

# ONE MAN AND HIS RACE

Formerly used to carry pilots out to ships, for rescue work and even a little smuggling, fast six-oared gigs are today raced in regattas around the coasts of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Sue Morris meets Ralph Bird, who restores and builds these slender craft and who inspired a river race in the waters of Carrick Roads.



**I** REMEMBER the first time I saw a six-oared pilot gig. She was the *Klondike*, 30 feet long, built in 1877, and I saw her among the memorabilia of brave days of wreck and rescue in the island museum on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly.

That was ten years ago but I can still recall the strong impression which the *Klondike* made upon me, with her long, clean lines and narrow thwarts (seats), with room in her for six oarsmen and a coxswain, room perhaps for the wrecked sailors saved from the sea, or for salvage, or for contraband...

Then one evening at Loe Beach near Feock

not long ago I was startled to see a six-oared boat pulling across the water. I remembered the *Klondike*, and yes, I was told this boat was also an old pilot gig. She belonged to Ralph Bird of Devoran and he had restored her from a shattered hulk, bought for £20. Now he was building a new gig in a shed in his riverside garden. There was even a gig race named after him. I was intrigued and I decided to visit Ralph to discover more about these fine boats and the race. As it turned out, we knew each other already from 'way back', when Ralph was a leading light of Truro Youth Rowing Club and I was very much a fringe member.

Opposite page: Ralph Bird with the *William Peters*, built in his garden shed near Devoran for the Roseland Rowing Club.



Right: The old gigs carried sail, as in this picture of the pilot gig *Slippen* with its crew in 1907. Jack Hicks (fifth from left) was the last pilot to board a vessel from a gig, in 1938. Here the crew are about to set sail to collect bodies from the *Thomas W Lawson*, a seven-masted schooner.



Above: This dramatic picture taken by Frank Gibson in 1985 shows Truro Rowing Club's gig *Energy* racing against the *Nornour* with its Scillonian crew off the Isles of Scilly in a heavy swell.



Friends, crew and rowing enthusiasts carry the newly built *William Peters* from Ralph's workshop down to the river.

I found Ralph, who is in his early forties, in his garden shed at Carnon Mine where he was indeed building a new pilot gig commissioned by Roseland Rowing Club and to be called the *William Peters* after one of the best-known Cornish gig builders of the last century. Thirty two feet in length, four feet ten inches at the beam, clinker built of Cornish narrow-leaf elm, Australian iron wood known as yang and oak, she is built to traditional lines and in the time-honoured way, using plane, hammer and adze, her planks being cut by hand.

"Why use the old slow ways?" I asked Ralph as I admired the gig's narrow gunwales and

hand-steamed oak timbers. "Because I'm old fashioned I suppose," he suggested. But that is not the only reason, of course. Ralph is a craftsman. He has been repairing and building boats, and making beautiful scale models of them too, since he was in his teens. And the gigs, of which so few have survived, have held a special place in his affections — several he has repaired literally "for love." He respects the old skills.

Ralph is passing on his knowledge, too, to a new generation. He teaches at Cornwall College in Falmouth and last year the boatbuilding students, under his instruction,

built, launched and raced a traditional pilot gig called the *Energy* (which is 'Nerth' in Cornish, and she has both versions of her name painted on her bow and quarter).

