

SQUADRON MAN

FORTY YEARS AFTER CUTTING HIS TEETH ON A WILD CRUISE TO CAPE TOWN, ROYAL YACHT SQUADRON COMMODORE **CHRISTOPHER SHARPLES** TELLS SAM FORTESCUE THAT HE'S ABOUT READY FOR ANOTHER ADVENTURE

The Squadron's 22nd Commodore has a lot on his plate. Following election in 2013 for a four-year term, he became responsible for delivering a splendid celebration of the club's bicentenary, this summer. And he is also involved in Ben Ainslie's bid to return the America's Cup to Britain for the first time since 1851.

"Over the years, the Squadron has become much busier," he agrees. And not least because of initiatives he has launched. "I am particularly keen to address the needs of younger sailors, primarily in their 20s and early 30s, who have less free time due to family and work commitments.

"I have introduced a new programme that provides a mix of social events and sail training on some new J/70s which we have recently acquired due to the generosity of a member."

The young people have to be 'sponsored' by a member, meaning most of them will be children, relatives or friends. "We're not throwing the doors to The Castle wide open," Christopher says. "It has to be like that because they'll be using the RYS facilities."

Conscious that there is a need to appeal more widely than the core sailing community, he has also launched a Foundation to help young people on the Isle of Wight train for jobs in the marine industry. He hopes to raise several million pounds from members – enough to help 20 or 30 youngsters each year find apprenticeships or complete training. "We will provide finance each year for young people who couldn't do it otherwise."

He says that the Squadron has always been like this – a club with social aims as well as leisure, and a membership running from ordinary people to the very rich. When the Squadron was first formed in 1815, the original 42 members comprised land-owning aristocracy but also Army officers, MPs, vicars, merchants (such as a manufacturer of sea biscuits) – a healthy social mix from all parts of the UK, bound together by a love of the sea.

"The mix has not really changed that much in two hundred years," Christopher says unapologetically. "The whole point of a private club is that the members get to elect their friends whose company they enjoy, whether it is

to have dinner with or perhaps for an extended cruise or yacht race. Of course, this tends to result in like-minded people becoming predominant in any club whilst still leaving room for mavericks such as Captain Scott and Max Aitken, whose personality and achievements are deserving of an invitation to membership on those grounds alone."

For one reason or another the formula seems to work. The Squadron has a waiting list of candidates that extends for several years, including, since the rules changed in 2013, some half-a-dozen women. "I would be surprised if we didn't elect our first lady member within weeks," he says, followed quickly by a caveat about not influencing the ballot. "On 1 June, the date of our actual bicentenary, we are meeting on the same site of our first meeting

in 1815 at the Thatched House Tavern in London."

He recognises that clubs can't stand still – even private members' clubs such as the Squadron. "Clubs come and go; they have to constantly reinvent themselves to survive. The RYS was in dire financial straits after both World Wars." Christopher thinks there's a good chance that the Royal

Yacht Squadron will still exist in some form 200 years from now, as long as it continues to evolve. "But you have to be careful not to throw tradition aside – it's one reason lots of members tell us they prize their membership."

To become Commodore of Britain's most senior yacht club, you have to be quite a distinguished sailor. Christopher seems to fit the bill, with numerous Fastnets, Newport-Bermuda races and no fewer than 45 Cowes Week regattas to his name. But his racing form is not why he was invited to join the Royal Yacht Squadron back in 1973, at the tender age of 27.

Cape Town or bust

Like many keen sailors, he grew up on and around boats. When Christopher was a young teenager, his father had first a 26ft South Coast One Design, then a larger 32ft wooden sloop followed by a 36ft Excalibur. "We pottered around the Solent and went cruising in the West Country and I have very fond memories of cruising in north Brittany, before the days of marinas."

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His father had bought a Gallant 53 named *Alaunt of Corfe* and at the age of 23 Christopher was given permission to take the large boat on his own from the Hamble down to Weymouth. After that he nipped across the Channel to Cherbourg with some friends. "Navigation was dead reckoning and the B&G Homer Heron which gave bearings to onshore radio beacons. We were complete amateurs and were bowling along under spinnaker across the Channel towards the French coast in a rather thick mist, with visibility well under a mile when one of the crew, Timmy Guinness who was claiming to be an expert using the basic navigation kit, came up on deck ashen-faced to announce dramatically that by his calculations we were now three miles inland near a church! We doused the spinnaker immediately just as the forts on the Cherbourg breakwater

loomed into view about half a mile dead ahead; most certainly more by good luck than good management."

