

October 2005

SCOOP



C O U T A B O A T A S S O C I A T I O N I N C .

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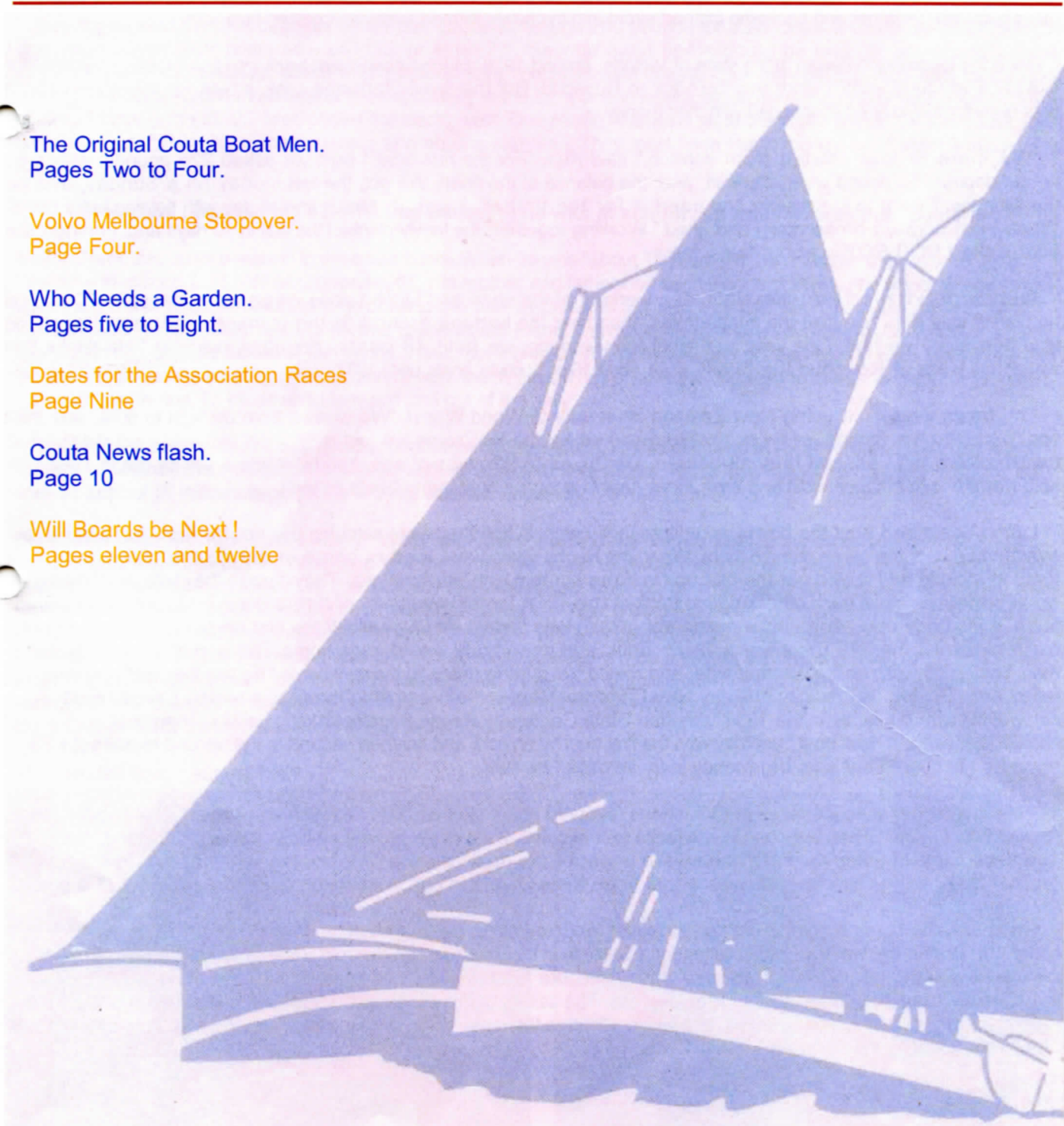
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The Original Couta Boat Men

Couta Boat Builder Ken Lacco, learned his trade of boat building from his father Mitch Lacco

The best known off the original couta boat builders were Peter Locke and Mitch Lacco. "Mitch" Lacco died in 1974, but he passed his skills on to his son Ken, who, as an 82-year-old, lived at the Westernport Bay village of San Remo in 1996, some 30 miles from Queenscliff. Ken Lacco was just three years old when his family moved from Rosebud to Queenscliff. Mitch Lacco started his boatbuilding business around 1917, before selling it to Peter Locke a few years later, around 1925. Ken Lacco said he was destined to work with Peter Locke as an apprentice, but after a disagreement between his father and Locke he instead event into the newly formed family sailmaking business.

