

RODNEY GRENVILLE HILL
3rd October 1930 – 26th April 2009

Tribute by Richard Taylor
at The Church of St Edmund, East Mersea on Wednesday, 6th May 2009

We are here to remember and give thanks for one of the most remarkable and colourful lives that most of us will ever be touched by -...Rod, Rodders, Monster, Nelson, Napoleon, Capt Bligh. He was known by many names, some printable, some not!

Many of us have kept each other amused for hours over a few beers by telling Rodney stories, mostly with affection and respect. He may have got himself out of so many scrapes because he himself got himself into them, but always because he had the guts and sense of adventure to take the risk in the first place.

I now have the privilege of this opportunity to tell a few Rodney stories, having years ago promised him to do so after several beers at another funeral - on condition that: A - I outlived him and B - I only tell the truth! That is easy, given that so much of the truth is almost unbelievable anyway and there are so many true stories to tell. So, forgive me Rodney if I get some of the stories wrong through ignorance rather than intent.

Yachtsman, inventor, engineer, entrepreneur, husband, father, friend, “Master Mariner” (though of course Captain Hill bought his Master’s ticket in an Aberdeen pub for a couple of hundred quid), self-confessed pirate. Rodney was first and foremost a seaman.

He would probably want to be remembered mostly for his many outstanding achievements - such as

- winning his class in the Bermuda Race,
- flying a light aircraft across the Atlantic from Wisconsin to Headcorn whilst his passenger, Sylvia Vroon, replenished the fuel tanks from 45 gallon drums in the cabin,
- representing his country in the Southern Cross series in Australia, and taking part in One Ton Cups in New Zealand and Australia
- his numerous victories in East Anglian and RORC races,
- his first transatlantic crossing to Antigua, via Rio de Janeiro in the days before the ARC and crossing the pond became commonplace,
- and of course his central role in coordinating the rescue efforts in the 79 Fastnet Race.
- But I believe that we will remember him mainly for his personality – inventive, kind, generous, wise, mischievous, loyal, puckish, entertaining, irrepressible, incorrigible, irascible, impossible! As they say, they really don’t build them like that any more!

Perhaps above all, we remember his courage, never more evident than over these last dreadful weeks. He demonstrated that courage

- On the night when a French fishing boat knocked off the bow of his 8 metre, “Scylla”, trapping those below, when he stopped the worst of the inflow of water with a bagged sail held in by an outboard motor, and then moved all the movable lead ballast onto the counter to keep the bows out of the water.
- Then of course in the 79 Fastnet storm when he and his crew guided in the RAF Nimrod aircraft and stood by some of those in trouble.
- When on the water-logged and sinking old Van de Dekken he ensured the safe transfer of each of his seven crew to the cargo net on the side of the massive containership in huge seas before taking her round on his own for one last attempt, lying the yacht alongside the ship before leaving the wheel and going forward to clamber to safety.
- And perhaps most of all, during his last illness. When I visited him at Colchester General he was totally composed and matter of fact about his situation but very much aware of the odds facing him. He casually remarked that he looked forward to meeting again either back at the Club or at the funeral”.

Rodney was born in Brentwood, but “found” Mersea by chance through the Cambridge University Cruising Club when he came to take part in a race against the West Mersea Yacht Club. Later he came to Colchester to work at Paxmans and live in Mersea. He met and married a Mersea girl, Jill Gowen, possibly the only woman in the world who could cope with him. What an amazing partnership it has been, if a little fiery at times. I will not forget seeing Rodney queuing for his supper at the fish & chip shop the day he beached the Humphrey Morris right across the Cadet Week start line, so Jill refused even to feed him! Though not exactly a romantic, I am sure that he loved her dearly. He certainly knew how lucky he was to have her and once told me so!

And of course they produced 3 fine kids – Andrew, the only RAF pilot professing to be a pacifist because the weight of the weaponry spoiled the aerobatic capabilities of his aircraft. Jerry Hill, national champion Laser “Sad Bloke”, always with a grin on his face. And Rebecca, having produced two fine sons, who has now picked up the mantle of Rod’s business as Chairman of Marine & Industrial Transmissions. Our sympathies and best wishes go with them all at this sad time.

Rodney started his sailing in dinghies, such as National 12s and Brightlingsea One Designs. He soon moved on to offshore boats in the aforementioned “Scylla” which he had dug out of a mud berth. Then the Stella “Starlight”, and the Buchanan designed Viking, followed by Cyprenus and Caniline. In the well known S&S 34 prototype Morning After, he sparred with Prime Minister Edward Heath in sister ship Morning Cloud. On one occasion, Rodney, in the lead, realised that he should have turned sharply at the last buoy. However he dropped his mainsail and feigned confusion as though a halyard had broken, then and waited until Heath had sailed serenely past him before re-hoisting the sail and turning back onto the correct course.