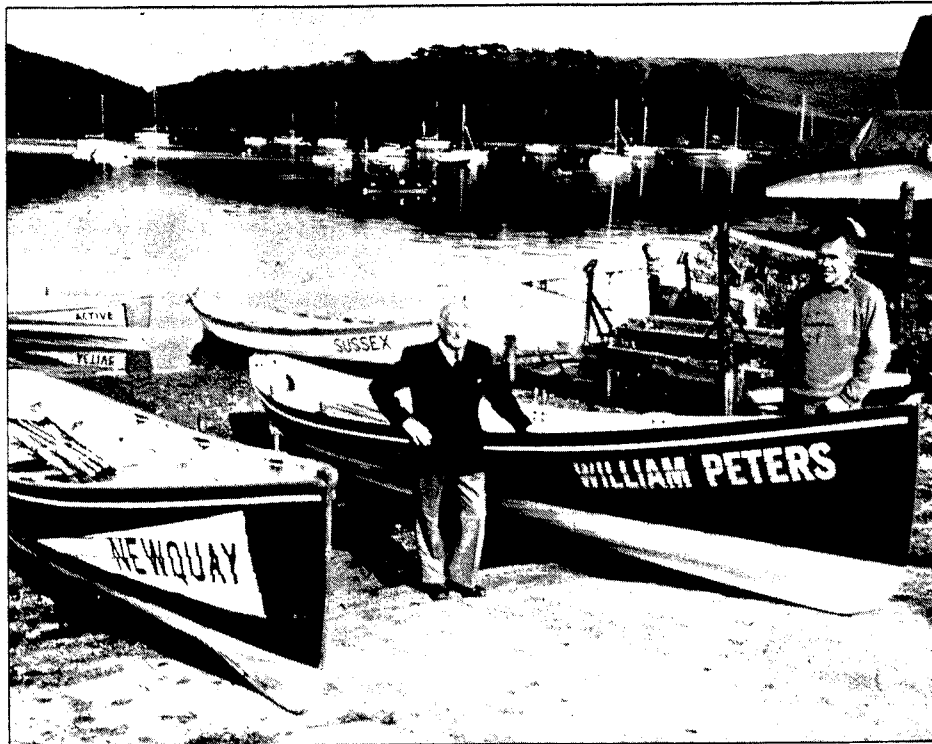
The recorded history of the pilot gigs of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly apparently goes back to a commission placed in 1790 with the Peters family boatyard at Polvarth, St Mawes, by a 'gentleman in Holy Orders', for a six-oared boat to be used 'for saving life on the north coast of Cornwall.' Tradition has it that this gig was the first Padstow lifeboat.

Over the next 150 years gigs were put to many uses all around the Cornish coast and on



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Left: The *William Peters* afloat for the first time at Devoran. In the foreground is the *Newquay*, the oldest gig in existence, built by William Peters in 1812. Right: Ralph Bird with the gig he built for Cadgwith Rowing Club last year, the *Buller*. Isles of Scilly photographer Frank Gibson puts in a rare appearance in front of the camera on the right. (Photograph by Marie Gibson.) Below left: Frank Peters stands between his grandfather's 175-year-old gig and Ralph Bird's latest handiwork. (Photograph by Frank Gibson.)



the rocks around the Cornish and Scilly coasts. One of the oldest surviving gigs, the *Golden Eagle*, took part in the rescue of the crew of SS *Sussex*, wrecked off the Isles of Scilly on 17th December, 1885, and in the salvage of her cargo of '200 fat bullocks, flour, lard, tinned beef and frozen geese and turkeys'. The salvage money was used to pay for the building in 1886 of Ralph's gig, the *Sussex*, named after the lost ship. The *Golden Eagle* is still raced in the Scillies.

Gigs were also used — unofficially — for smuggling. In the early 1800s His Majesty's Customs Commissioners issued a ban on the building of eight-oared gigs because these were so fast that the customs cutters could not catch them. (Hence gigs traditionally carry six oarsmen and a coxswain.) Despite this restriction there are records of regular smuggling trips to Roscoff in Brittany — a round trip of up to 250 miles. Perhaps one of the gigs' main uses was to put local pilots on board ships approaching the dangerous coastlines of Cornwall and Scilly. The job and the fee went to the first gig to reach the ship, hence the need for speed, and in some cases, cunning. Stories remain of St Mawes gigs hiding in an inlet near St Anthony lighthouse, known as Gig Hole, from which vantage point they could watch for, and head off, Falmouth gigs rowing out in search of pilotage.

