



WOOLLACOTT ASSOCIATION

LADYBIRD - FEATURE BOAT

Ladybird's success triumph for veteran yachtsman" ran the headlines of an article appearing in the New Zealand Herald on January 20, 1952. The paper was reporting the day after Ladybird's historic win of the 1952 gruelling 1570 nautical mile Trans Tasman Hobart to Auckland race. The article went on "for seven days 74 year old Mr. B.S.Woollacott of Devonport, known to most New Zealand yachtsmen as Bert Woollacott had been in bed, seriously ill. Yesterday he suddenly felt much better. He got up and he and his wife [Hilda] caught a ferry and bus to Orakei Wharf. There at 2.45pm his 34foot green hulled ketch Ladybird crossed the finish line the winner of the 1952 Tasman yacht race. This he felt was the crowning achievement of a lifetime devotion to yachting" Later in May that year the Australian yachting magazine Seacraft ran a very detailed four page article on the race noting that two "firsts" were chalked up; the first time the contest was sailed from Hobart to Auckland and the first time since the inception of the race twenty years previously a New Zealand yacht had carried off the main prize, the historic Trans Tasman Cup. With this win Ladybird became the first New Zealand designed, built and crewed yacht to win an international blue water yacht race and in fact the first New Zealand yacht to ever win an international sailing event.



Bert Woollacott was 72 when he drew up the lines of Ladybird in late 1949 assisted by his son John who did the detailed drawings due to Bert's failing eyesight. Bert assisted by John and other friends started to build Ladybird in early February 1950 adjacent to an old disused shed opposite the Devonport Yacht Club, once owned by the Devonport Steam Ferry Company when the company's slipways occupied the Club's present site. Of all kauri construction with planking one and a quarter inches thick, her vital statistics are, using the imperial measurements of the day, 33 feet 4 inches long [without bowsprit or bumpkin], 9 foot 10 inches in beam and with a 5 foot 4 inches draft. She is a fractional rigged ketch with oregon masts and spars [all still original] and carries a generous low aspect sail plan with 4 tons of lead on her keel making her very stiff and able to carry full sail when most yachts are well reefed. She is a powerful yacht in a fresh breeze as John Woollacott used to say "she can hang onto her rag". Launched at the Devonport Yacht Club in December 1950 by Bert's wife Hilda, she was christened Ladybird so the story goes because Bert's wife was a keen gardener and had an affinity for ladybirds which eat aphids. After a shake down cruise up north to the Bay of Islands over the Christmas period and after winning the 1951 Auckland Anniversary Regatta and the annual Easter race to Coromandel, it was decided to enter the yacht for the inaugural 1952 Hobart to Auckland race.



After preparations for the long voyage ahead were completed Ladybird left the Devonport Yacht Club slipway for the passage to Hobart on December 9, 1951. Her all Devonport crew consisted of John Woollacott, skipper, his sister Madge, Peter Edmonds, Jack Kean, Billy Morrice and Jim Moody. After a very hard eighteen day voyage into southern latitudes Ladybird finally reached Hobart on Boxing Day just prior to the arrival of the Sydney Hobart race fleet. The six yacht race fleet started in Hobart on January 5, 1952 and immediately ran into heavy weather once clearing Storm Bay at the entrance of the Derwent River. As a 15 year old Hobart school boy I saw the race fleet sail down the Derwent River and watched as Ladybird tacked close under the Allum Cliffs above which our home was situated. "Yacht fleet lashed by big seas" screamed the headlines of Hobart's Mercury newspaper published on January 8. Indeed the storm encountered was so severe that Ladybird was forced to "lie a hull" for eight hours with hatches battened down and with her spars unshipped and lashed to the deck to reduce wind age. However the little ketch rode the storm out like a duck and after the wind and seas had moderated somewhat the yacht carried on making good time with a record twenty four run one day of 210 nautical miles.



