

# THE AITKEN LEGACY



by John Walker

With the death, on 30 April, of Sir John William Maxwell Aitken, boating in general and powerboat racing in particular lost an innovator, competitor, promoter and figurehead. More than all these things, though, our sport lost a friend but whilst his presence will be sadly missed, the legacy he has bequeathed to us will live long and continue to shape offshore racing. He, and the sport, could wish for no greater monument.

The perception of fame varies enormously. One measure is that upon the death of the individual concerned, almost everyone feels a personal and striking sense of loss, even though their relationship may have been a remote one. There can have been few people in our sport of offshore powerboat racing who, on hearing of the passing of Sir Max, did not feel such loss. Born in Montreal, Canada, in 1910, to a background and family of great personal wealth, heir to a man of domineering and passionate beliefs that took him to pinnacles of commercial and political success, it was perhaps inevitable that Max Aitken would forever stand in the shadow of his father, later Lord Beaverbrook. That the son should have carved out for himself a personal niche in history, utilising those qualities of competitiveness and perseverance with which he was blessed, spoke volumes for him.

Moving to England was a plan already formulated by his father and in train so the young man was educated at Westminster and Pembroke College, Cambridge, gaining a football blue in the process, whilst his father undertook a variety of political roles and established what was to become one of the world's greatest publishing empires. With his mind already

*Main photo: Sir Max Aitken in the Long Gallery, his private Maritime Museum at Cowes. Above: Gypsy Girl, perhaps the best known of the Aitken race boats, competed in six Cowes Torquay events. Designed by Sir Max's great friend Ray Hunt and built in wood by Souters at Cowes, she was powered by Cummins Diesels totalling 1000hp.*

made up that following in the parental footsteps was not all that it was cracked up to be and with the desire to make his own way in the commercial world, the advent of the Second World War came almost as a blessing in disguise for it gave the competitive spirit of young Max full and free rein. With a war record that included commanding night fighter squadrons and the Strike Mosquito Wing in Norwegian waters, he emerged from hostilities with the rank of Group Captain and a DSO, DFC and Czech War Cross, his reputation made as a dashing and adventurous man of action with an independence that he cherished above all things.

Flirting briefly with his father's beloved politics, as the sitting member of Parliament for Holborn between 1945-1950, Max Aitken returned to Fleet Street to assume at least some of the control of the family publishing business, seeing the platform created by the newspaper group as a vehicle for more than just political and social comment. For him, the opportunities to promote the Daily Express through sport, and in particular, boat and car racing, were too great to ignore and thus the name of Aitken became interwoven inextricably with the resurgence of motor racing at Silverstone after the war and the growth of leisure boating. If these few facts provide the back-drop to the Aitken legacy then the personal involvement of the man himself provides the key to the success of his ventures, based upon his own love of the sea and his competition on it.

Sailing was and remained his first love. As a boy, he started sailing in dinghies at Seaview during his summer holidays on the Isle of Wight but it was whilst commanding his fighter squadron in Norfolk that he took to competitive sail racing, in what he described as a particularly hot dinghy class. Racing at Wroxham became an almost daily relaxation before flying his night missions and it was inevitable that after the war, he would continue. His father was ever suspicious of boating, being himself the almost unwilling owner of a 1000 ton steam yacht but more for the fact that being on the water put you out of contact. Perhaps because of this and seeing a perverse pleasure from this isolation from the boardroom of Beaverbrook Newspapers, Max quickly progressed from a Dragon called Joel that won the Cowes Championship under his command to what he described as his favourite boat, the steel schooner Lumberjack.

Lumberjack was a large staysail rig of 50 tons and 65 feet overall and lead, in turn, to Drumbeat, designed by the same Ray Hunt who was by this time beginning to dominate the embryonic offshore powerboat racing scene on the other side of the Atlantic. Aitken and Hunt had met in America on a number of occasions and during one of the winding down periods after a particularly tough ocean race, they watched the running of an early Miami Nassau powerboat event. The challenges and demands of racing powerboats over wide tracts of exposed seaways fascinated

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the competitor in Max Aitken and it was not long before the Cowes Torquay race was born in 1961, promoted by the Daily Express. Completing the chronology of the sailing boats that benefitted from Sir Max's hand on the tiller, Drumbeat was followed by Outlaw, which represented Britain in the Admiral's Cup winning team of 1963, a one tonner called Roundabout which also represented her country, Crusade from the board of Alan Gurney and built by Wilf Souter in Cowes and Perseverance.

The basis for starting the Cowes Torquay race was well appreciated but the actual start and finishing points need a little explanation. Cowes was ever likely to be the starting point; the centre of sail racing in Europe, it was by the early sixties also the weekend home of the Aitken family. Around 1950, the old sail loft and offices of Ratsey and Lapthorn had become vacant, placed squarely on the west bank of the Medina River in the centre of Cowes and Sir Max, realising the unique nature of the site and enjoying its close proximity to his old and dear friend, Uffa Fox's home, made the purchase. The Prospect, as it has become, comprised offices on the road frontage which now serve as the domestic and dwelling area with the old workshops converted skillfully into what has served in later years as a monument to all forms of yachting and a museum of unique qualities. That long gallery, once a sail loft, has seen the best competitors, builders and designers in the boating world pass through and during past Cowes Weeks, anything up to 180 people from the visiting Admiral's Cup teams have sat down to dinner there. The Aitken hospitality to overseas visitors has stretched to include the party on the first evening of the Cowes Torquay weekend and beneath the original roof of pitch pine, are stored so many mementoes of British boating heritage that even the regular visitors are jolted out of complacency.

