



18 GOING ON A HUNDRED-PLUS

A 'restricted' class, but only in length, and with only a handful of boats, the Falmouth 18-Footer, born 1898, is still sailing. Words and photos by *Nigel Sharp*



EMILY HARRIS

“The freedom that this single rule gives has inevitably resulted in boats with massive sail areas and deep, heavy keels”



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIGEL SHARP

Previous spread:
Magpie, Whisper,
Myrtle and Moey
off St Mawes
Above: Bob
Edwards in
Magpie

This is the story of a class of just nine or 10 boats – a small class by any standards – but one with a rich history spanning a period of more than 110 years.

The Falmouth 18-Footer Restricted Class came into being at the very end of the 19th Century. The word ‘restricted’ could almost be misleading as the only restriction is that the hull length has to be 18ft (5.5m) long. The freedom that this single rule gives has inevitably resulted in boats with massive sail areas and deep, heavy keels. It might seem strange that it hasn’t led to skiff-type boats such as the Sydney Harbour 18s (a class which actually has more restrictions than just the length), but this is probably because, during the period when it might have happened, there was very little racing activity in the class.

The first two boats were built in St Mawes by Fred Pasco in 1898: *Chow Chow* (renamed *Magpie* in 1904) to an A E Payne design for a Mr R Paul, and *Chin Chin* for a Dr Harden, a founder member of Falmouth Sailing Club, to his own design. These were soon followed by two boats built in Falmouth: *Marion*, built by the Jacket family for themselves in 1900, and the Alfred Mylne-designed *Myrtle* (CB170) in 1902, and then *Wahine*, another Pasco/Harden collaboration, built in 1903 above a coal store (now a Co-op) in the centre of St Mawes.

There is known to have been active, and often very close, racing between these five boats throughout the early part of the 20th century – in one race in 1929, for

instance, *Wahine* was beating *Marion* by one second at the end of the first round, and at the finish the positions were reversed but with the same time difference!

All the boats experimented with various gaff and gunter rigs during this time, but it was not until the early 30s that an almost revolutionary change took place. In 1931, a sixth boat joined the fleet. She was the bermudan-rigged *Marie* – built by the legendary St Mawes boatbuilder and sailor Frankie Peters (probably using some of the Pasco moulds) for Ian B Henderson.

It would seem that Henderson was more interested in owning a boat than sailing one; right from the start he allowed Frankie to race *Marie* as if she was his own, and then sold her to him a few years later. She proved to be unbeatable from the start – so much so that all the other boats gradually changed to bermudan rig, although that failed to make enough of a difference initially as Frankie dominated the class for a while longer.

That was to change after the war. In the late 40s, *Magpie*’s then owner, a Dr Dixon, died and left her to George Corke, a boatbuilder from Mylor. From then on, and well into the 50s, there developed an intense rivalry between George and Frankie. They would race each other up to five times a week, often with incredibly close finishes. This attracted huge local interest, particularly in St Mawes where it is said ‘the whole village’ would turn out to watch them. The St Mawes Sailing Club records indicate that, over the years, honours were pretty even.



Meanwhile, what of the other boats? Just before the war, the Jacket family sold *Marion* to someone in Fowey on condition that she would never be sold back to anyone in the Falmouth area, as they thought they would find it too heartbreaking to see her again. Sometime in the 50s, a St Mawes man, Stanley Green, went to Fowey with a view to buying her, but for some reason decided not to. She has not been heard of since.

Chin Chin was laid up at Freshwater Boatyard in St Mawes during the war, but not much is known of her from then until the 50s when, while she was lying in a field in Penryn already in a sorry state, a tractor drove into her. That was the final straw and the decision was made to break her up. *Wahine* is thought to have broken her moorings in 1978. As a result of the damage caused, her keel was removed for scrap and she was burnt.

