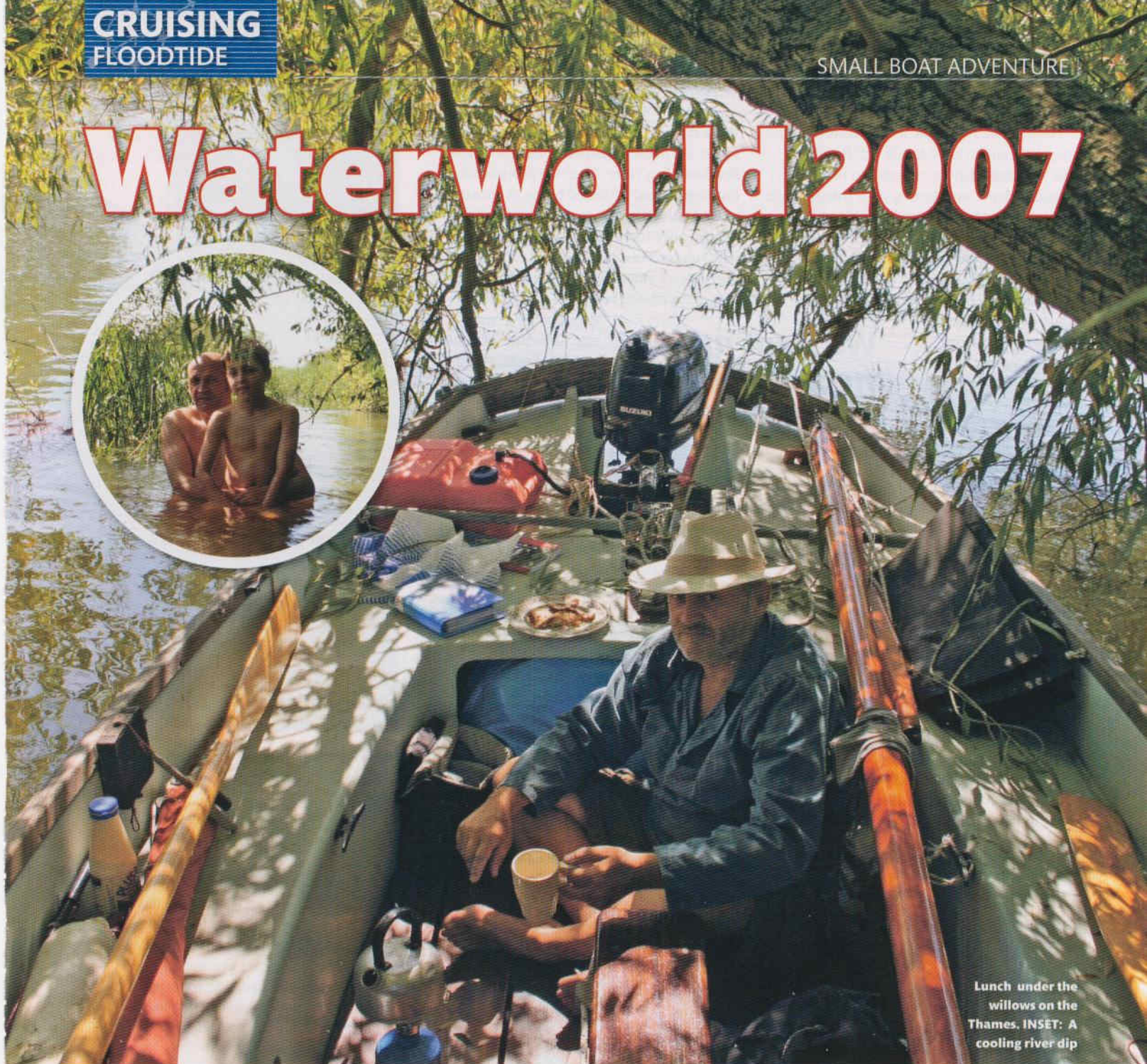


Waterworld 2007



Lunch under the willows on the Thames. INSET: A cooling river dip

Dick Durham left his Contessa 32 on her mooring and set off on a 200-mile adventure down the River Thames, sailing, rowing and motoring an 18ft Drascombe dayboat with his seven-year-old son. But he didn't reckon on the worst floods for 100 years...

The smaller the boat, the greater the fun, they say. Take this old adage literally, and you might end up sailing a Drascombe Lugger. You'd be in good company. The American Webb Chiles – who has been called 'sailing's worst lunatic and its best living writer' – sailed a Drascombe across the Pacific in 1979-80 and on the way from Fiji to Papua New Guinea was pitched over and left adrift for two weeks. He repaired the boat and almost completed a circumnavigation, before capsizing during a hurricane in the Atlantic.

