

# Beaulieu River Sailing Club

*A talk by Andrew Duncan - 4<sup>th</sup> November 2016*



This talk is a glimpse, through some of the BRSC's notable early figures, of life on and around the Beaulieu River in the 1930s, the Beaulieu River Sailing Club's first decade.

We already have the BRSC book recounting its official history . . . this by contrast is an unofficial history . . . a series of thumbnail biographies, which I'm hoping might provide some insights of a different kind. Gossip column history, not proper history.

I'm deliberately not including Pearl Montagu, later Pearl Pleydell Bouverie. So much is already known about her not least from her diaries but please remember that she was BRSC captain for most of the 1930s - the catalyst who made the BRSC possible.

Likewise I'm not including various other Beaulieu notables of the 1930s: for example Kenneth Moore and the Ehrman family; ditto Edward Cadogan, George Tozer, the Foster Pedleys, Bill Pease and other early BRSC characters not least Eddie de Rothschild and his sister who sailed scows called Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. The Ehrmans left Beaulieu in the 1980s... but William Ehrman, grandson of Albert Ehrman who lived in Clobb Copse in the 1930s happens to be here tonight.

Those old Beaulieu folk were often interesting people but I'm concentrating this evening instead on the club's earliest leading lights who were not only sailors, but long term promoters or organizers of sailing, locally or on a wider stage. Maybe later you'll see why. Along the way I will bring in some other minor players for a touch of colour, but not to distract from the mainstream.

Before I get down to the people, a closer look at this introductory photo. It was taken sometime between 1930 and 1935 when the club in its earliest form was based at Bucklers Hard. Later it moved to Gins. You can see the remains of its Gins jetty on the salt marsh just upstream of this clubhouse. The squarish area was called sailing club quay - the BRSC rented it from the estate. To put it mildly, it's basic - no clubhouse, just a few chairs. Can this really be a sailing club? They're sailing on a bit of river where often there's no wind worth having- or if there is, it comes from every direction. However the organizers and the

sailors are taking the sailing, and themselves, pretty seriously... the firmly closed gate definitely sends a message, as does the sign Members only...

A passing member of another sailing club might well ask 'Who do these people think they are?' Well here are some of the answers.

My first two characters are....

## ***Sir Francis Dent - and his second wife Winifred, always known as Win Dent***



Francis Dent was a Beaulieu resident from the 1920s, where he came to live at Dock House, Dock Lane probably soon after retiring. But he'd been a small boat sailor all his life...

...here he is as a young man sailing in tweeds, waistcoat and tie, as one did, in Holyhead Harbour where he was commodore of not one but two sailing clubs at the same time - somewhat typical. The Dents have a family joke... 'in a single handed dinghy, how can you have one captain and two commodores? Answer, Francis Dent.'

He was a BRSC founder member, in fact it's likely that he, with Pearl, co-founded the club. He would have prevailed on her to formalize what until around 1930 had been informal sailing meet ups. He would almost certainly have found it intolerable for the sailing not to be properly organized.

He took part in the first scow races, and sometimes gave children sailing lessons in a large clinker built boat. He was on the first committee and it's clear from the minute book that he and Fisher Dilke, I'll come to him later, were the two people who made it happen in the first four years

The son of an admiral (Dents had been on the navy list without a break since Samuel Pepys's time) Francis broke the mould and did his own thing by going into railway management. Sounds a bit grey? Perhaps not. As general manager of the South-East and Chatham Railway he masterminded WW1 troop transport to France... he clearly had a brilliant organizing mind, if not for which the flow of men to the trenches would not have been smooth. This was the first total war in Britain's history and mass troop movements were of the essence... so for a year or two at the start of WW1 Francis Dent was a central figure. He was knighted for this in 1916 aged 47.

Here he is in court dress - possibly after being knighted? Not sure.

My aunt Bunny Borthwick, then a young teenager, remembers him at Beaulieu as rather a gruff old man. He was a very strong character indeed. He had married as his second wife Winifred Fremantle but by the end of the 1930s their marriage had come unstuck. Win was having an affair with Admiral Hall, former director of naval intelligence in the First World War. Francis moved away, probably to Bosham and it seems likely that as part of the settlement he gave her a plot of land at the bottom of Dock House's grounds. Here, at Dock Head, overlooking Carpenter's Dock, Win and Admiral Hall built their love nest, but I don't think, as commonly supposed, Francis had to put up with Win and her lover co-habiting at the bottom of the garden while he was still at Dock House.