When the Depression began in the state of Victoria, around 1928, Mitch Lacco went back into boatbuilding, turning out *WATTLE* at Queenscliff before moving back to Rosebud. But the family fortunes took a turn for the worse when a debt collector they'd hired absconded with their money.

"We more or less started from scratch," said Ken. "For the first boat I built we asked 225 pounds, with a 50 pound deposit, 50 pound when planked, and the balance at the finish. We got the first money on a Sunday, and on the Monday 1 went to Melbourne and used it for the timber. I was in Melbourne all day with nothing but a drink. When I got home, I broke down and cried." Working together, the family planked the hull in 10 days and finished the boat, called *ROB ROY* in about five weeks.

Business picked up until there were eight men working at the shed and Mitch Lacco was making the sails. "Dad used no plans," said Ken. "He built the middle mold, then bent the battens around to the transom and stern, I've got no idea how many we built, One year, with eight men working, we built 48 boats, counting dinghies." He thinks that while they were at Rosebud the family built about 10 or 12 couta boats, up to 1937.

The boats were built using New Zealand kauri prior to World War II "We worked from daylight to dusk, and there was no such thing as "hours", said Lacco. "You worked for the job; some we lost money on and some we didn't. I had three brothers and Dad, and they all helped. Dad lived to 92 years of age, and he made a sail for me in 1968." He said Peter Locke at Queenscliff and John Jones near Melbourne built many boats as well.

Lacco described how the boats would lure their catch. When they were catching the couta, first they'd sail in a straight line until the couta chased them. When the Rugby (gasoline) motors came in during the 1930s, they motored in a circle and they'd get the fish up from the bot-tom with two leadlines. They'd circle the couta, and boats would sometimes cross each other's paths. Back at the town there'd be plenty of fights out-side the pub if you moved in on some-body else. And they'd argue about who was fastest. At Queenscliff the first boats home got the best berth to unload the fish. There was a 12-box limit, and everybody would race home. This is what made them racing men. They put the fish on the weather side, and they'd be gutting them all the way home." To test their craft, the men raced each Boxing Day holiday (the day after Christmas), but some-times also in other events.. Lacco recalled competing with his father in the 1934 Victorian State Centenary Regatta against racing yachts. Their boat, *REBECCA*, was the "limit boat," yet they won the first heat by an hour and finished second in the second to collect £75 pound's (\$150). "That was big money in those days," he said.

But the market began to shrink as the Victorians favoured shark over couta in their fish and chips. " This knocked the price, " said Lacco. " Then they had to put limits on the catch. If it was six shillings a box , it was pretty good, really. There were lots of times the fishermen were in debt from their catching. One box I remember I took to the tip (dump) for nothing. The freight have would been three shillings a box. With boxed shark you got about £1 a box."

Gradually, the boats began to change to accommodate the bigger shark catches, and then, in 1939, World War II broke out. During the war Ken Lacco fished for a while; then built boats for the US Navy and Australian Army, After the war, diesel engines were introduced and the couta boat designs changed again, becoming much bigger in the stern sections to support the bigger engines. The sailors themselves also moved on or died. In the 1960s commercial fishing fleets from Japan arrived, and within 10 years the couta were scarce. Lacco said it wasn't long after the war before shark fishing and "craying " (lobster;) took over.

Jack Beazley , fished from Couta Boats as a youngster — until seasickness got the better of him

Jack Beazlev spent a few years on the coma boats as a schoolboy. Unfortunately through a combination of inveterate seasickness and his youthfulness, his time was short, but at 67 years of age he was still able recall life as a couta boatman. He sailed with his grandfather Waiter Todd and his uncles aboard *WATTLE*, *DAWN*, and *DOREEN*, all of which were family owned. He sailed in 1938, '39, and 42 when engines were mostly used for fishing. "The sails still went up going out and coming home. The boats performed beautifully under sail," he said. "They were very fast and stiff boats, especially when the fish were stacked to windward." The boats usually carried two fisher-men onboard, or sometimes three, if the owner's were training one of their sons. He said his grandfather had five sons, and it was taken for granted they would follow him into the fishing trade. New boats were generally reserved for sons about to make their own way, or new people in the trade.

