

The Canoe Yawl

The Canoe Yawl

From the birth of leisure sailing to the 21st century

RICHARD POWELL



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3 Emergence of the Canoe Yawl

THE CANOE CLUB WAS FORMED in July 1866 and held its first Regatta at Hampton Court in April 1887. John ‘Rob Roy’ MacGregor was the first Captain and HRH the Prince of Wales the first Commodore. Within a year it boasted over 100 members and a 20-strong branch was formed at Cambridge, with a Mr J. B. Hopwood as Captain; in 1873 it received a Royal Warrant and became the Royal Canoe Club. The club expanded, with an Eastern Branch on the Humber and a Northern on the Mersey and other independent clubs were formed, including the Cruising Club, the Clyde, Bradford, Forth, Carlow, Trent Wanderers and Castle Troy Canoe Clubs.

The early cruising and racing canoes were mostly of the ‘Rob Roy’ type, with two derivatives, namely the ‘Nautilus’ and ‘Pearl’ series. There were three boats built with the name *Rob Roy*: the original canoe was built in 1865, a detailed description of which appeared in the *Transactions* of the Institution of Naval Architects, and another in 1866, which was an improved version, based on MacGregor’s experiences on his first cruise and again well described, this time in his second book *Rob Roy on the Baltic* published in 1867. This became the basis of most of the later canoe designs, and is one of the earliest purpose-designed leisure craft. Her successor, the third version which had cruised the River Jordan, survives to this day as part of the National Small Boat Collection, held by the National Maritime Museum Cornwall, in Falmouth.

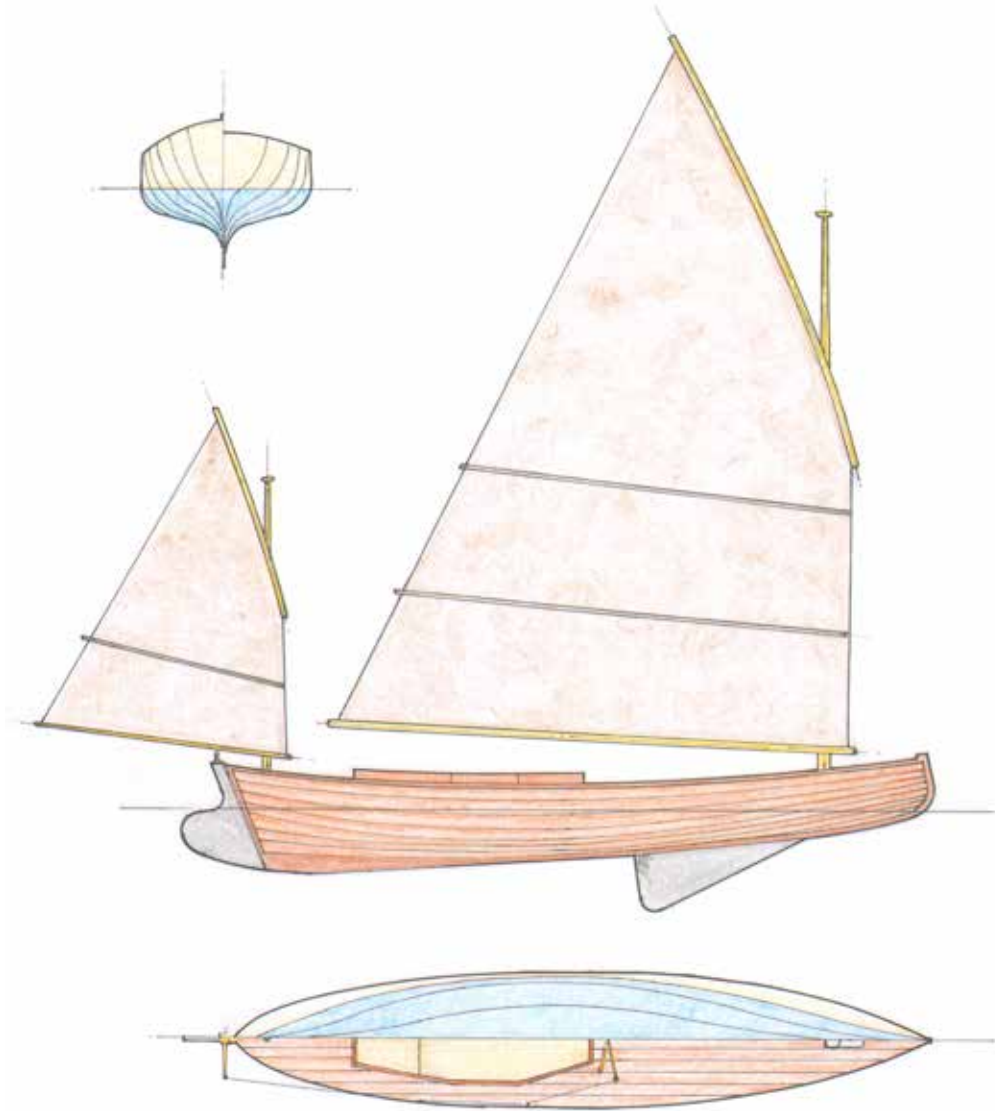
‘A canoe ought to fit a man like a coat; and to secure this the measure of the man should be taken for his canoe’ according to MacGregor, so she was designed ‘to be used by a man 6 feet high, 12 stone, and with boots one foot long in the sole. At 14ft. overall, a 26in. beam, with a main and jib in total 19½ square feet of sail, she was built of oak with a mahogany ‘streak’ (sheer strake) and cedar decks. The mast was tapered and the spars were bamboo. She weighed 71lbs. complete with fittings.