Nonetheless, this was the Beaulieu scandal of the 1930s, and Win the scarlet woman.



Here's Win while still married to Francis

I knew her in the 1960s by which time most people had forgotten about she and Admiral Hall. By then she was a respected local figure - a legend in fact - the woman with the three glass eyes - one to match her remaining eye, one a union jack for conservative association meetings and one a BRSC burgee for regatta days.

A couple of other Win Dent stories are irresistible - please excuse a short digression into the 1960s but they do sum up the spirit of Beaulieu and of the BRSC.

Win was a dog lover and when she got old instead of walking them on foot she put them on a lead and drove them scampering beside her open-top car. Fine if she got the speed right. One day on the airfield she was waved down by a man who happened to work for the RSPCA. He was told not to interfere: how dare he, she was a judge at Crufts. [William Ehrman has two more good Win stories.]

She was also famous for her rowing skiff, a long sleek craft with a very low freeboard. One day in the early 1960s she was rowing it off Dockhead when the Bignalls sailing school children were doing a treasure hunt. One of the challenges was to get the signature of someone with a title. Most of the scows headed towards the green and Palace House, but the crafty ones were on to Win in her skiff. Too many crowded alongside and it started sinking. Lady Dent, faithful to naval tradition, went on signing as she sank.

Several of Francis Dent's descendants still live in the vicinity: Henrietta Reynolds and Janet Robjohn, his granddaughters; Robin Dent his grandson and Gus Reynolds, his great grandson. Gus and Gerard Downes built the new sailing hut in Factory Field. I think they're all in the audience. I am grateful to Robin for the photographs and other information.



My second characters are a pair of sisters

## ***Anne Clerk and Dorothy Walker***

Anne Clerk was another Beaulieu one-off, and a founder member of the BRSC. She bought Bignalls, Dock Lane in the 1920s and was the direct opposite of her near neighbour Francis Dent - not at all interested in bossing people around - but what she left behind was in local terms concrete.

She is in fact my great aunt - and likewise of Sara Steele, Ginna Gayner and Emma Tew. We've got her down as a mildly eccentric artist spinster - very quiet and withdrawn - with strong female friendships - not discussed - and mad on sailing. It was unusual for a single woman to run a yacht in those days -



but here it is in the background, a Dutch barge named Vliehors, painted by a friend while moored at Eling Tidemill Mill off Southampton Water. Vliehors is a place - a large sandy plain and bird refuge on the Dutch island of Vlieland.

Anne was creative... she used her independent means to finance a life of painting, travel and sailing and we like to think that her Beaulieu and New Forest watercolours are interesting. It's not for me to big up the



great aunt's talent, but our local expert David Moore Gwyn says she is some notches above the average amateur water colourist.

Here's her view from Factory Field where the junior sail training now takes place, upriver to the green... around 1930.

Anne sold her paintings, but around 30 local scenes are spread about the family and add up to a delightful visual record of Beaulieu and its river at this time. Her work is far from chocolate boxy - she has a style of her own using watercolour as if it's oil - and the atmosphere is sometimes a little troubled, as if something dark was hanging over this little world.



This one looks from roughly the same spot as the last painting down river - in the distance is Francis Dent's Dock House beach with boats on it.

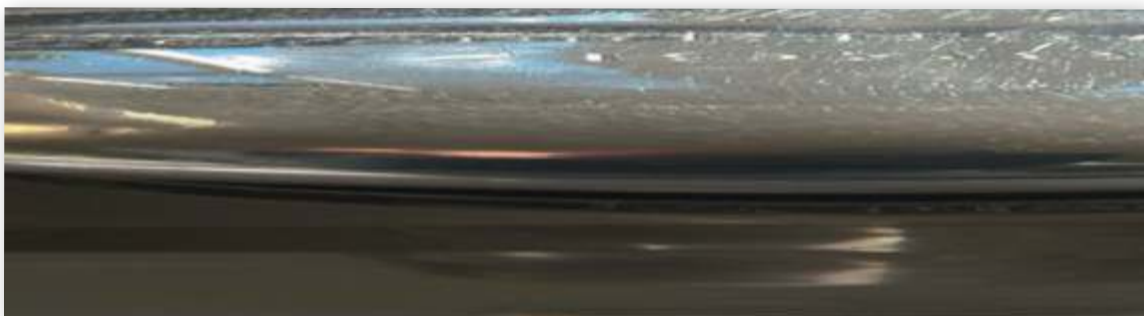


And this is low tide in the same bit of river

and here are large yachts racing in the Solent off Lymington - a bit sketchy, done in a hurry, I suspect, but still full of movement.



