

JOHN LEATHER



The loss of John Leather in February was a sad event for all who knew him. For many years John was our consulting editor, providing a valuable frame of reference with his knowledge and a constant stream of in-depth articles on design.

Dan Houston reflects on his life

1928-2006

The death of John Leather on Friday 17 February is like the end of an era for *Classic Boat* readers. John's insightful historical articles on naval architecture – both the vernacular design of workboats and the draughtsmanship of yacht designers – forms a huge body of work and research in the magazine, spanning its (and its late sister title *The Boatman's*) publication over the last 20 years. Much of this research was original, bringing together articles and plans from previous publications, and more often personal knowledge, to form an overview of a designer's contribution to the craft.

It is a subject that if handled too stuffily can seem as dry as stale cake but John would often highlight some aspect of the man (and it was almost always men) he was reviewing, and set the designs in a context, of sailing and boating at the time. He was especially proud of his own Rowhedge connections with the Cranfield and Barnard professional yachtsmen families on his mother Margaret's side. His great grandfather was Thomas Barnard (CB138) – “a fisherman, salvager, oyster merchant and occasional smuggler”, while Captains Lemon,

William Richard, John and George Cranfield – his grandmother's brothers – were famous big-class skippers. Lemon helmed the racing cutter *Formosa* for the then Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, while William helmed *Valkyrie II* in the America's Cup challenge of 1893.

John was born in Liverpool and his father was a merchant seaman. He described the Leathers as big-ship sailors, builders and marine engineers and saw it as natural that he went to work in a shipyard. When he was six, in 1935, the family moved to Fingringhoe, the village next to Rowhedge on the River Colne. It is where John would move back to in later life and where he kept his flotilla of boats.

Standing on the water's edge in March, with the village still gripped in the cold easterly late winter air, I felt guilty because it was the first time I had visited his home. I had come to see Doris, his widow and daughter Sue, who typed his articles for CB, and to pick up some photographs. I must also confess that I had always been keen to see his study, home of the legendary maritime reference library, into which he could deftly delve to retrieve facts and figures.

“Come into my study,” he would say metaphorically on the telephone a few days after receiving the latest copy of the magazine; he was our consulting editor. I knew I was in for a critical debrief pointing out the occasional silly error – mostly of nomenclature but also the, thankfully less common, regrettable mistakes that can attend publication. He spoke with a slight quaver in his voice – he had the gentle burr of an old Essex accent, but you always knew when he was serious. I came to value these conversations, which amounted to free tutelage. After the debrief John would turn his intellectual curiosity to what was new, what was coming up. He once told me: “a traditional man always looks forward.” It sounds oxymoronic, but for him it was no good being steeped in the past without it meaning something today. He was never sentimental. Nor was he ever too interested in modern yachts, but saw great value in small-village-style regattas using traditional craft, as good for the purpose now as they were when first built. He liked practical good sea boats. He loved gaff rig and really understood how it still had a place in today's boating.



Opposite page:
John sailing his beloved 14-footer
Left: An early regatta. **Above:** With family: Doris, Sue and David in the early 1960s sailing off Cowes, Isle of Wight
Right: The *Blue Peter*, shrimper, an early design influenced by his love of workboats



John's presence at the Boat Show on CB's stand would always result in a steady flow of readers keen to make his acquaintance or seek his advice. He would stand, arms crossed, hand on chin listening before pointing out that the boat in question was a sister ship to one he had personal knowledge of... he would give a likely build date and then appraise the designer, builder and yard's capability of building that type of craft, in those materials. Very often he would follow these up with later notes, made in his own time, and I was aware of a busy correspondence, taking place between readers around the world and the Fingringhoe outpost. He was fine at a boat show, or giving a lecture somewhere like the Nottage Institute in Wivenhoe, where his wry East Coast humour won him many friends, but he didn't like really big crowds. "Phew you won't get me there, I'd probably suffocate with all those people!" he said once when I asked him if he'd like to attend a Festival of the Sea.

He generously helped many people with his knowledge, from individual boat restorers to groups like the Endeavour Trust – restoring one of his beloved Leigh

Cocklers to sail – to outfits like Fairlie Restorations with the 19-M *Mariquita* (2004) or the current *Lulworth* restoration in Italy.