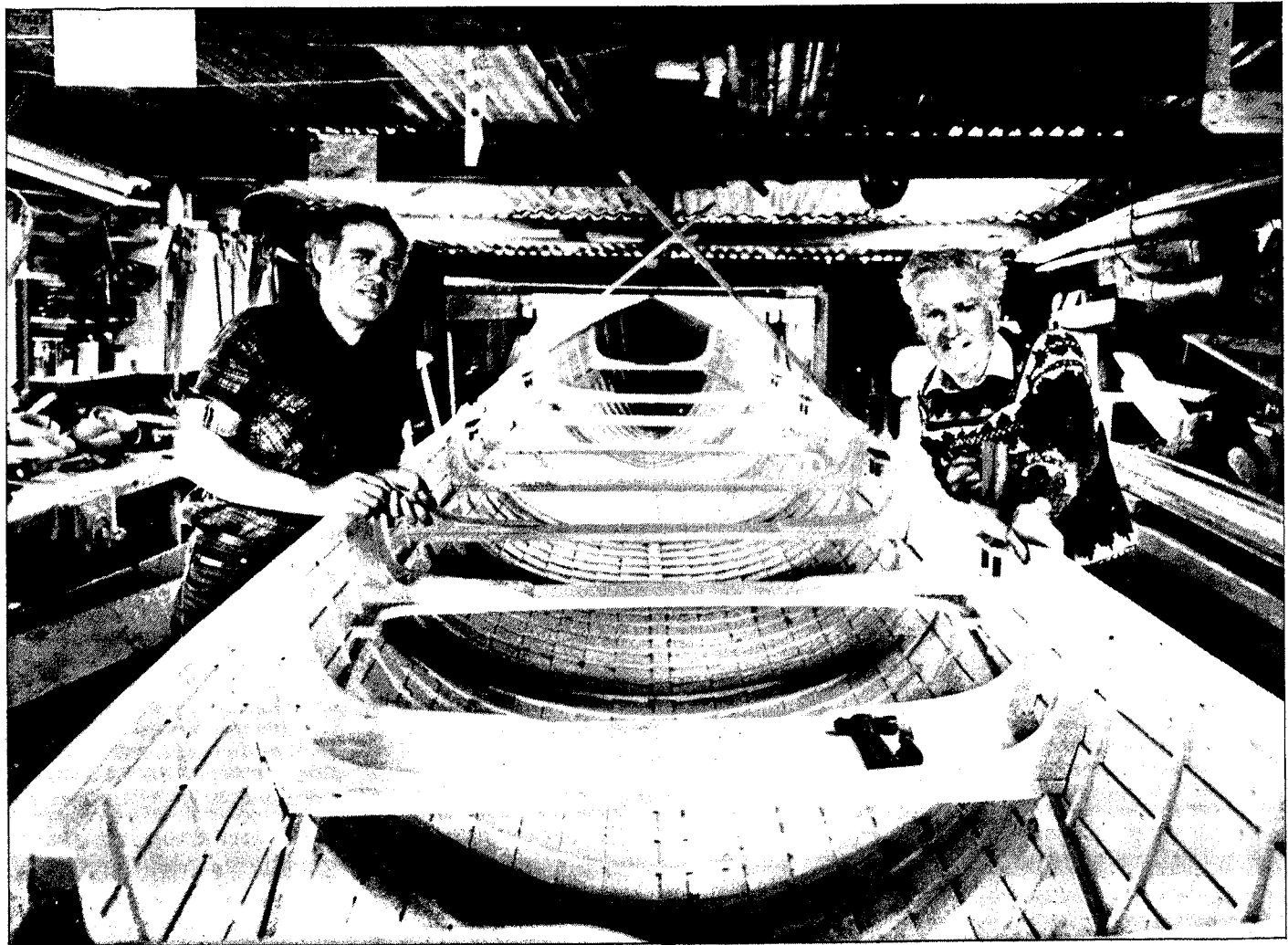
From this racing to put pilots on board ships evolved the racing of gigs in regattas, which took place all around the Cornish coast in the last century. Gig racing, on a triangular course over several miles, was taken extremely seriously, mostly because of the prize money involved. Even in the 1850s, first prize could be several sovereigns which, shared seven ways among the crew, gave each man a sovereign — more, probably, than he earned

the Isles of Scilly. They were, as Ralph says, "general dogsbodies. We look upon them now as lovely looking boats, which they probably did back in those days too, but in the old days they had to work for a living, not only the men, the gigs as well."