They reveal a landscape that's empty of human activity compared with ours now.



Something dark over Beaulieu? Possibly my imagination? Perhaps it was something dark hanging over her. Anne Clerk died young, of pneumonia in 1932, and left Bignalls to her sister Dorothy, my grandmother.

Dorothy Walker took over in the BRSC where Anne left off, she was another independent minded woman, a solo round the world traveller in her youth

Her elder two children were good BRSC Sharpie sailors through the 1930s. Her youngest daughter Bunny was mainly crew - her time would come.

She was on the BRSC committee most of the time from the late 30s to the 1950s, putting in a solid but low key contribution (club sec three times, and then mate) but of course doing the club a unique genetic service by producing Bunny, who as most people here know gave the club its new lease of life after the war by introducing sail training. Hugely helped and enabled, it must be remembered, by her husband David Borthwick. Dorothy Walker was the first woman, apart from Pearl, to be involved in running the club. We think it may have taken a while for her to be accepted here - like her sister she was strange and withdrawn.



And she had recently divorced her somewhat colourful husband. In those days divorce was still unusual and not easily accepted. In the end though, I think that people saw the point of her.

In 1943 the BRSC introduced a new class of boat, the Sharpie. This was a key event: now the racing really could mean something - the boats were identical, and fast compared with scows.

Dorothy Walker bought two, including the first one, made by Elkins of Christchurch - and this is it, M1, the photo taken incidentally by Francis Dent. The M on the sail means Montagu Sharpie. We think the flags dressed mast to stern might have been to announce the birth of the new class, or maybe they were a victory celebration. They did things stylishly then.



Talking of style, my next item is a stylish thing, rather than a person.

### ***Inkwell trophy***



Sorry about the photo. It's an inkwell. This is what you got if you were selected to sail in the Royal Cruising Club - Royal Navy Sailing Association Meet which the BRSC hosted at Gins in 1938 - one of the last great events of the BRSC's first golden decade. [bring in Admiral Blake of Fiddlers here] OK, you wouldn't want an inkwell now, but in those days they were essential. This is a well designed heavy object with a silver lid, worth keeping. It and similar BRSC prizes of the 1930s such as silver propelling pencils from Benzies the jeweller in Cowes are a reminder that these days the club has a politically correct, possibly puritan attitude to prizes - you get a useless pot which symbolizes your win, not a pleasant possession.

My next character is

### ***Sir Fisher Dilke***

Here is Fisher officiating at a very early BRSC regatta. He is reading out the winners while a 3 year old Lord Montagu of Beaulieu presents a prize to his mother. Quintessentially Beaulieu 1930s. It's one of the best pictures in the BRSC photo album, provided by a descendant of Fisher - more in a moment.



Like Francis Dent and Anne Clerk, Fisher Dilke was one of the group that met informally with Pearl even before the club's formal creation in 1931.

He's elusive, difficult to conjure up, but no less interesting for that. We have among us some of his descendants - Lucilla Bogaerde, wife of Gareth, is his granddaughter they have the lease on no 5 Needs Ore Cottages - but she hardly remembers Fisher because he died when she was three. His son, Lucilla's father, died aged 34 within three days of Fisher in 1944 so the usual channel for handing down memories is missing.



Even his house Lepe Point has vanished, demolished I think in the 1970s. You can just about trace the foundations if you walk on the high ground above Lepe Country Park. Lucilla's grandmother was devastated of course by husband and son dying in such quick succession and Lucilla remembers as a child the atmosphere at Lepe - sad and strange. Lucilla by the way grew up at Whitehall, the charming house in Beaulieu High Street now occupied by Charles and Jo Cooke Hurle.

We do know that as a young man Fisher was open to new experiences, and adventurous.

Here he is in 1903 travelling in Bolivia. And we know that in the first world war he fell off a horse, hit his head and was invalided out. He worked in MI5 for the rest of the war...



here he is with fellow MI5 staff on the office roof, armistice day 1918. Soon after that he must have retired to Lepe, to a life of leisure, filled with his marvellous view across to Cowes, his family, boats and sailing.

