

ED DUBOIS FIREBRAND

Superyacht designer Ed Dubois's heart belongs to *Firebrand*, his 43ft Olin Stephens design. *Nigel Sharp* races her at the Pendennis Cup and gets the full story

C/O ED DUBOIS

EMILY HARRIS



NIGEL SHARP

In 1998, at a time when he had just designed a 46ft (14m) traditional boat for himself and was in the process of getting quotes to build it, naval architect Ed Dubois was travelling back to the UK after a client meeting in the US Virgin Islands.

He had a day to spare in Miami before his flight home and, to pass the time, he bought a copy of *WoodenBoat* magazine. While browsing through it, he saw an advertisement for a boat called *Firebrand* which had been built to compete in the Admiral's Cup in 1965.

"I remembered her from when I was a teenager, and my fascination with offshore racing yacht design had just begun," Ed told me. He phoned *Firebrand's* broker and was amazed to hear she was lying in nearby Fort Lauderdale. "An hour later I was sitting on board with her owner Doug Kent." He found her to be the epitome of RORC yachts of her time, designed by Olin Stephens – a "sort of hero" of his. "I had a very powerful impulse to buy the boat," he said, "and I decided that if I got the new design job, I would do so. And I did, so I did!"

In fact, it so happened that a great friend of Ed's called Esben Poulsson was also looking for a boat, after returning from Hong Kong to live in the UK, so they agreed to buy her together.

Firebrand was built in 1964 for Dennis Miller, who intended to compete in the Admiral's Cup the following year. In the 1963 Cup, his boat *Clarion of Wight* was top individual points scorer, and Miller saw no reason not to use the same designer for *Firebrand*. Although it was unusual for British owners to commission non-British

designers at that time, she was drawn by Sparkman & Stephens and built by Clare Lallow in Cowes.

She was one of three selected out of the 15 British boats for the 1965 Admiral's Cup, alongside *Quiver IV* and *Noryema IV*, both designed and built by Camper & Nicholsons. This trio retained the Cup against a record seven nations, though *Firebrand* did not shine.

DIFFICULT RUDDER PLACEMENT

In line with design trends at the time, the chord length of her keel was quite short in an attempt to reduce wetted surface area, and the rudder – hung on the keel's trailing edge – was therefore a long way forward. As a result, she lacked directional stability.

Tom Richardson, a highly experienced sailor who owns the Elephant Boatyard on the Hamble River and sailed on *Firebrand* during her first three seasons, remembers winning the 1965 Round the Island Race. "It was pretty hairy, and at one time we were sailing downwind between two boats, overtaking them and praying we wouldn't broach." Ed once heard Rod Stephens, Olin's brother, say "downwind in a breeze, sailing *Firebrand* was no fun at all".

The following year, she crossed the Atlantic and competed in the Onion Patch (as part of the winning British team) and the Bermuda Race. While over there, her original rudder was pinned on the centreline, and a new separate skeg and rudder were fitted farther aft, setting a design trend for the future. At the same time, the wheel was moved forward in the cockpit.

Previous spread: *Firebrand* at July's Pendennis Cup in Falmouth. **Above top:** The late Olin Stephens with Dubois. **Top right:** with *Mikado* and *Tomohawk*. **Above:** Cornish scenery



“I’m delighted the boat went well, a credit to everyone
but most of all the designer, Olin Stephens”

A thin teak deck was laid in 1967 to gain a rating advantage under an obscure RORC rule, and *Firebrand* was again selected for the Admiral’s Cup. She was the best performing boat in the British team, but the Australians won and the Cup went overseas for only the second time.

Two years later, Miller moved to Bermuda and took *Firebrand* with him, selling her soon afterwards to an American lawyer called Robert Bicks, who gifted her to a Canadian bank to comply with a bizarre tax law.

MORE THAN A LICK OF PAINT

Ed doesn’t think *Firebrand* had been sailed much before he bought her. “She was well maintained in terms of the varnish and paintwork,” he told me, “but the sailing gear had not been updated for many years. She had aluminium winches, which weren’t original, and they were all seized up.”

The boat was shipped back to Bembridge Harbour on the Isle of Wight, where Attrills modified the steering gear again. A new semi-balanced rudder to Ed’s design was fitted farther aft still, and the wheel steering system was replaced with a tiller, which Ed prefers on a boat of this size. The cockpit layout remains the same, with the seats cut out at the aft end to accommodate the wheel.

