

SIX METRE SAGA

PART I 1924 - 1972

by John Reeve-Fowkes

She lay in a dark corner of the shed - a sleek keel-less hull, shored up on high chocks, dusty and forelorn. At first sight she was not for me: a hull without a keel presented fitting-out problems way beyond my experience (and probably beyond my means). In the immediate post-war years the price of lead was still high, and I would need about 2½ tons of it. Drawings would have to be found, or a naval architect employed to re-design a keel.

Less inhibited was my friend, Steve. He fell instantly for the hull and the challenge it presented. True, he had no financial worries since I was going to be the paymaster, but his enthusiasm soon persuaded me that this had to be the yacht we were looking for. Under the dust and dirt we found narrow mahogany planking in remarkable condition for her age, and down below the whole 36 feet of her varnished racing hull, unimpeded by any bulkheads, looked as good as new.

"How much?" was the all important question. The owner of Bursledon Shipyard, whose name escapes me after nearly 40 years, owned the hull. Subsequently, we learned that she was a 'debt' boat which explained the absence of a keel - the lead had been sold to settle yard bills. The answer - £60 for the hull, spars, rigging and a suit of sails - sounds today like the bargain of the century. But in 1952 it was still quite a lot of money for a young teacher with a growing family.

I think the yard owner saw in us a couple of likely lads who would rid him of a hull too good to scrap but almost unsaleable without a keel. His charming soft-sell approach was irresistible when he pointed out a sister-ship lying close by, with a cast iron keel replacing the original and fitted out as a cruising yacht. Furthermore, there was an architect-designed 'plug' for the keel which we could borrow without charge. By the end of the day I was the proud owner of Zenith, 6-metre, designed and built by Fife in 1924, a successful yacht in the heyday of 6-metre racing in the 'twenties and thirties, a champion of the Q Class (with sail number Q8) when racing resumed in the Solent after the Second World War. She was built for Mr J Lauriston Lewis, and subsequent entries in Lloyds Register show that ownership passed to his

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daughter who, I believe, raced <sup>her</sup> in the United States. In the 'thirties she was owned by Lt. Col. H.M.E. Bradshaw, described by Susannah Ritchie in her book 'Solent Days and Ways' as "a large ginger-haired man with a powerful voice and splended record. Appropriately his first name was Hercules but he was known as 'Monty'..... for thirteen years he held the record for the best time in the Round-the-Island race, sailed in Ronnie Burton's Iskareen and he had many successes with his 6-metre Zenith.

In 1952 it must be admitted that Steve and I knew very little about 6-metre or any of the International Rating classes other than that they were built in a formula which permitted some variation in design through a system of compensations: for example, a lengthening of the waterline to obtain a theoretical speed advantage would have to be offset by a reduced sail area, or some other factor. Thus the class could be raced as if it were 'one design' and without the necessity for handy-capping, while designers could experiment in hull design (albeit within restricted limits) to the advantage of yacht design generally.

The principal dimensions of Zenith were 36 feet overall, breadth 6 feet 8 inches, and depth (with subsequent iron keel) 3 feet 6 inches. The original keel gave a design <sup>keel</sup> depth of 5 feet. The bow and counter overhangs amounted to almost a third of the overall length. The mast was <sup>50</sup>~~48~~ feet from truck to keelson and the boom 18 feet long. (4)

At the time we were not very concerned about these dimensions. Our main interest lay in the size and shape of the hog and whether the plug for an iron keel would fit without too much modification. We need not have worried - the match was accurate to within an eight of an inch, including keel bolt locations.

We were planning to fit out Zenith as a cruising yacht with an auxiliary engine and decided to reduce the weight of the new keel by about 10 per cent compensate for the engine, materials used in construction, fuel and water tanks, and for ~~the~~ interior ballast to restore any imbalance which might <sup>arise</sup>.

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In retrospect this was an error: we should have kept the balast keel intact, even though she might have floated below her designed marks, for Zenith proved to be very tender. It was easy enough to reduce the keel weight - the plug was built of 2 inch planks and we simply removed the top one (using it as a pattern for deadwood between hog and keel) before sending the plug away for casting. The cast keel, which weighed 2.3 tons, cost £64 delivered.