LIVEBOARD

The rest is good news but only against all the odds. George Corke sold *Magpie* in the late 60s. Information is then sketchy – she may at some point have been used for dredging for oysters in the Carrick Roads, and she subsequently had a coachroof put on her. Around 1972 David Luck bought her “from a girl called Gail at Penpol Boatyard”. David’s family owned the St Austell Brewery and he lived on board *Magpie* for two summer seasons in the Scillies when he was looking after the company’s interests there. Sometime after he sold her in the mid 70s,

Above: Myrtle and Magpie
Right: Outrageous amount of sail on Myrtle



“He decided to take a one-off GRP moulding off her”

she somehow found her way onto a beach up the Fowey River. John Andrew Senior (another St Mawes man – there’s a theme running here) went up to have a look at her in about 1980 with a view to buying her for his sons but “she was lying on her side with another boat collapsed on top of her with a ply coachroof as rotten as a pear”.

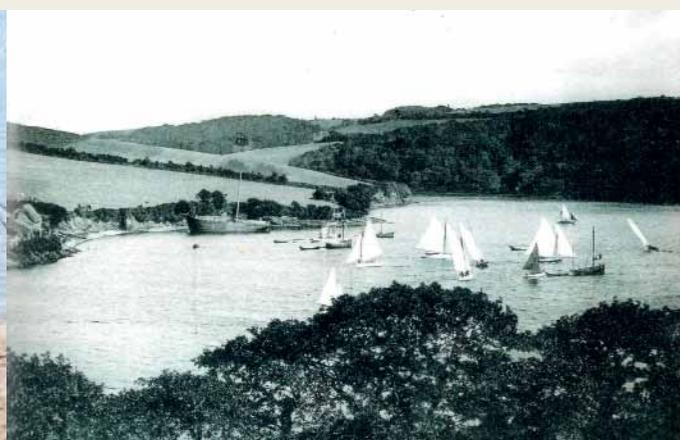
Not surprisingly, John left her there, but she was subsequently discovered by Dougie Burnett (yet another St Mawes man, and responsible for saving many classic boats from similar fates) and John Milan who, in conjunction with John Fuge, restored her. She was

relaunched in 1989 and has been sailing ever since, now in the ownership of Bob Edwards, Daniel Duff and Chris Thomas, who bought her in 2005.

Myrtle was also found on a beach – in 1981 up the River Fal by Chris Monk. After he made some enquiries he decided that he wanted to restore her. However, when he looked into it further, he thought that she was too far gone so he decided to take a one-off GRP moulding off her. Before doing so, he planed off some of *Myrtle*’s stem – if he hadn’t done so, the resulting hull would have been longer than 18ft by the thickness of the fibreglass. The

Below left: Moey waiting for the tide

Below right: 18-Footers in 1904



Experiments with sail area, rig and freeboard

Throughout most of the history of the 18-Footers, there has been no restriction on the size or type of rigs. In the early years most of the boats had a standing lug rig but then gradually adopted gaff mainsails. At that time it would seem that topsails were not always used, or perhaps only downwind, but they gradually came into more common use.

In 1925, Tom Jacket offered to reduce *Marion*’s sail area to 400sqft (37m²) “to encourage competition” and this was then adopted for the class. Certainly, the 1936 St Mawes race card stated that “The SA of the 18-Footers is restricted to 400 square feet”

In the late 20s, a couple of the boats experimented with gunter rigs to “improve windward performance”. After the bermudan-rigged *Marie* was built in 1931, all the others followed suit. Mast heights of 40 to 50ft (12-15m) were not uncommon, and *Chin Chin*’s was reported to be a staggering 60ft (18.3m) at one time.

When Mo Swale bought *Marie* in 1992, there were no other 18-Footers racing (Dougie Burnett had *Magpie* but rarely raced) and he had to race with the Bay classes in Falmouth Week. He wasn’t particularly happy with this so put a gaff rig on her so that he could race with the G Class – handicap gaff-rigged boats – in the more sheltered Carrick Roads. It would

seem that, just as they had in the ‘30s, the rest of the fleet has followed *Marie*’s example with regard to rig – they are now all gaff again.

There is no restriction in sail area now, but all the existing boats have a similar amount – around 550sqft (51m²) for upwind sailing, as well as asymmetric spinnakers held out with poles as long as the boat and often used with their inboard ends on a shroud rather than the mast to get extra reach.