Beazley recalled the price of a boat from Peter Locke as around 200 pounds for a 26-footer. It was a standard price, he said, even though some boats were 24', 25, or even 27'. Second hand boats could be had for anywhere between 50 pounds and 250 pounds, which might include sails, moorings, and dinghies, so new-boat prices had to be competitive. The boats carried three tons of ballast, usually in the form of iron ingots, cut-up railway tracks, or heavy weights from scales. Masts (around 26 feet above the deck) were Douglas-fir, and sails were trade of canvas. Of the couta men, Beazlev said, "They all earned a living; and no one starved - They must have made money, but it wasn't much of an income."

Harry Clark , conned his parents into believing he was at school , all while he was out "couta-ing "

Harry Clark also spent a season in the couta boats. When he was "about 10 years old" he did some fishing with Joey Wells, who owned *LILLIAN* at Queenscliff. His mother and father had been friends of Wells, and when he was school-aged the children had been allowed to go down to the pier at Queenscliff and buy fish when the boats came in. At 12 years of age he was signed up to the Queenscliff Fisherman's Union and taken, outfishing. Clark said one man might catch six or eight boxes of fish during a day, "but a blow-in like me would only get a couple of boxes. Joey Wells and his son Reggie used to work the leadline, and I'd work the fly lines. They'd work the couta up to the surface, then I'd catch them with the fly line. I'd be down to leeward and out of the way".

Somehow Harry conspired to avoid school while he was fishing. His family, who lived at Williamstown (a western suburb of Melbourne), thought he was attending school at Qtteenscliff. But at Queenscliff school they thought he was at school in Williamstown. All the while he was, out "couta-ing."

"The work was all right," said Harry. "We'd catch the couta and put them alongside the centerboard case. Then we'd chuck them into boxes. When we got the limit, we used to throw them aft, and Reggie and his father began gutting them on the way home. 'The couta would have to be boxed, with ice on top, ready to ship out, when they were loaded onto Queenscliff dock. "There were 22 couta to a box. You'd put the lid on them with the name of the boat under the lid". Clark said the fishermen used to put their own limits on how many they'd catch, depending on how the fish were biting and what the market was like. "They might say there'd be a limit of six boxes a day, or no limit at all." From the jetty at Queenscliff, the fish were loaded onto trains and shipped overnight to Melbourne fish markets. "It was good work; better than going to school," said Clark. "Reggie Wells used to say to me, 'If you're going to be a Quecnscliff fisherman, you're going to be a good one."

The wooden boat august 1997



I'm not sure whether I'm lucky or not! My Dad built me a boat.

The Reverend Alvin Hatters finished the Christening ceremony.

Louise named the boat "MALEESH LOUISE" and finally, at the third attempt, smashed the bottle of Tasmanian bubbly on the stainless steel prow boot.

A crowd of about 100 watched in anticipation as she sat on her trailer ready to be launched.

Stanley Stuart Macpherson Humphries, better known as Mac, or "Doodles" (we won't go into that!) was born in 1920, at Burnie, Tasmania. His family moved to the saw milling and fishing village of Smithton in '25 where, when he reached the age of 13, he took on work as a mill hand.

In 1940, he answered the call to defend the Realm, and served the full theatre.

Bearing no scars, other than some hearing impairment caused by the cannons he worked with, he returned safely to wife Audrey, affectionately known as 'Strawb,' and newborn daughter, Donna. Three boys, Joe, Gerry and Sam, followed. After retraining as a telegraph linesman, his interests were taken up at the local boatyards. He built an eighteen footer, "DONNAH.", in the backyard as a hobby and to further his boatwright skills.

A brief stint as a crayboat deck hand and his mind was made up. Having had one thousand pounds left to him by his late father, he decided to build a boat, and buy a Cray license. So was born, in the backyard, "AUDREY PEARL", a fine, round bilge crayboat of forty foot, taking some two years to construct, with local help, and launched in May 1964

She was a sturdy build, from local timbers. Pliable Huon pine garboards, one inch Celery-Top pine planks on one inch laminated Blackwood ribs set at half foot centres. Tight grained grown Manuka (man ookah) knees stitched the stem and stern posts and the decks through her ribs to the Celery Pine keel.