'Nautilus' was the name given to a series of canoes designed by Warrington Baden-Powell, a very keen sailor and the solicitor brother of the founder of the Scouting movement. The size varied with purpose, for example fourteen feet overall with a 33in. beam for sailing and sleeping aboard or fifteen feet overall with a 30in. beam for sailing and paddling. The rig, now lug yawl, was larger, a little over 50 square feet in total for the cruising versions although the racers carried much more, around 110 square feet. Later much larger versions were designed including, in 1893, one of twenty feet overall with a five-foot beam and 'considerable depth' described as a 'splendid cruising yawl'.

The 'Pearl' canoes were a range of seven designs by E. B. Tredwen, a Cornishman who, in 1868 and aged sixteen, came to live in London. He was another notable sailor of the time who also came to be known for his 'Barge Yachts' which were small cruisers based on the flat-bottomed Thames barges, of which we shall hear more later. These canoes were fairly similar to the 'Nautilus' series, and also came in cruising and racing versions, except that Tredwen generally favoured a flat, rather than a rising floor, on the basis that the canoeist could sit lower, and further to windward, when heeled.

Although other canoe clubs did exist there is little information as to whether they developed their own local types. Only the Eastern Branch (later to become The Humber Yawl Club which formed in 1883) and the Northern Branch (later the Mersey Canoe Club) which became independent of the RCC in 1873 after a dispute over subscriptions, developed their own individual and distinctive designs. To a lesser extent both the Clyde and Tyne Canoe Clubs developed specific 'Clyde' and 'Wear' canoes; purists may argue, but they were very similar to other sailing and paddling versions of the type.

The Clyde canoe was perhaps more notable; one, the *Lark* (1878) later *Wren* described in *The Field* as 'a cross between a birch bark and a kayak', had hollow lines and fine ends, 'perhaps too fine to accord with an English canoeist's idea of a cruising canoe, and are indeed finer than the ends of many Clyde canoes'. She was 14ft. 6in. x 2ft. 6in., of teak and white pine with mahogany decks. The type was quite popular within the Clyde Canoe Club, which had a very active cruising section during the 1870s and 1880s.



NAUTILUS No. 5, 1879

by W Baden-Powell. 14ft with a beam of 33in., she was probably the first canoe with a true keel.