Firebrand’s hull is Honduras mahogany planking – originally edge-glued – on elm frames, and was one of the last ocean racing boats to be traditionally built before cold moulding became popular. When Ed bought her, the seams had been splined – probably because the glue had broken down – but the job had not been done very well.

“She was as sound as a bell and very strongly built with bronze fastenings and bronze floors,” Ed said, “but when I took her out in a big seaway in the first year, her planking would move a little bit and she would leak.”

Attrills consequently sheathed the outside of the hull with two layers of glass and epoxy. At around the same time, the brightwork was stripped back to bare wood and 12 new coats of varnish applied, but the interior hardly had to be touched, apart from a new cooker.

A MUCH LOVED BOAT

In 2006, Esben moved to Singapore and Ed bought him out. *Firebrand* has since gone to Brittany and the Westcountry a number of times, but he now has four young children, and family commitments take priority.

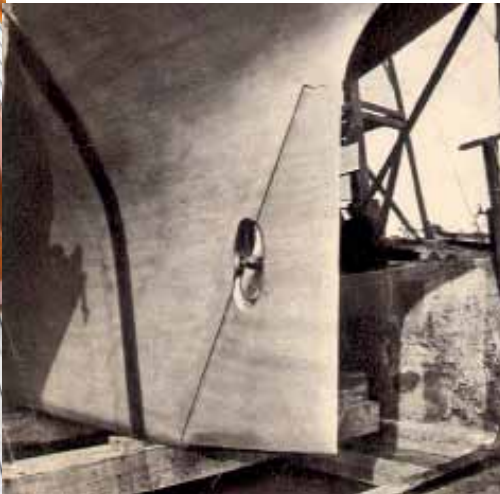
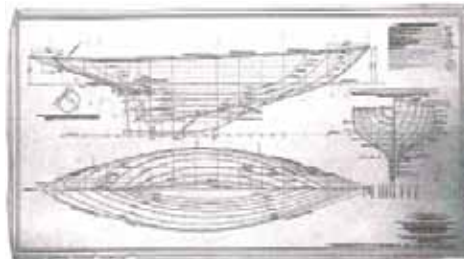
Ed still races her occasionally, doing the Round the Island race every year. She has often won her class, and did so again this year, immediately before the Pendennis Cup. She has also sailed in a few Cowes to Dinard races.

“She is a joy to sail in all conditions,” Ed said. “She is as stiff as a church and goes to weather beautifully and is safe and handy in the worst weather.”

In the summer, she is kept on a mooring on the Beaulieu River 400 yards from Ed’s house. “I can see her on the mooring and make sure she’s still floating!”

“I would hope I never part with her, as she is part of the family and I’d like to pass her on to my children. Someone recently said she is my spiritual home – I wouldn’t go as far as to say that, but I certainly feel very happy on this boat.”

Below: Note the cut-out cockpit aft, where the wheel used to be
Below right: The original rudder was too far forward, making her hard to handle on a run



FIREBRAND

- BUILT
1964
- BUILDER
Clare Lallow
- DESIGNER
Olin Stephens
- LENGTH ON DECK
43ft 3in (13.2m)
- BEAM
11ft 3in (3.4m)
- DRAUGHT
6ft 9in (2.1m)
- DISPLACEMENT
22,400lb (10.2 tonnes)
- SAIL AREA
725sqft (67.4m²)

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Firebrand at the Pendennis Cup

It looked as if *Firebrand* might not make it to Falmouth in time for the start of the Pendennis Cup on Tuesday, 3 July. Just three days before, owner Ed Dubois had sailed her in the Round the Island Race, winning IRC Division 3B, and the boat was still 150 miles away from the start line.

On Monday morning, he sent me a cautious email. “The delivery crew have had a bit of a pounding in near gale-force westerlies since leaving the Solent early yesterday and are now in Brixham, hoping to leave about now and get round Start Point and then arrive Falmouth late tonight/early tomorrow.”

Happily they made it with time to spare, so that by Tuesday morning, the crew had assembled, the racing sails were bent on and we were ready to go. Various members of the “mixed ability” crew would come and go during the week, but two of them were ever-present: former Olympic coach John Boyce and the four-times America’s Cup sailor Adam Ostenfeld.

