

1905

“SHEILA”⁴⁹

2005

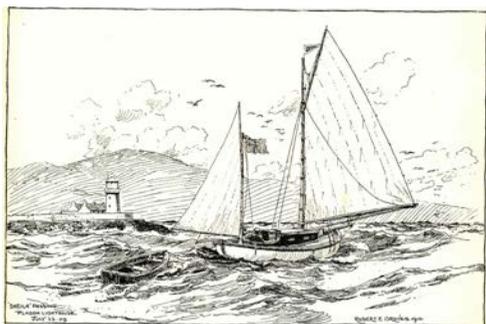
(25ft by 19ft 6ins by 3ft 5 ins)
Created in 1903 as Design No 70 for

ROBERT
F.
GROVES

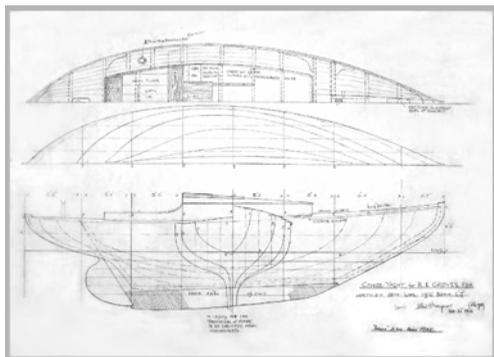
by

Albert Strange.

Built by Robert Cain on the beach at Port St Mary IOM in 1905



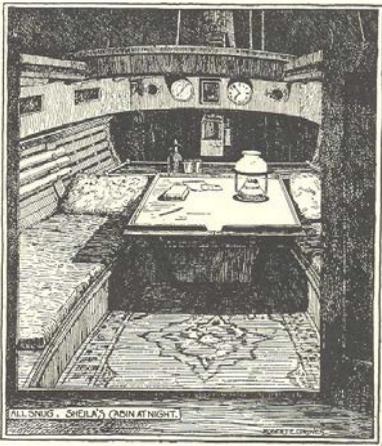
Yachting Monthly August 1910 "On the West Coast of Scotland"



Drawings traced from the building originals in Groves' possession in 1949

“Readers will be sad to learn...”. Her ‘obituary’, a full page spread in Yachting Monthly in 1914, gives a measure of the affection in which she was then held. Groves’ three month cruises in the Hebrides, exquisitely illustrated with Highland scenery, charted anchorages, and his beloved yacht, appeared in two issues for 5 years. They captivated readers with the possibilities of cruising grounds for very small yachts which before had been the preserve of 100 ton yachts for in 1905 few believed that such a small boat was safe at sea; early Clyde Cruising Club handbooks made much use of these accounts. Sheila won the Humber Yawl Club premier cruising trophy in 1910 and 1911 for her last two YM cruises and also in 1983 for sailing from the Deben to the Humber to take part in its Centenary Regatta. Her cruise from the Deben to Douarnenez in 1988 for “DZ88” (4 days there, 3 days back) won her the cruising trophies of the OGA, The Woodbridge Cruising Club and the Cruising Association that year to keep up her cruising credentials.

Albert Strange, as a noted painter, ran the Scarborough School of Art; Mr Strange’s “Tuesday 10 minute sketching classes” at Bootham School York were remembered long after his death in 1917.



Yachting Monthly December 1911 "My Last Cruise in the canoe-yacht Sheila". Note his pencils and sketchpad with the soda syphon for the whisky that would be his final downfall.



July 2005. Groves had his "Clyde" cooker forward with the bunk-heads against the after bulkhead in the fashion of the day; our "Taylor" is by the port bulkhead with a wet locker to the starboard. Groves' apparent space owes much to artists' license.

Sheila, named for Groves' first daughter, is the apotheosis of the sailing canoe, from Macgregor's Rob-Roy in 1865, through the cruising canoes of the British Canoe Association and the continuous development of the Humber Yawl Club (in both of which clubs Strange was a leading light in both governance and boat design) to the perfection of the small 'sail it alone' cruising yacht. She is fast, kindly and easy to handle as Strange ("The Father of the Yawl" YM 1949) wrote, "to get her crew to haven before they tired"; over nearly 30 years of cruising and racing her I find he achieved these aims magnificently as she has won 'pots' galore while getting us out of countless scrapes by her perfect manners in a crisis; she would be enormously loved for this alone but her sheer beauty of line, from Strange's painterly eye, leaves us glowing and has cameras clicking wherever she sails, while the sheer quality of her going is the sexiest thing imaginable.

These qualities, bred from Strange's central role in the HYC cruising ethic and his extensive experience as a lone canoe-yawl cruiser, with his exquisite eye for line and his innovative abilities bred his chance to create perfection in "The Keel Canoe-Yacht, designed for an artist's use in the waters of the West Highlands...the deep waters of the lochs and harbours admit of any amount of depth of keel so a centre-board was not made part of the design...The builder has undertaken to build a similar boat, complete with sails, anchors and all gear for a sum considerably under £100"(HYC yearbook 1904); Sheila is his first 'full keel' design. Thus was born, on the beach by a fishing boat builder, a little lady who has had a romantic history beyond that of many because she has always been deeply loved.