Chiles, they say, is 'a man relentlessly driven to discover his limits'. My limits were

more modest – a voyage in *El Fideldo*, an 18ft Drascombe Lugger, from the navigable source of the River Thames, at Lechlade in Gloucestershire, to our home at Leigh-on-Sea, at the mouth of the Thames Estuary.

The first inkling something might be going awry with my plans, was when my son Richard and I arrived at London's Paddington Station on a July summer's day dressed in sailing smocks, shorts and deck shoes. The station concourse looked like Heathrow Airport during a Bank Holiday air-traffic controllers' strike.

'What's going on?' I asked the man behind the information desk.

'Floods!' he exclaimed. 'The Environment Agency has issued six severe flood warnings and more than 100 standard flood warnings.'

Undaunted, we caught a train under darkening skies and hurtled westwards to Swindon, where we took a taxi to Lechlade, the highest town to which the Thames is navigable by large craft, including narrowboats. Lying at the southern edge of the Cotswolds, the town is a popular 'resort' for Thames boating, but thanks to flooding, farmer's fields were full of ducks and swans, instead of herds of cattle. The statue of Old Father Thames at St John's Lock benignly overlooked the deluge.

Nevermind, I thought, a boat is surely the best thing to have in a flood? But I was thinking offshore, where you need to calculate depth and getting over things. Here, it was a case of getting under bridges! Even the signposts were under water.

I had borrowed *El Fideldo* from Sarah Black, director of the RYA's Green Blue environmental campaign, who had kindly transported the boat

by road trailer from the south coast to Lechlade, finding the town's Riverside Marina under water. Rain had been steadily falling all day and now came down in curtains. I was alarmed at how quickly *El Fideldo's* bilges filled. One newspaper reported 90,000 gallons of rainwater per second was flowing into the river. Dozens of Camping Gaz and propane bottles swirled off downstream, and locals used canoes to get to their cars. Richard improvised, paddling about on an old railway sleeper, but *El Fideldo* was going nowhere..

At St John's Lock, red danger signs banned any movement of craft on the river. We splashed our way back to the boat, passing a tractor that had rescued a young mother with her newborn baby, after being cut off from hospital by the floods.

For a sailor, it's the hardest thing in the world to sit on the dockside watching a fair wind or a fair tide go to waste. For

three days we watched flotsam hurtle past under Lechlade's Halfpenny Bridge on the flood-swollen river. Then we postponed our voyage and returned home. A month passed before Lechlade surfaced from the deluge, once more surrounded by green fields instead of acres of water reflecting grey skies. Evidence of flood aftermath was everywhere: boat fenders and plastic

sheeting hung from tree branches.

A local sailing couple, Mike and Margaret Hing, had kept an eye on *El Fideldo* during our absence, so we pumped

the rainwater from the bilge and set off through swarms of dragonflies, a flotilla of swans, ducks and coots. Richard couldn't wait to work the lock gates at Grafton Lock, Oxfordshire. But he opened the up-river sluice gates before closing the down-river lock gates, letting a few extra thousand

'We slept under the stars aboard *El Fideldo*'



Reading Festival fans chilling out

Photos: Dick Durham

Passing under an ancient toll bridge

gallons of river water escape downstream. The patient lock-keeper showed us the right way to do it!

As dusk fell on a midge-fogged, glassy river, I longed for my Contessa's cabin as a full moon mocked my first attempts at erecting our tent in the lock-keeper's garden at Eynsham. In the end, I gave up and we slept under the stars aboard *El Fideldo*. It was a cold night and I welcomed the warmth of the rising sun. Jackie Cannon, skipper of the narrowboat *Lechuga*, moored just astern, generously loaned us two extra-thick sleeping bags, which proved a boon for the rest of the trip.

BELOW: Old Father Thames with two river offspring - YM's Dick Durham and his son Richard



Eynsham Lock

Oxford

DAY 2

Abingdon Lock

Abingdon

Lock Wood Island

Benson Lock
Ewelme

DAY 1



'Serious business this helming, dad!' says Richard

DAY 3

Reading



Petrol pumps under water at Lechlade



Lock jam! Two boats wedged in Abingdon Lock

to the source
23 miles

Lechlade

St John's Lock

Grafton Lock



INSET: The ever-changing riverscape. ABOVE: One of the 108 bridges passed. BELOW: A pastoral scene



Hills. Three miles away, in the village of Ewelme, is the grave of Jerome K Jerome, who wrote *Three Men in a Boat* about his own Thames escapades.