We were sailing in a class with three other boats for a four-race series, but what our class may have lacked in quantity it made up for in quality, including the S&S yawl *Tomahawk*, the 8-Metre *Pinuccia* and the 1904 Fife Clyde Linear 30 *Mikado*.

Race One

The first race took place in a southwesterly Force 3 to 4, with quite a lot of rain and poor visibility. The role of navigator was pretty crucial in those conditions, and when ours came on deck surrendering to seasickness halfway through the race, I was thrust into the position and quickly had to get to grips with an unfamiliar chart plotter.

We found ourselves trading places with *Tomahawk* throughout the race, as indeed we would throughout the week, with her yawl rig getting the better of *Firebrand* on the reaches, and the advantage going to us on the beats. The first two reaches were too tight for us to fly a spinnaker, as we proved beyond doubt when we tried it on one of them!

On the second beat, after tacking to avoid the gaff schooner *Mariette* as she charged towards us out of the gloom, we had trouble finding the windward mark off Porthallow, as did *Tomahawk*. By the time we spotted it, out of position, it was obvious that we had both over-reached it. *Mikado*, however, perhaps having seen our error, laid it perfectly.

After slipping inside us at the last gybe mark *Tomahawk* crossed the finish line a few seconds in front of us, with *Mikado* third, but on corrected time these positions were reversed. *Pinuccia* had to retire with a rigging problem.

Above: Owner Ed Dubois sitting below, in the largely original interior. Note the easy handholds



EMILY HARRIS



RICHARD LANGDON



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Above, clockwise from top left: *Mikado* races in the same class at the Pendennis Cup; shoreside fun; *Tomahawk* tries to catch us; sketching a sail change on *Mariquita*

Race Two

Wednesday brought a bit more wind, no rain and some sunshine. The course gave us some deeper downwind legs than the previous day, and therefore more opportunities to fly a spinnaker. By now, I had the measure of the plotter, but with much clearer visibility, it wasn't so vital. We led at the first windward mark after *Tomahawk* found less wind on the other side of the beat to us, and we were never headed. This time, however, we finished far enough in front of *Mikado* to win on handicap as well.

"A wonderful day, beautiful weather, Falmouth at its best," enthused Ed after the race. "I'm delighted that I had such a wonderful crew and the boat went well, a credit to everyone concerned but most of all the designer, the recently deceased Olin Stephens, who did a fantastic job."

Race Three

After a lay-day on Thursday, racing resumed on Friday but without Ed who had returned to Hampshire to honour other commitments. John was to helm the last two races and, as he and Adam had recruited some extra crew from the streets of Falmouth the evening before, and the forecast was for light winds, I took the opportunity to spend the day watching the racing from a press boat.

After a short postponement, some wind arrived from the northwest, and racing got under way. Once again, *Firebrand* and *Tomahawk* had a close race on the water with a number of place changes. At one point I noticed that both boats were having trouble finding the Porthallow mark again - this time on

a downwind leg - despite the fact that I had put its actual co-ordinates into the chartplotter! Once again, the finishing order of the first three - *Tomahawk*, *Firebrand* and *Mikado* - was reversed on handicap, with *Pinuccia* in fourth.

Fourth and final

Back aboard for the last race on Saturday, we knew what we had to do. If we won we would have identical results to *Mikado*, but would win the regatta on the "last race" tie-break system; and if we came second, we would have to rely on *Mikado* coming an unlikely fourth.

The conditions were ideal with a steadily building northwesterly breeze - it was a good Force 5 at the finish - and a gradually clearing sky. There was a slightly tense atmosphere on board. Once again we were having a close race on the water with *Tomahawk* and beating *Pinuccia* comfortably, and we were therefore ahead of both of them on corrected time.

At each mark we timed our lead over *Mikado*, so we knew that it was neck-and-neck on handicap all the way until the last - a long beat which we hoped would be to our advantage in the freshening breeze. However, not far from the finish we put in a bad tack - the genoa sheet caught on something and we had to tack back straight away.

Crossing the line, we waited to time *Mikado* in with a sinking feeling we had done enough. We hoped for official confirmation ashore, but results were kept secret until the awards ceremony that night. Our minds were only put at rest when we were duly awarded the Little Dennis Cup in the grounds of Pendennis Castle that evening; we'd won our class. *Nigel Sharp*