

# SUNK, BURNED, SURVIVED

Bequia's last schooner has been through a lot in 44 years, including a builder who set fire to her and an owner who sank her. Today she has found a new owner – and peace

WORDS & PHOTOS LUCY TULLOCH



Main photo: Mzungu's owner, Richard Boltar has her sailing balanced enough to leave the helm in light airs off Antigua's South coast

Inset: Bequia map by Xandra Fisher

It's just me, or when you see a classic boat, it feels as though you glimpse her multiple lives, like looking at the weathered, gnarled face of an old fisherman? Not that I'm saying that this boat is gnarly (although she is a little bit) but her gunwales, her lashed, exposed rudder, her handmade boom and her rough capping rail, all hint at her rich history and her colourful stories. Although at 44, some would consider her quite a youngster still.

Much younger still, were Sandy and her sister, barely in their 20s, when they arrived for a holiday on the Caribbean island of Bequia in the late 70s. They had both worked on the schooner *America* and had made friends there, so they decided to take the mail boat down-island from Puerto Rico for an adventure. Sandy did not know then quite what an adventure it would turn out to be...

Bequia means "Island of the clouds" in Arawak. It was, in those days, although really not much different today, a quiet, sparsely-populated island steeped in the tradition of boatbuilding, fishing and aboriginal subsistence whaling. Being just seven square miles (c18km<sup>2</sup>), fresh produce, tools and materials all came from Saint Vincent on the sailing cargo vessel the *Friendship Rose* among others. These cargoes required strong, seaworthy boats that could reach north across the Vincy Channel where the trade winds whip up the waves into steep, short, breaking seas. These boats were built on the beach with the rudimentary dimensions of length, beam and draught – no plans, no scientific calculations, no lofting and no model. When a significant piece of wood that would form a particular curve of a vessel was needed, a trip to the hills was taken to find the right tree to fell. Saplings, stripped of their branches, would then be lain down on the ground to act as rollers for these large logs.

## DEADLY BY NAME

In 1976, Sandy met Robert Luke, known to all as Deadly, and soon they started dreaming of building a boat. They may have referred to Howard Chapelle's book *American Small Sailing Craft* when they had in mind to build a cowhorn schooner, or Block Island double-ender as it was originally called. These vessels were designed with a shallow keel to sit easily on the hard between tides; no cabin house, no bowsprit, no jib, and rocks as ballast, to be thrown overboard and replaced with fish. They were very seaworthy, going out and coming home safely in weather that ruined much larger sailing vessels.

Sandy and Deadly frequently joined the crew of the Baltic Trader *Jens Jubl*, carrying cargoes from Trinidad. It was aboard one such trip that they met Chris Bowman who was building Bob Dylan's 67ft (20.4m) schooner, later named *Water Pearl*, on the other side of the harbour (CB419).

While much of the wood for the Bequia schooners is sourced locally, silverballi is said among some West Indian shipwrights to be the best wood with which to build boats. Silverballi was impossible to procure from Bequia, so instead it came from Guyana, 500 miles to the south, then a communist state ruled by a tough dictator. It was a challenging place to do business and Georgetown was a dangerous capital. Chris Bowman tells me this was the hardest part of building the *Water Pearl*. A group from Bequia went up into the hills in search of the best trees. These trees have a central water channel and the experts go



through the forest 'sounding' the tree to know its suitability before felling. Felled trees are transported across the river in 35ft (10.7m) lengths, then taken by ferry to Georgetown. Looking somewhere between mahogany and teak, the harder brown variety, more rare than the softer white type, bends well but is hard and durable.

With the help of experienced shipwrights Gilbert 'Gilly' Hazel and Lincoln 'Linky' Olivierre, Sandy and Deadly wanted to build in the traditional, romantic West Indies fashion, grown and hand-chopped frames, cotton caulking and all. But as they built, Deadly kept tweaking the shape of the boat by chopping and bevelling the frames, and by the time he got the shape he was happy with, the frames were too small and he became despondent at the thought of starting them again.

### DEADLY SETS FIRE TO THE BUILD

After a year there was still only a bare hull and one evening, when no one was looking, he decided to end his frustration and gathered up scraps of wood and lit a fire underneath her. But such was the impressive planking of silverball that she refused to catch fire. Deadly was then tasked with the chore of scraping and sanding the charred hull before once again resuming his brave project.