Possibly, says Lucilla, he wanted to move in a different world to that of his forbears. Perhaps it suited him to keep a low profile, possibly he felt overshadowed by the family tree - for the Dilkes are indeed an interesting family - notable 19th century literary critics, liberals, intellectuals and politicians. His

uncle Charles, the second Dilke baronet, an up and coming MP, had however smudged the page with a juicy scandal. He had an affair with his brother's mother in law, and was accused of seducing his brother's wife's sister. Littering the nest was even worse news than that now. In the sensational divorce case which followed it was alleged among many lurid accusations that Dilke enjoyed three in a bed - and that sometimes the third person was a maid whom he taught what the newspapers called disgraceful French practices. It was as

sensational as the Profumo affair of the 1960s, and Charles Dilke spent much of the family money trying to clear his name.

He was also a republican, criticizing Queen Victoria for not getting out and about enough to justify her civil list payments. Had he been around in the 1930s, would the BRSC have let him in? Good question.

Lucilla imagines Fisher as being a private man, happily married, a good diplomat - an honest broker - in the early years of the BRSC.

Read the BRSC minute book and he emerges as the one who makes the peace by coming up with intelligent compromise solutions. For instance, in 1933 the committee couldn't agree on whether it had money to spend on shoring up club quay. Fisher suggested they do half this year, and more the next. Problem solved.

One could see him helping Pearl to keep the peace among warring committee members - there were two colonels in particular who regularly tore each other's throats out.

Besides helping local sailing Fisher was becoming a bigger and bigger cheese in the yachting world beyond Beaulieu. Here he is



On the sailing committee of the RYS in the 1930s. And here is a unique object - a memento of perhaps his most respected sailing achievement

It's the box given him by Harold Vanderbilt as a thank you for serving as official observer on Ranger, the Vanderbilt yacht that beat the British entrant, Endeavour, in the Americas Cup, 1937. Fisher wrote a book about his experiences, Observer on Ranger which you can still buy on Amazon.



Why was he called Fisher? The family comes from Maxstoke Castle in Warwickshire. In the 1580s a younger son married the daughter of a local landowner whose surname was Fisher. Their son was called Fisher Dilke to keep Fisher in the family. Our Fisher Dilke descends from him. Maxstoke Castle is still occupied by another branch, the Fetherstone Dilkes.

Next and finally we have

## ***Sir Philip Hunloke***

A Beaulieu resident with royal blood - his grandmother was the illegitimate daughter of William IV and his mistress known as Mrs Jordan. And a curious figure because he wasn't quite what he seemed. He came to Hides Close, where the Dykeses now live, in 1936. His story up to that point, from a wider sailing perspective, is worth telling....

Born 1868 he was not Philip Hunloke but Philip Perceval - from an Irish gentry family. He changed his name in 1904 to Hunloke in order to inherit from an aunt the Hunloke estate, Wingerfield, in Derbyshire.

His father was a yachtsman so Philip sailed from an early age. Because of his royal connection he found his way into Edward, Prince of Wales's yachting set in Cowes in the 1890s and later when Edward became king, the circle of his son George. Christina Dykes has written a thesis on Philip Hunloke and it's she who has provided me with this material, some of which is fresh research.

Christina describes how George shared with Philip a love of sailing and the sea - George was a naval officer for half his life. That much is well known. Not widely understood until Christina's work is that George, influenced by Philip Hunloke campaigned to democratise yachting. They wanted to develop the sport by introducing into the Royal Yacht Squadron and other sailing clubs smaller boats that people could afford - the enormous J class yachts were ridiculously expensive to buy and to run.

More than this, George believed seafaring expressed the best traits of the British character - that yachting made you a real man.



Now returning to Philip: he had social credentials but not much income. He began borrowing against his already debt burdened Wingerfield inheritance and eventually the estate had to be sold. But that came later. In 1911 George, now King George V, asked Philip to become one of his courtiers and this probably seemed to Philip a good way forward, despite the appalling pay.

By this time Philip had been married to Sylvia Heseltine, whose father owned Walhampton, for around 20 years - but it appears that the marriage may have been a façade. In those days being a courtier meant spending weeks away from home in royal residences. We can speculate - a bit naughty since there's no proof - that being at court suited sailor Phil because he may have been bisexual. No one here would want to judge him for that, but possibly it was a cunning move to go to court because where else can you get such a continuous supply of good looking young footmen? And in uniform. He and his wife eventually separated in the early 1930s.

In 1913 Philip got his big break: the king appointed him Royal Sailing Master. With an interruption for war service and possibly unofficial duties as a personal spy-informant to the king, the best years of Philip's career now began.

The king's racing yacht, Britannia, was in its time state of the art and the king saw her as not just a recreation but as a PR exercise for furthering his views on the best of the British national character. Philip stepped up to the task and over the years turned in a spectacular number of wins for the king and his yacht. He really was a superb helmsman and a brilliant tactician, up there with the best of his day, possibly the best at times. There was a skipper who reported to Philip, but Philip was mostly at the wheel...