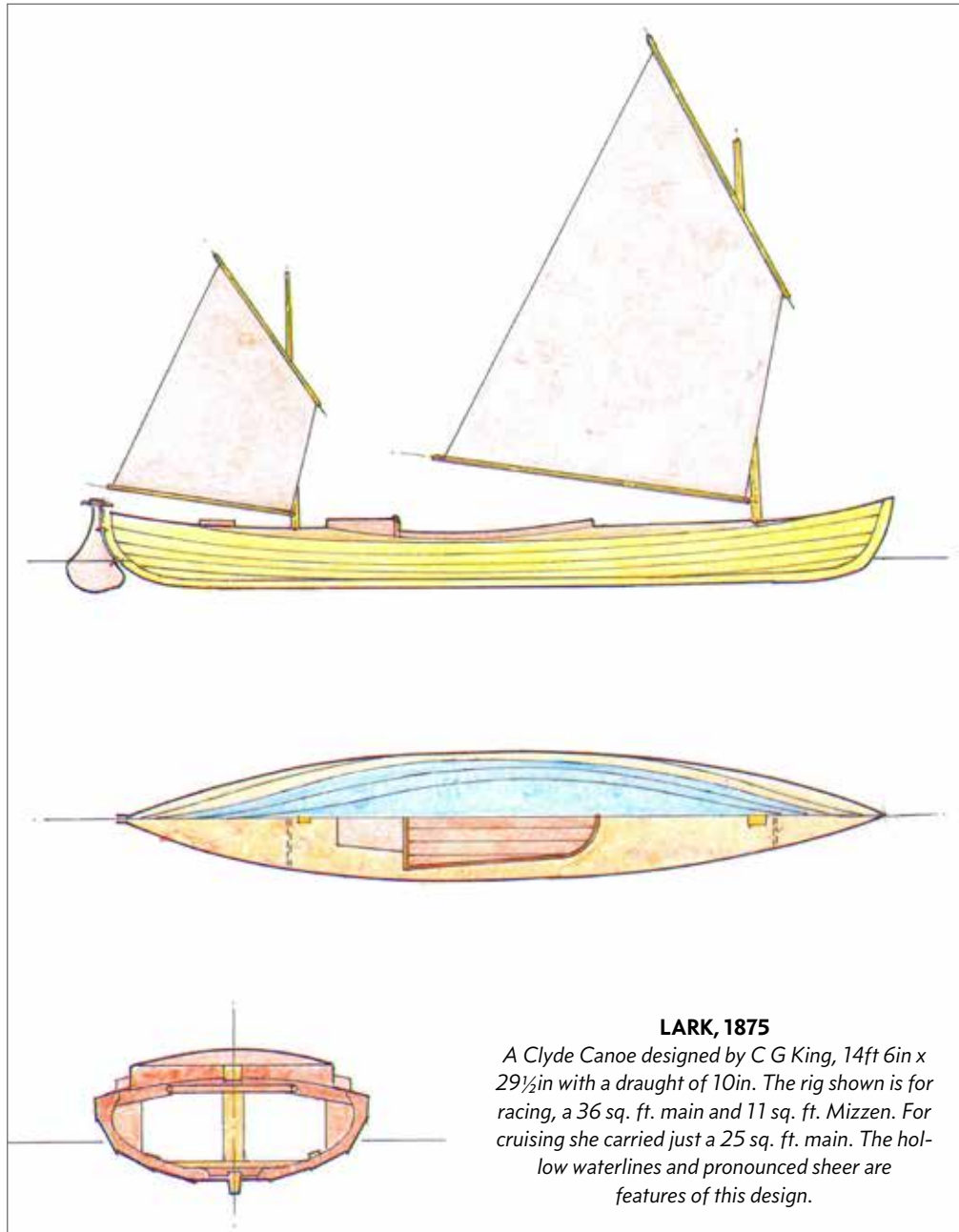
She carried 250 lb of lead ballast, a 65 lb centre plate, and drew about 15in.

She won the 1879 RCC Championship Cup, beating the 1878 winner, a Pearl canoe.

The canoe yawl emerged as a boat for the middle classes, and both cruising and racing versions developed alongside each other. This evolution came from an amalgam of canoe and workboat types, the canoes becoming heavier for more extended cruising and the workboats lighter for ease of handling. The entrenched opinion of the early years, that five or six tons was about right for a 'single-hander', was repeatedly found wanting and early pioneers made extended voyages in much smaller and lighter craft. Similarly, on the racing scene the canoe yawls, forerunners of the modern ultra light racers, were sweeping the board against the traditional 0.5 Rater on the Solent and elsewhere, provoking heated argument and accusations of cheating, a perennial hazard in class racing.

As cruising and racing continued to develop towards the end of the 19th century, the designs started to achieve much higher levels of sophistication as their authors increased their knowledge of naval architecture and the relationship between design and performance. Boats were now designed as leisure craft in their own right, and whilst the well-to-do used professional designers and established yacht builders, the growing demand from the emerging middle class enabled a number of new, amateur designers to flourish, some achieving standards at least equal to the professionals. Very prolific, they made use of small boat builders experienced in producing working boats to offer an elegant and affordable alternative to the gentleman's yacht, on a smaller scale, of lighter construction, and incorporating considerable innovation in hull design and rig, the latter particularly among sailing canoes.

No better illustration of this is to be found than in the articulate and amusing correspondence columns of the contemporary yachting press. Contentious issues were frequently debated in heated but gentlemanly manner over long periods of time. Some publications, such as *The Yachtsman*, first published in April 1891, were weekly, yet were never short of lively and readable correspondence, especially in the early years. The quality of this correspondence started to decline after the First World War, and the effortless, instantaneous and generally anonymous online forum of today is unlikely to restore it.



LARK, 1875

A Clyde Canoe designed by C G King, 14ft 6in x 29½in with a draught of 10in. The rig shown is for racing, a 36 sq. ft. main and 11 sq. ft. Mizzen. For cruising she carried just a 25 sq. ft. main. The hollow waterlines and pronounced sheer are features of this design.