Such large sail areas need correspondingly deep and heavy keels. The average draught is around 5ft (1.5m), and the lead keel that Mo Swale fitted to *Francis*, and then *Moey*, for instance is 1,150kg. *Magpie* has had a variety of keel configurations over the years – a centreboard originally, switching to a fixed keel, back to a centreboard and now a fixed keel again.

Another important consideration with these over-canvassed boats is freeboard. Lessons seem to have been learnt here over the years – Bob Edwards took the opportunity to add 3in (7.6cm) to *Magpie* when he bought her; temporary strakes were added to *Myrtle* before *Whisper*’s moulding was taken off her; and Mo Swale seems to have learnt the lesson twice as *Francis* had 2½in (6.4cm) more than *Marie*, while *Moey* has been given 3½in (9cm).

Falmouth 18-Footer

DESIGNED
Various

BUILT
1898-2010

LENGTH OVERALL
18ft (5.49m)

BEAM
Varies

DRAUGHT
Typically
5ft (1.5m)

SAIL AREA
Typically
550sqft (51m²)

“When he mentioned a transom-hung rudder it met with disapproval”



Top left: Rob Collins and Daniel Duff adjusting rigging on *Myrtle*
Top right: *Whisper* off St Mawes
Above left: The restoration of *Magpie*, and
above right: *Magpie* before work began

new boat, called *Whisper*, is now owned by Julian Davey (of Pasco’s Boatyard, St Just-in-Roseland) and Pete Little. *Myrtle* herself was then due to be scrapped, but somehow she was saved and was in Pip Guest’s garden in Fowey for many years until, once again, Dougie Burnett came to the rescue and instigated another restoration with John Fuge. Sadly, Dougie died before the work was complete but the project was then taken on by Jonathan Money and Phil Badger, who sailed her on the Helford River until 2006 when they sold her to the ‘Gerrans Syndicate’ headed by local sailmaker Rob Collins.

Marie is the only boat which has not been troubled by such uncertainties. Frankie sold her to local plumber Joe Madden in the late 50s, and she then had several changes of ownership before Mo Sawle bought her from Jack Cannon in 1992. He put a gaff rig on her for the first time and enjoyed many years of sailing in her, mostly racing in the Falmouth Handicap G Class.

In 2008 he decided he wanted a lower-maintenance boat with more freeboard, so he sold *Marie* to Chris de Glanville, having taken a GRP mould off her. From that he moulded himself a new boat which he called *Francis*, after his father. This was his first attempt at GRP boatbuilding and he soon came to realise that she was too heavy, so in early 2010, using the same mould, he built another hull which he expected to be 600kg lighter. He took absolutely everything off *Francis* including the rig,

deck fittings, ballast keel and even the cockpit coamings and toerails, and fitted them to the new hull. Christened *Moey*, she was launched on 25 June 2010 and took part in her first race less than 48 hours later. The 18-Footers are clearly in Mo’s blood as Fred Pasco, builder of three of the original boats, was his great-great-uncle.

DOUBLE FIGURES AND HIGH-TECH

That makes nine boats – the 10th is due to be launched this year. She is being built in Falmouth by Steve Neal who has sailed Thames A-Raters and multihulls, and will be called *Daisy May* after his grandmother. Construction is relatively hi-tech – cedar strip planked with epoxy/carbon inside and out. Above the waterline her lines are very similar to those of *Magpie*, but she is relatively flat-bottomed and will have a lifting keel – mainly for easier trailing but also useful on long downwind legs in passage races. Even though he can do what he likes within the 18ft length restriction, Steve is sensitive to the spirit of the class – for instance, when he mentioned to existing owners that he might have a transom-hung rudder and it met with disapproval, he changed his mind.

While it is obviously sad that two or three of the original boats no longer exist, it is almost a miracle that all of the others do. And it is also highly appropriate that the five boats currently sailing are all based in the Percuil River, so close to the birthplace of most of the fleet. 🌐