

A Formative Experience

Kit Power



Kit aboard *Duet* in 1958, and now (below)

When I was at Cambridge in the 1950s, one of my great friends was Christopher Courtauld. His father, August, was a member of the RCC (his obituary appeared in the *Journal* for 1958) and he owned a 22 ton yawl called *Duet*, built in 1912 and designed by Linton Hope. She is a beautiful and highly distinctive yacht, so much so that once, when sailing with Chris in Kiel, an old man hailed us from the quayside: "Isn't that the old *Gaviota*?". That was *Duet's* name when in German ownership before World War I and the old man

had immediately recognised her from the days when he had sailed in her 45 years before. He came aboard for a feast of nostalgia.

In the summer of 1958 I had just left Cambridge and Christopher, who was already an RCC member, invited me to join his crew in *Duet* for a race from West Mersea to Ostend. August was very ill – he would die early the next year – and would not be coming with us. We were a pretty green crew aged about 24, so to make sure we didn't make a mess of things 'Navy' Mussett would join us. Mussett was *Duet's* paid hand, a splendid Essex seaman of vast experience who was surprised by nothing because he had seen it all before. I remember him telling us how, as a teenager, he had been employed as part of the crew of some vast gaff rigged yacht and was sent to clear a fouled topsail sheet. This involved climbing up the mast hoops, and then working his way along the gaff to the peak. They were sailing downwind and looking down from the peak he saw that the owner, on the helm, was looking up at him, rather than paying attention to the course. Mussett saw the leech start fluttering and just had time to get himself on to what would become the windward side of the sail where he managed to hang on when she gybed, all standing. Mussett did all the cooking on board and a feature of his cuisine was 'sea boot



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soup? This was served every evening and came from a stockpot into which went all the day's leftovers and anything else which came to hand so that the flavour changed gradually from day to day. When a carrier pigeon landed on board and then disappeared we asked Mussett what had happened to it. He said nothing but just



Duet starting the Ostende Race in 1958

went over on her beam ends and I remember noticing that most of the guardrail was under water. I tried to head up to spill the wind. The noise was deafening, the rain was torrential and lightning was striking the water all around us. Then there was a bang and I saw the jib describe an arc above the mast. For an instant it streamed from the masthead like some vast burgee before the mast parted above the lower shrouds. Hanging from the remains of the rigging, the upper part now swept randomly and viciously just above the deck threatening to wipe out anyone caught in its path. The mizzen had blown out on its own, and now at least we had managed to shorten sail, even if it had not quite been done according to the book.

We were all shell shocked and pretty frightened. At this point Mussett, who had been down below preparing supper, appeared on deck, with his beret pulled right down. Hardly ever was Mussett seen without his pipe, and now he made no exception, though he had turned it upside down to stop the rain putting it out. As usual, Mussett had seen it all before and immediately he made his way to each of

nodded at the stockpot. We never did discover the truth.

Duet made a good start to the race and for most of the day we enjoyed a nice reach in F3 or 4. At about 1800 I was on the helm and noticed a strange black cloud low over the sea and right on our course. 'Might be some rain' I thought, and found an oilskin. Suddenly we were inside it. It was like night and in the space of a few seconds the wind increased to something I had never known before – F10? I have no idea. We had everything up – full main and mizzen, main topsail, staysail and jib. *Duet*

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us, cupped his hands and shouted into our ears. Afterwards we compared notes and found he had said the same thing to us all “Merry old breeze!” With that reassurance we knew that the world was not coming to an end after all.



‘Navy’ Mussett had seen it all before

Somehow we managed to catch the murderous topmast lunging across the deck and the wind left us as quickly as it had come leaving an oily swell and devastation on deck. Gradually we sorted out the wreckage, lashed down the broken topmast and started the engine. After a few minutes there was a burning smell. We lifted the engine hatch, smoke poured out and dimly we could see something glowing red hot. So we would have to sail and we set about making a jury rig. Somehow we managed to get enough canvas on the stump of the mast to make it to Ijmuiden in Holland. The harbour was full of fishing boats and it was hard to find a berth but we laid ourselves alongside a trawler – only to find that her topsides were covered with wet black paint - think six very large paint rollers on pristine white topsides and you get the general idea. So now there was more clearing up to be done.

The engine, amazingly, did recover - a torn piece of mainsail had managed to cover the water intake. We returned to West Mersea under our jury rig, having first had to deal with a pier head jumper who wanted to join us and was almost certainly a prospective illegal immigrant. Nothing’s new! The mast was quickly repaired and later that summer I joined *Duet* again for a cruise to Norway, with that wonderful boat now none the worse for her (and our) adventure. And I had learnt that it’s best to steer clear of isolated black clouds.

Chris Courtauld later co-founded the Ocean Youth Club with Chris Ellis, also an RCC member and their two boats, *Duet* and *Theodora* formed the founding fleet of the OYC (now Ocean Youth Trust). *Duet* is still sailing, 108 years old and in really good order. She is being operated by the Cirdan Trust on the East Coast.