Zenith was constructed like a dinghy with steamed frames at 6 inches apart and every fourth frame made from sawn oak, finished to a section about one and a half inches square. Mahogany planking, three inches wide and finished to between half an inch and three eighths of an inch were fastened with copper rivets to the steamed frames and bronze screws to the sawn frames. Some of the latter had broken across the grain and had been strengthened by short frames spanning the fracture, or by larger frames lying alongside. The steamed frames were virtually undamaged, though many of the rivets had lost their heads and had to be replaced. Some of the original steel floors were still intact, though rusting rather thin. However, the main floors accommodating the keel bolts <sup>a</sup> had been recently replaced with heavier wrought iron. Generally the 28-year old hull was in remarkably good condition and there was very little we had to do in the way of repairs and renewals.

By May 1953 the iron keel had been fitted, the hull and canvassed deck painted, the bottom anti-foulinged, the spars varnished and the galvanised rigging treated with rust-preventing fluid. As I recall neither standing nor running rigging needed renewing, while the mainsail and jib were worn but still serviceable. So we were ready for the great day - the launching of a thirty-two year old 6-metre after a long lay up. We had been warned by friends that she might leak a bit, but we were not prepared for the enormous inrush of water which threatened to sink her alongside the crane jetty. There was frantic activity by yard staff and worried owner to find sawdust, which sprinkled around the hull is supposed to be sucked between the planks and expand, thereby providing 'instant' caulking. Whether this palliative works

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or not I have doubts: I can see <sup>the</sup> sawdust may fill and caulk seams close to the surface, but how it can reach gaps in the garboards is beyond me. However, by the time Zenith had sunk to a level of half her freeboard the inrush had slowed down, and by the end of the day we were reasonably hopeful that she would remain afloat overnight. Indeed, after pumping out the following morning she was fairly 'tight' and within a few days she was as dry as she would ever be without exterior hull treatment.

After a weekend stepping the mast and setting up the rigging we were ready to take to sea. Without an auxiliary engine and with two and a half miles of the River Hamble to navigate before reaching the Solent, we cast off with some trepidation, having first made sure that winds would be light and tidal streams favourable. We need not have worried - Zenith handled like a dinghy, responding quickly to helm and sail adjustments. In those days the Hamble had no marinas, very few piles, and only well scattered moorings, so there was plenty of room to tack.

The exciting sailing we enjoyed in the summer and autumn of 1953 gave us plenty of information about the hull and its sailing qualities. Firstly, we found that the iron keel, though it brought her down very close to her marks, altered her centre or lateral resistance very considerably and she had heavy weather helm. Secondly, the garboards and adjacent planks were visibly opening and closing when under sail in force 4 and over ~~her sail~~, and we were constantly pumping out. Thirdly, the lightly constructed hull, with only the hog and the deck shelf beams in timber of any real substance, twisted like a racing dinghy when under sail, made clearly visible by the canvassed deck which rucked into a wave formation, running diagonally from bow to stern and changing direction according to tack.

In the late autumn of 1953 we had Zenith lifted out and back under cover in Bursledon Shipyard for fitting out as a cruising yacht. Our plan was simple: to stiffen the hull laterally with three bulkheads, and longitudinally with solid cabin sides, including cockpit coamings and extensions over the foredeck and counter, built from full length mahogany timber. Hours were

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spent planning the shape of these long members to disguise as far as possible the height of the doghouse coach roof to give standing headroom at the aft end. The foreward bulkhead was placed just in front of the mast with a small door, through which we could enter the fo'c'sle by crawling on hands and knees. Here we installed the heads, but even with the coachroof extending forward some three feet we had to built a hatch over to make use of it. The world knew what was going on when a head appeared.

The salon had two conventional berths at the forward end, ~~running fore and aft~~, with two folding pipecoats over for the children. They used these under protest, for they were narrow and uncomfortable, with very little headroom over. In the doghouse there was a quarter berth on the starboard side, running under the cockpit seat. So we could sleep five! An engine box occupied about half the sole in the doghouse, the top serving as a galley working surface. The galley stove was housed on the port side over the engine box, which was itself offset for a shaft passing through the port quarter. <sup>(v2)</sup> Stephen was an Austin 7 enthusiast and we found an engine which he marinised very successfully, and which gave Zenith a forward speed of 5 knots at half throttle. The engine gave us satisfaction for nearly 18 years with only rare failures. There were, of course, blocks exchanged and re-bores made during this time and I recall searches in scrapyards for suitable magnetos. The gearbox was modified with a system of sprockets and cycle chain which enabled third geat to be used for driving Zenith astern at about 3½ knots. Aft the engine box was a bulkhead with a central companion way into a fairly spacious cockpit, with the third bulkhead positioned just forward of the rudder post.