John's character was steeped in the dry wit of the Essex boatmen: "I'll miss John most for his gloomy predictions about my chances as a boatbuilder," Adrian Morgan says. "When I told him my plans, he replied my chosen profession was likely to be "a frustrating and unrewarding business". He was right, of course, but when did that ever stop anyone doing what they wanted?

"John was my datum. Whenever I became too enthusiastic he would bring me down to earth. He hated hyperbole. Of West Country-built boats he was especially scathing. To him they were thrown together quite unscientifically, unlike his beloved Essex boats.

"Above all I relished his stories about the fishermen and crew of the big class, the skippers and topmastmen, ordinary folk. He brought to life the hardships of fishing or the drama of a cross-Channel thrash brilliantly."

For all his research he was also a practical man and was often hard to reach in April

and May. "I've been varnishing the 14-footer," he'd say breathlessly as if he had just run 700 yards home to the phone... "The grandchildren are coming for a few weeks and she's got to be ready if we're going to have any fun"; he had six grandchildren.

The 14ft (4.3m) 1950s Cook's One-Design (*Sea Swallow*) from Wivenhoe was his favourite boat. It is the kind of boat he first sailed when he took to the water in the late 1940s. As a teenager he'd worked on farms and would spend summer holidays with an aunt at Leigh-on-Sea, going shrimping or cockling in the Thames estuary. In wartime, in 1941, he went to Colchester Technical College to study mechanical engineering, and studied naval architecture at evening classes at the Wivenhoe's Nottage Institute before signing on for a five-year draughtsman apprenticeship with the Rowhedge Ironworks Company. Photos from this time show him with friends attending the likes of Mersea regatta in 1948, sailing shrimpers. He was a skilled draughtsman and made many artistic sketches of local boats. Doris had only just discovered a sheaf of such sketches when I visited. "I had no idea he could draw like that," she

said, confirming that John was indeed a man of parts, to use a Scots expression.

Doris met John in the early 1950s on a train from Brightlingsea one night: "We had been at the same school in Rowhedge and I said: 'Hello, I haven't seen you in a while!' I lived in Brightlingsea and he had just been there to buy a boat, a Reg White One-Design; I remember him telling me all about it. I have never been into boats myself and so we were a total mismatch like that, but we got on well and we took it from there. Last September we celebrated our Golden Anniversary."

John and Doris married in 1955, two years after he had qualified as a naval architect at 25. He had already designed his first boat, the *Laura Bruce*, a shrimper in 1952 at Rowhedge. The couple moved to Brooke Marine, in Lowestoft, where John worked for four years as a draughtsman. Their son David was born there in 1957.

From Suffolk the young family returned to Wivenhoe, Essex, in 1959 when John joined Lloyd's Register of Shipping as a ship surveyor. He began commuting by train to London – Sue was born in 1960 – and is remembered by friends as writing notes for his first books on the train. One of those friends is Don Goodsell, with whom he founded the Wivenhoe and Rowhedge Yacht Owners Association in the 1960s. Don read John's

funeral address at the Norman church of St Andrews in Fingringhoe.

John's first book, in 1970, was *Gaff Rig*, which was done as a favour for a friend. "A publisher had asked him for a small book, just a handbook really," Sue recalls. "But dad thought it was a big subject and so the book expanded – to 18 chapters!" The *Gaff Rig Handbook* won the *Daily Express* Best Book of the Sea Award and is still published, updated in 2004, by Adlard Coles today. John became a Senior Surveyor, moving to the Southampton office in 1972, and the family relocated to Cowes, Isle of Wight, with John still commuting, but by ferry up Southampton Water.



John always described his professional life as being involved in complex steel structures, while for personal enjoyment he designed and sailed small traditional craft, and wrote about them. His third book (after *The Northseaman*) was *Clinker Boatbuilding*, in 1973 – a prescient practical guide to a fast disappearing craft. He wrote 17 books in all.

Over the years he designed many craft, unfortunately we are not yet sure exactly how many; mostly small carvel- or clinker-built gaffers. Like Maurice Griffiths, *Yachting Monthly's* former editor, he regarded the East Coast as *the* place for sailing, and didn't care much for blue water. He did, however, design a Cornish Pilot gig, *Dauntless*, built by the Morton

family in St Martins, Scilly, in 2001. But she is controversial and not allowed to race – although she does take part. John was reticent about writing her up for CB because she was not to the blueprint required in the gig racing rules, plus she'd caused a fuss.

