



**Sail training**

# Teenage skipper

Four days in the life of Rona Sailing Project's Ocean 75 ketch *Donald Searle* and her crew of 15-year-old schoolboys. CB contributor *Nigel Sharp* was aboard as part of the afterguard



**Left: Takeover Day on Donald Searle**



We called it Takeover Day, the climax of our short sail-training cruise, when one of the 15-year-old boys from St Edmund's School in Canterbury would be given command of a 75ft (22.9m) ketch, with two others acting as helmsman and navigator, and we would find out whether our efforts at instruction had borne fruit.

Just four days previously, the Ocean 75 ketch *Donald Searle* had cast off from her berth at Universal Marina on the Hamble River with this crew of school CCF cadets. Three of them had sailed dinghies a couple of times but that was the total of their sailing experience.

*Donald Searle* belongs to the Rona Sailing Project, a sail training organisation founded in 1960. The volunteer after-guard included skipper Richard Reeder, myself as mate, and watch officer Nicky Boyce. We also had Paul Bold, a teacher from the school, on board.

St Edmund's had taken over four other boats too – *Rona 2* and *Merrilyn*, which are also owned by the RSP, and the Discovery Sailing Project's *Thermopylae* and *Discovery* – the whole exercise being part of the school's CCF training programme. We would be meeting up on the last evening but, other than that, each boat was free to go wherever its crew chose.

Before we cast off, Richard had briefed everyone on various safety matters and some of the important differences between living on a boat and living in a house – use of the heads for instance and the limited supplies of fresh water and electricity. The crew was split into two watches, more for the purpose of dividing the domestic duties rather than for sailing the boat as we weren't planning any long passages.

Once we got out into the Solent, we hoisted the mainsail and a No 2 Yankee – the boat could easily have carried more canvas in the conditions but we wanted to take things easy at first. We practiced some tacks while giving the crew particularly





**Left: Up main!  
Right: Rowing  
practice**



careful instruction in the use of the winches, and then tried a couple of gybes. We also practiced man-overboard drills, but using a bucket tied to a fender – much to the relief of a couple of the crew who had misunderstood the briefing and feared they might be the ‘chosen ones’!

Soon after 8pm we picked up a mooring off Yarmouth. It is the Project’s normal practice not to leave the Solent on the first day and to moor up somewhere with no access to the shore – to give a gentle introduction to the process of living on board and bearing in mind that both afterguard and crew may have had long and tiring journeys that morning.

Meanwhile two of the crew had been preparing shepherd’s pie for dinner which we all then sat down to enjoy.

This was to be a relatively short voyage of just three nights and four days, whereas most of the Project’s sail training voyages last a week and usually cross the Channel. We knew that the other boats were planning to go to Poole the following night but, based on a weather forecast predicting a southeasterly on Wednesday moving round to the west on Thursday, we thought that Weymouth was a much better plan.

On Wednesday morning we cast off at 0600 and motored to Totland Bay where we anchored to have breakfast, get an

update on the forecast and wait for the tide to turn in our favour. The forecast hadn’t changed so Weymouth it was.

We then had a sail down the coast which most of us thought was delightful, although mal de mer spoiled it for a few. By mid afternoon we were moored up in the Cove at Weymouth and, after the boat had been cleaned and tidied, most of the crew went ashore for showers while the duty cooks prepared roast lamb with all the trimmings.

To ensure we wouldn’t be fighting a foul tide going back into the Needles Channel, we cast off and left Weymouth at 0300 the following morning. Unfortunately the weather let us down this time – no westerly



## The Donald Searle

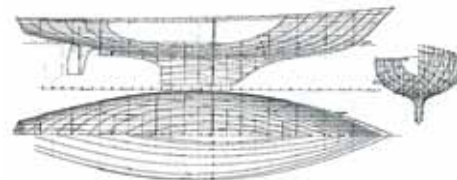
In the late 1970s Donald Searle, co-founder of the MFI furniture business, tragically died in a gliding accident at the age of 52. The terms of his will dictated that a sum of money should be spent on setting up a sail training organisation. As part of their research into this, his trustees contacted the then-named London Sailing Project. They soon realised that there was a lot more to it than had previously been thought, so it was decided to pay for a boat to be built for an existing organisation, and the LSP was the very fortunate beneficiary of that decision.

An order was then placed with Southern Ocean Shipyard in Poole to build a Van de Stadt-designed Ocean 75, which was completed in 1979 and duly named *Donald Searle*. She was the first GRP boat to be owned by the Project, whose main boat at that time was the 77ft (23.5m) timber ketch *Rona*. She was fitted out with 20 berths, including separate cabins for the skipper and for the rest of the afterguard.

*Donald Searle* competed in the Tall Ships Race each year between 1980 and 1991, including the 1984 Transatlantic race. This racing role was then taken over by the Oyster 68 *Rona 2*, and since then *Donald Searle* has concentrated on sail-training voyages nearer to home.