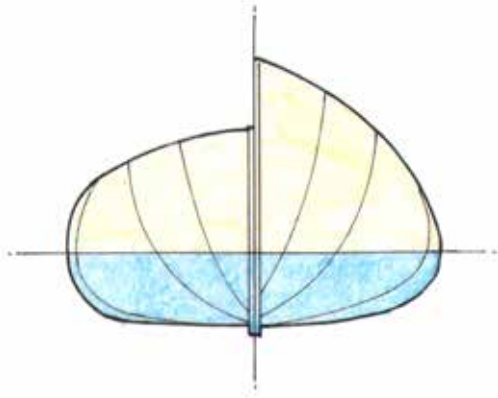
The heavier canoe designs developed on the Mersey and Humber were a response to the rougher waters of these large estuaries than the earlier, finer sailing canoes could handle. There then began an evolution from canoes towards more of a working boat hull form, while working boats themselves became lighter and finer. The estuary canoe types became more seaworthy as more experience in cruising was accumulated, while the lightweight sailing canoes continued to evolve independently, and part company with this narrative.

Interest grew in heavier, more seaworthy types such as the Mersey Canoes which originated around 1877 and were built by Sam Bond of Birkenhead, of which the *Vital Spark*, c1880, is a notable example; she had a both a small ballast keel and internal ballast under the deck. Built to a very high specification of yellow pine planking on oak frames with a teak top strake, and lockers. The lockers were made to incorporate air bags or zinc boxes for buoyancy. This interest in heavier boats developed as the Eastern Canoe Club itself declined and the Humber Yawl Club was formed in 1883 with four former ECC members, including a young George Holmes.

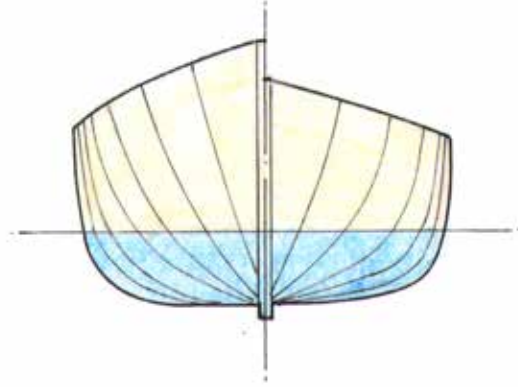
To improve sea-keeping and sail-carrying ability it was necessary to breach the 2ft. 6in. maximum beam of the sailing canoe. George Holmes was one of the first designers to take this step. He was born in 1861 in Hornsea, a small coastal town in the East Riding of Yorkshire, his father owning a tannery business in nearby Hull.

George developed a keen interest in small craft of all kinds. His first boat was a 20ft version of a local type, the coble, a beach boat with a dipping lug rig, fine forefoot and deep rudder. However the need for something smaller and lighter that could be launched and retrieved more easily was uppermost in his mind. He entered into his father's business, now named Thos. Holmes & Son, in his early twenties and with his time now limited a more suitable craft became a necessity. In addition to the Humber estuary he also sailed on Hornsea Mere, which was sheltered, inland water with boats for hire. The Mere was also home to J. A. Akester, a small boatyard which was to build a number of Holmes's designs over the years.

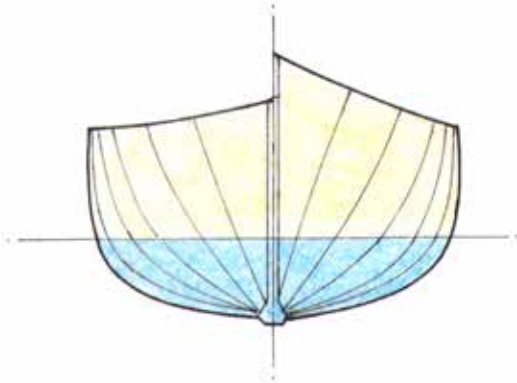
Gerrie of 1881 was his first design; with a workmanlike lug yawl rig and with oars as a secondary means of propulsion, she was one of the earliest examples of the



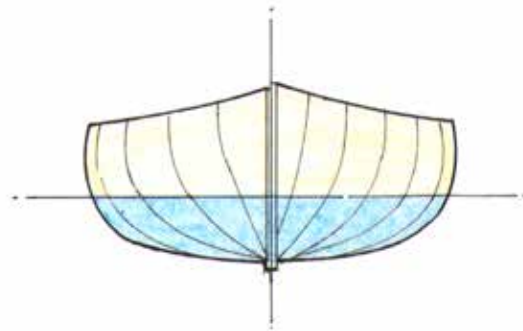
Wear canoe



Nautilus No. 6



Pearl No. 5



Rob Roy

CANOE HULL FORMS

—comparison showing Lines and Midsection of four local types. The Wear canoe is quite extreme but Nautilus No. 6 and Pearl No 5 are fairly similar and more typical of the emerging type, albeit the Nautilus has a much firmer bilge, whereas the Rob Roy is much more of the traditional Kayak hull form.

