

Sonia's Last Cruise

Burnham-on-Crouch to Copenhagen and Return

James Grogono

'Are you *Sonia*?'

'Yes.'

'Good. We just wanted to know you are in.'

The shouted question came, to our surprise, from an off duty Lightship in Harwich Harbour. It was blowing SW8, dusk, and raining. We had set off from Burnham-on-Crouch that morning, a crew of six students, aiming to cross the southern North Sea by night, and make a landfall in Holland the following day. *Sonia* did not show her name, but was well known on the East Coast for her long, low profile, Bermudian ketch rig and tan sails. The forecast wind was SW4-5, but it quickly increased, and when we reached the 'turning point' at Long Sand Head, 20nm out in the Thames Estuary, it was an easy decision to turn to port for refuge, and not to starboard for Holland.

The year was 1958. *Sonia* had been owned and cruised by my grandfather and father from the early 1930s. Her history was unusual. She was built by Summers and Payne in 1905 as one of five Linear 36 Footers, and raced on the South Coast before WWI. I searched for and eventually found a photo of her in 1905, then named *Edie Two*. In 2019 I found a reference to her in *Le Yacht*, August 1905, 'un tres elegant bateau' coming in Regattas at le Havre and Trouville.

Her second owner was a redoubtable lady called Betty Carstairs, an oil millionairess, who also owned fast cars and aeroplanes, and raced speedboats. Miss Carstairs loved her day-racing



Edie Two

yacht, and could not cope with the idea of anyone else sailing her. She decreed that, in the event of her death or departure *Edie Two* was to be towed out to sea and scuttled. Miss Carstairs moved to the Bahamas, perhaps to escape the scandal of

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her numerous affairs with famous 'ladyfriends', but the yard owner could not bring himself to sink her. Neither, in conscience, could he sell her. In the 1920s she lay abandoned in a mud berth in Tollesbury, Essex, minus her original lead keel and rig.



Sonia with reduced rig

There she was found by a Burnham-on-Crouch yard owner, towed round to Burnham, and acquired by my grandfather for £225 in 1930. He worked with the yard owner to refit her with a much reduced keel and rig.

In the 1930s she was cruised on the East Coast and southern North Sea by various 'Grogs', before being laid up for WW2, again in a mud berth, this time at Iken, near the top of the River Alde in Suffolk. In 1947 we found her there, in a parlous state. She was refitted once more, and cruised extensively on the East Coast and Holland throughout the 1950s. My brother Alan and I were given shared command in our mid teens, and had the good fortune to have an ace photographer, Jock Workman, as a school friend and shipmate.

My father encouraged us to sail *Sonia* without him, and in 1954 I skippered her on a short East Coast cruise with a crew of three school friends, all aged seventeen. This experience turned my head. Each year we made longer and more ambitious cruises, mainly to Holland. By 1958 I felt ready to go to the Baltic. I was then a clinical medical student, and I engineered an extra long summer holiday by telling the Dean I was leading a University sailing team to race against similar teams on the Continent. This was said in good faith, but I failed to find any Continental Universities with sailing teams. We finally made contact with the Junior Sailing Division of the Royal Danish Yacht Club in Copenhagen. Our team was granted