The Cape Reinga light was sighted very early on the morning of January 15 and her log reports her off the light at dawn surrounded by birds. But with her radio out of action the first news of the yacht in New Zealand waters came from the lighthouse keeper at Cape Reinga who reported back to Auckland sighting a "green hulled ketch" off the Cape early that morning sailing in calm seas. Then it was a neck and neck tussle with Ladybird's main rival the 33 foot sloop Lahara all the way down the coast to Auckland. Finally Ladybird crossed the finishing line just twenty minutes ahead of Lahara to win the race taking just on eleven days [266 hrs. 14mins and 50 secs] to complete the course and thus winning the Trans Tasman Cup. Despite being forced to batten down during the storm and sailing much of the race under storm canvas Ladybird nevertheless averaged just on 6 knots for the whole passage. A reading of her log records showed endless problems encountered with chaffed and ripped cotton sails all having constantly to be being sewn up by hand. After winning the 1952 Auckland Anniversary Regatta the Woollacotts sold Ladybird to Cyril Hill who made a lengthy incident free round trip of some 6000 nautical miles in her up to Tahiti and the French Polynesian islands.

After the return Ladybird was eventually sold to colourful Auckland yachtsman Boy Belvie who restored the now somewhat weather beaten yacht to her former condition and maintained her in pristine condition. Boy was well known for his idiosyncrasies such as boiling up a pot of hot water and pouring it over the side of the yacht so as to lessen the shock of the cold water into which he would then jump! Boy also installed Ladybird's teak skylight and the bronze name plate on top of the rudder stock as well as repainting the topsides white. I first met up with Boy in 1961 when anchoring my 22 foot flush deck mullet boat Patere alongside Ladybird one dismal wet afternoon in Matiatia, Waiheke Island. My young crew and I were invited over to enjoy Boy's hospitality. We stayed late into the evening and Boy cooked up a superb meal. After a mullet boat Ladybird seemed enormous. We met up again the next summer on a number of occasions and I and my crew were always made most welcome. Sadly Boy died aboard Ladybird in Coromandel Harbour whilst away with Ray Esdale later that summer. For many months Ladybird sat forlornly on her Westhaven moorings whilst Boy's estate put the ketch on the market. For a while it seemed that no one wanted her. Then Brian and Joyce Blake found her and fell in love with her as this was just what they wanted for a growing family with two teenage boys into sailing. Now back once more as a Devonport Yacht Club vessel, Ladybird with her teenage crew was a regular competitor in Club's family cruising races.



I quote from Sir Peter Blake's autobiography, *Peter Blake Adventurer* [a limited edition]. "Ladybird was a major influence in my life. My parents used every cent of their savings to buy her... We children were over the moon... It was on Ladybird that I learned to work as a member of a crew... and to navigate. We later sailed Ladybird to Tonga and Fiji my father, mother and me. I experienced my first gale at sea on this trip. It lasted for thirty six hours, something I will never forget." Interestingly Sir Peter always referred to Ladybird "as a proper yacht". Only four years before his untimely death in 2001 he took his family away on Ladybird for a Christmas cruise. Sir Peter's mother Joyce confided in me once by saying "buying Ladybird was the best decision Brian and I ever made".

For the next thirty four years after the purchase Ladybird often in company with my sloop *Truant* and initially with teenagers Peter and Tony Blake aboard, we would make annual cruises up north. The Bay of Islands and Whangaroa Harbour were popular destinations as was *Great Barrier Island*. Just before Brian Blake died and at the request of the family, I and my wife Janet took over this classic yacht in 1997. Together with our son Matthew we have also enjoyed some wonderful cruises up to the Far North in Ladybird. A few years ago I formed a partnership with Mike and Tash Strong to ensure Ladybird's future would be in good hands.

To-day Ladybird's profile remains the same as at the time of her original launching, complete with all her original varnished spars and varnished brightwork - not bad after sixty years!