

The Cruise of the *Muriel*

Adam Bridger

Whilst researching for a trip to India I found, buried away in the archives of the Royal Cruising Club Journal, a little-known entry about a sailing adventure that started on the far side of the world. It was called *The Cruise of the Muriel*, and told of its captain's epic voyage from India to England.

The *Muriel* was built in Bombay to a Fife's of Farlie design. She was a pole masted schooner, 100 feet long and with a sail area of 3,800 ft. And, if that wasn't enough power, she had twin 23 hp Gardner petrol engines.

But my real interest lay in the *Muriel's* starting point – The Royal Bombay Yacht Club (RBYC), founded in 1846. The impressive club proudly stands by the Gateway to India, an arch built to celebrate the visit of George V and Queen Mary in 1911. Its history is steeped in the days of the Raj and the British Empire. I wanted to know more about the club, the schooner *Muriel*, and her captain C T R Scovell. What better way to find out than go there in person. So, with my wife Mary, we included a three-day visit to the RBYC as part of our itinerary during two weeks in India.

The RCC archive had already painted a wonderful picture of Scovell and the *Muriel*. It told how on 3 February 1909 he set sail from Bombay to England via the Suez Canal. His crew consisted of eight Lascars (the generic term for any sailor from India or South East Asia) and two Europeans, known only as Gibson and Fletcher. Provisions and water were laid in for a six months' duration, the Lascars being 'fed according to the Board of trade scale for foreign going ships'. (Things are much the same today aboard my own 24 foot Beneteau *Little B*). Most of his supplies were ordered from The Army and Navy store in London



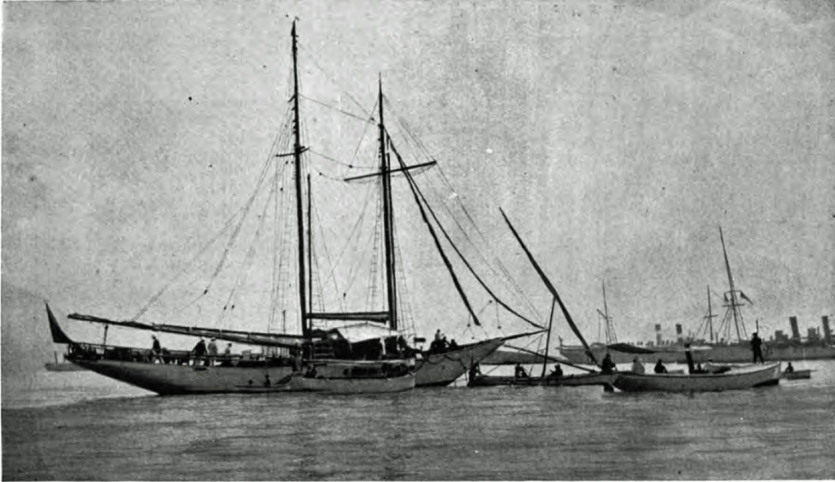
The Crew - 26 April

and were shipped out in two lots, the first to Bombay and the second to Port Said.

On 28 April they sighted Start Point off the Devon coast, and made landfall at

Adam Bridger

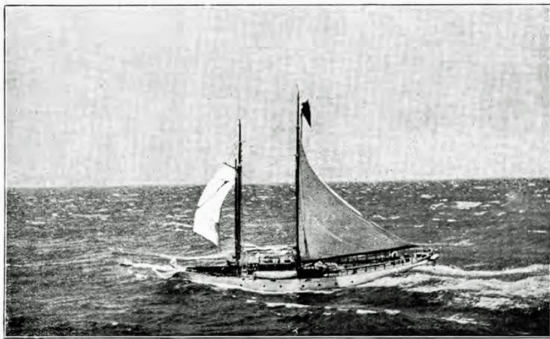
Brixham to send telegrams on to London. The voyage had taken 84 days and covered 6,996 nautical miles. Scovell was an excellent navigator and stayed to the route taken by the P&O steamers, using their track as a navigation aid and contacting them for accurate GMT updates. Captain and crew also coped with the usual lot



