

JOHN COUNSELL'S SAILING HISTORY

Excerpt from a memorial reading on 13 April 2026 by his childhood friend Dick Wettenhall, stepson of Clive Langdon

In addition to the relics of old cars, the Langdon and Counsell garages were crammed with bits of teak and rigging salvaged from the remains of old sailing ships found in the Williamstown dockyards. Apparently the intension was to use these materials for restoring yet-to-be acquired old boats.

As Rosalie alluded, John inherited these interests in spades, and for better or worse, passed on his obsession for old sailing boats to their older son Hugh.

I was reminded of this on my last visit to see John at Harkaway about a year ago when he proudly showed me the remains of two of his three beloved wooden yachts – the cold-moulded, Illingworth designed Top Hat that he had spent three summers changing from full keel to short keel and skeep, and the Amy Christina, a heavy, carvel-planked Couta boat built by Alec Lacco in 1946 for fishing in Westernport Bay and Bass Strait out of Rhyll, Phillip Island. These boats were surrounded by stacks of old marine timbers with which John had planned to refurbish them in his retirement!



The refurbished Top Hat 'Flicka' in 2008



The Couta Boat "Amy Christina" sailing at Rhyll

JOHN'S INTRODUCTION TO SAILING.

John's obsession for and considerable achievements in offshore sailing will be well known by all present. What may not be known is that the John and I learnt to sail in my stepfather's wooden dinghy on Albert Park Lake. On our first solo outing, we bottled the boat in the middle of the lake and had to be rescued.

But once we mastered the art of sailing, we went onto many adventures in the dinghy both in Port Phillip and Westernport Bays, including day trips from the Point Leo Boat Club to French Island, Flinders and Phillip Island for picnic lunches.

In our teenage years, we gravitated to a racing skiff, the Hornet. We were soon joined by my stepfather's nephew John Langdon, who had not sailed before. But typical of the Langdons, this John was an unrealistic dreamer and invested in a Finn – a highly unstable one-man racing dinghy designed to be sailed by Olympic athletes. Needless to say there were many rescues, but he eventually mastered the Finn and joined us on our trips to Flinders and Cowes – by then for counter lunches in the local pubs.

In true Counsell-Langdon tradition, our early days of sailing included many dramas. On one occasion, in wild conditions we bottled the Hornet near the Port Melbourne pier in front of large ocean liner with warning horn blaring.

Although our dinghies had centre boards, the northern end of Westernport is extremely tidal. Sailing around French Island still ran the risk of running aground, and the flukey winds caused frequent capsizes that led to wet sleeping bags and spare clothing when we were camping.



John (RHS) & I rigging the Hornet for a sailing-camping trip to French Island during which we bottled more than once.



Drying out on Sandy Point beach.



The Jubilee – John's answer to a bosun's chair and doing routine maintenance.



Another memorable incident occurred when three of us decided to sail across to Cowes – John and I in the Hornet and a friend Ann on her Moth which is not much more than a surfboard with a sail. This trip entailed negotiating a tricky passage around the notorious McCaffey's Reef, so my mother and stepfather insisted on accompanying us in their dinghy as rescue team.

While we were enjoying our counter lunch, the forecast southerly change arrived. The wind was so strong that Ann was unable to keep her craft from bottling, so she joined John in the Hornet while I, being significantly heavier, sailed the Moth back to Point Leo, perhaps unwisely tackling the now wild seas around the Reef.

My more circumspect parents in the support dinghy were nowhere to be seen and struggled home a couple of hours later having first been carried to French Island by wind and tide. The rescue boat came close to requiring rescue itself.

Although I kept my half share in the Hornet, I later acquired a small Bluebird keel boat that was moored at Williamstown. It was designed for bay sailing only, but of course John and I decided we could sail it to Westernport Bay via the Port Phillip Heads. More drama. The Bluebird was pooped by a large breaking wave as we negotiated the rip outside the Heads. The Tohatsu outboard motor was swamped and would not start. This meant sailing into Newhaven Yacht Squadron marina which was forbidden because of the very strong tides and narrow channels within the marina. We were greeted with very angry shouts from Newhaven Yacht Club officers.

Finally, John's wooden boats: Inspired in his early life by the tales of sailors such as Joshua Slocum (*Spray*), G.H.P. Muhlhäuser (*Amaryllis*) and Peter and Anne Pye (*Moonraker*), John long dreamt of ocean cruising. The family graduated to more serious wooden sailing boats, starting with the heavy, carvel-planked, 18' Jubilee. But, as so often happened with the Counsells, this also came with drama. The only recently purchased boat sank on its too short mooring at Point Leo during an easterly gale. Undaunted, they bought another Jubilee shortly thereafter.

Then there was Merlin, which I am sure we will hear a lot more about from others. After their epic voyage from England, she was sold in 1978 to a Queenslander, changed hands twice more and eventually fell into a state of disrepair. John was so upset that he repurchased the near wreck and had it transported back his Harkaway farm where son Hugh and a team of specialist shipwrights refurbished her back to her former glory.



1977 Drifting in the Doldrums



2009 Repurchase Rescue Mission



2019 Post Refurbishment

John's last boat purchase was the derelict Couta boat, the Amy Christina, now stored in a shed at Harkaway surrounded by stacks of old marine timbers, waiting for Hugh to refurbish!