

PHIL BARBOUR

Wanderbird

'COME IN, SIT DOWN while I put the kettle on.'

Over tea Phillis Barbour and I look at some faded black-and-white snapshots of a bygone era. Her husband, Roy, died recently, and she has a wealth of memories.

'I started out with a corrugated-iron canoe. We filled all the cracks up with clay – you can guess how long that lasted! Then I bought this little keeler, *Tiare* — I must have been in my late teens. It was unheard of for a girl to own a boat in those days. I used to keep it at Point Chevalier. I had a bicycle, too. I would ride down to the boat with the anchor on the back, and the sail, somehow — I don't know how ever I did it — I certainly got some funny comments on the way.

'I met my husband and fell in love with him . . . I think it might have been his boat, he had a Lidgard 28. She's a classic now. We sailed everywhere in that boat. Look at that lovely stern . . .

'This one's me on my honeymoon, coming up to Russell. I had to sew sails all the way up!'

Talk turns to *Wanderbird*, the tidy Woollacott ketch on a mooring in front of her house in the Bay of Islands. Built in Whakatane in the early sixties, at first she didn't have a name. On her maiden cruise she was anchored between the Hiscocks' famous *Wanderer* and the Blake family's *Ladybird*, a sister ship. The name suggested itself.

'We bought her just after the *Wahine* storm. We'd been to look at her, but Whakatane was flattened, and we thought she'd be lost with all the other boats. We phoned up and found she was fine, she'd only dragged her mooring a little way. We had to have her.

'She was such a mess when we bought her. She'd been up through the Islands, on the first Noumea race, but she'd never been properly finished. Now you should see my bilges, they're dry as a bone.

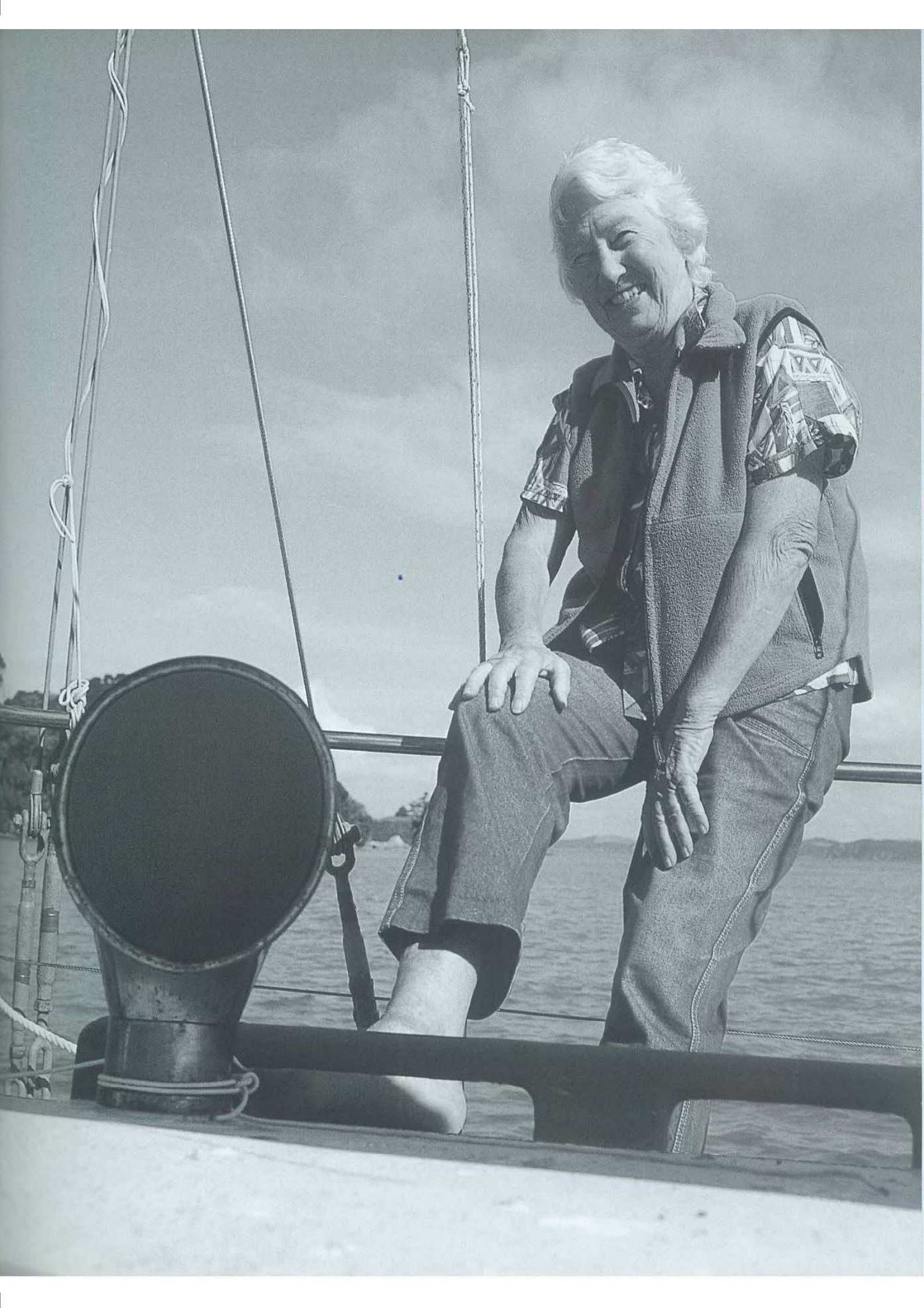
'I cook, steer and clean the bilges. Hubby did the navigating, and I used to haul him up the mast to paint it. I need a crew to do that for me now. It's a lot to keep up with, as well as looking after my horse and the land. I was scraping the decks down for painting recently when my neighbour Pete invited me to go sailing in *Undine*. Well, what do you do? We sailed all the way across to Russell and back!'