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I think our plan was probably as good as it could be, having regard to the shortage of space below decks. Certainly we never made any significant changes to the accommodation. <sup>for eighteen years</sup> We sailed almost every weekend from April to October and cruised during the summer months, enjoying very happy sailing, some anecdotal incidents, and two major disasters, before parting with Zenith in 1972.

I recall our first day-sail in Zenith after her conversion to a cruising yacht. As long ago as 1954 Cowes at the weekend teemed with yachts and dinghies scurrying around apparently aimlessly, waiting for the starting gun, and with our comparative inexperience we were reluctant to enter. So we sailed into Curnard Bay without reference to charts and dropped anchor. When we re-appeared from below after lunch and an afternoon nap we found ourselves afloat in a pool, entirely surrounded by rocks. A quick reference to the chart showed that we were in a section of the Solent marked 'Anchoring and Fishing Prohibited' and when we lifted the anchor we discovered the reason - a submarine cable was entangled in the flukes. We quickly freed the damning evidence, and on a rising tide beat a hasty retreat.

A few seasons later I had, I fear, become over-confident in my ability to handle Zenith in all circumstances. Returning to Bursledon after a day sail with my brother David and his family who had never sailed before. I inadvertently abandoned ship, leaving them in charge of a 6-metre under full sail. The circumstances were these: Zenith had an 18 foot boom reaching out abeam on a run to a distance of nearly half the yacht's length and almost out of sight! It was sad that a very slight misjudgment on my part should cause the end of the boom to touch the rigging of a moored yacht, snagging on the bolt-head of the

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outhaul ~~hook~~. It was even sadder that the skipper, acting with admirable promptness, but without due consideration, should leap out onto the counter and manhandle the boom to free it. It freed, of course, and swung out as Zenith sailed past, taking the skipper with it and landing him as neatly as a circus artist on the foredeck of the moored yacht. David still remembers with dazed shock what happened next. To be left in charge without warning, the skipper having abandoned him in such an odd manner, was not initially frightening; indeed, there was some laughter at the antics of the skipper. But when the truth dawned and the skipper started bellowing orders in very plain English 'steer right into the river bank' a panic situation began to develop. I have to admit that David mastered the art of steering in double quick time, and managed by great good luck to strike the bank where it was soft and muddy, and before we were mutually out of earshot. He heard and understood my next order to undo all the bits of rope at the foot of the mast and pull down the sails. This was a mistake on my part, for as soon as the sails were down pressure holding the yacht against the river bank was released and on a rising tide Zenith drifted off and proceeded tide-borne upstream, her mainsail and boom hanging overside in the water. What might have happened next does not bear thinking about. Fortunately I was ~~not~~ out of earshot or I might have issued further disastrous orders. Even more fortunately, a retired longshoreman who was fishing from a dinghy in Bursledon pool, and who had crewed Zenith in her racing days, saw what was happening and rowed over to take charge. He helped David to drop anchor and then collected the marooned skipper. He didn't have much sense of humour, nor did we at the time see the funny side of it, so his derisory comments about amateurs stated in very

un-parliamentary language, were not well received.

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The first of the disasters occurred in the early 'sixties'. I had joined the Portchester Sailing Club and had a swinging mooring off Portchester Castle. After a heavy overnight gale I drove down to the harbour on my way to work to find Zenith sunk at her moorings, with only the topmast appearing above the water. She had been holed under the forefoot, probably by a baulk of timber. The boatyard at Gosport Hard salvaged her in less than 24 hours, lifting her on slings between two launches to shallower water on the first tide, then patching her with canvas and pumping her out on the second tide, when she was towed round to Gosport and craned out. Even in this short time the bilges filled with several inches of mud and everything was contaminated with engine oil from the sump. The dinghy, which we specially designed and built to sit on Zenith's counter, either upright in a cradle, or upside down over the cradle, disappeared and was never seen again. This was a sad loss for it was light enough to lift aboard single-handed, yet roomy enough to accommodate three adults, albeit with limited freeboard. Within six weeks repairs and renewals were completed, the engine stripped down and rebuilt; only the magneto needed to be replaced. We also took advantage of the disaster to do something about the rig in an attempt to reduce both Zenith's tenderness and the weather helm she carried. To this end we cut 8 feet off the mast and 4 feet off the boom, reducing the sail area and moving forward the centre of effort. The result was that Zenith sailed at a much more comfortable angle with reduced weather helm, and with a new suit of sails seemed to lose nothing in performance. We also made an effort to stop the ever-present leaks in the garboards when under sail. From the beginning there had been some copper tangles and these we replaced with more extensive copper sheathing. This only



