

Success , Intrigue and Disaster in a Lost Local Sport

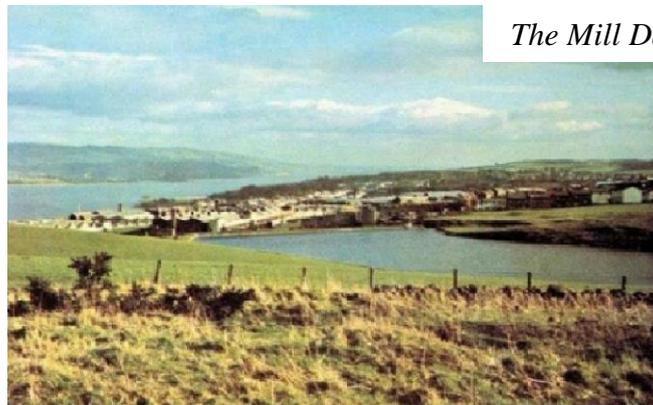
By

John Smith

This story tells of the ten years after World War II when Port Glasgow Model Yacht Club flowered as a local club rising to pre-eminence in Scotland and Britain only to be extinguished for ever in a single night.

Some Background - The Opening of Port Glasgow Model Yacht Club in 1922

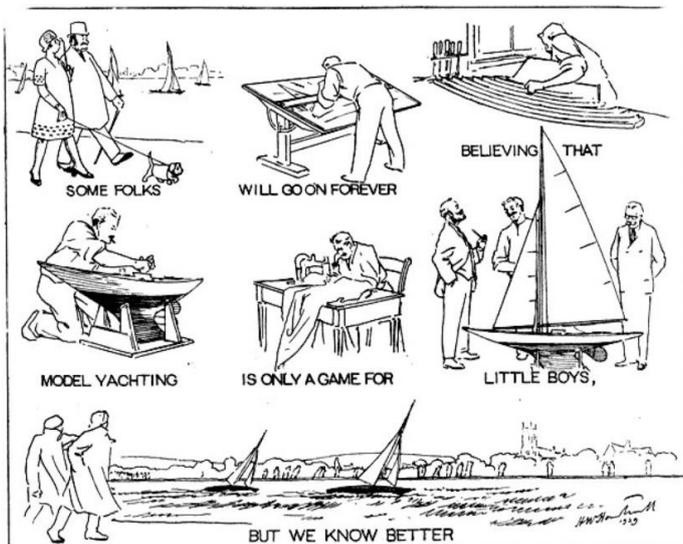
Port Glasgow Model Yacht Club came into existence in 1922. This was not a new club in Port Glasgow as there must have been several people in 1922 who remembered the short lived Model Yacht Club based at the Mill Dam in the 1880s supported by the shipbuilder Robert Duncan until he died in 1889.



The Mill Dam from the south-west

The sailing pond was the Mill Dam owned by the Gourock Ropeworks Company

Model yachting is about the building and the racing of model yachts. Model yachts are usually scaled versions of full size yachts.



It has always been customary for large ship-builders to make a miniature model of the vessel under construction, which is in every respect a copy of the original on a small scale, whether steamship or sailing ship.

In the case of sailing yachts, these models were often pitted against each other on small bodies of water, and so arose the skilful sport of model yachting.

It took about six weeks of concentrated effort and skill to make a new model yacht.

The next few years

The Club was now very much alive and kicking and had become important in the town having gained its respect. It took part of the town's celebrations, and special events meant extra effort to hold a social occasion, such as on the King's Jubilee in 1935 and the new King's Coronation in 1937.

The Second World War

The second world war arrived in 1939 and some of the younger men in the Club went off to fight. The Club remained active through the war years but was impacted by the war itself. In 1941 one of its prominent members, Hugh Kitchen, was killed with his family in his house struck during the German air raid that damaged Woodhall so badly.

The start-up after the War and the start of ten eventful years



The clubhouse and members on the 1947 Open Day

The Model Yacht Club had a slow pick up after the end of the conflict. There was still no money about. The shipyards were busy but men were also slow to return from their war duties. There would be no real sailing till after 1946.

At the start of 1947 there was much more enthusiasm.

A major boost was when the Scottish Model Yacht Association picked Port Glasgow Mill Dam for the site of the Scottish A Class Yacht championship in 1947. This was also an important year as this was the Silver Jubilee of the Club.

The Port Glasgow Club members were becoming better known in Scottish Model Yacht circles.