Next was the lovely varnished Morningtown (Browntown) and the blue Tartan 41 (Bluetown) in which he competed for a place in the 1973 Admiral’s Cup team with a bunch of yachting heavies including Donal (Paddy) McClement, Belinda Hamilton, Gerhard Clausen and others. Paddy reminded us of the occasion after the 74 Hook Race when we sailed up the River Maas to Rotterdam and convinced the river police that we were also motoring by the subterfuge of two Irishmen down below going “duff, duff, duff” while Rodney changed the

head gasket below. Rodney was never afraid of making modifications and actually reduced the lead keel of that boat with a chain saw!

Dismasted I believe six times in total, it was the occasion when he lost the mast on a Channel Race that he invented the novel new rig of “boot rigged yawl” raising a jury rig by stepping a spinnaker pole in a seaboot. After that he used to recommend every boat to carry a welly boot for the purpose – just in case! That piece of advice proved valuable to Adam Claxon who later put it into practice when dismasted on the Cape Town to Rio.

“Bluetown” was the last of the racing boats before the two Oyster cruising boats, 39 and 46, with which he explored the Atlantic and the Caribbean. Also the two little ships, Humphrey Morris and Tjeldoi, the Nelson “Seawork” and a miscellany of other craft. He spent much of his time in recent years in the Caribbean, and particular Becquia where Tjeldoi has become quite a landmark in the Bay.

After a successful career as MD of British Twin Disc he mounted what we would now call a buy-out with the support of Twin Disc boss John Batten, taking on the franchise for distributing Twin Disc products in the UK. It was a big gamble and came just before the 1976 RORC Round Britain Race, for which Rodney had entered Bluetown in the Stopping Division, involving 24 hour stops at Crookhaven, Stornaway and Blythe before returning to the finish at Gosport.

Rodney, anxious about his new business, had arranged to fly home during the leg around Muckle Flugga from Stornaway to Blyth. He was making frequent link calls to check on the business, but I remember overhearing these calls and finally persuaded him that he wasn't needed back at the office and he should not give up on the then greatest sailing adventure of his life. However he had promised Nick Greville to take over as skipper for that leg and didn't want to disappoint him, so he eventually agreed to stay on board for the leg as Chief Steward, to which he added the job of “engine starter”. However in this latter task he failed as, having used up so much battery power on his VHF we had to arrange for the Blyth Yacht Club to provide a tow in.

But I don't think he ever went back to daily attendance at Queenborough, declaring that “a thousand a day keeps the Chairman away” and duly moved with his family back from Kent to Mersea.

As a relief from the tedium of the mainstream business, he set up Seawork. Rodney described them as “professional pirates” as they carried out ad hoc maritime jobs that no-one else would touch, such as the rebuilding of the section of Southend Pier demolished by a drunken coaster captain, or the demolition of the wreck of a paddlesteamer from a beach on the Gower peninsula. They even had the distinction of building the first over water windfarm. However, increasing legislative restrictions and health and safety rules led them to sell that business a couple of years ago.

Rodney always liked to have a campaign on the go and was passionately protective of the Mersea Waterfront. He was never really a Committee man although he was President of the unofficial WMYC Lunchtime Committee. Many was the time he would come on the phone to me with “the Commodore is trying to do his and that, and there are a group of chaps that just won't allow it!” David Powell solved the problem for a while by making him Vice Commodore - House and we all enjoyed Peter Vince's steak sandwiches at the Bar in what became known for a while as “Rod's Caff”.

Rodney also held the posts of Deputy Launching Authority and Hon Secretary of the West Mersea Lifeboat, which gave him the opportunity of returning past favours, having been a “customer” on several occasions.

As proven by the number of people here today, some of whom have travelled great distances to be here, and the enormous number of letters, cards and emails received by Jill and the family, he was a wonderful friend and great company, always with a fund of stories and ideas. His wisdom and common sense was always worth listening to. He was immensely loyal to his friends, family and especially those who worked for him and sailed with him..... And he held no grudges - I remember having a huge row with him in the lifeboat shed one day after which is was straight round to the Club for a beer as though nothing had happened! Mind you if he had born a grudge against everyone he had ever rowed with, he would not have many friends left.

Rodney, I hope you reckon I have told the truth this afternoon, but if not it will probably be because the story came from you, and you never let the absolute truth get in the way of a good story!

I could carry on telling Rodney stories for many hours, and probably will. We will always remember him with great respect and affection. I shall certainly miss that voice from beside me at the Bar which always said "Ah! Young Richard – And how is your world?"

Rodney, my world is a lesser place without you!