One of his most popular designs was the 17ft (5.2m) gunter-rigged Norfolk Oyster, currently built by Charlie Ward in North Norfolk, in wood or glassfibre.

The apogee of John's career was as the Technical Secretary of the Royal Institute of Naval Architects (RINA) – a role he held from 1979 until his retirement in 1994. One of his jobs at RINA was to stage international technical conferences on subjects concerning warships, merchant ships, propulsion, offshore engineering and small craft. He described that period in his life as one of the most fulfilling.

When he took the RINA job the family moved back to Fingringhoe. "We could have moved to Wivenhoe because he'd designed a house we had built there," remembers Doris, "But we moved to a farm near the water's edge. He never liked the farm." John and Doris moved to West Mersea in 1983, and then back to Fingringhoe in 1986. John had kept a field by the farm and used a workshop there to look after a growing flotilla of small boats; all traditional. Interestingly, in such a rural location, he never learned to drive. "I was his chauffeur," Doris confirms, "but he used to get a lift to the station from other commuters in the village."



Above: With son David off Cowes
Inset: Barge hound
Right: Entertaining a group at the Nottage Institute, where he studied naval architecture.
Far right: *Maid of Veyan*, which he owned in the 1960s





John's early drawing ability led his mother to suggest he become a draughtsman. The Butt and Oyster, Pin Mill, and drifter, hauling nets



Landing herrings by coble, *above*, and herring coble running before the gale, *right*. John was especially fascinated by the East Coast fisheries

Despite John's hectic schedule at the RINA he still found time to take interest in the fledgling CB. Founding editor Pete Greenfield remembers approaching him: "I had read a few of his pieces for *Yachts and Yachting* and thought he'd be ideal for us." His first piece for CB was in issue 2, the spring of 1987, and he was in home waters, describing the workboats of his beloved East Coast. He had already published an impressive list of books by then, including *A Saltwater Village*, posthumously, by his mother Margaret, which is a tour through 1920s Rowhedge.

He became one of CB's most prolific authors (his output commands nearly two and a half columns in our Index) and virtually became an institution of naval architecture in his own right.

We all form our own images of authors, and mine was of John sitting in a dark study, its walls surrounded by books with a desk creaking with papers... maybe a green editor's lamp casting a 60-watt pool of illumination onto the work in hand on the desk. But his study was the dining room of a red brick 1950s house where he worked at the circular dining table. "We've just been clearing it up," Doris

said on my arrival, "there were papers everywhere." Curiously there is no computer; John, with his own library, never needed to consult the Net. There are complete sets of *The Yachtsman* and *The Rudder* magazine in leather binders and some essential tomes of reference in shelves above. "Books were John's passion," Doris sighs. "And he carried on ordering them right up to the end. There are shelves all over the house containing books – more than 2,000 I think. He read about aircraft and model trains as well. I think every time I went out another boxload would arrive! But he'd say: 'I don't smoke, I don't drink, books are my vice!'"

Like many men of his generation John rarely visited a doctor. "He never even went to an optician," Doris says. "But he would stand in the window reading a letter or a text, using a magnifying glass if he needed it. He'd started losing weight by the end of last year and was off his food before he went to the doctor. He hadn't seen him for 10 years!"

John went to hospital and was diagnosed with advanced stomach cancer that could not be treated. "He came home on a Wednesday and died on Friday,

just after seeing the doctor and thanking him for his help. It was a terrible shock really; it just seemed to happen so quickly. At least he didn't suffer too much. But I still expect him to walk in through the door," Doris says stoically.

I retire, to see the place where John kept his own boats, and to my thoughts. Just the day before, a contributor had telephoned mentioning a boat by a designer I hadn't heard of and I had instinctively reached for the phone to gauge John Leather's reaction, for an instant biopic of the designer's life and importance. That's how much we valued him. And I suddenly feel rather lonely. I realise that going into John Leather's study was a state of mind – an active place of reference where we would often plan future articles, to suit future issues; where I could organise today, and he could supply yesterday. I know I am going to seriously miss him, as I am sure so many who knew him already miss him. I stand in the cold grey mud of the slip that was the Rowhedge Ironworks and watch the tide coming in up to my feet. Nothing has changed in the river itself; but without John Leather it's the end of an era. 🌐

Adrian

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