A Secret Royal Visit



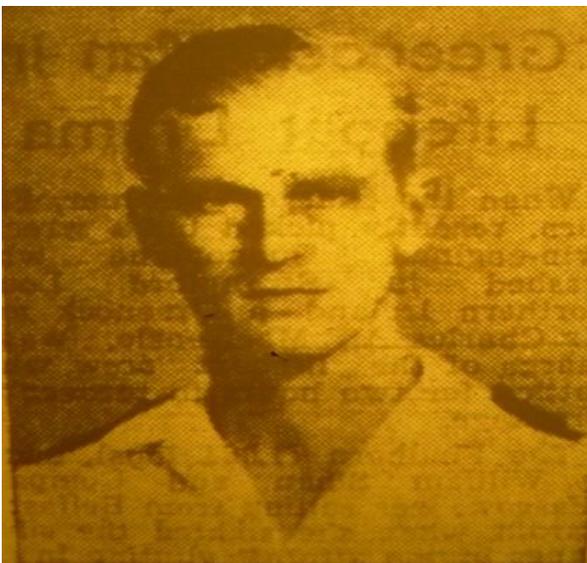
A remarkable incident happened at the Model Yacht Club also in 1947. Since the Second World War there had been visits of Royalty to Scotland, but it was felt that a large event should take place that would once again bind the Royal Family to the country. It was decided that there would be a great benefit in having a Royal Navy Fleet review of up to one hundred ships on the River Clyde. This was arranged for July 1947.

It was decided that the King and Queen would station their Royal Train on the High Railway Line above the town of Port Glasgow. It was planned they would remain there from Monday 19th July till Thursday the 22nd July.



This was also a special time for the Princess Elizabeth who was on this trip with her brand new fiancé, Lieutenant Phillip Mountbatten. He was on his first Royal engagement since the announcement. In the evening after the Review the Royal Party would return to their two parked railway carriages and have dinner.

Most of the Royal party would rest for the night but the Lieutenant was too restless to do that and he took to having, an evening walk on his own above the town. One incident has remained unreported till now.



On the Tuesday night, a long summer evening, the Port Glasgow Model Yacht Club was busy in heats to select the adult club sailors who were to skipper the Club boats in the upcoming British Championship. Alex Smith, one of the members, was up at the Club and he recalled that mid way through the evening a tall, thin, blond gentlemen came into the clubhouse. He introduced himself as Philip Mountbatten, and asked to be shown around. Alex said that he then spent up to an hour or more showing the Prince every aspect of what goes on in a Model Yacht club. Just as inconspicuously the Lieutenant left and went back to his royal life, and somehow the secret of his visit was kept.

One doesn't know fully what the effect of casual visits like this can have but it is a fact that Prince Philip, became patron of the Model Yachting Association (MYA) in 1952.

Families at the Club

After the War the Club prospered as 1950 approached. There were not just individuals from families involved but many family groups. Three prominent families were the Gemmells, the Bonars and the Smiths.

The Gemmells under the father of the family, George, had been in the Club since the 1920s. He had been born in 1912. He was a sheet metal worker who was good with his hands. He lived in and built his boats in Highholm Street. He believed in scrupulous fairness, never pushing his yacht out but just letting it go. There were two sons, George and Billy who had sailed after the war..

The Bonars' connection went back to the Club's formation with the Grandfather, David, taking the honour of winning the very first race in 1922. In the 1940s there was Willie, David's son, and his children Terry and David. Willie was a foreman plater in the yards who did not like promotions. He was born in 1917 and so was 33 in 1950. Terry, his daughter, was the only competitive model yacht girl probably in Scotland and certainly in the West of Scotland. She lived at Glasgow Road in Port Glasgow when she started in 1948. They moved to 2 Bruce Street. She was ten when she got involved. She remembers carrying yachts up the hill as then they didn't store yachts at the club. This was a walk of about three miles. She remembers travelling by train to Paisley for a competition and walking for about two miles to Barshaw Park with the yacht being carried all the way. Eventually the Bonars moved to Southfield Avenue in 1951 and Alex Smith, whom we will meet later, built yachts in the their kitchen and Terry remembers the smell of the shaved wood.

Terry is helpful as she can recall the Clubhouse after the war. She says there was a lovely fireplace at the back end of it that had been put in by Sam Craig round about the early 1940s. It was always gleaming. There was an old table large and heavy and polished. There was a long bench behind the table facing the fireplace. On the wall there were flags and pennants. There was also a framed constitution there too. All cooking was done outside on the grass on a barbecue. Light was from pumped Tilly lamps.

The committee room was treated with respect. No one went in with wet clothes. All wet gear was taken off in the tack room

The last involved family became members after about 1940. This family has Alex Smith as the father and we have just met him with Prince Philip. He started in model yachting about 1940. He had five sons and in the 1950 period four of them, David, Bob, Jim and Sandy raced in the Juniors and Seniors

Making do

The after war years in Port Glasgow were not easy. As was said there was little money. Life was a struggle so people became very resourceful in every way. Up at the Clubhouse on Wednesday night the Juniors met to race. They were also sent out to the fields to 'harvest' some potatoes ('totties') and turnip ('tumpties') and they would be roasted in the big roaring fire.