"AUDREY" proved a magnificent sea boat, capable and efficient. She handled the Tasmanian West Coast exceptionally, braving the tough swells that arrived at the completion of their seventeen thousand kilometre journey from Cape Horn. A new fisherman would arrive in the district and was welcomed, asked aboard for a feed or drink, shown the better spots to fish, and given every assistance. The fishing game was good to him, not in so much as a business but a life-style. Prices were good, he worked for comfort, not to get rich.

In 1972, when working the rich bottom around the Hunter Group, "AUDREY" had a completely innocuous graze with a submerged "bully". She been in contact with rocks and bars much harder before without injury. But she wasn't holed, she'd taken the knock on the for'd wet well head, springing a plank only half an inch. It wasn't until Mac's deck hand went to make a cup of tea in the fo'c'sle, landing knee deep in water, that they realized their predicament. "AUDREY" was sinking, taking on water much faster than her pumps could handle. Mac steamed her to the nearest sheltered bay, and she went to the bottom in thirty feet. In a magnificent display of camaraderie and "return favour" by local abalone divers and Cray fishermen, she was salvaged in less than 24 hours.

Refurbishment, and improvements to the boat's workability, had things return to normal. June '78 found a week of absolutely foul weather on the west coast. "AUDREY" was left on secure moorings at the coastal fishing village of Couta Rocks. A message was received. She'd slipped her mooring and had been driven up on the beach.

Quick inspection showed no damage of note, so a 'dozer was carted in to reposition her and set her to be refloated on the next tide. She showed some reluctance to move with the first gentle tug by the 'dozer so a little more power was used.

"AUDREY PEARL" split amidships!

Mac, with probably more than a lump in his throat, found that his pride and joy had been holed by, and was laying on an unseen "bully". The rock had prevented her moving, causing the 'dozer to split her in half. She was irreparable. Absolutely crushed, he salvaged all useful parts from her then burnt the ruined hull, so to leave no trophy or monument to his disaster.

He traded his 36 craypot license for a little twenty-eight footer with eighteen pots, named her "BONNIE PEG" after his mother, and had worked her for a while before Strawb even knew about it, having kept the purchase secret for fear his Darling would not agree to it. Someone spilled the beans. They didn't talk for some time.

Working single handed didn't suit Mac anyway. It was a lonely job, and the going was hard. In 1980, at 60 years old, he sold off "BONNIE PEG" and took up as a deck hand with some of the abalone divers. But things were not the same.

Strawb pinpointed the problem. Mac needed a boat, and suggested he should build one.

So was born, in the backyard, "MALEESH MAGGIE". At twenty-nine feet she is another good round bilge hull, the stem drawn out more to ease her into the rough west coast water, and built with the ability to take up as a working boat. Launched in July '88, she took longer to complete; 'Boat building gives way to every charity in town,' and, after all, the fella was essentially now, an OLD fella, though still sprightly and capable. "Fit as a Mallee Bull, and twice as dangerous!" Strawb would be happy. She could see a garden happening in the backyard when "MAGGIE" was gone.

As "MAGGIE" was nearing completion, a new set of plans had appeared on the shed wall. A lovely little Danish trawler of twenty-six feet. Mac had seen a story about the boat, liked the look of her, and procured the plans from her builder in Canada. I said what a good looking boat it was and, jokingly, that I would rather have one like her than "MAGGIE", then gave no thought to my statement after that.

"MAGGIE" was well launched, a good crowd, a barrel of beer on the wharf afterwards to sate the appetite of all helpers and friends. Mac finished her off. She steamed well, handled as all boats the Old Fells had built. He had a boat, and he'd built it.

A couple of years later, in '91 or '92, no-one is really sure of the date, Strawb, under the impression that the backyard was about to become a garden, noticed something not really unusual!

There, in the backyard, was another familiar shaped, long lump of Celery, where "MAGGIE" used to be. Mac confessed. It was a keel. He said the last thing in the world he could get interested in was gardening, and there was one way to stop that.

So was born, in the backyard, a fine twenty-six foot Danish trawler, with the stem drawn out more, to ease her into the rough west coast water, a bit added amidships, and some finessing around the stern, which would give her a finished stem to stern length of thirty feet.

We could now see he not so much needed a boat, but to BUILD a boat.

