



The yawl *Nordwind*
in the 1939 Fastnet

BEKEN OF COWES

At the outbreak of war

Nigel Sharp reflects on how it affected the weekend's sailing

Saturday 2 September 1939. Much of the country was enjoying pleasant weather with a light and variable southerly breeze. Sailing races were taking place at a number of clubs: from London Corinthian SC to Looe SC, from Shanklin Amateur SC to Strangford Lough YC and from Weymouth SC to the Clyde Cruising Club. But it was no ordinary Saturday. The previous day German troops had invaded Poland and Britain had issued an ultimatum that they must withdraw by 0900hrs on Sunday. Two hours after the deadline passed, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain made the announcement: "...this country is at war with Germany".

Tensions had been building up throughout the summer. The RORC considered cancelling its Harwich to Weser race in May but decided that this would be an



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undesirable snub to German yachtsmen and it so went ahead; the following year the RORC's London clubhouse would be destroyed during the Blitz.

The Hindenberg Cup (an annual regatta for European navies sailing Stars) was held in Kiel in July. It was won by a Royal Navy crew for the first time with the Kriegsmarine, the German Navy, coming second. The British skipper, Lieutenant Sam Woodcock, would subsequently serve on HMS *Barham* and would be one of 841 sailors to lose his life when she was sunk by torpedoes in November 1941.

The 60 ton yawl *Nordwind*, owned and sailed by the Kriegsmarine, won line honours in the Fastnet Race, after which British, German, French and Dutch sailors enjoyed a dinner together at Plymouth's Cooperative Cafe. At the end of the war, *Nordwind* (see CBs 85, 199) would become one of the so-called Windfall Yachts when she was taken as a war prize by the Royal Navy.

At Dartmouth Royal Regatta at the end of August, the regatta guard ship, HMS *Brazen*, was forced to leave suddenly in the middle of the night, just two days after she had arrived, to take up more serious duties. The following July *Brazen* would be sunk by enemy aircraft in the Dover Straits.

Lowestoft Sea Week was due to end on Saturday 2 September. The last two days were cancelled and all visiting yachts were instructed to make their way to their home ports. "Not only was this the end of a sailing season but the end of an era", wrote Peter Scott, who had been competing in his International 14. "Perhaps we would never sail dinghies again."

Meanwhile the Royal Torbay YC was hosting Burton Week, the national championships for National 12s and

this should also have ended that Saturday. But during the course of Friday, after news of the invasion of Poland came through and increasing numbers of competitors were leaving to report for more important duties elsewhere, the last race was brought forward to that

afternoon. Bruce Banks' *Westwind* won that race and the Burton Cup itself. Another race – for 12-Ms – was to take place in Torbay on Sunday. However, soon after it started a launch approached each of the competing crews to tell them that war had been declared and the race was immediately abandoned.

Although Burnham Week (due to start that Saturday) was cancelled, a handful of yachts from the Royal Burnham Yacht Club enjoyed a sail on the River Crouch a few hours after Chamberlain's announcement. John Booth was on board *Felise* with his new fiancée Peggy whose father was the club's Commodore and he later wrote that they were "half expecting to see German aircraft before we got to the Roach. What were our thoughts? Relief, fear, anticlimax, or just a nice day for a sail."