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partly resolved the problem of leaks caused by the downward pressure of the mast on the hog, frames and planking both forward and aft of the mast step. At a later date we tried what was then a new treatment linked with the development of waterproof glues - Cascover - in which a closely woven fabric was glued to the prepared hull and the fabric moulded to the hull shape. We covered an area of about 8 feet x 4 feet on both sides, tenting the hull so that we could apply heat from electric <sup>heaters</sup> ~~figures~~ to cure the glue. After application the cloth was painted with a water-proofing fluid which gave a /glossy/ 'mackintosh' finish. The result was very satisfactory and leaks disappeared.

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The second disaster occurred in the summer of ~~1972~~. My son and his wife, together with her teenage sister, ventured too close inshore when anchoring in Osborne Bay, Isle of Wight. Zenith took the ground and lay at an <sup>acute</sup> angle at low water. This had happened on a number of occasions before in different places and was not of great concern. Unfortunately the <sup>year</sup> ~~summer~~ of 1972 was very hot and dry and the gunwhale and adjacent planks had opened up. On a rising tide they admitted quite a lot of water into the bilges. The acuteness of the angle also caused some engine oil to escape from the filler pipe (if she had heeled to port this would not have occurred) and <sup>spilled</sup> petrol from the carburettor. This was a lethal mixture on a hot summer's day, and when my son decided to make tea while waiting for the tide to float her off, there was an explosion and fire. He suffered first degree flash burns to his legs - fortunately he had put on a shirt after sunbathing. His wife, still sunbathing on the cockpit, leaning against the doghouse and her legs stretched out along the cockpit seat, was out of the line of flash and escaped uninjured. Her

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young sidter, sitting at the end of the counter with her feet in the water, had her hair, eyebrows and eyelashes singed even though she was more than 12 feet away from the doghouse companionway. His wife reacted with admirable promptness and had my son up from below and over the side into the sea in a matter of seconds - there was only three feet of water at the time and no fear of drowning. Not far away, anchored in deep water <sup>was</sup> with a Brazilian yacht competing in the Admiral's Cup series, with two crew members (the rest had gone ashore in the yacht's dinghy) waving frantically, each with a couple of shiny chromium-plated fire extinguishers, but with no means of getting close enough to use them. My son, recovered from the shock of the explosion and revived by his sudden immersion in the sea, scrambled back on board, launched the dinghy and rowed over to fetch them. Some precious time was lost in trying to make the extinguishers work - instructions were in Portugese. Eventually a number of jets were playing on the seat of the fire in the doghouse. By that time the police launch Ashburton had arrived and my son and his family were taken off. The last thing <sup>Brian</sup> he tried to do before leaving was to explain to the Brazilians that <sup>1 who spoke no English,</sup> they were standing on top of the petrol tank while fighting the fire. By great good fortune there was no further explosions and they succeeded in putting the fire out. Meanwhile the police launch landed its passengers in Cowes, where an ambulance was waiting to take them to Newport Hospital. Ashburton returned, and when the tide lifted her, Zenith was towed to Cowes and moored alongside the Town Quay. When I saw Zenith the following morning she was a sorry sight. The lower mast and boom were blackened, the terylene mainsail had partially melted and hung down in festoons, while down below, there were large areas of charred timber, including frames and planking. I found the petrol tank still half full of fuel -

four gallons - while under the tank where paint was stored, every tin had exploded with the heat.

This was almost my last view of Zenith. As far as the underwriters were concerned she was a write-off. They sold her to a breaker's yard in Southampton and she was brought by an enthusiast who had her extensively repaired by the Elephant Boatyard in Bursledon. It was said that the new owner cruised her to the Baltic and road out a very severe gale in the North Sea. Later, friends said that she had been seen in a Welsh harbour.

ap/ [Thereafter, Zenith was just a memory of eighteen years of very happy sailing. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when in 1990 my daughter took me to a boatyard in Falmouth to see Zenith as I had never seen her before - completely restored to the 6-metre she was when launched at Fairlie on the Clyde in 1924. But that is another story.

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