Mac had picked an unfriendly design for someone in later life to build in the backyard, the 'Cruiser' stern was to present some difficulty, with very tight, involved turns, so much so that, every now and then, Strawb had to abandon her usual serene pursuits of the occasional crossword and piano playing to assist with the gritty task of bending steamed timbers around the stern of a boat. No mean feat for anyone, let alone a woman, a 'princess,' in her seventies. He had decided to follow a new style of planking. Instead of starting at the gar board and working up, one starts at the top, and the bottom, and 'chases' the planking in. She was to be a pleasure boat as opposed to all the working boats he had built, rigged as a gaff schooner, and powered with something around fifty horsepower.

Louise and I were working on mainland Australia. We spent a lot of time at home in Tasmania, and each visit saw something different happening with the new hull, and a chance to give a hand.

The new hull took shape slowly. 'Boat building gives way to every charity in town' and Mac, in his mid seventies, still did a lot of repairs and refurbishment work on local boats which tended to take up his time, but proved useful in so much as finding parts and gear. Through the network he found a good little Perkins Prima and gearbox, which a fisherman had left over after re-powering his boat.

We were back home when Mac and I working out the possibilities for placement of the motor when he said "If you're going to have this one, son, you might have to throw a few quid in!"

I had never given a thought that this boat would be mine, or 'Ours'. I could only manage "O.K."

So anyone who's been involved in building a boat would know the thoughts that went through my mind. I hadn't really considered the work that had gone on, and what I would have put where. She was fairly well advanced, the bunkroom mostly complete, probably not the way I would have done it.

As was the wheel house, sunken in to the deck about thirty inches to give a better profile, but probably not quite the way I would have done it, even though I'd had fair comment.

I had a fear that she would not look as sweet as I would like.

It turns out that the man who built her, less from plans, more from vision, knew much, much better. The closer she came to completion, the sweeter she looked! Most of the remaining work was fairly straightforward. Fitting the motor, hooking up tanks, fitting steering gear, fitting electronics, sorting out wiring. I found out the worth of the quotation 'A boat is just a big hole in the water that you pour money into, and never fill up!' My boat wasn't even in the water! I learned that every scrap of wood and metal is invaluable. That shapeless piece of stainless steel will end up as part of an engine bed, or on the mast, or doing something which, just holding it in your hand, one would never conceive.

Working with my Dad didn't create any problem. In fact, we made a fairly good team. Our only differences came with the placement of the mainmast. Mac wanted it to land on a bulkhead so no step actually encroached on cabin space. I wanted it two feet forward to give better proportions, also seeing the step as useful in the cabin. He wanted cross trees, I didn't. I will admit that neither of us had, or have, much idea about sailing vessels. Mac's only other mast had been on "AUDREY", carrying a leg'o' mutton sail that was only ever launched to keep her steady when steaming in rougher weather. So we spent many hours poring over some very good publications, old and new, and ideas passed on by friends.

The popular idea was to put just one mast in, less cordage to bother with one than two, but Mac had his heart set on schooner rig, and I was not prepared to deny him that, even though we had our difference on where that mainmast would actually land, and what would be hanging from it.

As time passed, the mast problems slipped into the background. To finish the boat and get her in the water became priority. She was fully planked, but the splines to replace caulking were not finished. I pointed out to my dad that, although I was a fairly capable chap, and he was in pretty fair 'buckle,' it would be better if he could finish off splining before he died, then we could get to water. Each summer was to be launching date, but small things held it up.

Louise got a good break from her job at the beginning of '97 which came as a blessing. Four months at home saw a major push towards finishing the boat to the point that, when launched, she could be motored straight to her berth and spend the first couple of days under surveillance while taking up. Louise put in a huge effort sanding and painting decks, bulwarks and cabins. The boat was near enough to ready.

Our next minor conflict occurred. Mac wanted to know what her name would be. I said, naturally enough, "LOUISE MARY", named after Louise. He said if I was going to have the boat it would have to have "MALEESH" in the name. Maleesh is an Arabic word he learned during the War, which, loosely translated means 'don't worry about'. The rest of that story does not need telling, either! So we argued, over a beer or two; I caved in, and She would be named "MALEESH LOUISE." At the same time we resolved the issue of the main mast. We compromised. My placement, his cross trees. After all, 'doesn't a mast look naked without cross trees?'

"LOUISE" was lifted by crane and placed on a trailer to be taken to a shed for painting. It had been a particularly hot year, even by Tasmanian standards; her timbers had become very dry and quite a few cracks and splines had opened up. Nothing too serious but enough to create more work, and make us say, 'if only we had got her in last year.' Final sanding, a coat of paint and anti foul, and she was ready!