So if Cowes gave us the start line, why Torquay? The stories vary and may be apocryphal but most credence hangs on the legend that the national hunt season included horse racing at Newton Abbott around that part of the season and with Lady Violet's love of equine sport and some involvement by the Daily Express, it was easy to slip away for a day's sport on the turf. More likely however was the fact that the Aitken holiday home in Devon served as a good base for overnight recovery, before the return trip to the Solent. However it occurred, Cowes to Torquay became not just the first race of stature in the British offshore calendar but a sporting challenge that proved the toughest mix of logistics, skill, navigation and sheer good boat handling in Europe and North America and Sam Griffiths, having been denied a win, spoke of it that no-one could truly call themselves World Champion if they had not won 'Cowes'. That comment, from that man, could have pleased Sir Max more than any other.

For seven years, the great race ran one day, saving the return run for the Collingier Goblet, but in the build up to the eighth race, Sir Max again set the seal of greatness on the event that he had created, by asking the boats to do the round trip. Nor was he reticent to take part in his own creation and threw himself wholeheartedly into the business of competition. As with his sail boats, so did he bring and seek innovation in the power-

boats that he owned and raced and he swiftly graduated from cruisers to purpose built racing machines. From the relatively standard Ray Hunt designs, built by Bertram Yacht Company, the Aitken need for speed, quickly produced first Vivacity in its obvious but pretty yellow and white livery and then the giant Gypsy Girl.

For those of us who first met Sir Max Aitken in the sixties, truly the vintage days of his race, his direct stare and direct speech was mirrored in the comment with which he inevitably concluded his welcome to competitors during the race briefing. Safe racing was his creed, but let the day be rough! As he had the best rough weather boat in any race fleet, his request was natural but his results over the eleven years of his participation demonstrated a consistency that proved the overall competitor who could indeed take the smooth with the rough. A fifth place in 1968, seventh in 1964 and 1971, eighth in 1967 and 1969 were the best of his crop and he was supported regularly and ably by Lady Violet, whose Ultra Violets were a feature of the sixties. Nor did it stop there. Maxwell Aitken has proved a doughty competitor, navigating for a wide variety of visitors including Bobby Routbord in Fino, Roger Hanks in The Blonde, Willie Meyers in Mike Doxford's Limit Up fleet and more recently, for the astonishingly quick Red Iveco.

Mention the name of Sir Max and most people outside his immediate circle would have first conjured up the image of a successful company chairman, moving in the corridors of power and at home in panelled boardrooms, enjoying the cut and thrust of big business. While he could be all of those things, it was at sea or at Prospect that he came really alive, close to his beloved boats and never happier than when afloat or near the movement of the tides, the slap of waves against the jetty. In an interview conducted at Prospect in 1974, all the spark was there, all the drive and enthusiasm that made him such a dominant and resourceful character to the fore. His comments were, and are, more than a little illuminating.

Asked why he enjoyed sailing so much, the answer came back that he didn't know why, he just did; pressed further on ocean racing he was more forthcoming. 'Because

I'm a competitive person by nature and because racing imposes disciplines on sailing that you don't otherwise get. You push on, regardless of the weather, and you don't stay in your bunk an extra half hour just because it's wet outside'. On the reasons for his involvement in powerboat racing he was equally illuminating. 'I started the Cowes to Torquay powerboat race and I felt that having started it I had better go in for it. I kept up my involvement because I think it does you good and keeps you young and it sets an example for people from abroad to come here and race too'.

With ocean racing as a pastime, a major powerboat race carrying the Aitken and the London Boat Show to his credit, Sir Max could have been forgiven for backing off a little but his obvious caring about the sea and its accessibility came bubbling through when asked about the future of boating. 'The boating explosion, as everyone persists in calling it, has meant that a lot of relatively unknowledgeable people are taking to the water. The Government is trying to improve water safety and that, I think, is a very good idea but I hope they don't try to licence boats. The Americans have, and I think it's a great mistake. They will control us. They will say that we may go here but we may not go there and to date, the sea has been free. In my view, it should remain so for ever'.

His final comments on that day, as we talked about the artefacts in the gallery at Prospect, have a hollow ring about them now. His boating had always been of the basically taxing and physically uncomfortable kind so what motivated a man who could command almost anything that he might desire, to regularly push himself to the limits? 'I'm just a very competitive person and I probably always will be, at least until I retire and maybe then I can devote more time to cruising and getting my enjoyment in a less extreme way'. By the time that he relinquished the day to day running of the newspaper empire that he had inherited from his father, Sir Max Aitken, ocean racer and powerboat driver was already a sick man and his dearest wish remained unfulfilled. We should be eternally grateful that the Aitken legacy lives on — and that we can benefit from his farsightedness still.

*The Prospect at Cowes started life as a sail loft but became the favoured home of Sir Max. The patronage by the family of many businesses on the island did much to stabilise the local economy.*