Crew (L to R) Grogono, Green, Travis, Vines, Jones

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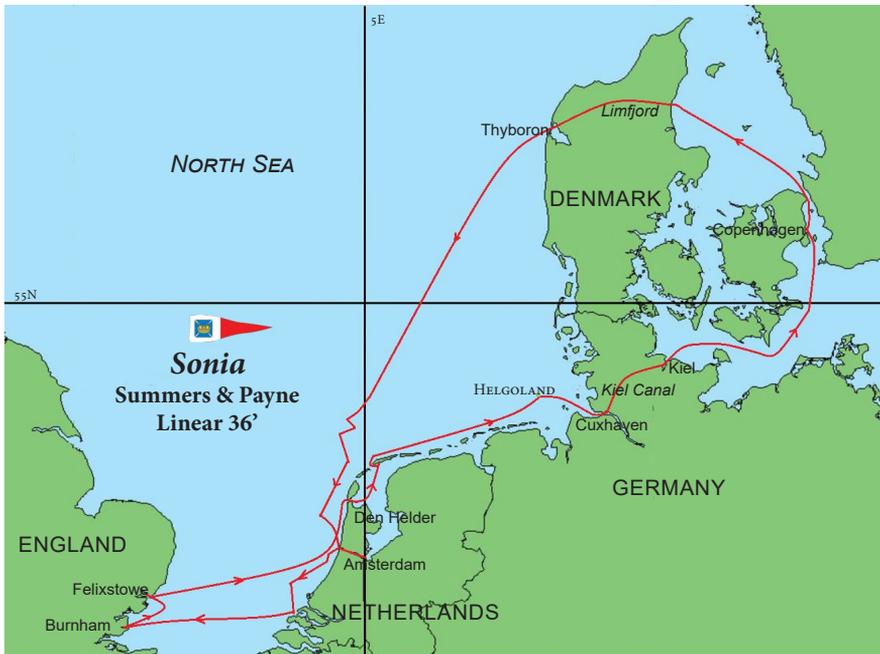
status as a 'British Universities Sailing Team'. The team consisted of three from Cambridge, Andrew Green, Jeremy Vines and Richard Harrison, and three from London University, Peter Jones, Lewis Travis and myself.

Two days after our unexpected gale we set off again, and had an uneventful passage to Holland, sailed inside Texel and spent a night in West Terschelling. We sailed round outside the remaining Friesian Islands and north German coast to approach the Kiel Canal. We got soaked and swamped in a squall outside the Canal entrance, but dried out as we sailed along it, and were well entertained at the British Kiel Yacht Club.

Later the same day we set off for Copenhagen, aware that we were behind schedule. We had strong following winds, and 23 hours later we arrived there, having averaged 7.2 knots. We were exhausted. All we could see through the rain was a murky coastline, a far cry from the 'Wonderful Copenhagen' of the popular song. A small knot of people were



Drying out in the Kiel Canal



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standing in yellow oilskins on the harbour wall. They greeted us with a cheer, and the words, 'You are ten minutes late!'



Party on *Sonia* to return Danish hospitality

The next 10 days remain as a pleasant blur in my memory, with excellent hospitality from our Danish hosts, some light-hearted racing against their juniors, and return hospitality on *Sonia*. One of our hosts owned a shipping line, and offered to arrange free deck transport for *Sonia* back to the UK. She had an open cockpit, ten feet long, draining into the bilges, and freeboard so low that the dinghy's rubbing strake rode over her gunwale. There was a risk of being sunk at sea if caught out in a full gale, and I saw a flicker of interest in one or two of my crew. However, loyalty prevailed, and we set off sailing north out of Copenhagen Sound, and through the Limfjord. This is a short cut which avoids sailing round the north tip of Jutland. These inland waters were ideal for *Sonia*, and two days later we arrived at Thyboron, a fishing village on the west coast of Jutland, facing the North Sea.

We waited for a weather window, and befriended some local fishermen. We sat drinking in their tiny cabin marvelling at the chunky small craft in which they stayed at sea in all weathers. We returned their hospitality, and saw that our sentiment was reciprocated as they looked at our long low craft and frail hatches.

Our North Sea crossing was uneventful, in light winds. Three days later we approached the Dutch Coast in fog with our dead reckoning putting us already in the Zuider Zee. This seemed unlikely. A small coaster approached us and hailed, 'Five miles south east you will find the Texel Light Vessel.' We waved acknowledgment as if this was expected news, and then scurried below to find out where we were. Two hours later we were safely into IJmuiden for much needed stores. Our crossing had been longer than expected, and we had lived mainly on mackerel for the last days at sea. We felt we were nearly home in the familiar Dutch Canals, and three days later we made a short overnight crossing from Flushing back to Burnham. We had been away five weeks, and were not the only ones relieved that we were safely home. *Sonia* was well known in Burnham, and we saw flags flying from one of the Yacht Clubs.

My father sold *Sonia* soon after, replacing her with a high sided 30 footer which I did not fancy. Four decades later I learned the reason. My mother had told my father that she would 'never forgive him if HIS boat drowned one of HER sons.'