The 28th February '98 arrived. Louise flew in from Sydney, I had been down some time, doing finishing touches. An old friend of Mac's arrived with a figurehead likeness of Louise he had carved and it was lashed to the bowsprit. A tractor hooked onto the trailer and "LOUISE" took the short journey to an oyster farmer's boat ramp ready for the launching.

The Reverend Alvin Hatters finished the Christening ceremony, Louise named the boat "MALEESH LOUISE" and finally, at her third attempt, smashed the bottle of Tasmanian bubbly on the stainless steel prow boot. A crowd of about 100 watched with anticipation as she sat on her trailer ready to be launched.

With six people on board, she was eased back into the water and held short of floating, to check for leaks. Well, water flooded in. Two one thousand gallon per hour pumps were not keeping up. She was leaking like a sieve. Mac was crushed. He'd never had a boat make this much on launching. There was nothing to do but pull her out. A boat launch is probably one of the most confusing and terrifying situations anyone can ever get themselves into. You worry about the boat sinking, or, worse, having to pull her out and go back to the shed! The crowd wants to see it launched, everyone is in charge, no-one is in charge, and it takes a good person to make a decision.

*Someone did.
Not Me.
Orders were thrown.
The Statement was made
"She'll go in regardless!!!"*

A high capacity pump was found, someone arrived with a bituminous substance, and anywhere that looked remotely like a possible leak was jammed full of it. Someone else brought, of all things I thought, candles, and started rubbing them furiously over any crack he could see. They actually worked brilliantly. Time was against us, the tide had peaked and was running away. She needed to be in very soon otherwise we would have to put her at the wharf, not the preferred spot. A quick run into the marina next to the launch ramp would have her, at half tide, sit on mud. It meant that if she did sink, it would be in only five feet of water at high tide. If she didn't, and did not take up, she would be easy to re-trailer.

*Back in she went.
Mac was not on board. He was too disappointed.
This time with the pumps
"LOUISE" eased off the trailer and she came alive!*

We ran her straight to her berth, and tied off. Mac's disappointment faded. We celebrated. I stayed with her all night, some friends turning up at the strangest hours to see how she was going. It is an amazing phenomenon how a wooden boat takes up. By morning, the pumps, which had been continuously pumping when she went in, were clearing about every half hour. Now, even sawdust does not get damp in the bilge. She is a dry boat.

That day, the 1st March '98, "MALEESH LOUISE" went for her maiden voyage. Only about a one hour run in the company of her sister boat, "MALEESH MAGGIE". My brother, Gerry, had taken her over.

Which is probably the point of this story. At 78, Mac doesn't have a boat.

In August '98, there appeared, in the backyard, another familiar shaped, long lump of timber, where "LOUISE" used to be. Mac said it was to be garden borders, but Strawb knew better.

So was born, in the backyard, a fine round bilge boat of twenty-five feet, with the stem drawn out more to ease her into the rough west coast water, which gave her a finished overall length of twenty-eight feet, to be named "MALEESH STRAWB."

*My Dad built me a boat.
I wasn't sure whether I was lucky or not!*

I KNOW I AM!

Ps Maleesh Strawb is well under way. A minor stroke slowed her down, but who needs a garden.

WE ARE ON THE WEB
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## **"Couta News Flash"**

Sorrento Sailing Couta Boat Club  
( SSCBC ) October 1st, 2005.

A 25 foot-long remains of the Ross Ice Shelf, the floating Antarctic ice sheet that was once the size of France, will be displayed in the SSCBC basement freezer through out December. " We thank the generous members of the Club who donated this polar-cap remnant when it washed up on their beach earlier this year," Commodore Andrew Skinner said. " The ice sheet is a valuable artefact of the earth's geological past."

Guests at an upcoming fundraising dinner will be served cocktails made with chunks of the ice shelf.





