



THE CLASSIC OFFSHORE POWERBOAT CLUB • FOUNDED 2006

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Ray Bulman

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It was with great sadness that we heard on New Year's Day that our President, Ray Bulman, had died that morning, aged 89.

*We thought that the best possible tribute to Ray and his life would be to reprint the fascinating autobiographical article he wrote for **Motorboat & Yachting** in May 2017, to mark his 50 years of writing for the magazine.*

Our thoughts are with Brenda, his family and friends.

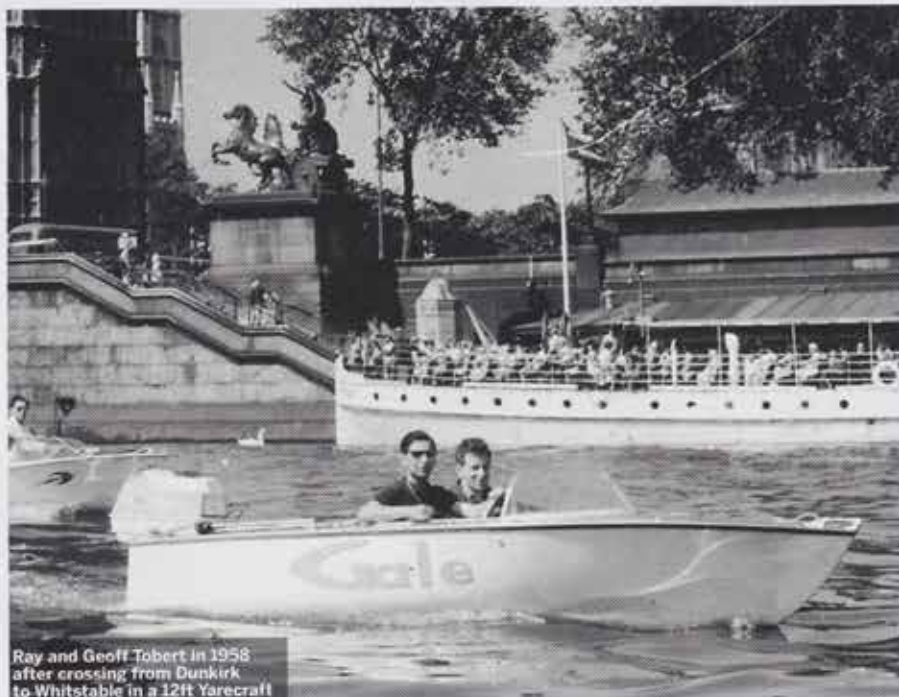
Barry Sales, COPC Commodore

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

MBY's longest-serving contributor of 50 years looks back at a lifetime of powerboat racing adventures

by Ray Bulman





Ray and Geoff Tobert in 1958 after crossing from Dunkirk to Whitstable in a 12ft Yarecraft



Ray (right) on another mad small boat adventure, this time to the Baltic in 1964

Opportunity is a word easily ignored. It comes and goes, and is often only recognised when it's too late to take advantage. But an opportunity came my way over 50 years ago in 1964 which changed my life and

took me and my writings around the world. Whether or not I knew it was an opportunity at the time I cannot say, but after spending my teenage years canoeing on the Thames and my twenties sailing my old Colin Archer in its estuary and across the Channel, I suddenly found myself in a powerboat.

It all came about because my oldest friend Geoff Tobert was selling a range of small speedboats and wanted to attract publicity by competing in them. The only problem was he didn't know where to point the bow. I, on the other hand, had completed a navigation course on the then recently restored *Cutty Sark* at Greenwich. We decided to enter long-distance events such as the old Putney to Calais race. We also cruised them across the Channel to the Baltic and beyond in a forlorn attempt to swell Geoff's customer base.

At the time I was employed by the Post Office. I worked in one of its training schools instructing auto

telephony, where my seagoing antics provided a constant source of entertainment for my colleagues on Monday mornings.

My school days had been sparse to say the least, spending my last year's singing *Roll out the Barrel* and similar national treasures in air raid shelters under the playground as bombs fell above. Hence when I left school at the age of 14, a year before the war ended, I couldn't spell (still can't!) and thought English was the language we all spoke. My first pay packet was 19 shillings and 4 pence (98p) for a 50-hour week. Then I became a marine writer.