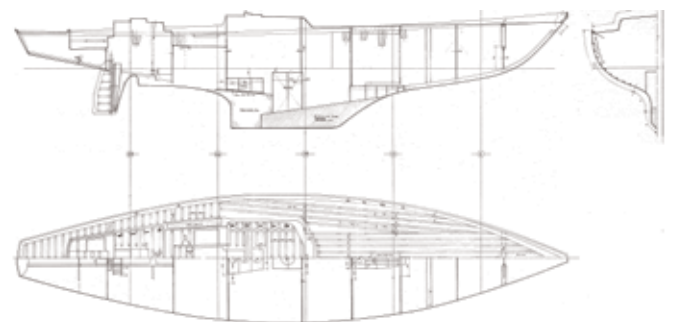
In June 2004, the boat's 25th birthday was appropriately celebrated with a dinner and a regatta based at Gunwharf Quays, Portsmouth. The other Project boats, *Helen Mary R* (a Bowman 57, since replaced by *Merrilyn*) and *Rona 2*, also attended, as did sail-training boats from other organisations and some boats privately owned by Project members.

Over the years the Searle Trust has continuously made generous contributions to the Project specifically for the upkeep of *Donald Searle*, and Donald's son Andy has been on the Project's Board of Trustees since 1998. When the Project completed its new boat, the Ocean 62 *Merrilyn*,



### Donald Searle

LOA: 75ft (22.9m)  
LWL: 61ft 10in (18.9m)  
Beam: 17ft 4in (5.3m)  
Draught: 8ft 6in (2.6m)  
Design: Van de Stadt



in 2009, Andy asked if it would be possible for *Donald Searle* to have a major refit to bring the standard of fit-out nearer to the new levels set by *Merrilyn*. The answer was, of course, 'yes', and this work has now been completed. The cabin soles have been replaced, headlining panels have been fitted for the first time, the bunk fronts are now in high-gloss varnish, the topsides and coachroof have been painted and a swept deck has been laid using the composite material Tek-Dek. All this extra work was generously paid for by Andy.



## The Rona Sailing Project

In the late 1950s, Lord Amory, Chancellor of the Exchequer and a keen sailor, found himself reluctant to make sailing plans lest his parliamentary duties meant he had to let people down. One solution proved to be to find a crew of Sea Scouts. This led in time to Amory's convening, in November 1959, a meeting of people with experience of youth work and sea activities, which led to the London Sailing Project.

The Project, which currently owns the Oyster 68 *Rona 2*, built in 1992, the Ocean 62 *Merrilyn* and the Ocean 75 *Donald Searle*, has just five full-time employees but, more significantly, an amazing 400 or so volunteer skippers, mates, watch officers and watch leaders, many of whom first sailed with the Project as trainees and have worked their way up through the structured promotion system.

*Donald Searle* and *Merrilyn* do 16 week-long sail-training voyages each year as well as special voyages for schools and special-needs groups. *Rona 2* competes in the Tall Ships Race each year and sails as many other voyages as time allows during the rest of the season.

The voyage fee is now just £100 for a week all-found – a fraction of the real cost. The afterguard pay the same and are also obliged to take part in a refit weekend and a familiarisation weekend each year.

The experience includes living together in a fairly small space and working as a team in every way. All the trainees have to help with the cleaning and catering, and the standard of meals can be surprisingly high. All the afterguard and trainees sit down to meals together – a fundamental part of the team-building experience.

Each trainee has the chance to win an Amory or Scott award if they 'give of their best'. The Project's aim today is still very much the same as it was 50 years ago: "to provide ... opportunities for young people and people with disabilities to acquire those attributes of a seaman, namely a sense of responsibility, resourcefulness and teamwork, which help them throughout their lives"

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**Below: The heaving-line competition**



wind, in fact no wind at all – so we motored all the way back to the Solent, with some rain thrown in for good measure. We anchored just east of Lymington for lunch, and to discuss the plan for the following morning – Takeover Day. Each of the five boats would be sailed by the trainees on a course from Prince Consort cardinal buoy to the mouth of the Hamble River.

It was hoped that this would all happen without any intervention from the afterguard – however, should this prove necessary, points would be deducted. We suggested the crew appoint a skipper, one or two helmsmen and a navigator from amongst themselves.

In the afternoon the sun appeared and a gentle breeze came in from the southwest, allowing the crew to get some practice, although it was all too brief as we needed to be moored up at East Cowes Marina to clean up the boat, have an early dinner, and then get up to the recreation ground for the competition – throwing heaving lines, a knot-tying relay race and a nautical quiz in which our team did particularly well, even answering a question that we had never discussed with them!

Everyone was up very early the next morning brimming with enthusiasm for the task ahead. Once we were out of the Medina River, our new 15-year-old skipper

George took charge. The light westerly wind and the strong east-going tide prompted our real skipper to turn the engine on for the first bit – it wasn't cheating as it wasn't a race – and we were by no means the only boat doing it! Helmsman Lawrence then took the boat along the course, guided by Theo the navigator. We had to step in for safety reasons on three occasions, resulting in a six-point forfeit.

However, we got safely to the finishing line, the crew making us in the afterguard very proud that they could achieve what they had done after such a short time sailing on such a big boat, and winning the competition in the process. 