At the age of 24, he'd been working for six years in the sugar brokerage business and was, by his own admission, "keen for some adventure". He had heard about a new race from Cape Town to Rio, due to depart in 1973, and decided that he wanted to take part. His boss agreed to give him a sabbatical year, so all he needed was crew... and a boat.

"Not thinking he would agree for a moment, I asked my father if I could borrow *Alaunt* without disclosing what I had in mind. He said 'Sure, do you want to go to Weymouth again?' When I revealed my intention to set sail from the Hamble to Cape Town and then Rio and back again, having never done more as skipper than one trip to Weymouth and another to Cherbourg, to my great surprise, he agreed."

Above
Christopher at the helm of borrowed Baltic 42 *Going Concern* on passage to Poole



Somehow he talked four friends into taking sabbaticals as well and set sail from the Hamble in May 1972. They spent a couple of months in the Med, put into the Canary Islands and the Cape Verdes then made the 4,600-mile hop to Cape Town. Christopher recorded the passage for an article later published in *Yachting World*, but highlights included romping along at 9 knots in the Horse Latitudes and endless tins of ravioli. “I was the oldest on board at 25 by the time we reached Cape Town and they gave us a grand welcome.”

They completed the race, but tragedy intervened soon afterwards, during the return from Rio. Christopher and his crew were on passage for Bermuda to meet his father, Richard, who had taken up the governorship of the island the year before. As Richard walked with his dog after dinner on 10 March 1973, he was gunned down by an assassin for what was later discovered to be a black power group.

Christopher is understandably reluctant to talk about this period of his life, but on his return to Britain, he was invited to join the Squadron by family friend Ted Heath. Christopher and his father had taken the then Prime Minister sailing a few years earlier, when they were entering RORC cross-Channel events. “I recall this was the first time he had been on a cruiser/racer. He once told me this is what gave him the ‘sailing bug’ that led to *Morning Cloud*.”

High flyer

The young man decided at this point that he would never work again for someone else. Instead, he set himself up as a commodities trader. “I had learned the ropes already and one thing lead to another. Episodes in life give you the confidence to do things you didn’t know you could do.”

He is similarly modest about his subsequent success as an entrepreneur – first in commodities trading, and later in software companies such as Fidessa, now in the FTSE250, and Digital River, which rode high in the dotcom bubble of the 1990s. His firms have created thousands of jobs, but he puts some of it down to luck. “I was there at the start of the tech revolution and I could spot opportunities to use it to deliver services people wanted. I don’t know the first thing about computer coding.”

Work has dominated his adult life, and he admits that he hasn’t done as much sailing as he might have liked over the past 30 years. “But more than many”, he adds quickly.



Besides the regular racing, there was a stint on charter in the BVI and the Stockholm Archipelago last year. Now, he’s planning to join the RYS rally to Burma next year, which is expecting up to 50 people in 12 boats chartered from Thailand. “Burma is opening up – there is now a trodden path, although you need a special licence to cruise there.”

And once he’s finished his term as Commodore, he has grander plans still. “I want to cross the Pacific,” he says simply. That would be difficult at present, as his only boat is a 42ft GRP motor launch used regularly for RYS purposes. But he’s fixing his sights on the Tropics. “Having sailed the Atlantic again two years ago in the trade wind belt, I have no doubt that the warm weather and deep blue seas with the stars ‘to steer her by’ is an experience that is hard to beat.”

But first, he has to see out his term as Commodore. I ask him whether he’d rather sail a J-Class or a modern America’s Cup foiling cat, and he laughs. “The J-Class are coming to Cowes this summer as part of our Invitational Regatta in July and of course the Squadron is very involved with Sir Ben Ainslie as we are the challenging club for the America’s Cup. So maybe I will even get the chance to do both!”

Either way, he’s hoping for an emotional finale in Bermuda in June 2017, a few months before he steps down. “Given my family connections with the island, it will be the ultimate icing on the cake when hopefully Ben wins the cup in Bermuda for Great Britain and the trophy returns to its original home at our RYS Castle in Cowes.”

Left
Arriving in Cape Town on *Alaunt* in 1973

Above
With the crew of *J/109 Inspira* – 5th overall in her class at Cowes Week 2014

Below
Showing future PM Ted Heath the ropes in 1967 with father Richard at the helm

