

The Woollacott's

The Devonport Yacht Club's centenary in 2005 brought about the impetus to launch The Woollacott Association, an association designed to preserve interest for owners and enthusiasts in classic yachts and launches designed by the late Bert Woollacott of Devonport. This move also follows the rejuvenation of interest in classic yachts in this country in recent years.

Most New Zealand yachtsmen will have heard the name Woollacott but to-day few will have any real understanding of the contribution made to New Zealand yachting by this remarkable English man who came to settle in Devonport with his family in 1922. Most keel yacht clubs in this country will have a "Woollacott" on their club's register, not surprising seeing that over three hundred yachts to the Woollacott design have been built the majority of which have been crafted by amateurs.

From the mid 1940's the Devonport Yacht Club became known as "the home of Woollacott yachts" due to the number of Bert Woollacott designed short enders owned by club members. During the early fifties and up to and including the late seventies it was common to see upwards of a dozen or so Woollacott designed yachts hauled out during the winter months on the club's hard stand premises on King Edward Parade.

For the cruising yachtsman the name "Woollacott" became synonymous in this part of the world with safe sea kindly yachts, yachts suitable for cruising up to the Pacific Islands and beyond and yachts that could be built by backyard amateurs from plans drawn up by Bert Woollacott at nominal cost. And most importantly Bert Woollacott was always on hand, often travelling considerable distances at his own expense with a bag of tools in tow to assist the would be boat builder during some difficult stage of set up.

New Zealand yachting owes much to this dedicated amateur yacht designer and time served boat builder whose fame has spread far and wide.

Son John Woollacott used to say that his dad's boats were designed to be safe seagoing yachts, fully self reliant, capable of being sailed with a minimal of crew and being fully provisioned and watered for staying at sea for long periods of time. Importantly these yachts also had to be able to maintain a good overall average of a hundred or more nautical miles a day. The proof is certainly there and vouched for by many yachtsmen.

Bert Samuel Woollacott was born in England in 1878 and did not come to New Zealand with his family until 1922 then aged 44. Prior to coming to New Zealand he had had a tremendously interesting and varied life having started out his working career as an apprentice boat builder in Falmouth. Only one year out of his apprenticeship he designed and built a 59ft gaff rigged yawl *Sea Urchin*, the sale of which set him up with his own boat yard. After building a number of other successful yachts and designing a 14ft dinghy he turned his attention to designing and building speed boats for wealthy entrepreneurs.

For some reason prior to World War 1 he sold up and moved to the United States and became heavily involved in speed boat racing with considerable success. He also worked for both Camper and Nicholson and Natt Herreshoff on America's Cup challengers and defenders and greatly increased his knowledge on what a "proper yacht" should be. However that is another story. Just after the outbreak of World War 1 Bert was booked on the ill fated *Lusitania* to return to England but as luck would have it he missed the sailing. *Lusitania* was sunk by a German U-boat off southern Ireland with an appalling loss of life including a former Devonport Yacht Club commodore and mayor of Devonport, Jim Macky.

After arriving in New Zealand Bert and the family settled in Devonport and lived here until his death forty two years later.

Shortly after arriving Bert built the 16 footer centreboarder *Rival* and not long after built *Rover* which his son John always used to say was built for him in his teenage years. During the remainder of his life in Devonport Bert built no less than twelve other wooden keel yachts mainly at his home in Bond Street or close by the Devonport Yacht Club. These were *Vectis*, *Lucy*, *Medina*, the powerful *Rambler* in this instance being built by Percy Vos, *Ghost*, *Big May*, *Wanderer*, *Little May*, Trans Tasman champion *Ladybird*, *Gloaming*, *Calm* and *Shimmer*.

Altogether Bert designed over fifty yachts and, what is not so well known, well over thirty launches and fishing boats. It is virtually impossible to say with any degree of accuracy the total number of Bert Woollacott designs that have been actually been built. It was a prestigious outpouring of design and building. A number of Woollacott yachts have circumnavigated the globe starting with Tony Armit's 28ft ketch *Marco Polo's* three year exploit in the fifties for which he was awarded the internationally acclaimed Vos award for this outstanding feat. Countless Woollacott yachts have sailed the Pacific and beyond. The list is endless. Several have won major blue water ocean races. Many of Bert's designs have been built overseas in America, Australia, Fiji, South Africa and in other lands. Whilst wood was obviously Bert's first choice of construction some of his designs have been built in steel and concrete.

In addition to the *Marco Polo's* circumnavigation here are some well known voyages of Woollacott yachts: Ross Norgrove's voyage to the West Indies in *White Squall*; Fred Norris's South Pacific exploits in *Nada*, *Hope* and *Landfall*; John Woollacott's 1952 Trans Tasman success in *Ladybird* in which *Ladybird* became the first New Zealand designed, built and crewed yacht to win a Trans Tasman race, a gruelling 1550 nautical mile ocean race from Hobart to Auckland. *Ladybird* also made subsequent Pacific voyages under her newer owners Cyril Hill and later under the Blake family ownership with famous son Sir Peter on board made a Pacific voyage. Also worth mentioning was Tom Buchanan's winning Suva Race in *Wanderer*; Mick Orchard's *Faith I* and *Faith II*, Jim Moodey's *Nina*, Phil and Coral Warring's *Ebb Tide* and so on. Among the very many other Woollacott yachts to make successful ocean passages are *Blue Water*, *Lady Pat*, *Kiwi*, *Gesture*, *Ranginui* and *Tanganui*. All these yachts were built in local sheds, backyards or on farms.