He explained that the *Klondike*, the gig which is now in St Mary's museum, had been a coast-guard gig, used for changing the Bishop Rock lighthouse crew. His own gig, the *Sussex*, which I had seen at Loe Beach, was, in an emergency, often used to fetch the doctor from St Mary's to the off-island of Bryher. The old gigs carried sail, and for speed the *Sussex*'s lug and mizzen would be set, the crew crouching

in the bottom of the gig on five hundredweight of stones gathered from the beach as ballast. She would speed before the wind, the men soaked with the spray breaking over the gunwales. In less anxious times the *Sussex* also carried wedding parties; indeed it was in the *Sussex* that Bertha Jenkins travelled from Bryher to her wedding on Tresco on 6th August, 1929, and so became the last bride to arrive at the church by gig. She wore blue silk and her hat was trimmed with orange blossom.

Gigs were used for salvage operations, and dramatic accounts remain of gig crews rescuing strange cargoes from ships broken on



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in a week. Gigs were often rowed long distances to take part in regattas. For instance, in 1893 a crew from Newquay rowed their fastest gig, the *Treffry*, 22 miles to Hayle one Friday evening after work. The *Treffry* is still owned by Newquay Rowing Club.

Ralph Bird explained that gig racing gradually died out after the First World War. As gigs ceased to be built the skills were lost, but were revived in Newquay in the 1950s "largely thanks to the enthusiasm of one man — (the late) Richard Gillis," who encouraged the maintenance in good repair of Newquay Rowing Club's three old gigs — the *Newquay*, the *Dove* and the *Treffry*, all built in Peters' yard at St Mawes in the 1800s. Indeed, the *Newquay* is the oldest surviving gig, built 175 years ago. A 'delegation' from Newquay also visited the Isles of Scilly in 1953/54 and

succeeded in the rescue from their sad fate rotting among the bracken — one was even in use as a chicken house — of four of the Scillies gigs: the *Bonnet*, the *Golden Eagle*, the *Slippen* and the *Shah*. These gigs were all brought back to the mainland and restored with many hours of hard work, and not a little hard cash.

The *Shah* cost £1 a foot new in 1873. In 1954 Richard Gillis and his two companions bought her, derelict, for £35 cash, a bottle of whisky, a bottle of rum and a bottle of sherry. Today a new gig would cost upwards of £11,000.

Gig racing was revived in Scilly in the early 1960s and the four old gigs restored by Newquay are all now back in the islands where they can be seen racing on summer evenings. But Ralph Bird had his own ambition: "to see the gigs racing again over here on the river" — that is, on Carrick Roads, scene of much fierce competition for pilotage and regatta prize money in the last century. In 1979 he asked the trustees of Newquay Rowing Club if they would lend their gigs to race on the south coast. They agreed, and so was born the Ralph Bird River Race from St Mawes to Restronguet. The first race was such a success, Ralph explained, "that we've kept it up ever since, each May."

"How does it feel," I asked him, "to have a boat race named after you?" Ralph is a

modest man and found this leading question difficult to meet head on, but his pleasure in knowing that gig racing is now restored to his home river is clear to see.

I left Ralph painting the *William Peters*. He had completed three coats of red and white paint, and had three more to do. She is the second gig he has built in his garden: last year the *Buller* was launched, commissioned by the Cadgwith Rowing Club. Soon he will begin work on a new gig for his own club, Truro.

This year seven gig crews raced for the Ralph Bird River Race Trophy and the winner, to everyone's delight, was the *William Peters*. The rowing is hard work, as Ralph knows — he has done it. "When it's near the finish you're just aching, and no strength left, and you think to yourself 'Never again!'"

But they recover — enough to raise the rafters later with *Trelawney* and *Lamorna*. Early this month the slender lines of the racing gigs will grace the Henley Royal Regatta. Members from Newquay and Truro Rowing Clubs have been invited to row on the calm waters of the Thames. They will take two boats, the *Sussex* and the *Newquay*, the latter, built in 1812, being 12 years older than Henley Regatta itself. The boats are back on the river. Gig racing is alive and well in Scilly and Cornwall.

SUE MORRIS