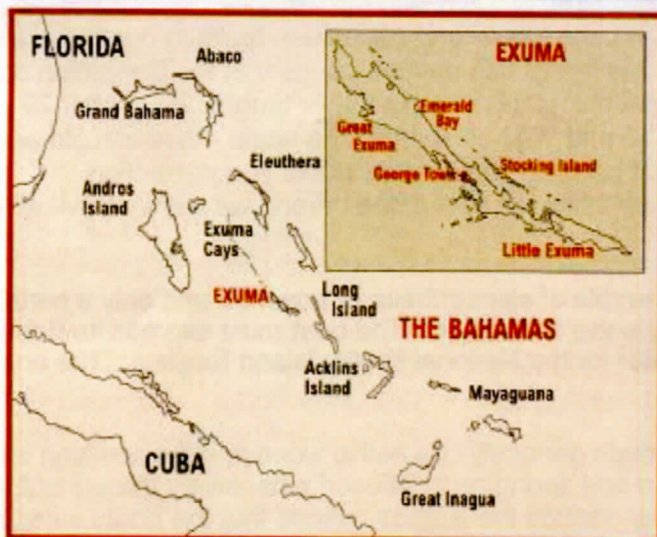
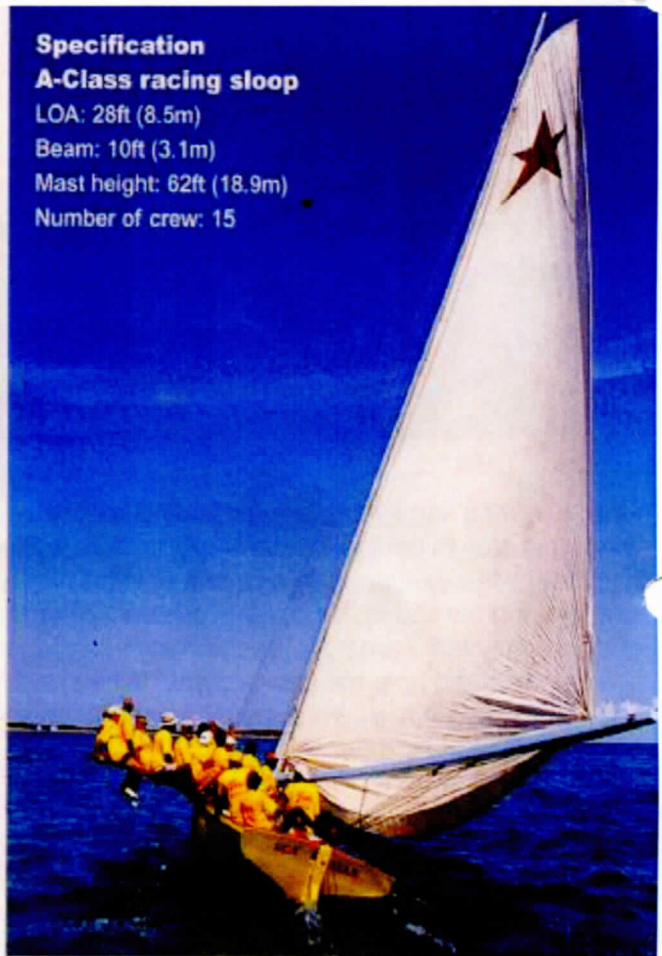
"These boats are machines," he said - and he's not exaggerating. The biggest A-Class is 28ft (8.5m) LOD and has a mast that towers 58ft above deck, with 4ft below deck. The sail area is 265 sqft, powering the boats up to speeds of 10-12 knots in 20-knot blow. The crew numbers are flexible, varying from 18 to 21, depending on conditions: "You cannot chuck people over the side though," Mark hastened to add. "You have to bring them all home." And to make matters more complicated, the boats are fitted with what are known as 'prys' - a Bahamian word for the board that slots into a bracket for the crew - the whole crew - to stand on and hang off the boom. "At this stage, the helmsman can't see a damn thing," explains Mark. "The sails are in the way and the boat is going so fast 10 to 12 knots, the helm has to rely totally on his bowman to give him guidance." Hairy!

*Hairy indeed at least the start would be fun! . But I would sure hate to be the twit lugging the esky down the jetty.....editor*

An article by Boatbuilder Mark Knowles and Co-ordinator Chris Kettel CLASSIC BOAT DECEMBER 2004



**Specification**  
**A-Class racing sloop**  
 LOA: 28ft (8.5m)  
 Beam: 10ft (3.1m)  
 Mast height: 62ft (18.9m)  
 Number of crew: 15



Plenty of room for all: the boats have 'prys' - the local name for boards that enable the numerous crew to balance the huge sails - which are shown on the A-Class Sea Star (above) and the cosier B-Class *The Cottage* (top left)

Do you have cockroaches in your Kitchen ?

Then just buy a hedgehog.

For they just eat them up!!!

*Couta thought for the season*