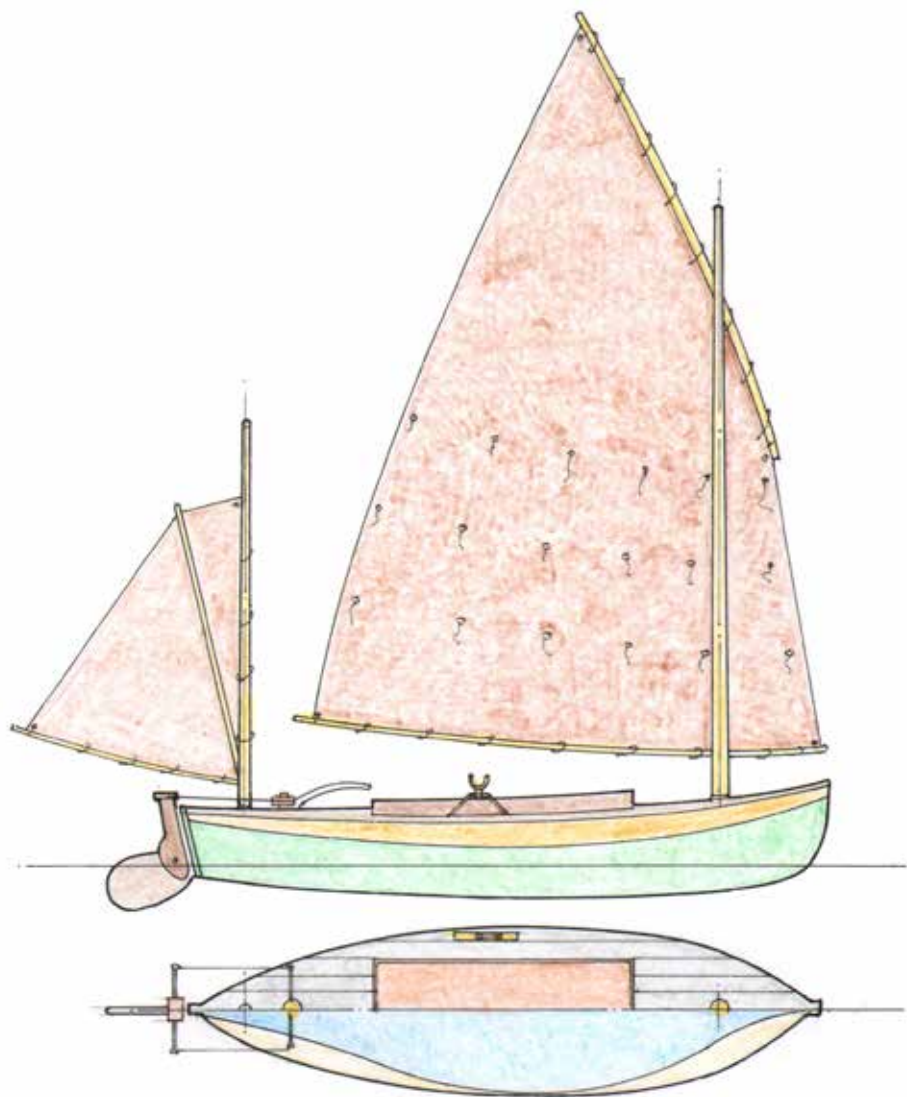
transition of beam away from the narrow paddling and sailing canoes. An otherwise innovative design, she had the cod's head and mackerel tail of an earlier outdated hull form, and without a keel or centreplate she was not a success.

His next design, the *Cassie* of 1883, was a much better boat, with firm bilges, smaller rig, a centre plate with a 3ft. 3in. beam; it became the definitive Humber canoe yawl of the time, and a number of examples were built. Holmes was a keen sailor and became a prolific small boat designer, commissioning a new boat nearly every year, continuously refining and adapting his designs after a season or so of sailing. He was one of the most innovative designers during the 1880s, and designed around 50 boats, of various types, during a long life which ended in 1940.

Boats were now being designed specifically for the Humber, one of them by Holmes's boyhood friend John Hamilton Jr. At 18ft the Humber Yawl *Viking* of 1886 owed her ancestry to the double-ended working boats, and though of the same dimensions as *Vital Spark* she was deeper with a centreplate, a most seaworthy boat which may survive to the present day—she was still sailing in the 1980s but her current whereabouts are unknown, in spite of considerable efforts to locate her. Hamilton is also credited as the first man to add a cabin to a Humber yawl in 1887.