DAY THREE

We were now leaving the rural Thames, which has changed little since medieval times, for the urban Thames: still beautiful but with bigger, more expensive houses, bigger, flashier motor-cruisers and glimpses of packed commuter trains through the trees.

We passed Reading Music Festival in full swing and at Marsh Lock, near Henley-on-Thames, we squeezed in with nine other craft – the busiest lock we encountered – and later found ourselves in company with a classic wooden canoe dayboat called *Debbie McGee*. The name seemed familiar and then I recognised her skipper: TV magician Paul Daniels, enjoying a summer's day on the river with

his wife, Debbie McGee.

'Ask him to do a trick, daddy!' Richard implored me.

That night we pitched our tent on Black Boy Island, named after King Charles II, described by his mother as a 'black baby' when he was born. After dinner in the Dog and Badger at Medmenham, we walked back to the boat in pitch blackness, bathed in sudden bursts of illumination from anti-burglar spotlights guarding millionaire's mansions. Owls hooted. 'They really spook me, dad!' said Richard, as we held hands. I didn't tell him I was spooked, too. On the river, a full moon blinded our night vision and for a while we blundered about on the wrong island, before finding our tent. →

DAY TWO

Once clear of Oxford, we stopped near Lock Wood Island, where the author Lewis Carroll once picnicked with Alice Liddell, the inspiration for Alice in Wonderland. We deliberately ran the boat into the riverbank under some willow trees and swam in the cool river. I had a 'bath' and washed my hair and a shirt – a bonus of freshwater sailing.

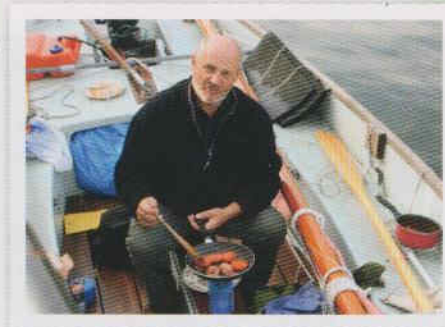
Downriver, Abingdon Lock was blocked and we joined a crowd of spectators watching the operation to



Magic moment: encounter with Paul Daniels' classic launch

extricate a narrowboat and a motor-cruiser wedged together across the lock gates. Three hours later, the gates opened and the race was on to be first through

the lock. That night we pitched our tent in a park at Benson, just west of the Chiltern



Full English afloat with YM's answer to Gordon Ramsay



Richard gets to grips with busy Marsh Lock at Henley-on-Thames

DAY FOUR

The following day we passed Marlow and Quarry Wood, the setting for Wild Wood in Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*. Just after Cookham came Cliveden, the Buckinghamshire mansion at Taplow, now a hotel run by the National Trust, but in 1961 the less innocent setting for the beginning of the Profumo Affair.

Our last night beside the freshwater Thames was spent camped on the front lawn of Stephan Fritz, who lives aboard *De Jelt*, a Dutch Clipper barge-yacht, on the waterfront near Old Windsor Lock. We dined that night in the Bells of Ouzeley.

DAY FIVE

After a pause at Hampton Court to see if we could get lost in the maze, we arrived at Teddington Lock and weir, the boundary between the freshwater river and the tidal Thames. We were now in the domain of the Port of London Authority.

Up until now we had been travelling as though through a dream: softly, sweetly carried on the back of the still dying freshwater floods. Now we shot out into the tidal Thames and Richard dipped his hand in the water to taste if it really did change to salt. It didn't – not until we got into the East End of London, evidence that surplus rainwater was still making its escape eastwards.

Now the river's swift-flowing ebb carried us through a backdrop of world-famous London sights and sounds. Richard gave a thumbs up as a red London bus crossed above us on Lambeth Bridge. We passed Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament and



ABOVE: The Lugger used only 15 litres of fuel



No need to open Tower Bridge for a Drascombe

Richard rubbed his eyes in disbelief as we were dwarfed by the giant London Eye. He cheered as we passed under Tower Bridge and at dusk we shot into Limehouse Basin cut. The lock-keeper had gone home, so we moored *El Fideldo* to a floating pontoon and headed for the luxury of a 'cabin' with bunks at the Cruising Association's HQ.