"MURIEL" IN BOMBAY HARBOUR—AN HOUR BEFORE SAILING
Muriel in Bombay before departure

of long-distance sailors - winds varying from flat calm to severe gale, groundings, collisions, snapped halyards and sheets, and broken gammon irons. There were also numerous engine problems involving fly wheels, sticking valves, choking oil pipes and worn keyways. Oh, and a mention of being pursued by pirates – plus the extortionate charges imposed by Greek harbour officials. Scovell also mentions another danger; 'sharks' in port - characters who latch on to the yacht just to get free drinks.

On the morning of departure from Bombay Scovell's entry says they 'breakfasted at the Yacht Club', before being accompanied out to sea by nearly all the yachts on the station. The *Muriel* and crew were honoured by the



"MURIEL" AS SEEN FROM THE P. AND O. "MACEDONIA," APRIL 20.

Muriel seen from a P&O steamer shortly before arrival
Flagship *HMS Hyacinth* who mustered the crew with the Admiral's band playing *Auld Lang Syne* and *Home Sweet Home* and the owners of *Turquoise* and *Eileen IV* also came on board for a parting drink.

Despite the detailed archive entry, Scovell doesn't actually name the RBYC. I

The Cruise of the Muriel

was keen to make that connection, and I found an Indian historian who could help me. Mr Gulshan Rai had written an acclaimed history of the RBYC. He'd also won the Scovell Challenge Shield. A quick Internet search unearthed Mr Gulshan Rai, and a month later we were sharing a drink in the RBYC.



The RBYC entrance

The Club, founded in 1846, was granted its Royal title by Queen Victoria in 1876. Its current home was built in 1896 and is described as a blend of English neo-gothic with a Tudor half-timbered idiom. Uniformed guards standing under a portico salute you as a porter, dressed in a uniform of white shorts and sailor's tunic, takes your bag. Each

floor of the building has an impressive tiled high-ceilinged corridor running its entire length. The floors are interconnected by a sweeping stair case, and there's a classic old-fashioned lift operated by another uniformed staff member. The rooms on the first two floors are dining rooms and lounges, a library and study, a gym and a very useful shop. And, there's the bar where I met Mr Gulshan and his wife.

As we explored the club one felt surrounded by the history of the place; paintings, including one presented by members of the Royal Thames Yacht Club, and models of yachts that were famous within the Club cover the walls. There are cabinets full of fabulous silver trophies; one, awarded by the famous American newspaper magnate, Gordon Bennett, is a full three feet high not including



Gulshan Rai, Adam Bridger, Mary Bridger and ??

the base. The Bombay Challenge cup is huge, larger than the FA cup. The bar wall is adorned with the burgees of a hundred clubs and crests of naval ships.

And it was there that the Scovell jig-saw began to fall into place. I discovered from the boards of honour that not only had he been a member of the RBYC,

Adam Bridger

but had been Commodore from 1904 to 1908. I also found the Scovell Memorial Shield, presented by the members of the RBYC in memory of Commodore Scovell in 1910. Clearly there is a tale behind all of this. And Mr Gulshan Rai was the man to tell it.

Firstly, Gulshan Rai is a first-class yachtsman himself, having sailed from England to India in a *Dolphin 31* in 1981. Then in 1987-88 he did a circumnavigation in a *Vancouver 32*. He has been awarded the Ocean Cruising Club's Barton Cup, and the prestigious Padma Shri, the fourth highest civil decoration of India.

Over a splendid lunch of *Chole Bhature* and Mutton Railway Curry, Gulshan Rai told me about our man C T R Scovell. Charles Thornton Rennie Scovell was the Chief Engineer in the British Indian State Railways, a very prestigious position in the British administration. He was a most popular and charismatic Commodore of the Club from 1904-1908.