Building a record-breaking yacht with whatever you could gather together

In all model yacht clubs you built your own yacht. Getting the materials such as lead for keels, brass for the fittings, cloth for the sails and wood for the hull, needed innovation and a little cunning.

Lead could be got from old boats or from the scrappy but you had to mould and pour the lead in your own home. Brass was got from the yards by modifying brass burning nozzles for instance. Cloth for sails came from the cloth used to draw the plans of Clyde ships used by draughtsmen in the local yards. The wood was wherever it was found.

Here a story is told of Alex Smith and the getting of the wood to build his new boat he was to call the *Mary Dee*. It is a tale of history and undercover work.

In 1762 the town of Port Glasgow was rich and merchants were making substantial fortunes in the tobacco trade. One such merchant decided to build a large mansion, Broadfield House, that would

sit on perhaps the finest site above Port. It sat in twenty acres looking north. It was built using the best wood available at the time, with all the rafters of Canadian Pine.

In the 1930s Broadfield House became run down, and about 1949 everyone knew it was to be demolished. One night Alex and his son David chose to visit the house and 'obtain' a small amount of the sound timbers from the ruinous shell. This was accomplished stealthily and successfully and the wood was put to very good use.

How the Mary Dee was built

Alex Smith had been building boats since about 1940. He had progressed from a novice towards the stage where he could design and complete a racing yacht that could win races. He designed a new 6-metre yacht in 1949 he was to call the *Mary Dee* after his wife Maisie Dick.

This was where the almost 200 year old yellow Canadian pine wood he had acquired would be used. Little jig band saws were used for cutting up the wood in a back bedroom. Sawdust was every where, and wood shavings in his socks and the carpet. The lead for the keel was melted on a bare kitchen gas ring and the lead poured molten into a home-made sand mould in a bedroom. The cooled rough keel was slowly filed into its final shape. The sails were sewn on an old Singer sewing machine. The yacht was designed in a Scottish style as a 'double ender' with a pointed aft end as well as the prow. It had been based on a design by Smith of Largs.

The British Championship story and the rise of the Club in status

In 1950 the *Mary Dee* was first raced by Alex's son David on 22nd March and it won. This was to be a big year for the Port Glasgow Model Yacht Club and the Mill Dam for once again it was to hold a Senior Championship. This was however the biggest it could hold, the British and Empire 6 Metre Championship.



Alex Smith (skipper), the Mary Dee, the trophy, and Willie Bonar

The Championship took place over the weekend of the 20th and 21st May, 1950. Water was scarce at that time and it was only on the night before racing started were the sluice gates opened and the Mill Dam filled properly. Nine clubs were involved from all over Britain. Participating teams sailed on Saturday and Sunday with Port Glasgow coming out on top.

Later that year the same team and boat won the Scottish Championship.



Alex Smith's Trophy display in 1950

Intrigue in a Cut Throat Sport

Competition between sailors and between clubs was very keen; everyone was looking for that winning edge and not all by fair means. This could be in the sail material used or the amount of polish on the yacht's expensive paint job, and there were occasional sharp practices causing fraught tempers at times. It would be naive to believe that the competition was always fair and above board. One simple way to gain an unfair advantage was to find out what settings that your competitors yacht had for the pond on which they were sailing and he would try to keep his secret from you till the yacht was set off on the course.

Using who you know

A case of a more fundamental advantage was one uncovered at the Port Glasgow Club when a new yacht was introduced and it started to win races. Other sailors were suspicious that the yacht seemed to be able to carry more sail than they thought it should. It had however gone through the measurement code of the Club and passed the tests. This is where in a large water-filled bath the displacement and all relevant measurements were made to ensure the yacht met national and international standards. Suspicion however fell on the boat as although the boat was measured by the Club Measurer no others were present except the yacht owner who happened to be the measurer's father in law.

Outright accusations were not made but one dark night the aggrieved losing sailors went up to the club house and remeasured the boat and found it not able to pass the required specifications. On the next competition a formal challenge was made against the boat in question and quietly the boat was withdrawn never to be raced again. It became the practice from then on that several club members had to be present when a boat was measured.

Pure Skullduggery

A second incident involved a much higher level of trying for an advantage. Port Glasgow had the winning yacht for the British and Empire Championship of 1950, the *Mary Dee*. It was a one-off yacht that had been designed by Alex Smith and built by him. The yacht had great sailing properties. It sailed well in very light winds but also in heavy weather too. People studied the yacht

wherever it sailed.

One competition in 1950 came after the British Championship success. It was held at the Greenock Club and was to take place on the Saturday and Sunday. It was agreed that boats from members from outside clubs could remain in the club house overnight. Nothing seemed to be amiss.



