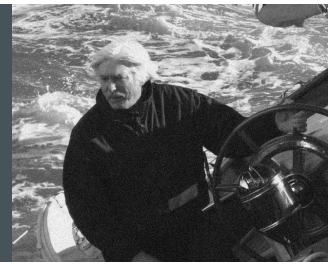


Tom Cunliffe



A Childhood Afloat

Tom's daughter, Hannah Cunliffe, takes time out of a busy life to share her memories of growing up at sea



Hannah concentrating hard on helming the 50ft pilot cutter on which she lived

My first memory is of a blue deck. When a curious friend asked for more details, I was unable to give any, I simply knew that at a very early stage in my life I had spent some considerable time looking at a pale blue canvas deck. Puzzled, I turned to my parents for enlightenment, and they, surprised and slightly shamefaced, admitted that they had tied me to the mast of our 27ft (8.2m) gaff-cutter, *Marishka*, to keep me out of trouble whilst they were busy working on board. In this fashion, I had spent hours (happily, they assured me) crawling around the foredeck area, and yes, the deck had been blue.

'Fancy taking a toddler to sea,' said my friend in amazement. I smiled, but did not add that in fact, my initiation to life on the water had begun some time before, only a few days after my birth. When I was born, my parents were living on *Saari*, the 1903 32ft (9.8m) Colin Archer pilot cutter on which they had just returned from Brazil. The hospital was dubious about allowing a new baby to be driven proudly home to a small boat, but home it was, so I soon found myself having my nappies changed on the chart table. I think I can say that I was the only superfluous item, before or since, that my father has ever tolerated on his chart table without comment.



Hannah's first taste of salt water

Feeling the need for space, my parents reluctantly sold *Saari* a few months later and moved ashore. Even then a boat was seen as a necessity, so *Marishka* was our salvation. But this was only ever a short-term measure and by the time I was three my parents were making plans which included selling our house in exchange for the 50ft (15.2m) Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter, *Hirta*. Perhaps I was too young to take in the significance of this, but I do remember the interminable journey to Scotland to collect *Hirta*, the car piled high with goods and a guitar on the back shelf banging relentlessly against the heads of the long-suffering crew in the passenger seats.

The delivery trip from Scotland to Cowes, Isle of Wight, and subsequent events are more of a haze to me. A scheme for new accommodation was discussed and we began to make *Hirta* suitable for family and friends. I was to have my own cabin: my parents considered me a member of the crew and therefore deserving of my own space. Hence, some six months later, having said goodbye to my friends at play school, I found myself in the top berth of the bunk beds in my cabin putting to sea with a selection of toys (some of my teddies had announced that they didn't like sailing and were happier visiting Grandma).

From Norway to Newfoundland, we followed in the wake of the Vikings. At four years old I took little interest in this, being entirely occupied with the dreaded business of seasickness. It has been recorded that I screamed 'take me back to dry land Mummy,' - my parents were conscience stricken, wondering if they had made an awful mistake and whether all those who had decried against taking a young child on the ocean were right. Perhaps I subconsciously registered this and determined to prove them wrong. More likely I simply found my sea legs.





*Singing loudly
in the cockpit
to counteract
seasickness*

From the beginning of this, my first major voyage, my parents and I discovered the way to combat seasickness and employed it thereafter. It's no good thinking mal de mer will never happen again, because it will, even to the most hardened sailors - Nelson himself was known to succumb, this was lesson number one. On *Hirta*, we swallowed Stugeron tablets like addicts and all hands would loudly sing in the cockpit (the theory being that it is impossible to be sick if you are singing.) 'Sick bics' were another favourite - better known to many as Rich Tea biscuits. One way or another, the combined effects of these remedies would always work in the end.

Up on my feet again, the next challenge for my parents was how to entertain me for the rest of the lengthy voyage. Many people have quizzed me about this, the usual question being: 'Weren't you bored out of your mind? I mean, all that time without a television?' I find this a somewhat bizarre idea; being at sea is an entertainment in itself, if you are prepared to appreciate it to the full. I was treated not as a child, but as a crew member. Right from the start I contributed to the running of the ship, entrusted with jobs which I executed seriously and with a growing sense of skill and importance.

You may wonder what tasks could be given to a child that would be of any real value in operating a large pilot cutter. My parents found many. I knew, for instance, that when dropping the main, it would be my job to put the sail ties over the boom and once the sail was being flaked and stowed, to flick them into the hands of the crew. Every item on the boat was given a name, not only for practical reasons, but also I suspect to make things more fun for me. Consequently, when coming alongside I was the one to hang Charles and William, our fenders, over at the right moment.

It could be considered that my parents had a very casual attitude, allowing a small child to wander around on deck with no apparent thought for safety. In fact, when at sea, my activities were curtailed by a harness in rough weather. I quickly adjusted to this and one of my favourite games was 'morris dancing' on deck, clipped securely on to the guardrails.