'Under his leadership yachting and good fellowship prevailed.'

He instigated eight-mile yachting excursions to Hog Island, starting with a breakfast of scotch kippers on ice. Arrival at the island culminated in dinner to the strains of songs such as *The Roast Beef of Old England* with great fun and a most congenial atmosphere.

Gulshan Rai quotes one report: 'The yawl discharged the piano which found its way to the Club's bungalow on the crest of the hill...the fauna of this island must have been astonished to hear the musical accompaniment to all this and the other toasts...Scovell expressed his pleasure at seeing so many present...he would remind them, there was to be a ladies Tiffin party on the Island and he hoped all would come in force. He hoped himself to bring a dozen ladies in *Godwit* (great laughter and a voice; "Ho for his 12 little wives!") I am sure this will remind RCC members of the Beaulieu and many other Rallies.

Sadly, there is a tragic end to our RCC/RBYC hero, Scovell. The story is told in Gulshan's book, and by eye-witness Philip S Wellby for the RCC journal for 1910.

On her arrival in England from Bombay *Muriel* was sold to a Mr J E Jewell of Birchington, Kent. Scovell was determined to buy a steam vessel to get him back to India. In the winter of 1910 he bought the *Charlotte* in Hamburg, but, owing to being posted to Calcutta instead of Bombay, he decided to bring the vessel over to England to be laid up. Scovell, with Wellby and four other men and a boy, hastily went to sail the *Charlotte* from Hamburg. They were, however, plagued with problems from the outset. In Scovell's words, 'a good example of how things should not be done'.

They set sail on 16 November 1910 and immediately ran aground due to engine failure. On 17 November at 1222, the weather deteriorated, forcing them to run for Cuxhaven, in Lower Saxony, Germany. The engines failed twice, causing a minor collision and necessitating a tow into Cuxhaven.

On 18 November, they cast off in a light easterly breeze. That night the engines and bilge pumps failed again, and the engine room flooded, requiring all hands to bail with buckets. During the night of 18 November rough seas and squalls developed. By 0500 on the 19th they were in rough, breaking seas, and an

The Cruise of the Muriel

‘Impossible hurricane W’ forced them off course, with ‘every hatch and skylight leaking’. By this time three feet of oily water was washing to and fro over the engine room floor, threatening to put out the boilers. With no bilge pump the crew were bailing for their lives.



Charles Scovell, 1904

At 1600 on Sunday the 20 November off Sandettie light-vessel, north of Calais, Scovell fell overboard and was never seen again.

In the RCC Journal Wellby says that Scovell had just left the bridge and was talking to Evans when he leant against the rail at the gangway which, following some damage, had been lashed with old signal halyard. The lashing gave way and Scovell fell overboard. No time was lost in launching the dinghy and Evans jumped in and pushed off, standing up and sculling. He called out to the Mate, ‘Can you see him?’ The Mate cried out ‘I can’t see him. My God I can’t see him.’

Gulshan Rai writes, ‘The grim news was received with sincere regret at the RBYC. The yards of the yachts were cockbilled and the rigging was slackened off to display grief and the colours were dipped. Later that year they honoured him by instituting The Scovell Memorial Shield.’

I started this journey by wanting to know a little more about the RBYC, but ended becoming enthralled by the story of this RCC member, Commodore C T R Scovell. Without doubt, a charming, charismatic man with sparkling blue eyes who was in fact the epitome of an adventurous gentleman yachtsman of this era.

As for *Muriel*, it seems she was sailed on the south coast for some years and was known as the ‘Indian Yacht’. She was eventually sold to a Mr Cernadas in Buenos Aires and renamed the *Pampero*.

On the website www.histarmar.com.ar there is a drawing of *Muriel* with a new rig conformation and a photograph of her final resting place, wrecked ashore in Uruguay. A sad end to a lovely vessel.



With thanks to the members of the RBYC for their hospitality and to Gulshan Rai for sharing this story with me.