DAY SIX

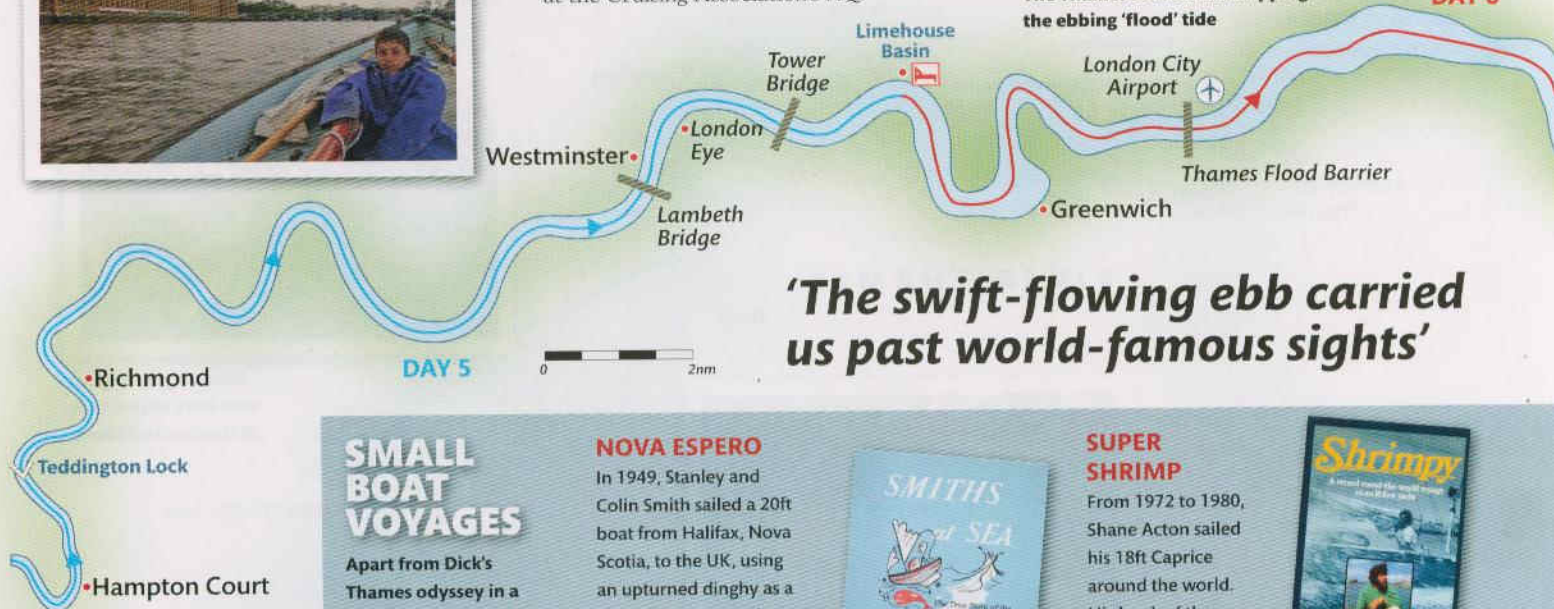
At dawn, without a breath of wind, the ebb carried us to Gravesend, where we raised *El Fideldo*'s mainsail and tacked downriver with a northeasterly breeze. Finally, the Thames widened out at Lower Hope.

The final night of our open-boat adventure was spent at Yantlet Creek in north Kent,



The Thames Barrier: no stopping the ebbing 'flood' tide

DAY 6



'The swift-flowing ebb carried us past world-famous sights'

SMALL BOAT VOYAGES

Apart from Dick's Thames odyssey in a Drascombe Lugger, there's a host of small boat adventures

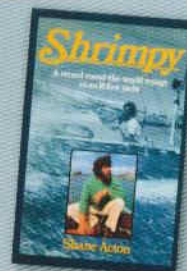
NOVA ESPERO

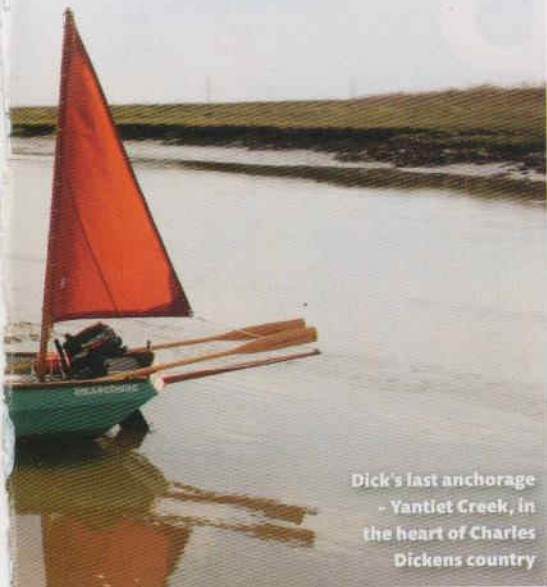
In 1949, Stanley and Colin Smith sailed a 20ft boat from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to the UK, using an upturned dinghy as a cabin. They wrote about the crossing in their book *Smiths at Sea*.



