side of the Heads. Couta boats are being built in quantity. A visit to the





Wooden Boat Shop is an eye-opener. I saw one 26' 6" cuta boat ready for delivery and another ready for decking, while there were 40 or 50 in the yard for overhaul. There is plenty of racing, and plenty of fun. It's a dynamic scene!

Our mullet boats are sadly fading away, on the other hand. There are only two 26 footers in anything like original condition; the very rapid 22 footers are still racing at Ponsonby thanks to the efforts of a band of enthusiasts including Ron Copeland, Brendon Crawford and Martin Robertson, but their relationship to the 22 footers of the 1904 Restrictions is fairly remote. The stunning 20 footer *Wairere* does well in our regattas, but we need more of them to be saved and out on the water.

Tony and Bruce hope that, by encouraging cross-Tasman visits, both cuta boats and mullet boats will prosper from the exchange. It is by no means too late to save the mullet boat, but the time is now when they are readily and cheaply available of all ages, some over a century. They can still provide what they were intended to provide, thrilling sailing, good spartan cruising and a wholesome way to learn seamanship and sailing skills. We need an injection of enthusiasm and style from our Aussie cousins.

As to speed, my pick is that a well-sailed big cuta boat would take a 26ft mullet boat only in a blow, in a chop and on the wind, while our 22 footers will hose all over the smaller cuta boats. It will be fun to find out if I'm right.



*John Tattersfield getting his 40-footer, Aloha (Dick Lang) ready for the Rudder Cup*

## *Revving up for the Rudder Cup Race*

Going to press there were 41 expressions of interest in the race and a climbing number of firm entries. There is definitely going to be a race on the night of 12<sup>th</sup> December to celebrate the centenary of the first race, held by the Squadron in 1908 for the magnificent Rudder Cup, donated by *Rudder Magazine*. Thanks to the generosity of the Matheson family, the 1908 Cup will be on display at RNZYS in the place formerly occupied by the Auld Mug as well as the log of the winning boat, the Matheson brothers' *Maroro*.

The 1908 line honours boat, Steve Thomas' *Seabird* (James Reid, 1908), is arriving from Nelson shortly to contest the race again, while the handicappers, Bob Salthouse, Max Carter and Brett Bakewell-White, will be scratching their heads on how to be fair to a wide range of motorboats.

The start is at 1900 hrs off the Squadron, a mass start down harbour, with the only instruction something like, "From the start, Sail Rock to starboard and finish off RNZYS in a westerly direction."