But what made Bert's yachts so successful? In the first place of course his yachts could be built by total amateurs in the good old kiwi fashion. It is said that his inspiration was the Falmouth Quay punt. His boats had a reputation of being safe and easy to handle. Bert always maintained

that the most essential quality in a boat was good balance and he worked on the heeled waterlines at all times to get good balance at all angles of heel. His boats had to be capable of sailing themselves on all points of the wind except flat off. However with the advent of wind vane self steering devices Bert's long keeled yachts came into their own as they responded easily to self steering arrangements and steered easily on all points of sailing, even under the most difficult conditions like when running before large breaking seas. And short enders proved to be wonderful sea boats.

Again they were strongly constructed and had the ability to heave to and lay a hull under extreme conditions, surely the hall mark of a well found vessel. Bert didn't design for speed alone but believed that a slow boat was not a good sea boat so he made them as fast as possible for the type of boat they were.

Bert travelled all over the North Island to help and advise people who were building his boats. He looked forward to these trips and thought the New Zealand amateur boat builders were simply wonderful. His presence was inspirational and gave that encouragement to tackle things far beyond their owner's believed ability. Bert's favourite tool was the adze and he could finish in minutes what a poor amateur would sweat over for weeks!

During all the time he lived in Devonport his designs virtually remained unchanged in their basic overall parameters. He always aimed at a section which gained power as it heeled rather than one more on the initial emphasis on stiffness.

One of Bert's favourite yachts was the 23ft *Little May* which was beautifully balanced and a delightful creation to sail. The story goes that he liked her so much that he wouldn't have another like her built and so that only two modifications of the original design have ever appeared.

In rig he steered clear of extremes. He made several innovations in construction by doing away with the single plank garboard by running the planking down in at an angle to the wooden keel. He did away with hanging and lodging knees by stressing the decks and bulkheads and dropping the clamp below the deck beams so it wasn't checked out and thus weakened.

Bert raced regularly when he had the powerful 35ft cutter *Rambler* out in the Hauraki Gulf but later preferred racing in very light conditions when the greatest skill is needed. As he grew older his eyesight started to fail so he would rather build boats than race them. During the last twelve years of his life his eyes became too bad for drawing so his son John did it all and took over more and more of the designing work and carried this on after his father's death.

In all a quick tally indicates that over 30 yachts had been built to his 28ft *Marco Polo* design, 15 to the little *Sheryl* design, 11 to the *Katheryn Anne* design, 9 *Nadas*, 8 *Ladybirds* and a few *Gloamings* and so on and not to forget the *Westwind* launched in 1946.

After Hilda Woollacott died in 1955, Bert moved into a house close to the Devonport Yacht Club. In his last years he used to love standing operating the club's haulage winches whilst winter haulage was in full swing. As a youngster I recall that one day during the 1959 winter uphaul I was on haulage duty operating the eastern winch when this bespectacled white haired

elderly gentleman stood alongside me and offered to work the winch whilst I attended to the rearrangement of snatch blocks to side haul a keeler off the slip. I was unsure whether I should leave the winch so I approached one of the club committee members for advice. The reply was “oh, that old Bert Woollacott-that’s OK”. Thereafter I supervised the side hauling operation whilst Bert ran the winch.

Bert Woollacott’s last sailing outing was on his son’s 28ft sloop *Truant* in 1961 a trip to Islington Bay. And what did he think about his son’s own design and built Woollacott yacht? Apparently Bert thought that *Truant* was a little too modern and short of about 30 square feet of sail. Many years later under my ownership, *Truant* was re-rigged with an alloy spar which enabled the new mainsail to incorporate additional sail area along the lines of Bert’s suggestion. *Truant’s* performance thereafter was much improved.

Bert Woollacott was 86 when he died and it was an end of a full, active and creative life. His work brought satisfaction and pleasure to thousands as well as to himself. Few men can claim the same. The Devonport Yacht Club is justly proud of this long association. Here in New Zealand “Woollacott” is still a byword for sound, practical yachts with exceptional sea-keeping abilities.

As Bert’s eyesight began to fade towards the end of his life the design work was carried on by his son John. John Woollacott has the distinction of skippering his father’s ketch *Ladybird* to victory with an all Devonport Yacht Club crew in the 1952 Trans Tasman.

Like his father, John was a true amateur and gave thousands of hours of unpaid time in assisting yachtsmen to build their own Woollacott designed short enders. No problem was ever too big for would-be enthusiasts to approach John for advice and assistance. Following his father’s death John carried on the design philosophy created by his father and many John Woollacott designed yachts have subsequently been built of which *Truant*, *Whisper* and *Ankledeep* he built himself.

John had a passion for cruising the Northland coastal waters and after his retirement in 1977 would spend several months each summer cruising in his own designed and built 32 foot ketch *Whisper* which he built in 1967 and later aboard his last built yacht *Ankledeep* which was a centre-boarder. He loved exploring far out of the way places and was the repository of some amazing stories. With his son Rob *Whisper* was raced in the club’s 1977 double hander around the North Island and later *Whisper* made a return trip to the Marlborough Sounds for a family summer cruise.

To-day Rob Woollacott has benefited by the traditions and skills of his father and grandfather and has spent many years sailing around the South Pacific in his own designed 45 footer *Blue Moon* which was built in his own backyard in Devonport.

Due to its historical connection the new Woollacott Association (www.woollacott.org.nz) will remain closely affiliated with the Devonport Yacht Club.

Martin Foster