Enter the enigmatic Bruce Smith, sailing in on his 21ft (6.4m) Antigua sloop. He had just finished helping Paul Johnson build *Pluto*, a 34ft (10.4m) *Venus*, for Lulu Magras in St Barths "which of course made me the island expert on strip planking and epoxy." He noticed that Deadly had a 55-gallon (210-litre) barrel of West System epoxy that he planned to glassfibre the finished boat with. Bruce suggested that he could reframe the boat in just a few weeks, putting some thickness back into the frames that was lost by the earlier shaping, if he trusted him with laminating. The thought had not occurred to Deadly and he was flabbergasted. So, they ripped about six strips of wood, glued them to a curve on a bench and the next day Bruce handed the curved, laminated piece to Deadly and told him to "go beat a palm tree with it". Ten minutes later, sweaty and overjoyed, clutching the unbroken curve, he agreed to proceed with laminating the vessel's frames. For \$8 a day, the going rate for a Bequia shipwright, the boat had new frames. Eventually, Bruce convinced him to abandon the West Indian style of carved planking and opt for the much quicker and easier strip planking, which they had done and finished in about six weeks. Normally the 1 3/4in (44mm) by 1 3/4in (32mm) planks would go on edge, 1 3/4in being plenty strong enough for a 35ft (10.7m) hardwood, strip-planked boat, but Deadly insisted on making the hull 1 3/4in (44mm) thick. She also has huge 3in (75mm) by 4in (100mm) frames so she ended up with the scantlings of a 70ft (21m) schooner, not dissimilar to the boat being built on the other side of the bay.

After Bruce sailed away for his own adventures, they reverted to the West Indian style of chopped deck beams and a laid and caulked deck. Unfortunately, the decks were never tight and many assumed, as the boat leaked, she was built the same way.

She was launched in 1979 with many hands coming for the party and to pull her down the beach by rope into the water. It was only at this stage that the name was revealed and a hand-sewn flag was proudly hoisted announcing her name *Atlas*. After rigging her, Sandy worked with Bluesy, the local sailmaker, to make her sails. They sailed her up to St John, US Virgin Islands, where Sandy later gave birth to her daughter Chumney on board their beautiful schooner.

Life moved on and *Atlas* was sold twice in St John but as she received less and less attention, her decks deteriorated and sadly she became rather forlorn. Cockroaches, rodents and the odd vagabond made her their home.

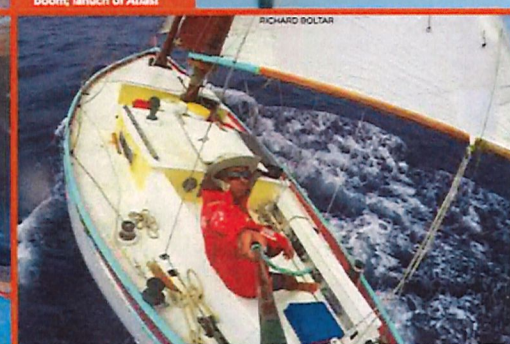
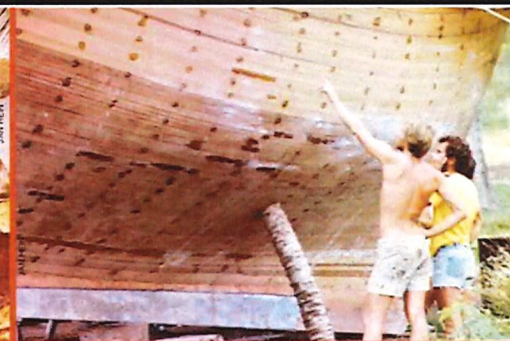
In 2009 Barrett Wyles Raymond, artist, sailor, wood enthusiast and lifelong Bob Dylan fan, found a scrap of paper in his oilskins pocket with a number on it. He remembered a man saying "This is the boat for you" but had no memory of who had given it to him. He called the number and was told of the abandoned schooner. He flew to the US Virgin Islands where she was being used as a kind of drugs lab, her white interior black with soot. He immediately decided to buy her and dragged the mattress from her cabin and slept next to her until the bugs drove him to move on board. Burning sage to dispel negative energy and incense to dissipate smells, he cleaned her up to sail over to St Barths where he left her on a mooring as he flew off the island to return to work. She was moved to another mooring but broke loose and drifted onto some sharp rocks and was holed and sank. The harbour authorities dragged her up by her mast and Barrett returned to rescue her. He called on every friend and stranger he could persuade to help, and they got her to nearby St Maarten where, over the next few months, he and his shipwright friend fixed her holed hull and damaged stem.

A challenging solo sail to Antigua in 2010 showed Barrett there was still much work to be done on the boat. In particular, his log records his concern about a crack in the mast. Nevertheless, he cruised south with his girlfriend in the hopes of reaching Bequia, but after two days they reluctantly decided not to push the boat and eased sheets to Nevis before waiting for the trade winds to clock before their return to Antigua.