The brown decked replica of the Mary Dee in the foreground

However two or three months later a yacht appeared in Greenock that was an exact replica of the *Mary Dee*. It belonged to Robert Thompson. What had happened was that one or two resourceful local sailors had taken advantage of Alex Smith not taking the *Mary Dee* back to Port Glasgow for the night. They had slipped into the club and 'taken a set of lines' from the yacht. This meant that they had taken measurements that allowed them to make a full scale replica of the *Mary Dee's* shape. This story has a modern twist, as Hugh Shields, one of the foremost present day model yachtsmen with more than sixty years experience in the sport, still has the *Mary Dee* replica from 1950. (To be clear, Hugh was not involved in the intrigue) Alex himself made copies of the *Mary Dee* for people at the Port Club. They did not however reach the same performance as the original.

Passion leading to blows

Tempers also were sometimes frayed in the heat of competition. Again this incident involves Alex Smith.

John Cunningham was a character well known in Scottish model yachting. He was based at the Whiteinch pond in the Victoria Park Club and had a manner that was considered quite officious, and a stentorian voice. He spoke loudly or shouted everywhere. He was nicknamed the 'Voice of Scotland'. He was a Salvation Army man and an inspector on the trams in Glasgow. All his boats were in Salvation Army colours.

An argument broke out between Alex and John. It was about the number of touches a sailor could have on his boat in a race. John claimed Alex had had too many. Davie Leggett, the official, tried to calm down the pair. He, as the race official, ruled in favour of John Cunningham. John, not being satisfied with that loudly exclaimed 'I am glad I made my point!!!' in his not so quiet voice. Bang!!! Alex with one blow knocked John into the water.

In 1954 another Scottish prize came to the Club.

The last major highlight of the Port Glasgow club was the winning of the British Championship on the 19th and 20th June 1954. The winning boat was Lucifer sailed by Robert Smith (son of Alex) aged 20 at Paisley. The weather was very variable over the three days and he had to use his 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th set of sails to win.



Robert Smith with Lucifer.

The Dramatic end of the Club

The Port Glasgow Club continued to prosper, then disaster came upon it in one night in January 1955, All the members received a message that the wooden Clubhouse had caught fire and was burned to the ground, with all yachts lost. Forty yachts went up in flames. Alex Smith's British and Empire Champion, the *Mary Dee*, worth over £50, was lost.

Only about six boats were saved. No cause was ever found, and there was nothing stolen, such as the valuable lead keels.

However two local boys (Ian Gallagher was one) had been the first to come across the fire. They gave this evidence at the court in Greenock. They had been walking up Bar's Brae and saw a red glow ahead. They ran to the Clubhouse and could not get into the front door as it was locked but when they went to the back they saw the back door wide open and several boats outside the clubhouse on the ground and no-one about. They tried to get some more boats but the heat drove them back and they waited till the Fire Engines arrived. The Clubhouse was lost.

The melted lead of the keels of the lost boats was salvaged and sold for scrap. Nothing else was left except the flagpole that for years was used by the Port Glasgow Protestant Club at the Glen. Nothing also was insured so all was lost in monetary value but the history and skill had also been lost.



The Clubhouse in 1953 at the Coronation

The years afterwards



Enjoyable times at Greenock

In the following years several of the Port Glasgow members stayed in the sport. They went down and sailed at Greenock, being welcomed there by the Greenock sailors. They raced as the Port Glasgow Club, and won trophies under that name.

Several times the Port Glasgow Town Council made noises that they would aid in the rejuvenation of the Club. One town councillor called Jimmy Carlton was very enthusiastic but he was killed in a bus accident at Robert Street in 1955 before he could help.

There were a few meetings in 1955 but with no plan. So a new Clubhouse eventually came to nothing.

The Mill Dam now is like the Gourock Ropeworks itself (which has closed down) , not in any fit condition to be used for its original purpose. The Dam is fully drained and the feeder stream from the Harelaw Reservoir bypasses the main area.



The dried-up Mill Dam looking along the breakwater

It is hard now to imagine the amount of pleasure this small body of water had given the people of Port Glasgow for model yachting, fishing and for fun. It is all now lost.

Modern radio-controlled 1 metre



Nowadays

Model yachting is still practised at the resilient Greenock Model Yacht Club at the Cowdieknowes Pond. Hugh Shields, the past Commodore, has carried on its tradition faithfully. He has travelled from Shetland to Gosport to sail his yachts.

Now there is some return to model yachting, where hi-tech is being applied, giving full control of the yacht in open water to the sailor by using radio.

This allows the yachts to be raced again in the old Tournament system and it is a splendid sight to see the twenty or so one-metre yachts jostling for positions in a brisk breeze. One can only hope these sailors will get the community support they need to carry on this tradition in the future, unlike the defunct club in Port Glasgow.

All Model Yacht associated photographs are the author's. Royal photos from the *Greenock Telegraph* and Model Yacht sketch from *MYA Magazine*, 1928.