SUPER SHRIMP

From 1972 to 1980, Shane Acton sailed his 18ft Caprice around the world. His book of the circumnavigation is called *Shrimpy*.





Dick's last anchorage
- Yantlet Creek, in
the heart of Charles
Dickens country

in the heart of Charles Dickens country. It's all big sky, lonely marsh and a cockleshell beach. Not far from here lurked the prison hulks from which jailbirds like Magwitch once listened to the eerie pipings of curlews in *Great Expectations*. The hulks have gone but the curlews are still there and it's still a spooky place. I prefer it at dawn, rather than dusk. That night



Sailor's-eye view of the M25 at
the Dartford Crossing



Dead bass
washed up at
Yantlet Beach

Tilbury
Gravesend

RIVER THAMES

we built a huge bonfire from driftwood and discarded trainers. In the morning, *El Fideldo* was sitting up on the cockleshell bank as I cooked breakfast in the shelter of the creek gully. Our last sail was across Sea Reach, in the mouth of the Thames Estuary, to Bell Wharf, Leigh-on-Sea, where Richard hopped ashore with the painter. Home was just a walk up the hill.

THAMES WATER IN OUR VEINS

The River Thames has flowed through the lives of three generations of my family. My grandfather began a long life at sea as an apprentice in sailing ships, settled at Leigh-on-Sea and became a master mariner. My father learned to sail on the Thames and taught me to sail. So it seemed right to carry on the tradition with my own son.

The trouble is, the glue of my own bonding session came unstuck, thanks to the worst flooding for more than 100 years. Instead of taking two weeks to introduce Richard to the delights of messing about in boats, we had to dash down the river in fear of the floods returning!

We'd spent six days by oar, sail and outboard, covering almost 200 miles from Lechlade. We'd passed through 44 locks and underneath 108 bridges. It had cost us £45 for a two-week licence from the Environment Agency and we had used a meagre 15 litres of fuel. The river, where Richard had thrown a stone from one bank to the other at Lechlade, was now three miles wide. ▲

DRASCOMBE LUGGER

2007 is the 40th anniversary of the Drascombe Lugger. John Watkinson, a former Royal Navy officer, designed and built the first one for himself and his family. He wanted a daysailer that could be towed behind a car and which would be seaworthy in open water. He drew his inspiration from the traditional working boats of England's north-east coast. He built the first boat in a barn on his farm at Drascombe Barton and she was an instant success.

Watkinson went on to produce the boats in GRP and other models followed - the Coaster, the Longboat, the Dabber, the Scaffie, and the Drifter 22 - but all following the original philosophy of safety, robustness and fun.

Drascombes are now manufactured by Churchouse Boats of Whitchurch in Hampshire. About 5,000 Luggers and their sisters have been built in the last 40 years.



Journey's end at Bell Wharf, Leigh-on-Sea, at
the mouth of the Thames Estuary



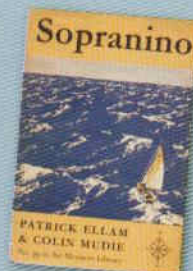
Pitch perfect:
it only took five
nights to erect the
tent properly

FATHER'S DAY

In 1993 Hugo Vihlen sailed his 5ft 4in boat from New Foundland to the UK and wrote about the crossing in *The Stormy Voyage of Father's Day*.

SOPRANINO

In 1952, Patrick Ellam and Colin Mudie sailed the 19ft Sopranino, east to west across the Atlantic and wrote a book, named after the boat, about their adventures.



WANDERER

In 1963 Frank Dye sailed his 16ft Wayfarer dinghy 650 miles from Scotland to Iceland. He and his wife Margaret went on to have many adventures in their boat, some of which they documented in their book *Sailing to the Edge of Fear*.

TREKKA

From 1952 to 1959, John Guzzwell sailed his home-made 20ft boat *Trekka* around the world from British Columbia and wrote a book about his adventures. *Trekka* is now in a maritime museum in Victoria.

