

The ISORA Story

by W. M. Nixon

The Irish Sea has few rivals anywhere in the world as an ideal area for middle distance and shorter offshore races. An interesting variety of coastlines, a useful selection of turning marks, a fascinating mixture of tidal conditions, and an entertaining choice of hospitable ports at which to start and finish races, makes for the ideal mixture whereby the offshore brigade can have the maximum amount of sport and its attendant celebrations with the minimum amount of hassle.

So not surprisingly, although the Irish Sea Offshore racing Association as it is now constituted only dates back to 1972, the history of offshore racing in the area goes back for a very long time. Indeed, it could be argued that it goes back more than 300 years, to 1663 when the world's first offshore race was held between the Holyhead to Dublin packet boat and the

revolutionary catamaran *The Experiment* which was the brainchild of the pioneering surveyor Sir William Petty. *The Experiment* won this first 50-mile windward race by something like 15 hours, but the sailing world then as now was worried by the dangers of multi-hulls disintegrating (which actually happened in the Bay of Biscay with a larger *Experiment* development) so the world of offshore sailing continued to adhere to monohulls.

Modern yachting is reckoned to date from the great peace which descended on Europe in 1815, and certainly the 19th Century was to see developments which led to the emergence of the first hints of offshore racing as we know it today. It was at the north end of the Irish Sea, in the North Channel, that cross-channel matches among craft of the Royal Northern Yacht Club –

originally founded in Belfast, but subsequently with a second base in the Clyde, and latterly wholly in the Clyde – became a regular feature by the middle of the century. And by the 1870s that pioneering organisation the Royal Alfred Yacht Club of Dublin Bay was running cross-channel races either to Holyhead or the Menai Straits, and linking up with events run by the Royal Mersey and the Royal Dee in North Wales and at Liverpool.

But although these events undoubtedly took the participants offshore, they had the flavour of extended day sails rather than being recognisably modern offshore races. However, back in 1860 there had occurred what is arguably the first true offshore race originating in the area, from Dublin



START OF THE R.A.Y.C. CHANNEL MATCH, 1888



The DBSC 24 ft. 00 Vandra, once owned by Mungo Park whose Tam O'Shanter was to win the Gulf Salver in the 1973 Fastnet Race. The 24-footers, successors of the pioneering DBSC 25s, provided many regular competitors in offshore races in the Irish Sea in the 1950s and '60s.

Bay to Cork Harbour. Seven yachts – ranging from the 25-ton cutter *Mask* to the 140 – ton schooner *Urania* – started on Saturday July 14th, and the winner was Sir Arnott's 39-ton cutter *Sybil*, commanded by the legendary amateur skipper Henry O'Bryan.

The 'Golden Age' of yachting from around 1885 until 1910, with its rapid development of design, was reflected in an acceleration of offshore activity. The world's first one design class of cruiser / racers, the Dublin Bay 25 ft. ODs, which first raced in 1898, raced as a class across St. George's Channel to take part in the Menai Straits Regattas in the luxurious days of the Edwardian era, while across on the English side, the Tranmere Sailing Club's famous Midnight Race from the Mersey to the Isle of Man was first run in 1907, further racing of an offshore flavour also being provided by the Royal Mersey's traditional race westward to take the Liverpool fleet to the Menai Straits in high summer.

The Great War of 1914-1918 brought development to a complete stop, and political events in Ireland during the 1920s tended to restrict cross-channel contact, but by 1929 the Irish Cruising Club was in being, mainly through the inspiration of the great Harry Donegan of Cork whose cutter *Gull* had been one of the seven yachts taking part in the

very first Fastnet Race of 1925, which had led directly to the formation of the Royal Ocean Racing Club. Harry Donegan's enthusiasm for offshore racing in general and the new Irish Cruising Club in particular is evident from the fact that in 1930 he sailed *Gull* from Cork round to Dublin Bay simply to do the new club's inaugural 80-mile race from Dun Laoghaire to Douglas in the Isle of Man. Eleven boats raced, and the winner was the 15-ton cutter *Espanola* owned by the ICC's first Commodore, Herbert Wright.

The tradition of an ICC race in the Irish Sea at Whitsun was thus established, and in 1933 for the first time it went to Holyhead, where the Irish fleet met up with the yachts of the Royal Dee YC, giving a first hint of the kind of sociability which is now a feature of ISORA life. During the 1930s, leading ICC skippers included such legendary figures as Billy Mooney (who sailed from Howth in those days, though later he was to be most closely associated with Dun Laoghaire) and the famous designer / builder John B. Kearney, whose *Mavis*, an 11-ton yawl, was renowned both for her speed and seakindliness, particularly impressing Humphrey Barton (later founder and admiral of the Ocean Cruising Club) when she beat his *Dauntless* and half a dozen other craft in the ICC's



The 1961 veteran Grenade, owned by the Morris family of Abersech, is one of the most successful ISORA competitors.

stormy Whit race of 1935, which was from Howth to Peel in the Isle of Man.

Further possibilities of cross-channel racing were being aired when World War II arrived, and halted development. But then by the late 1940s things were on the move once more, there was successful Irish participation in the 1947 Fastnet Race by Billy Mooney's *Aideen*, and growing interest from the Lancashire and North Wales fleets saw the establishment in the early 1950s of the RORC's Beaumaris to Cork race, a reflection in some ways of that trail-blazing race of 1860, but equally a leap into modern times as early participants included such names as Denis

Doyle, Michael Tomlinson, the designer Peter Brett, Rory O'Hanlon, Douglas Heard, Frank Hopkirk, Fred Cudmore, Stuart Tod and many others.

