

LUKE POWELL

Working Sail

A LIFE IN WOODEN BOATS



FOREWORD by TOM CUNLIFFE

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I first met Luke Powell twenty years or so ago at a classic boat regatta. He and a few mates were careering round the moored craft in a heavily canvassed cutter of unusual beauty called *Charmian*. They were having a whale of a time and a lot of folks in the anchorage were casting beady eyes on them hoping they wouldn't get out of control near *their* yachts. They needn't have worried. These guys knew their business. I didn't realise then that Luke would turn out to be a master boatbuilder and a great artist to boot.

The next time we met was in Exeter while he was building *Lizzie May* and I was commissioned to write an article on the boat. When I saw her, she was a shell without much accommodation and two things struck me. The first was what a joy it is just to lie down among the timbers of an empty wooden boat and feel the harmony all around. The second was a sense of admiration for a man who, in a world driven largely by what sells at boat shows, was prepared to put his soul on the line for what he believed in. Many non-race boats of today are designed and built with accommodation as first priority. Huge aft cabins with island beds impress at Earl's Court or Excel; they work in marinas too, but try using one in the North Atlantic hard on the wind in force six. No, thank you very much, has to be the seaman's response. Luke Powell's boats are obviously created primarily to be at one with the environment in which they are built to serve. The accommodation goes in afterwards. It is this understanding of what really matters that makes such vessels the most comfortable and safe of all.

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The men who built Scillonian pilot cutters in the nineteenth century knew not only how to make a boat that would do their job, they also must have cared about how she looked. Luke has researched his subject as thoroughly as anyone alive and his boats stand out in any seascape as the loveliest of all. His eye is extraordinary, but it never compromises the critical factor of how the boat swims on the water. I loved the account in this book about bringing *Agnes* from America. Her passage time was similar to the one I made in my own gaff cutter *Westernman* when we sailed her from Cape Cod to Falmouth. Like her, we had three reefs in for much of the time, yet still we flew onwards. The photograph of Bishop Rock on a rough, grey day says it all. The Bishop

remains the most romantic landfall in the world for me. For Luke and his crew, sailing their pilot cutter home across the mighty wilderness to where she must long to be, I know it will never be forgotten.

Luke Powell has done us all a favour by writing this book. Tell your friends about it, leave a copy in the marina office so that those who do not yet understand can be brought to a richer life through its pages. Who knows, maybe some of them, too, will leave the consumer world behind and find a boat that is at peace on the great waters.

Tom Cunliffe
2012



FOREWORD by JEREMY IRONS

The seas were big and the wind delightfully strong as I felt *Agnes* muscle into the waves ...

At the furthestmost tip of south-western Ireland, between peninsulas that reach out to the Atlantic like fingers, lies Roaring Water Bay. Surprisingly, not named for its own nature, but rather after the tumbling river which spews its roaring waters into the sea at the bay's landward end. Guarded by Clear Island, the bay is peppered with other, smaller outcrops, some peopled, others deserted but for crumbling ruins, hardy flocks of sheep and the occasional goat; visited in fair weather for their little beaches, but avoided in foul, as are the unpredictable rocks which lurk just below or above the tide. Ten miles out to the horizon lies the Fastnet Rock with its famed lighthouse, and beyond that, America and much of the Irish diaspora.

From time to time I live in a tower house on one of those small islands on the edge of the bay, and on a clear night I can lie, one hundred feet above the sea, enjoying the beam sweeping from the Fastnet playing on the walls around my bed with its unchanging rhythm.

The morning has never been my best of times, but when I'm there my first joy is to peer out of the uncurtained windows to see how the new day has dawned. Sun, cloud, or rain, and what weather the sky and wind direction predict for the remains of the day.

One such summer morning I was greeted by the sight of a pair of what I judged to be Brixham trawlers, the *Hesper*

and the *Agnes*, a long way from home, and moored in the lee of my island. Few boats venture this far inland, for to do so means negotiating the ubiquitous mussel lines crisscrossing much of the bay, but advertising, by their presence, the pureness of its waters.

So these silent visitors, for at this hour there was no one stirring above decks, were a welcome sight. Traditional sailing boats built of wood and rigged in sisal and canvas have become a rarity, as we succumb to the easy maintenance of plastics and glass-fibre, and, in my experience, the men and women who sail them can be some of life's most interesting.

A few miles away, on the banks of the Ilen River my friends Liam and John Hegarty who twenty years ago built my gaff-rigged ketch in the yard where their father worked before them, are rebuilding, and sometimes building anew, traditional Irish workboats, and as you explore this coastline you come across examples of their work nestling up in sheltered bays.

But that morning's visitors were bigger than our local workboats; well able to withstand the ocean in its foulest moods. They dwarfed my little ketch moored nearby, and as I looked longingly at their lines, honed by generations of maritime experience, their crew began to stir.

In my experience, however well provisioned and kitted out a boat is, after a sea voyage its crew always welcomes the chance to enjoy the comforts afforded on land.



... glorying in her own splendour, with *Hesper* rising and falling beside us as we vied for speed and trim.



And so it was no surprise that my invitation to showers and a full Irish breakfast were accepted with alacrity as I gave directions where to come ashore. And while we crowded into my little kitchen and downed coffee, eggs, bacon, black and white pudding, toast and marmalade, I was introduced to this extraordinary man, Luke Powell, who had built, and his family and friends that were crewing, the two boats swinging at anchor fifty foot below my kitchen window.

Later that morning, hunger assuaged and bodies freshened, we set sail down the bay, and out towards the Fastnet Rock. The seas were big and the wind delightfully strong as I felt *Agnes* muscle into the waves, glorying in her own splendour, with *Hesper* rising and falling beside us as we vied for speed and trim. And as we rounded the Fastnet, with the white spume thundering against the rocks only metres away from us, I felt both privileged and protected aboard this magnificent sailing vessel.

For those who have never experienced such sensations, I would exhort them to seek them out. This wonderful volume may whet your appetite. And for all of us, even the saltiest of sea-dogs, perusing these pages on a winter's night will allow us to marvel at the wonders of the past, and, perhaps, dream of wondrous voyages to come.

Jeremy Irons
2012