Light displacement was now being promoted for cruising boats, in particular by Albert Strange. He was an experienced sailor; he began cruising around 1871, following the events which led to him acquiring his 'Yot' which have been described. He had long admired the little canoe yawls, particularly those of his friend George Holmes, thus when he started designing them he had almost twenty years of regular, mostly single-handed, cruising under his belt. His designs were based on sound practical experience and, coupled with his considerable artistic ability, soon established him as an amateur designer of some note; commissions came thick and fast.

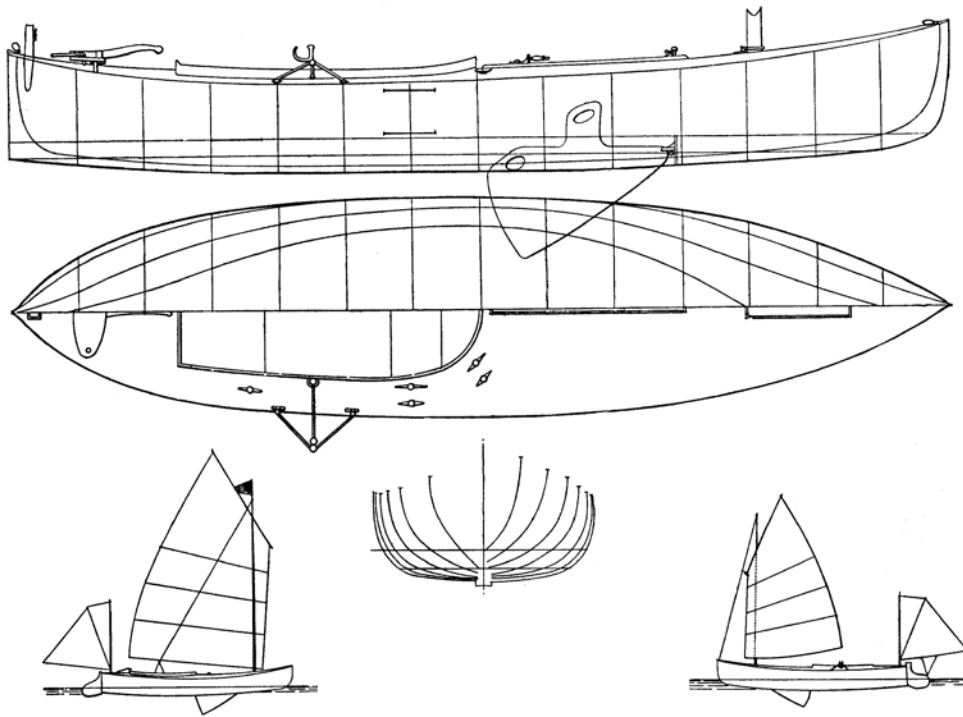
Albert George Strange was born in Gravesend on 29 July 1855, the son of George I'Strange, a china and glass dealer, and Sarah Elizabeth, née Jarman, who was his second wife. His first wife Mary had died in childbirth in 1849, along with an infant Thomas, the twin of Charles, who survived, along with their first child, Elizabeth. Albert's mother died in 1874, aged thirty-five. His interest in boats started early in life



GERRIE, 1881

by George Holmes. 12ft 3in x 3ft 3½in, clinker built of yellow pine; an interesting Canoe Yawl design in several ways. She has a very shallow 2in keel but had a workmanlike rig and, unusually, the alternative propulsion is not paddles but oars in brass rowlocks. These, 'after several costly and unsuccessful experiments' were later replaced with iron outriggers. She has a hollow bow and a fine run aft which is quite advanced for the time, and although unsuccessful she was another step along the way.

EMERGENCE OF THE CANOE YAWL



CASSIE, 1883

by George Holmes. 14ft x 3ft 4in; another imaginative design, she has a little more beam than was usual for the time and was a break from the RCC model. Her construction is not known but she carried 85 sq. ft. of sail for cruising, and for racing an extra-large mainsail took it up to 135 sq. ft. She had a 70 lb. iron centre board and was un-ballasted but when racing an extra 1 cwt. of gravel or sand in bags was added. Again the auxiliary propulsion was oars with outriggers, no doubt from Holmes' experiences with Gerrie. He also made the outriggers removable; his work at this time was one of continual development.

and when he was fourteen a church choir outing on a Thames fishing boat led to him being a regular 'hand' on fishing trips and accompanying his fisherman friend Bob, who acted as a pilot, on the local racing yachts, which he greatly enjoyed.