JUST THE JOB

There is no greater sport for developing egos than competitive powerboating. In those days the sport was huge, with offshore fleets of well over 50 craft competing in more than 60 British events every season. Even more important was that major boating magazines such as *Motor Boat & Yachting* were published every two weeks. Such frequency required finding a great deal of content, and powerboat racing, with its exciting photographs, was a perfect source.

It was always the drivers who got all the coverage, while the co-driver, who handled the vital navigation, changed the fuel tanks, moored the boat and all manner of seagoing tasks, was completely overlooked. My fellow co-drivers and I felt unfairly ignored so I put together a story called 'You work your passage in Class III'. With my sketchy educational background, it took me about three weeks to write and with fingers crossed, I sent it to another well-known fortnightly magazine, which in those days gave extensive coverage to powerboat racing. Much to my surprise, not only did I receive a positive reply, but the same letter asked if I would be interested in covering powerboat racing for the mag. Little did I know my submission had coincided with the loss of their full-time writer, who had been sacked for abusing his expenses. Some things never change!

I just couldn't believe it. On the back of a single painfully constructed story, I had been offered the top job in powerboat racing media. So keeping fingers firmly crossed that I could carry on producing the goods, I accepted. I now had two jobs: instructing telephony by day, furiously tapping a typewriter with one finger by night.

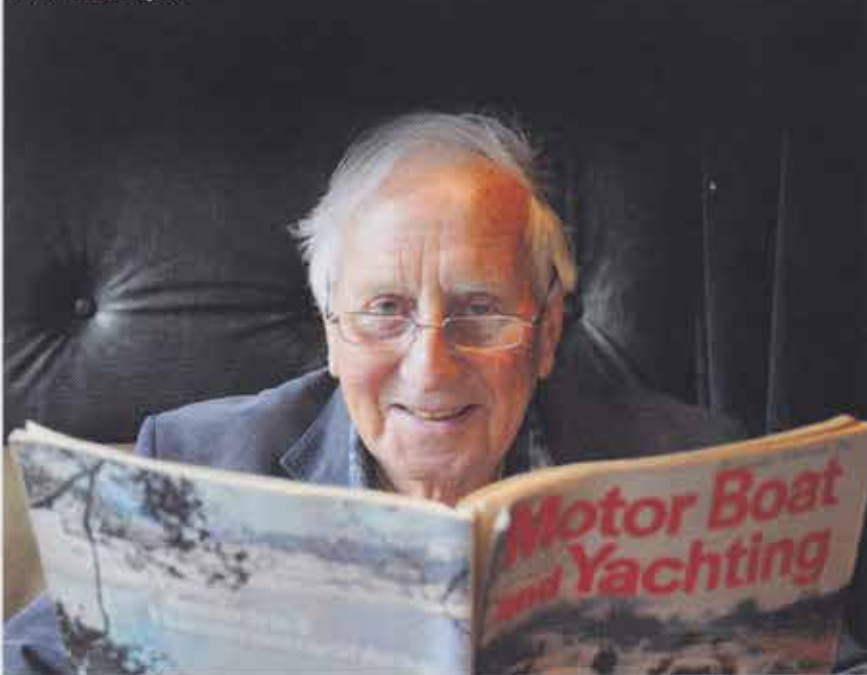
Ray and Geoff arrive in Copenhagen in their 18ft Owens



Sharing the commentary box with Murray Walker at the Bristol Grand Prix



Ray seems to have aged better than the magazine he's worked on for almost 50 years



Covering powerboat racing involved travelling all over the country at weekends, which on some occasions meant attending one offshore race at Whitby in Yorkshire on Saturdays, for example, before travelling half the night to the midlands for an inland circuit race at Chasewater on Sunday. I thought this might adversely affect my day job but surprisingly, it had the opposite effect. Instead of being sacked by the Post Office, I applied for and was given a job in the public relations department. Here, I was able to broaden my writing skills while commissioning freelance graphic designers for leaflets and posters.

I must have been reasonably successful with my night job too, as it wasn't long before the magazine began extending my involvement to include boat testing and other cruising features, even representing it at various press conferences when the full-time staff were busy in other areas.

It was early in 1968 that I had lunch with Crab Searl, yachting correspondent for the *London Evening News*. He had achieved considerable financial sponsorship for powerboat racing from the *Daily Telegraph* and *BP* and asked if I thought a race round Britain was possible. I said it was an ambitious idea and to go for it. A date was set for June the following year and my job was to achieve as much publicity as possible. This task had been made easier in '68 when I was approached by the sports department of the *Daily Telegraph* to be their powerboat correspondent.