We walk down the path and row out to *Wanderbird* in the dinghy. Phil wears her buoyancy vest. She can't swim, and climbing aboard is a challenge with a stiff knee.

'I do apologise for the mess — it's those shags again. This one hasn't even digested its last meal . . .'

Hand-built boats all have a story. *Wanderbird* was built from one of the last mountain kauri trees from the Coromandel. Her bowsprit was a truss off the old wharf at White Island, and the skylight is a large

Phil Barbour, with one of the 'real' ventilators.





Wanderbird, designed by Bert Woollacott.

bronze porthole off the *Clansman*, a steamer wrecked some years ago. Phil shows me her bilges; they're as good as new. The ventilators are plastic bottles cut to fit over the holes in the deck, not the real thing. Phil proudly shows us the real ones, custom-made in polished brass, kept safely below wrapped in an old pair of long cotton knickers.

The engine is a Petter 10 hp diesel with a chain drive, no reverse. 'You do it once, you do it right,' is how Phil explains it. She recounts how when she took the boat up to Ashby's yard in Opuia for a paint job, she hadn't reckoned with the new marina. As she came bowling in with a following wind, no brakes, the man met her with, 'We weren't expecting you yet.'

'Well, I'm here! Catch this rope, or else!' Fortunately, he did.

'Your wealth is in your health. I've had three heart attacks now. Sometimes it gets lonely, but as long as the boat is there, it's asking me to enjoy it. Without the boat, I'd give up.'

Our visit is all too brief, but on the way out we meet Peter Richards of *Undine*, the 110-year-old trading cutter, the original Fullers Cream Run boat featured in *Blokes & Boats*. At that stage *Undine* looked a hopeless wreck. Now she's sailing again, as mentioned. We thank him for referring us to Phil — her indomitable spirit is an inspiration.

'Did she tell you about her aerobatic flying days? And I guess you saw all the trophies she won with her riding?'

I didn't know to ask.