

Jol Byerley - The voice of English Harbour

Writer, photographer, many-times-winner of Antigua Sailing Week, much — loved voice of English Harbour Radio, five-times Commodore of Antigua Yacht Club, trophy-winner for Exceptional Service to Antigua Sailing Week, and now “Grand Officer of the Most Illustrious Order of Merit” awarded by Antigua’s Governor General ... where does one start?

Well, Jol Byerley started from a cottage by the river on the Norfolk Broads on the East Coast of England. “As a very young boy, I sailed my dinghy into fantasy land. Reed beds became the coastline of Tierra del somewhere or other and the small lakes were as formidable as the North Atlantic”.

Later he raced *Stars* and would have competed in the '56 Olympics had he not eloped with his new wife Jenny.

He began skippering in the mid — fifties. First the 70ft yawl *Gladonis II*, out of Devon, England then the 92ft, 1919 ketch *Harbinger* for Camper & Nicholson in Cannes (Imagine! running what would have been a huge yacht then in Cannes ... you can almost imagine Bridget Bardot stepping on to the taffrail for a Ricard with Jol...)

But it was when working for Commander Nicholson, skippering the famous 1903 *Mollibawk*, that Jol found a mentor and a friend. “He became a father figure for me,” he tells “managing to teach me the few things that I have learned. He was a wonderful man. “

He fell in love with the magic and isolation of English Harbour and was soon living in the abandoned historic Officers Quarters in Nelson’s Dockyard, his daughter Cary growing up amongst the capstans. Indeed, when he first arrived there was not a light to be seen except for a sole paraffin light in the Pay Office where Commander Nicholson lived with his wife in Robinson Crusoe like seclusion. The few yachtsmen that sailed in used to meet at the Admirals Inn, to drink and make music and dance and at the end of the evening, disappear into the night...

After skippering the 1940’s 100ft Brig *Caribee*, he had a very exciting commission: Captain of the *Rose*, an engineless replica of the 123ft, 18th century Royal Navy frigate. When she was launched in Lunenburg, Jol & his afterguard trained the 25 — strong crew in the traditional way of sailing a square-rigger. And when he tacked into Boston Harbour in 1970 for a re-enactment of the famous Boston Tea Party under full sail, an American paper called it “one of the finest pieces of seamanship ever seen”.

Jol’s 1928, 50ft ketch from the Clyde, *Ron of Argyle*, was one of his favourite boats. He chartered her in the Caribbean for seven years and praises her as “the best boat built — ever”. He also ran

gaff-rigged schooner, cruising to Venezuela in 1971 — one of the first sailing boats to be seen down there. Now, chartering in those days was a million miles from what it is today. Typically from Boston, Newport or Annapolis, guests were usually more informal and trips wilder in nature and experience. Many became his life long friends. Then came motor-yachts *Mirage* and *Etoile de Mer*.

After many years of running Nicholson’s Yacht Sales, he now manages his eclectic shop Lord Jim’s Locker, specialising in books, charts, jewellery and now a fashion boutique.

Racing has always been one of Jol’s passions. He was one of the pioneers of Antigua Sailing Week and participated for over 30 years. With his long time partner Judy McConnachie, inveterate travelers both, he has owned an array of famous racing boats including the Dehler 34, *Hightide*. Indeed, although he won ASW 1971 in *Matchless* and 1973 in *Sundance*, he is best known as the winning skipper of the infamous Hightide Girls — all — female topless crew who some say may have been witches — as the competition’s spinnakers blew out, masts broke, & surprisingly the sudden nudity on the start line causing certain boats to gybe all standing! Without his enthusiasm, events such as the Thursday Race, Round the Island Race and Green Island may never have happened.

But sailing is not his only passion or indeed talent. With Katie McConnachie’s illustrations, he wrote the well — loved children’s book *Shadows of the Moon*. Indeed, a prolific writer, he has written articles for countless yachting publications. But a very important part of visiting

Antigua on a boat is the voice of English Harbour Radio. Broadcasting the Caribbean weather forecast, local &

international sailing news and all-important local events, he really is the voice of the nautical scene of Antigua. And when Jol cannot, it is presented by Judy — a pillar of support behind Jol’s work.

There is a wonderful story back in the old days when Jol was first in the Caribbean. He was cruising in Martinique & got wind that the French Naval Fleet was due in. He had the idea to play a joke and to hoist the white ensign on Diamond Rock — the very place the French had not managed to defeat the British for many years back in the early 1800’s. The flag was spotted and frantic plans & changes of courses were ordered for the Fleet to come round the island the opposite way to prevent the humiliation the French suffered so long ago. Subsequent telexes flew across the Atlantic, accusations hurled... meanwhile Jol sipped Martinique Rum oblivious to the effect his mischievousness would have. He has not lost his charm today: the twinkle in his eye, the adventurous spirit, the enchanting stories and everlastingly youthful attitude is something we know Jol for and is the very thing that makes us want to be just a little more like him.



Jol at the helm of Rose.