Even at the Post Office I soon discovered that many of the designers, copy writers and printers I worked with either owned boats or had an interest in them so my desk was usually surrounded by like-minded souls.

HEALTHY COMPETITION

It was in October 1968 that I had a call from John Liley, then editor of *Motor Boat & Yachting*, inviting me to lunch in the City. He got straight down to the point and offered me a job writing for his rival magazine.

Initially I was reluctant, as my regular mag had given me my first break five years earlier and I felt obligated with a certain loyalty to continue with them.

We finished a very enjoyable lunch and departed, John saying he would contact me with an offer in writing. And then it arrived.

What an offer! I was to have an expense account covering all my travelling rather than just the basic fuel costs I had been getting; a limited amount for entertaining and most important of all, a fortnightly column, an agreed fee per story and freedom to write on all subjects other than powerboating such as boat tests, cruising and other related features.

I showed the offer to my editor. He was speechless and said there was no way he could match it, giving me no alternative but to accept. My first monthly fee from my original magazine amounted to around £16.10; my first cheque the following month from *MBY* came to almost £300. Remember, this was an era when £4,000 would purchase a house in a London suburb.

The workload was enormous. Finding sufficient copy to fill a magazine every two weeks was not easy. My efforts, which typically included two race events, a column and a feature did, on some occasions, account for about a third of the magazine's editorial content. 1969 was also the year I received the first of many invitations to cover events in the United States.

This was a crucial breakthrough, as major powerboat races would be supported by several pages of advertising from boat builders, engine manufacturers and all manner of related equipment suppliers, from spark plugs to radios and fuel. But getting copy and photos to the editorial office was not easy. I still had two jobs; fortunately my job at the Post Office was based in the City of London, less than a mile from the IPC building where *MBY*, plus many other titles were published. This usually meant I had just enough time to deliver my copy by hand during my lunch break, but it didn't always work out so smoothly. Fax machines hadn't been invented yet and the internet was still a distant dream, but with a two-week publication cycle, deadlines were still extremely sharp. This meant that the more important events that had to appear in the next issue could be a

serious problem. A good example here was the Cowes-Torquay-Cowes offshore powerboat race. The magazine always hired the same fixed wing aircraft and pilot from Biggin Hill every year. This would fly staff photographer Eric Coltham (who had been with the company since the 1930s) back and forth over the racing fleet at a dangerously low altitude taking great action shots.

Eric would then go straight back to the office on the Sunday to develop and print his photos while I would sit in the Isle of Wight writing the story. Once finished, I had to rush it to the ferry on Ryde Pier, which would carry it to Portsmouth where a porter would put it on the next train to London. This service was called Red Star, and once my story reached Waterloo, it would be collected by the deputy editor and taken back to the *MBY* office where the layout man would choose the applicable photos to fit the story and paste in the words. In those days, this particular race report would be given at least six pages to match an eight-page preview I had written in the previous issue.

I was now working about 18 hours a day. By 1970, I had also been made powerboat correspondent for both *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraphs*. My work was appearing in Germany (*Boote*), Japan (*Kazi*), Spain (*Yate Y Motonautica*), Australia (*Powerboat*), South Africa (*SA Yachting*), the old USSR (*Motorboat & Yachts*) and USA (*American Powerboat*). I was serving on three RYA committees and was vice president of the United Kingdom Offshore Boating Association (*UKOBA*) – the UK's largest offshore race organiser. A pretty heavy load for a sideline but in 1975, relief came in an unexpected way. In those days, the magazine was totally produced in house and at the end of 1974, the printers went on strike. The editorial group had no idea how long this would last or when it might suddenly end. Hence, 24 issues were produced and never published. A lot of work for nothing and



Ray (circled in the lifejacket) is rescued after the boat he was racing in the 1970 Putney to Calais flipped

when the title reappeared 12 months later, publishing policy had changed and MBY had become a monthly.

I was now producing a monthly rather than a fortnightly powerboat column, which continued for another 15 years. The sport of competitive powerboating was also slowly declining. My column continued until 1990 when the new editor decided to call it a day. This happened to coincide with retirement from my job in public relations with BT, where I had recently been involved with the government's first ever major privatisation.