His father had in mind a career in the law for young Albert, but he persuaded his father to let him attend Slade School of Art in South Kensington, where he became a certificated Art Master, going on to the Liverpool College of Art. In 1881 he took up the post of Headmaster of the newly formed School of Art at Scarborough. Under his tutelage the school flourished and produced a number of extremely talented and subsequently well known artists. He married his childhood sweetheart Julia Louise Woolard, a Quaker, after his appointment, and she bore him two sons, George and Albert, and a daughter Dorothy who died early aged twenty-eight.

THE CANOE YAWL

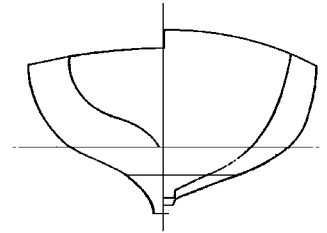
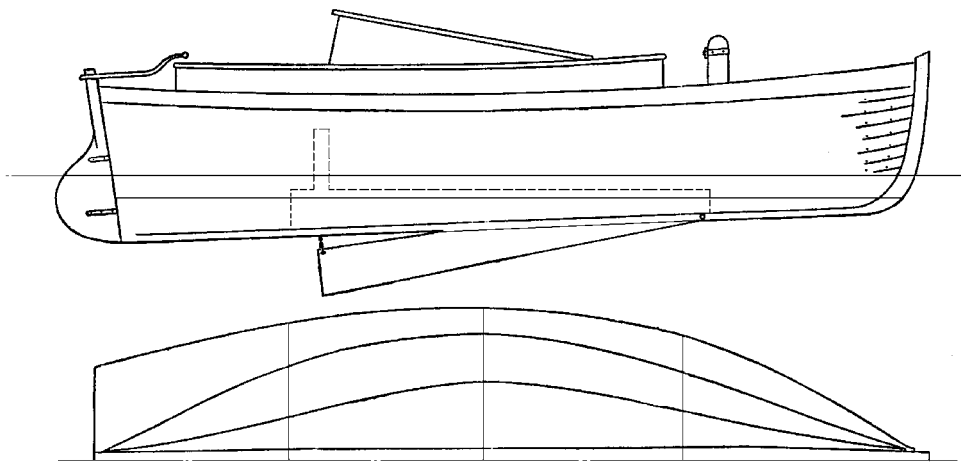
Strange joined the Humber Yawl Club in 1891 and was a founder member of the Scarborough Sailing Club in 1895. He produced some 160 boat designs and a further twenty or so for model yachts, and wrote extensively on the subject in the publications of the day, notably *The Yachtsman*, a weekly publication, and *Yachting and Boating Monthly*. An accomplished artist, he regularly exhibited at the Walker Gallery in Liverpool, and many times at the Royal Academy. He was well known and respected locally, with a reputation as a raconteur and wit. Very recently new pontoons in Scarborough Harbour were named after him, a fitting tribute to a man of many talents, but most especially remembered for his little canoe yawls. He suffered from failing health in his later years and finally died of heart failure in July 1917, and his death was much lamented by his friends and associates.

Strange designed his first boat, *Cherub*, in 1888 for his own use, she was a typical heavy cutter with a transom stern, and unusually she had two centreplates; he sailed her for several seasons, commenting favourably on the centreplate arrangement, but he did not repeat the experiment. His first commissioned design was probably the *Wren*, of 1889, a small cruiser with a gaff yawl rig and a small cabin. The cabin had a lifting roof and she was a little over fifteen feet long, again with a transom stern. Design details and a brief account of her sailing abilities were published in December of that year in the weekly *The Field*.

Other boats were to follow, one of the most well known was the 1909 design *Betty*, an auxiliary cutter of 48 feet overall, subsequently renamed *Tally Ho*, and in the ownership of Lord Stalbridge she was to win the 1927 Fastnet race in atrocious weather conditions when all others, including the famous Le Havre pilot cutter *Jolie Brise*, had retired save *La Goleta*, an American 70-foot schooner. In the days before specialist design of offshore racing yachts this was a considerable achievement.

With racing boats a number of different factors contribute to boat speed: primarily stability, weight and wetted surface area, but a fine entry and a fine run aft had become accepted as one of the pre-requisite for good performance. This increased knowledge of hydrodynamics led to faster and (mostly) better boats, but it was not without relevance to the design of a cruiser. An easily driven hull is desirable and a