In time this race was to alternate with another RORC event, this time within the Irish Sea and known as the Morecambe Bay race, but back in the mid-'50s developments were also taking place at a more local level with the formation of Mersey and North Wales Joint Offshore Co-ordinating Committee, brought about particularly by the efforts of Peter Brett and another of the area's renowned skippers, Mostyn Vicars of the famed cutter *Dione*. That the title of the new body was such an incredible mouthful reflects the fact that it had to tread carefully for fear of offending local susceptibilities and traditions, but by 1954 it was co-ordinating a typical season of six races with an average turnout of around eight starters, the biggest fleet being sixteen for the Midnight Race.

Offshore racing in the Irish Sea was also outward looking at this period, with boats such as Michael Tomlinson's *Dee 25 Rondinell* and Douglas Heard's revolutionary Flying Thirty *Huff of Arklow*, heading off to take part in RORC events elsewhere, *Rondinella* being for ever written into the history books by continuing to race through the storm which swept the Channel Race of 1956 and getting second place overall. For much of his campaigning in the English Channel, Mike Tomlinson's navigator was a young Liverpool doctor called Dick Richardson, who return north with an enthusiasm for the offshore racing theories of John Illingworth, and one of the earliest boats he was to complete was one of the Illingworth-designed Tiger V's which was based on the Junior Offshore Group concepts.

It was in fact largely Mike Tomlinson and the crew of *Rondinella* who saw to it that the old M & NWJOCC was given a new lease of life when it was re-constituted as the North West Offshore Association at the AGM in the Royal Mersey YC on October 14th, 1963, and since that time twenty-one years ago, everything has of course accelerated with the remarkable expansion in all areas of sailing. This was reflected in the attractive programme of NWOA events, such that by 1971, by which time Ireland was regularly taking part in events like the Admirals Cup, half of the entries in all Irish Sea



Eifion Evans' She of Lleyln from Pwllheli is typical of the smaller craft racing with division B2.

offshore events were coming from the Irish side. So in the following winter a meeting, inspired mainly by Dick Richardson and Hal Sisk, was held in the familiar surroundings of the Royal Mersey, and the Irish Sea Offshore Racing Association came into being.

In the first flush of enthusiasm, it was hoped that it might co-ordinate events in the entire area from the Clyde right down to Cork, incorporating traditional happenings such as the Round the Isle of Man Race (established in 1952) and devising new courses as well. But in practice ISORA's greatest success has come through an emphasis on races in the Irish Sea and the northern half of St. George's Channel, with most of the competitors being drawn from ports on the Dublin / North Wales axis.

The attraction of the ISORA programme is that it provides a maximum of sport for a minimum of fuss, with the added flavour of racing to a 'foreign' country where everybody conveniently speaks the same language. In an average year, about eighty different boats will take part in some or all of the races, with turnouts per race averaging around the forty mark, and the biggest single fleets pushing towards the sixty level.

It is participant sport par

excellence, and one of the most encouraging aspects of the Association's development in recent seasons has been the increased interest taken in the inter-club competition for the Royal Mersey's Victoria Cup. This enlivens the racing in all sections of the fleet, and winners in recent years have included Holyhead Sailing Club, the National Yacht Club, Howth Yacht Club, and Pwllheli Sailing Club.

But the thing which most vividly brings the story of ISORA to life is the recollection of the outstanding boats and the larger-than-life characters who have been sailing them at the head of the fleet. Perhaps it is unfair to single out any craft, but those of us who have been involved with ISORA racing since the Association was founded will always have entertaining thoughts of the Sisk brothers with *Alouette de Mer* and the gallant *Standfast*, David Hague and the magnificent *Dai Mouse II*, Otto Glaser with *Tritsh-Tratsch*, Dick Richardson with *Harry Furlong*, Alan Stead with *Andromeda*, Noel Speidel with *Malaise*, Gerry Haggas and *Sundancer*, Mark Hill, Peter Gray and now David Bradley with *Frenesi*, the Morris family with the evergreen *Grenada*, Eifion Evans and others with *She of Lleyln*, Derry O'Brien with *Morning Flame* and *Living Wire*, Ross Courtney with *Bandersnatch*, Robert Mollard with *Korsar*, Anthony Jones with *Mererid-O-Lyn*, Tony Vernon with *Force Ten-sion*, Dermot Ryan with *Red Velvet*, Jim Poole with *Feanor*, Patrick and Kieran Jameson with *Findabar*, Huw Tudor with *Panache*, Frank Hughes and Peter O'Reilly with *Tearaway*, Bob Johnson with *Quickstep*, Tony Cowper with *Stargazer*, Bernard Cox with *Greased Lightning*, three-times champion Brian Kelly with *Rapparee II*, Bruce Lyster and *Swuzzlebubble*, and many, many others, all enjoying the great sailing and good fellowship which ISORA provides.



Michael Tomlinson's on her moorings at Moel-y-don in the Menai Straits. With Rondinella and later with Pellegrine, Michael Tomlinson played a leading role in the development of offshore racing in the Irish Sea.