Five years passed and I was once again asked to write a column based on traditional motorboating, which lasted 15 years until my eightieth year, giving me an association with the title of almost 50 years, more than half a lifetime. It's hard to describe how much the boating world has changed in that time.

I well remember covering an offshore race at the Royal Motor Yacht Club in Poole at the start of my career and being refused entry to the dining room on the basis that I was a tradesman. I was shown to the crew canteen. A few years later I was their guest of honour alongside Lord Mountbatten at the club's centenary celebrations at London's Hilton Hotel.

One of the early highlights of my MBY career was spending almost two weeks at sea covering the first Round Britain race in 1969. It was an outstanding event and an ambitious undertaking that against all odds, proved to be a great success. It set the pattern for all future marathon races including the London to Monte Carlo that took place three years later in 1972. But my MBY involvement didn't centre on powerboat racing alone.

The mag was still a fortnightly and my job in those days was to ease some of the load facing the full-time staff. Among these were boat tests, particularly of smaller runabouts. It was on such an occasion in February 1970 that I was asked for an opinion, and gave a response I'll never live down.

The small runabout I was testing had been built by Poole Powerboats headed by a young enthusiast called Robert Braithwaite. His ambition for the brand was infectious but at that time, many small boatbuilding firms were losing their shirts. This chap Braithwaite was much too smart to follow that route and decided to ask my advice.

"We've sold a boat to a French dealer who's worried his local customers will confuse Poole with Poulet (French for chicken). We thought about Sunseeker. What do you think?" asked Robert. I looked around. It was cold, wet and getting dark. "Sunseeker?" I replied. "You've got to be kidding. That'll never catch on."

The rest is history and 40 years later, at the age of 80, me and my life-long friend Geoff drove a restored version of that very runabout 260 miles from London to Calais and back in 16 hours, just to prove that we hadn't lost the touch.

On another occasion, the organiser of the London to Monte Carlo race in 1972 invited me to be the RYA observer for the race, travelling the entire ten-day journey by helicopter. He needed as much coverage as possible and since I would be covering the event for both MBY and the Daily Telegraph, his invite ensured this would happen.

It was a tremendous adventure where I met a huge number of dignitaries from the British vice Consul in Bilbao, who happened to be a reader and insisted on kneeling on the floor to clean my shoes, to the late Princess Grace at the final prize-giving in Monaco. We landed the chopper in an empty marina in southern



Spain surrounded by piles of bricks dotted with the odd restaurant and bar. The developer was desperate for publicity and thought that by offering me an off-plan deal, he might get a few lines of coverage for the marina in the magazine. "How about £3,500 for a one-bedroom apartment or £950 for a 21-year lease on a 12m berth?" I turned him down flatly. Aside from the dubious ethics of the deal, the place had the appearance of a bomb-site. It turned out to be another Bulman faux pas. On returning the following year, the building site was now a beautiful marina and had a shiny new name to match – Puerto Banus.

ROUND UP

During my time at MBY I've worked for no less than seven editors over almost 50 years. I've covered three Round Britain marathons and dozens of lesser races at home, in Europe and the United States, but it is the major races I remember most fondly.

On the Inland circuit, the Embassy Grand Prix on Bristol's Floating Harbour and the Paris Six Hour were particular highlights. They were the nearest powerboat racing ever came to Formula 1 motor sport and it was at Bristol I had the honour of sharing live commentary duties with the great Murray Walker.

Sadly, both Bristol and Paris have long since gone the same way as so many great offshore races, including the annual Cowes-Torquay-Cowes classic. In 1969, it fielded a fleet of 68 entries. In 2016, there were just 12.

It wasn't all exotic venues and celebrities, though. Powerboat racing is a dangerous sport and in my time I've written over 20 obituaries, eight of whom lost their lives in Bristol alone. But if I was asked to name my personal high point, it must have been in 2004 when MBY reached its centenary. To celebrate its anniversary, the magazine hosted a Festival of Power in Cowes which was attended by over 50 motors cruisers of all shapes and sizes. I was asked to take the salute for the parade of power from the Royal Yacht Squadron. It was an honour, and a memory that will be difficult to better. But whatever the future holds for me and the magazine, I will forever be grateful to the people, the boats and this strange but fascinating hobby of ours we call boating. **MBY**



Ray and Geoff relive the Channel crossing they made 40 years earlier in a 17ft Sunseeker Sovereign