

SKIP NOVAK

A VISIT TO COWES ON THE UK SOUTH COAST PROVOKES A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE, ALTHOUGH NOT EVERYTHING IS QUITE AS SKIP REMEMBERS...

With not much happening on the water for me, it's time for a dose of nostalgia. I recently was invited to speak to Shirley Robertson for one of her podcasts in Cowes on the Isle of Wight. This was a real privilege to be interviewed by an Olympian and to join her eclectic line-up of racing sailors, both very current and those a bit over the hill. I am surely in the latter. Readers under the age of 50 might want to skip this column.

On my way back to meet the Red Jet to Southampton I had to time to stroll around Cowes High Street in a light drizzle and many memories were rekindled. This was the place I had started my European – no, make that global – racing career. In the summer of 1976, fresh off my first transatlantic delivery as a skipper, I joined the Australian Frers 53 *Bumble Bee* for Cowes Week and stayed with her for the Skagen race in Scandinavia later in the summer, then the Middle Sea Race beginning in Malta. One thing led to another, possibly for no other reason than being a novelty of an American sailor having let go his anchor in the UK of the day.

That fall, in the Fountain Hotel bar over a pint, I was engaged to navigate *King's Legend* in the 1977 Whitbread Race. It was as simple as that – a 10 minute conversation. Consequently I spent part of the winter of 1976/77 in Cowes based at Groves and Guttridge, the Dickensian shipyard, which is now the upmarket Cowes Yacht Haven.

All those pubs... They were not visited, they were 'used.' And we used them all. The Spencer's Rigging Company, just above the High Street, smelling of hemp and tar was a gathering point. There was always rigging to do, and the characters who worked there, many who had been there for decades, were known as the Spencer's Boys. Whichever pub was in favour with the Spencer's Boys was the one the rest of us would frequent.

On my walking tour, I saw that The Union had hardly changed. Further on, the Island Sailing Club was remembered as a Sunday lunch favourite. But I could have sworn the Three Crowns was just down the street on the right. Possibly it had eventually

collapsed into itself with all those spongy floorboards upstairs. I was informed by the lady in the newsagent on the quay that it had burned down 25 years ago. They made a superb cottage pie as I recall.

The Pier View, The Anchor Inn and, at the far end past the cop shop, the Duke of York. For some unexplained reason we never used the Vectis Tavern adjacent to the Fountain Hotel. It is hard to believe it might have been 'too rough' even for us then, but possibly.

Only years later would I venture south of the high street to realise what a rural paradise the rest of the island in fact was – but that is another story.

On the Red Jet quay I sat on a bench, socially distanced, overlooking the hard at the Yacht Haven with the aroma of chips and vinegar in the air. That hadn't changed, but the proliferation of yachts both big and small was impressive. At the same time of year in 1977 the yard would have been a shadow of what we have today.

My mate Blowie, a rough spoken Aussie of Finnish extraction, and I were living on board *King's Legend* and for a time she was up on the poppets for a bottom job and other repairs.

I couldn't help thinking back to the time we met two lovelies from Wolverhampton in the Anchor Inn one evening, down to the island for a few days of winter holiday. The girls were fascinated to meet two sailors and after pub closing were invited on board to see the yacht.

Next morning we woke up to the roar of the travel lift underway and realised we were in for it, the yard in full swing. Sheepishly we helped our guests in their dresses and high heels back down the steep, rickety wooden ladder while the travel lift throttled down for no other reason than to put the focus on us, the yard workers appearing out of their workshops to witness the procession of Blowie and I leading them across the hard, down the alleyway and into the High Street. It was straight out of a Benny Hill sketch.

The guys in the yard didn't say much about it, but a nod's as good as a wink. And let's remember before too many letters of condemnation are penned to the editor, the year was 1977. ■

'This was the place I started my racing career'