Here is a rare photo of Philip not at the wheel - it was an official photo. On this occasion the king had to be seen to be the skipper, but Philip is by his side with the binoculars telling him what to do.



Note that the king is wearing a circular sailor's hat, not an officer's peaked cap. This was more royal PR, but genuinely in character for King George. He hugely admired the Royal Navy's ethos of advancement through seafaring courage and ability rather than social rank, disliked snobbery and class barriers and saw sailing as a means of relaxing them.

To practise what he preached he wore the sailor's hat and if there was a job to be done near him on deck, however menial, he insisted on doing it. Philip had nightmares keeping him safe while he coiled ropes knee deep in torrents of green water on the lee side of the heeling yacht. The two became friends. George's later letters to Hunloke begin 'Dear Phil.'

Phil was knighted in 1920 and his great Britannia period lasted until 1936 by which time she had become uncompetitive against newer yachts, uneconomical to maintain. With heavy hearts it was decided to scuttle her off the Isle of Wight - an event described by Philip in his diary with three words - 'it was grim' and it was after this that he became a full time Beaulieu resident. He liked going out sailing on his yacht Winstar with the locals and joined the BRSC committee in 1938, staying in place as caretaker for the duration of the war. It's reasonable to suppose that he bought to Beaulieu his enthusiasm for sailing; and that he talked about widening the sport to a broad range of incomes - what sociologists call a cultural influence. My grandmother Dorothy Walker sometimes went on Winstar with him - in fact she took this photo



Here he is with Dorothy's elder daughter Anne, later Anne Duncan

You might wonder how the three of them got on afloat. No problem with Dorothy and Philip - highly compatible, both repressed but for different reasons, super correct, stiff Edwardians. My mother, roped in for an extra pair of hands, was pretty much the reverse. But in fact the trips went well: we can guess that sailing bridged the gaps between temperaments and generations. Philip gave my mother a memento of those trips, salvaged from *Brittania* before she was scuttled: a pair of beautiful yacht models carved in ivory, used to demonstrate the racing rules and kept in a jewellery case. When I asked my mother about them she was a bit vague with the facts, as mothers can be... "Oh yes. An old boy gave me those. Someone important on *Brittania*. He could sail very nicely."

## **Conclusion**

Well, what does it all mean, if anything?

First, I think we can safely say that Beaulieu in 1930s was a community destined for continuity. Leaving aside the Montagus, a remarkable number of those 1930s families still have descendants in the neighbourhood, and so do some of the post war arrivals such as the de Traffords. However, we know this already - it's merely an observation, to be expected because it's a pleasant place to live especially if you like sailing.



Second, it's probably fair to say that Beaulieu in the 30s had more than its fair share of original people who ploughed their own furrow. Certainly everyone I've talked about this evening has that in common. But again, that's not especially remarkable - it goes with the territory and we've got a few of them around today.

Could there be anything else, perhaps less obvious?

Could one say, perhaps, that the BRSC was - is - a good example of how well organizations can run themselves and evolve if the climate is right and if left alone? Without interference from lawmakers in London or Brussels?

I'm not trying to say that the BRSC is a paragon, and I'm not suggesting that all private organisations do well if left alone - simply that they can do, and that it's easy to forget this in the current climate of intense regulation of everything.

If you compare the BRSC today with what it was in the 1930s you see that the changes have been slow but real and benign.

In the 30s it was a privileged club. The entry ticket was an expensive house on the Beaulieu estate, it was run by Pearl P-B and gentlemen such as Fisher Dilke, titles were two a penny; the regatta was reported in the Tatler.

Today, well, how can one put it... The Tatler hasn't been interested in reporting the regatta since World War Two. Women have been on the board of management since 1937 - longer than in many big businesses. Yes, the membership is still restricted to the Beaulieu neighbourhood, and yes that defines it but try comparing the BRSC with a posh golf club: it's long been a relaxed, friendly family affair. I'm not implying that Aunt Bunny or any of the old BRSC people had liberal, reforming instincts... good lord no

... but I hope you think it's amusing to reflect that they and others encouraging small boat sailing all over Britain were unknowingly performing no less than the reforming vision of King George V, for this kind of evolution is exactly what he and Philip Hunloke wanted. Those two well understood then, as do people running sailing clubs now, what a powerful leveller and - character builder - the sea always was - and always will be.