"Written off" in a famous storm in Dublin Bay she was beautifully rebuilt by her second owner, Captain Patrick Walsh, Ireland's premier HYC member; he is shown in the picture taken in 1911. In his 'rebuild' he gilded the already famous lily with a spectacular fully swept kauri-pine deck while also lowering the draft a further 5 inches from Strange's modest 3' 5". He sold her after the 14/18 war to buy Groves' second Strange commission Sheila II, now in New Zealand where she was sailed back to the home of her NZ army purchaser in 1949, Adrian Hayter writing a book on the journey, "Sheila in the Wind", that is still a classic.

In the twenties Sheila lead a chequered life but in 1935 she found a new love with James Y Wilson a Scot "from the Southlands of the Norsemen"



who owned other fine yachts alongside her - but Sheila he kept till he stopped sailing in 1978, selling her and buying her back twice in the process. He sold her in 1939 whereupon she was damaged by a stray bomb while being stored in a boatyard in Ayr. JY bought her back from the insurers for £20 and proceeded to tidy her up to continue sailing her till he sold her in the '50s, buying her back 5 years later as he did not see her being kept properly! JY told me many a fine cruising story where Sheila had got him out of trouble in the furious waters of Western Scotland, including rowing her through the Corryvreckan race, she still has the rowlock bosses on the cockpit coamings. "Despite the turbulent waters off the Kintyre she never took water into the cockpit"; considering her modest (16") freeboard this is a testament to Strange's understanding of buoyancy and balance in the ends of a yacht; I have watched as following seas are reliably parted by that sexy little canoe-counter without driving the bow underwater; the earliest true canoe-counter to survive which, by his own defence in The Yachtsman, was a Strange creation.

In 1978 she was bought by a noted East Coast sailor who had been badgering JY for 20 years! I found her, dismantled for 'restoration' in Woodbridge, looking a sorry little thing. I knew nothing of her but went to see her owner who said "she is not for sale but here is what she looked like originally". He showed me the pictures in Yachting Monthly and I was captivated by the passion that glowed through Groves' drawings. A week later he was persuaded, for the sum of £3,000, a price that Woodbridge said was mad for 25 ft of old boat. A first restoration led to 10 years cruising and very successful racing. In 1994 she welcomed a new 'first lady' who, with my parents, supported the costs of the restoration of the deck to continue the tradition we inherited from Walsh and Wilson of the passion and preservation to which beauty is properly due. The joys we have had of her ownership make that purchase the best investment in pure pleasure I have ever achieved. Our reward has been a continuous experience of a quite different order to that obtainable with the everyday.

Sheila has never had an engine, nor now any electrics. The huge mizzen (19% of the sailplan but as shown here reefed) gives her powers that very few yachts possess; this, blended with her fine form and her original reefing jib, means that she will dance you into and out of anywhere while you stand in the cockpit handling all the 'controls' which she has had 'lead aft' since her building. She has taught us the delights to be had sailing without an engine which has led us to memorable voyages through her incomparable ability to get there under apparently impossible conditions with the continuously sizzling style of her going; we have sailed her under 'jib&mizzen' many miles which is the true measure of her 'two sail' sailing canoe provenance.



She hit her centenary astonishingly original (and very smart indeed), not only in fact, but in the intent of the work we have done in our 27 years in her company. Groves could step on board today and, except for the gilding done by Walsh in 1914 (with a little ourselves), sail her exactly as he did when he took delivery in the Isle of Man in 1905 to sail her to her new home in Tarbert, where, despite the Irish interlude, she has spent the majority of her life; were we to sail her there now there would be old salts who would say "Och it's the bonny Sheila" a fitting testimony to the joy that so many have derived from her being.



Walsh's deck, recreated in 1994 in Alaskan yellow cedar is secret fastened directly to the deck-beams as original practise. The deck pump, cabin slide, doors and their furniture are original, the halyard cleats re-create what was there in 1905. The backstays mount to the anchorages of original Patent legs .

The exotic bronze rudder-head, carries her name and date, while the even more extraordinary nave plate carries her builder's name and port with the three legs of Man; a truly splendid affair for so small a yacht.

The bumkin sits to one side of the sternpost in HYC style, as it did originally, it was reset in the 1994 restoration from a position it had acquired over the sternpost. The cartouche records the 1994 restoration. The pinrail is a sailing joy. The Horse is the original.



Both pictures taken by John Roberts of Top Floor Studio, after her 'centenary' fit out, in mid July 2005 on the River Deben by Methersgate Quay.

The differences today to her 1905 state are the fancy deck, the extra draft and an extra stay on the mizzen in 1914 . In 1978 came our re-creation of the interior (which had vanished) and with the deck rebuild in 1994 some decorative embellishments. The bowsprit is now some 6" longer and more robust, while the jib is longer in the foot to give her extra windward power. To support the mast under the extra loads imposed by sails we carried racing (topsail, masthead genoa, mizzen staysail and huge 'single luff' spinnaker) we have used the anchorages for the original Patent legs to set a pair of 'occasional' backstays on purchases; for her first 70 years she had survived upon the two main stays set to the hounds. The jib, main and mizzen rigging details are exactly as 1905. The mizzen boom, like its canoe forbears, is furled with a brail up to the mast so the sail can be 'removed' immediately for stopping. The original reefing jib allows any area to be set and with all the sail control gear, including a throat down-haul, being lead aft ensures that everything except setting the tack reef hook and hauling the appropriate clew-line for a reef is done from the cockpit - allowing us to continue to tack through tight tidal moorings and sail into marinas with confidence. © M R Burn 2005