### A NEW BEGINNING FOR ATLAS

A heart-breaking accident in 2012 tragically took Barrett's life and his beloved *Atlas* lay in the mangroves for a year before being rescued by her current owner, a keen South African sailor who had just sailed in from Cape Town. Richard Boltar immediately bought the boat for a dollar and moved on-board to make her safe. He renamed her *Mzungu*, translated from the Bantu word for wanderer.

A year later in 2014, hurricane Gonzalo was barreling towards Antigua, where Richard had her in the shelter of English Harbour. As wind speeds reached 80+ mph, she dragged, but there was no way to re-lay the anchor so he dived into the turbulent, water-whipped sea where the roar of the hurricane immediately became silent, and in wetsuit, mask and snorkel, secured the boat by tying lines to the shore. Nearby yachtsmen watched in amazement at this eccentric manoeuvre.



Clockwise from top left: Sandy, planting the larch spar in Bequia, c.1978; Bruce Smith advises on the launch of *Atlas*; West Indian-style porthole and Richard's hand-cast bronze chainplates; Richard on a lively solo sail from Antigua to Guadeloupe; Barrett repairing the hull after a going on the rocks in St Barths; Richard building *Mzungu*'s new pine boom; launch of *Atlas*



## MZUNGU



### MZUNGU

BUILT: 1979  
LWL: 33ft (10m)  
LOA: 36ft (11m)  
BEAM: 12ft (3.6m)  
DRAUGHT: 5ft 3IN (1.6m)

*Mzungu* was riddled with termites. Richard could hear them in the mast while lying in his bunk at night. When he poisoned them, they went aloft and when the poison wore off, they returned. Eventually, he decided to sink the boat. Being a commercial diver he was well-prepared with bridle and lift bags at the ready. There was no engine, so there was no danger of fuel or oil spill. He emptied the boat, screwed down the sole boards and water tank and started pumping. As she started to go down, an acquaintance came over in his dinghy to help with what would have looked like a disaster. He saw the pump and said: "Oh, you've got a good big pump, you're OK." Things are rarely what they seem...

He made the mistake of leaving the portholes closed, thereby trapping air, and nearly blew the cabin top. As she went down, the dorade whistled a roaring gale. After a visit from a surprised snorkeller then the local authorities, he informed the coastguard that he was the owner of the sunk boat in Falmouth Harbour, that it was clearly buoyed, lit and under control and was to be raised in three days. Familiar with working underwater, he decided it would be easier to cut the mast while she was on the bottom, to keep the termites from coming down and to diminish damage. He assumed the triatic stay was old and frayed so when the aft mast was cut, it would snap, but it didn't. It fell to 40 degrees and stopped. His next manoeuvre was to climb the mast with a knife in his teeth to cut the stay, jump away from the mast and throw the knife.

All this had drawn much unwanted interest in the middle of the quiet Antigua summer. Not ideal for one who avoids attention, so Richard chose night time with a full moon to raise *Mzungu*. Lift bags, lines around her hull and a night of pumping brought her once again to the surface where he planned the rest of her restoration.

Bruce Smith helped design the new shorter rig, and masts were acquired from Carriacou sloops *Exodus* and *Summer Cloud*. He stepped them and insisted on putting a Canadian copper coin (detering rot) to replace the US

**Above:** Easing sheets off Pigeon Beach, Antigua. NB the figure-of-eight lashing on the rudder to replace pintles and gudgeons

**Below:** Reaching along at a respectable pace, showing *Mzungu's* relatively high freeboard and distinctive stern

silver dollar placed by Sandy and Deadly. Richard then set about casting bronze fittings including chainplates, crane iron and boom end. He laminated a new pine boom. He fitted a Yanmar four-cylinder engine. He sheathed the leaking deck with epoxy and polypropylene cloth, and repaired the bulkheads.

Richard considered the rudder was not working as well as it might, so while she was out of the water he reshaped the trailing edge of the hull to create a more hydrodynamic join. He used a lashing that he'd seen used in a Wharram catamaran, where the pintles and gudgeons are replaced by a continuous figure-of-eight lashing which is passed through the rudderpost and the hull, creating a hinge that allows no chafe: no fittings, no rust and removable and adjustable in the future.

Richard lives on board, anchored in Falmouth Harbour, Antigua. In typical South African style, he makes or salvages almost everything he has for the boat. Homemade biltong hangs in the galley with antique silverware, and reclaimed bronze details and fish skulls adorn the bulkheads. A trip south with *Mzungu* to the Grenadines beckons, paying homage to the last schooner built in Bequia.



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