EMERGENCE OF THE CANOE YAWL



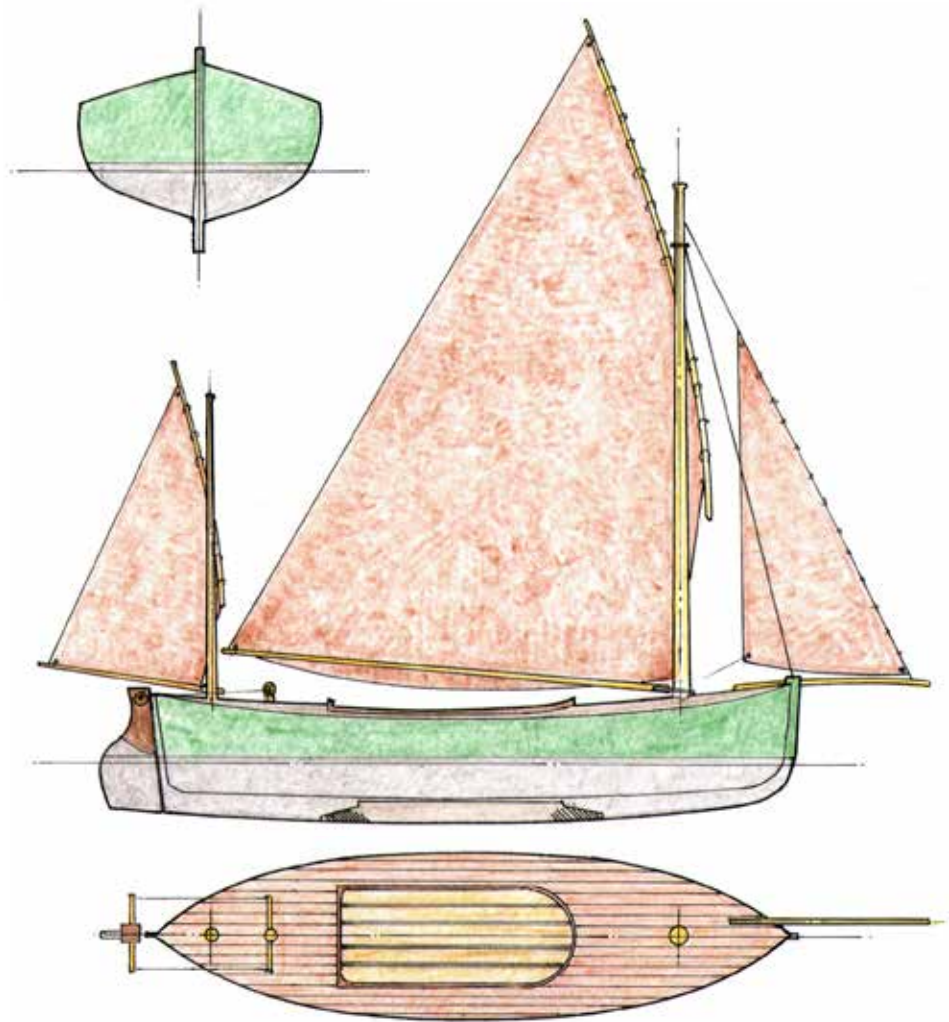
WREN, 1889

by Albert Strange. 15ft 5in x 14ft 10in x 5ft 6in with 1ft 3in depth was probably Strange's first commissioned design. She has the hinged cabin roof which was to feature in several of his designs, along with the long shallow centre plate under the cabin floor with a tube extension to take the lifting tackle well above the waterline.

canoe hull is exactly that. Thus original design thinking, previously confined to the racing yachts of the rich and famous, began to percolate down to more humble and affordable craft.

Ethel of 1888, one of four boats of that name designed by George Holmes, was built by J. A. Akester at Hornsea Mere, and marked a further departure from accepted wisdom in light canoe design. She was 13ft. overall with a much wider beam of 4ft. 6in. and out-performed her narrower cousins, including *Cassie* described earlier, by a considerable margin in local club racing. With her much increased volume she proved a more spacious and suitable type for cruising as well as racing. She was an inspirational design, marking a fundamental change in the hull form of the small canoe yawl, spawning several similar boats at the time and a number of modern replicas and derivatives.

The following year Holmes designed *Daisy*, a smaller version of a heavy Humber canoe yawl with an iron ballast keel and galvanised iron centre plate; she was designed for cruising with a two man crew and was another of the many Holmes boats built by Akester. *Daisy's* antecedents are working boats and the likes of *Vital Spark* and *Viking* rather than the much lighter canoes and kayaks. She was based on Hornsea Mere



VITAL SPARK, c1880

by Sam Bond, Birkenhead. A little larger than the original Mersey Canoe Yawls, which started around 1877, at 18ft x 17ft 9in x 5ft with a draught of 2ft 2in, displacement of 1 ton 13 cwt., carrying a sail area of 178 sq. ft. but for racing it would have been about 300 sq. ft. She was rigged with a small jib, and was a clear development from working craft, rather than true canoes. She had 4½ cwt. of lead on the keel and carried a further 4½ cwt. internally. Later versions were larger, around 20ft, with another 1 cwt. of ballast added along with centre plates, no doubt to improve windward performance.