

PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM WRIGHT



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Love, Desire and the White Bitch

LUCY TULLOCH

There's something wonderfully outrageous about commissioning one's yacht with a name *White Bitch*. It would be daring in 2019 . . . but in 1939 England, it must have caused quite a stir. Henry Von Berge was an unusual man, and he knew exactly what he wanted to celebrate the occasion of his marriage to his new wife.

A skilled navigator and experienced sailor himself, he was inspired by the Grand Banks Schooners and wanted a strong boat for offshore cruising. In meetings with the designer, William McKeek, he requested "exceptional strength, capable of taking care of herself and her crew in really heavy weather". But he wanted her to sail . . . and sail fast.

From an article written in *Yachting World* in 1937: "Although she is to be unusually heavily built, the strength of her construction is dependent on ample scantlings, good workmanship and efficient fastenings, rather than mere bulk of timber."

Nevertheless, she is 3 inch Burmese Teak planks on steel frames, with a draft of 13ft and a beam of 22ft. Von Berge had the interior designed to support ocean sailing, and to this end, there was just one, well-appointed guest cabin. He did not want a floating guesthouse.

Nor did *White Bitch* suggest anything derogatory . . . it

references dog breeding for the Royal family at the time and his wife Jean's family name of White.

Nevertheless, by the time she was launched at Brooks Marine in Lowestoft, England, in 1939, the largest schooner to emerge from this renowned yard, her outlandish name had changed and the magnificent 103ft Staysail Schooner *Jeanry*, dressed overall, slid down the railway to the pride and anticipation of all present.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE BELOW: *Under full sail, Eros is in her element broad-reaching in the trade winds at Antigua Classics.*

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: *Chartered and sailed by Mill Reef Yacht Club at Antigua Classics, guests enjoyed Caribbean sailing at its finest.*

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT: *Wilson stitching running repairs to the clew on the way out to the start line*



ABOVE: *Eros* in Monaco
 RIGHT: Photographer and author Lucy Tulloch captures *Eros*' energy from her bowsprit as she thunders towards the windward mark.

Rumoured, but not verified, is a story that soon afterwards, in the great Dunkirk Evacuation in 1940, she was, like many hundreds of merchant marine boats, fishing boats, pleasure craft, yachts, and lifeboats that became known as the "Little Ships of Dunkirk", she was called into the service that rescued over 300,000 allied soldiers from the beaches of Dunkirk in northern France in World War II. Tragically, Von Berge was later killed in combat.

After the war, she sold to the Greek shipping magnate billionaire, Stavros Niarchos, who renamed her *Eros* – honouring the Greek God of Love and Desire. She became well-known cruising the Mediterranean and was the darling of the wealthy elite. Indeed, King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain spent some of their honeymoon aboard as a wedding present from Niarchos, staying too on his Greek island. He owned *Eros* for about 25 years during which, some of this time he also owned the magnificent *Creole*.

She was then owned by American Lucy Bancroft as *Fair Sarae* who sailed her on the US East coast as well as California for about 15 years.

Lucy sold her to an optimistic German, who embarked on a huge multi-million dollar refit that he was sadly unable to complete. Some boatyards would be tempted to give up on her, sending her to all sorts of unmentionable fates, but the owners of this yard had such a love for classic boats that



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their desire to see this mission complete sealed her fate. Bill and Grace Bodle had owned three large classic, wooden schooners already, so they knew exactly what kind of project they were taking on. And it was a momentous one.

From 1990 to 2010, they loyally and meticulously rebuilt *Eros* to her former glory. A bowsprit was added and 20ft to the main mast. Great attention was paid to retaining her authenticity, including her original turnbuckles and her 1939 bell from the naming ceremony. Her 22,000 Admiralty bronze fittings were all recast. Her steel frames and rigging were either replaced or reconditioned. Indeed, each Burmese teak plank of her hull is original 1939, having been reinstalled following rigorous inspection.

On completion of an almost 20 year renovation, they chartered her in the Caribbean and San Francisco Bay.

Eros' current owner (American/Canadian) Cameron

Riddell, had grown up in California before an adventurous family trip took him sailing around Europe including Britain, the French Canals, Greece, Italy and Malta. He knew the Bodles sailing in Greece back in the early years (where he had built and learnt to sail in a Mirror dinghy in Malta as a boy). So, when he visited his parents in San Francisco in his 20s and 30s, he watched keenly the hard work they were doing on the beloved schooner.

Finally, in 2016, Cameron and a fellow sailor partner acquired *Eros* following the completion of this high-quality restoration. Now, she boasted four luxurious double cabins and accommodation for five crew; she had been brought up to the high standards of today's modern charter yachts, whilst respectfully retaining many of her original details and without losing any of the first-class elegance of her former years.

Cameron tells me about owning *Eros* and her future

programme. He, his partner, his family and friends enjoy some wonderful cruises and continue to welcome charter guests to keep this important piece of marine history alive. She is a workboat, he says, not for the Concours d'Elégance.

She is ideal for private and regatta charters. They will offer the New England race circuit, including Nantucket and the Opera House Cup. It is a unique chance for guests to feel truly involved in preserving this historical yacht and to keep *Eros* sailing.

When I sailed with her in the 2018 Antigua Classics, Mill Reef Yacht Club guests were thrilled to be part of such spectacular action for a few days, and with renowned America's Cup sailor Gary Jobson at the helm, and Jeremy King, Captain of an enthusiastic and competent crew, she felt just as you'd imagine those glamorous and Royal days of the 60s. And not a bitch in sight ...