*Checking the stores to make sure
there's no rotters!*



Hannah, dressed for 'school' in her school tie, practising knots beforehand

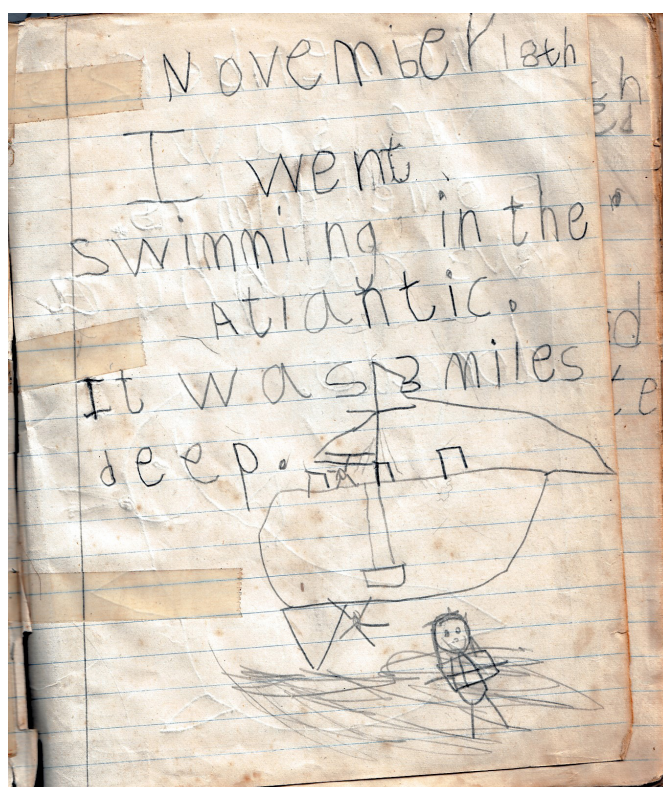
I rarely wore a lifejacket; only if I was with another child who needed one. I was at home with the boat's motion and as steady as on a climbing frame in the backyard. I understood the dangers of the sea and would not play the fool when underway, but I fell in the water several times whilst in harbour and thanks to my parents' way of thinking, saw it as part of the game. Having been taught to swim before we left England, I would paddle around happily until someone came to pull me out. Far more frightening to me were the occasions when one of my toys took a tumble.

The Atlantic crossing was a very useful period for me. There was plenty to learn. My mother was ruthless in ensuring that I knew the key knots. I was not deemed capable of tying a secure bowline until I had mastered it with my hands behind my back and eyes closed. It was a challenge that stood me in good stead and heightened the number of jobs I could usefully do.

But not by any means, were all my days filled with nautical lessons. I was encouraged to write my own log book and waged war against the 'Bilge Monster' who lurked beneath the cabin sole gobbling the pens and crayons I had left unstowed on the table. My mother was determined that the voyage should not put me behind at school and taught me herself for a few hours every available day until we returned to England when I was seven.



Hannah with a friend from another cruising boat



An extract from Hannah's first log book



Number One toy, Cuddly Bear, was always on hand

As an only child, many comment that I must have missed the companionship of other children my age. I have never felt this myself. When on shore for any length of time, my parents sent me to the local school, so that I found myself bemusedly pledging allegiance to the American flag during a winter sojourn there. When at sea we were always joined by at least one other crew member. They provided the best companionship for me, entertaining me with stories or songs, playing games and entering into my child's world. On their arrival I presented each new crew member with a soft toy from my collection, to ward off loneliness at night.

The last of the crew, but certainly the most significant in my eyes (and probably those of everyone else) was my number one toy, Cuddly Bear. CB, as he was nicknamed, was quite a character. He hated the wet and would complain ferociously about deck leaks. His favourite colour was blue and his favourite task was helping me in my role as Ship's Provisions Officer to dole out the 'greedy' bars to the crew on night watch. Cuddly and I were also in charge of the swear box. This institution was a neat way of coping with a dilemma on board. My parents were concerned I might pick up bad language which was inevitable on a trip at sea. The issue was solved when I began to substitute every swear word uttered with the phrase 'peanuts' and relentlessly monitored the crew's language, making them give a penny for every slip. It certainly paid off: my collection grew to £11, which I triumphantly presented to the lifeboat fund one summer.

When we returned to England in 1986, I was seven and completely at home on the boat; the difficulty now was how I would take to life ashore. The lessons had been worthwhile and I was more than up to speed with my class. It was fun to go to school with other children and have my own bedroom, but I was more than happy to return to my snug cabin for the holidays. Thereafter



began a pattern. I was taken out of school every summer to give us enough time to make a trip of three months. We sailed *Hirta* to Russia and the Baltic, Spain, around Scotland and France and sometimes took a school friend, thereby getting the best of both worlds.

With the advent of serious exams, our idyllic summer routine ceased and our activities became limited to legitimate holidays. However, by the time I was 16 years old GCSEs were over and the whole summer stretched ahead – but I had grown up considerably from the small girl who had set sail some 13 years previously. Now was my chance to turn my back on the sea, to say that my parents had forced me onto the water, that I had never liked it, that I never wanted to go sailing again. It didn't cross my mind. I was well and truly hooked.

Perhaps my upbringing at sea made our family a closer unit and forestalled teenage rebellion. I don't know. It certainly meant that we spent a lot of time together and that I never had to wait for my parents to get home from work to ask them a question. We have always enjoyed each other's company and still sail together now, although, wrenchingly, *Hirta* was sold some time ago. She was my childhood home, effectively a member of the family to me, having known her for 15 of the most formative years of my life.



Little Kingfisher

My childhood memories held strong and later my husband Dan Matthews and I purchased a Harrison Butler-designed 21ft (6.4m) gaff yawl, *Little Kingfisher*, followed when the next generation came along by another gaff yawl, the 1909 28ft Falmouth Quay punt *Lady Belle*. Similar in many ways to the boats I sailed before I could walk, she is ideal for cruising in the Channel – just one critical difference, she doesn't have that infamous blue deck!

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Ed. Note:

Hannah now lives in Hamble with Dan and her two young sons, Alex and Leo. She is the Director of National Historic Ships.



Lady Belle