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Ralph Bird: Cornish boatbuilder



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Bird at work: he hand-built 29 of the 141 gigs now in use;

Ralph Bird was the Cornish craftsman boat-builder who took the moribund sport of Cornish pilot gig racing from the pages of the history books and turned it into a thriving competitive pastime, claimed now to be the fastest-growing community sport in the West Country and even to have become an international sport.

The scale of Bird's contribution to this anachronistic revival may be partly gauged from the fact that of 141 registered gigs now in use, he personally hand-built 29 of them.

And it was also on his initiative, and indeed in his front room, that the racing gigs' standard form was agreed and the governing body of the sport of racing them was conceived and christened.

The Cornish pilot gig, a traditional rowboat customarily powered by six rowers, originated in the late 17th century as an all-purpose workhorse, or, as Bird liked to say, "the white van" of the harbours, estuaries and coastal waters of the South West.

They were also more dramatically employed in salvage, smuggling and life-saving, and their principal purpose was to take pilots out as quickly as possible to incoming

ships. For this, gigs needed lightness, buoyancy and lithe flexibility to be manageable in heavy seas.

The sport of gig racing derived from the keen competition between gig crews to reach incoming ships first and to get their pilot aboard to claim the pilotage fee.

When engines supplanted sails and oars, interest in gig racing clung on in Newquay and the Isles of Scilly, though the few 19th-century traditional gigs still in use survived the Second World War only because they were kept watertight and seaworthy so that they could be used for training sea cadets.

Bird was, by his own account, enraptured by the speed and elegance of the gigs when he first saw them as a teenager. Inspired by a zealot's desire to see them racing again on the River Fal, he arranged with Newquay Rowing Club to borrow three of their traditional gigs to stage the first Ralph Bird Three Rivers Race in Truro in 1981.

The drive and determination with which he promoted the event triggered a renewed revival, and within a few years four more clubs — Mount's Bay, Cadgwith, Roseland and Truro — had been formed to compete and to popularise the sport.

Bird and George Northey, of Newquay, arranged a meeting of club representatives, which was held on December 5, 1986, in the front room of Bird's cottage at Carnon Mine, Devoran.

They agreed that in future gigs should be built to standard measurements, and that a Cornish Pilot Gig Association should be established to ensure the specification was respected.

The following January, at the Royal Hotel, Truro, Bird's detailed specifications, based on the famous Newquay gig Treffry, reckoned the best made by William Peters, of St Mawes, the pre-eminent gig builder of the 19th century, were accepted for the future standard — a clinker-built rowboat fashioned from planks of narrow-leaf Cornish elm, 32ft long and with a beam of 4ft 10in. The first gig that Bird had built himself — Buller, which he made for Cadgwith in 1986 — was a copy of Treffry.

Bird became president and life member of the Cornish Pilot Gig Association, an ever-present and indispensable driving force behind its growth and development. There are now 53 affiliated clubs, mostly in Cornwall, but also in Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Avon, and Pembrokeshire. World championships held in the Isles of Scilly have attracted teams from as far afield as London, the Netherlands, France, the US, Australia and the Faeroe Islands.

It is now reckoned that more than 7,000 people participate in gig racing at more than 300 regattas around the South West each summer, and many thousands more from all over Britain and the world enjoy watching the keenly fought races.

For 21 years Bird, a painstaking and unhurried perfectionist, produced from his small but functional workshop in Devoran classic gigs for many of the leading clubs of enthusiasts that his initiative had inspired.

A quiet, mild-mannered and unassuming man, he was a peerless craftsman, but also a prodigious researcher and amateur marine historian, amassing over decades a vast fund of detailed information, photographs and reference material about all his subjects.

His public talks about gigs, pilot cutters, wooden boats generally and local history conveyed his enthusiasm and delight in the subjects, and usually sold out. He lectured on boat-building at Falmouth Marine School and made weekly visits to the National Maritime Museum, Cornwall, where he was closely involved in a succession of restoration projects. As a historian Bird wrote two books, one a history of Newquay Rowing Club and the other *Devoran and its River: A Photographic History*, which won a prize from Waterstone's in Truro as its bestselling local history book.

A great traditionalist, Bird built boats that were likened by enthusiasts to the works of the great cabinet makers. A notice displayed in his workshop declared: "If God wanted fibreglass boats there would be fibreglass trees" (but, of course, some clubs do now use fibreglass training gigs to reduce wear and tear on their wood-built classics).

Ralph Ian Bird was born of a Cornish family in 1942 in Fish Hoek, Cape Town, South Africa, where his father, who died while Ralph was still young, was living because of ill health. He spent his first birthday aboard a ship back to Britain, and was brought up in Cornwall by his mother and his grandfather, who worked on the ships in Falmouth harbour.

As a youngster Bird was regularly taken aboard the gunboats and battleships laid up in the Fal estuary after the war. He often said he was the only boy who had been lucky enough to have had a real fleet to play with instead of a mere model boat.

After attending primary school and technical college in Cornwall he learnt his craft as a shipwright through an apprenticeship with Falmouth Boat Construction.

Once he had perfected his skills, he told friends, his teenage interest with traditional Cornish pilot gigs became an adult obsession.

On October 6, 2007, the year he retired from boat-building, all 29 gigs that he had built were brought together on the beach at Newquay for the christening and launch of his last, built for the Porthgain club in Wales. The owners named it Ralph Bird in honour of its creator.

Bird had been battling cancer for years and more recently suffered a debilitating stroke. Such was his popularity in the world of gig rowing that his funeral in Truro Cathedral this month was attended by some thousand mourners, many of them gig rowers wearing, as Bird had requested, their gig club colours for the occasion.

His coffin, draped in the Cornish flag of St Piran, was towed to the cathedral aboard the gig William Peters, which he built for Roseland in 1987, and gig rowers formed a guard of honour on the cathedral steps with raised oars as the coffin was carried in.

Bird is survived by his second wife, Marie, former postmistress of Devoran Post Office, and by three children of his first marriage.

Ralph Bird, boatbuilder and president of the Cornish Pilot Gig Association, was born on August 1, 1942. He died of cancer on November 2, 2009, aged 67