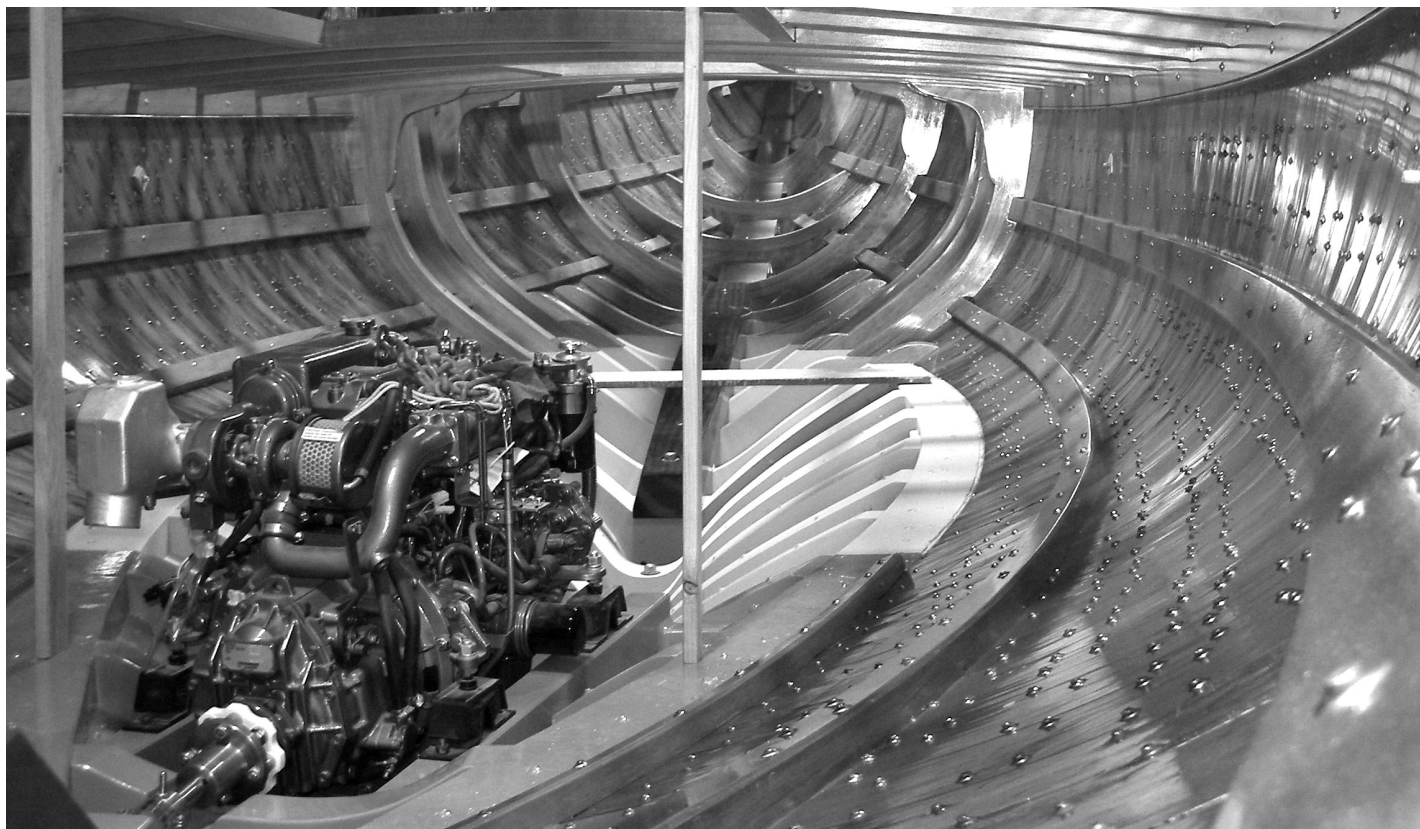
It should be a magnificent spectacle.



*Steve Thomas' Seabird – coming for Nelson*

### **CYA LIBRARY**

Thanks to generous donations from yachting families, the CYA's Library at Hobsonville is becoming a valuable resource. Once the basic cataloguing is completed and the collection is housed, both well under way, we'll be deciding on the parameters for its use as a research facility and as a reference system for CYA members.



*Wood, wood, glorious wood with the engine in position*

# *Rawhiti restoration*

**Words and photos by  
Chad Thompson**

*Rawhiti*, Arch Logan's last Big Gaffer, was launched back in October 1905, and is now midway through one of the most high profile restorations of recent times. The work is being undertaken by Peter Brookes of Brookes Classic Boats out in Waimauku for Greg Lee and Sam Stubbs and their families.

*Rawhiti's* progress towards her relaunching is steady, if slower than anticipated. So what's new? When was the

last time a quality restoration was completed on time and dare I say to budget?

Nonetheless what is happening out at Peter Brookes' yard is just magnificent. The hull has been refastened; new floors have been set in place. She has been substantially replanked; a new mast step fitted over new floors, and her new stem timbers are all in place. The deck beams have now been fitted and she is soon to be redecked. As can be seen from the photos the workmanship is of the highest standard.

During the recent visit by the members of the Classic Yacht Association, Greg and Sam looked like the cats that have got the cream; and rightly so. Dare we say they are the epitome of patient owners.

While we have previously reported in the journal that it was hoped to have *Rawhiti* back in the water in time for the February 2008 Classic Yacht Regatta, to be realistic she will be completed later in 2008 and ready for the 2009/2010 season.

The competition is lining up to get alongside and check

her pace. Hopefully one of them will be *Sayonara*, the recently restored Fife over in Melbourne. She was *Rawhiti's* intended rival from the time she was gallantly sailed to Australia.

It is hoped to have the two yachts sailing together either in Melbourne or here in Auckland. And there'll be more battles to be waged against *Waitangi*, *Rainbow*, *Thelma* and *Ariki*!

- The project can be studied in greater detail on Peter Brookes' yard web site at <http://www.classicsail.net>

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