

“BROADS-HAVEN” “LADY CLUB”  
(MEN ONLY)

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OCT 5-7th 1945

The men who build and let and service boats for a living seldom get the chance to sail them for pleasure. This is as true on the Norfolk Broads as it is anywhere else. But it seemed a pity to F/Lt. Mackay, a newcomer to Potter Heigham - which, as everyone knows, is one of the chief Broadland yachting centres. Mackay had a notion to put things right.

He was inspired by the fact that Potter Heigham's biggest letting concern, Herbert Woods "Broads-haven" Yard, has a class of boats, hirelings throughout the long and strenuous season, which are not only sister ships, but which have pretension to speed, and undoubted claims to manoeuvrability.

These "perfect Lady" yachts are 28 ft. over all, 9' 10" beam and draw 2' 10". They have short overhangs and a stump bowsprit, as befits a Broads boat designed for hire. They are Bermudian rigged with a moderate sail in mainsail and loose footed jib. They sleep four in comfort.

These boats - eight of them were available out of the fleet of ten - seemed to Mackay to be just the craft in which thirty two men could get a fine week-end's racing and sailing at the fag end of the Season. Herbert Woods himself helped things on to the limit, not only making the boats available without charge other than insurance, but presenting a cup and four money prizes for the principle races. With a lead like that it's not surprising that pretty soon a "Broads-Haven" "Lady" Club was formed, and a programme arranged.

A few amateur helmsmen were invited; but it was mainly a professional party which set off, at 3 p.m., Friday, October 5th, for the first race of the series.

The course was along the River Thurne from Potter Heigham to Thurne Dyke, a matter of just over two miles. The wind was light and fluky, making a run all the way, and without the fair tide the race would have been tedious indeed.

The boats were started in pairs, Nos. 1 and 2, 3 and 4, etc. at five minute intervals; and as so often happens the last boats picked up the only draught of the afternoon and romped home very comfortable winners. No. 8 won and her partner No. 7 was runner up. No. 6 was third. Walter Woods, No. 8's well known professional skipper pocketed the modest sweep money, and the party repaired to the Thurne "Lion Hotel" for the club's inaugural dinner, followed by a sing-song. Quite a few of the men "off the yard" proved they could sing a good song - not all of them about boats! - and the proverbial good time was had by all.

The next day the main race of the series was started at 2.30 p.m. This was a really keen event. With eight boats competing and four prizes to win, everyone had a fifty-fifty chance of being in the money. And nearly every boat spent the morning in having a look at the course, and incidentally training crews, some of whom had never so much as handled a jib sheet before, and quite a few of whom had never sailed in a race. By the afternoon, the tuning-up process was complete, and the eight boats went to the line with only one object in view - the cup.

It was blowing pretty briskly from the North, and although the boats are designed for cruising, not racing, the sailing committee very wisely decided to order a reef. The course was two rounds, of four miles on the River Bure, on either side of Thurne Mouth. Here the river bends enough to give you a test on every point of sailing and is broad enough to afford plenty of room for a start. There are no trees to cause a fluky wind, and the wild green-brown marsh on either side of the river and the vast, windy sky overhead, make this a beautiful place as well as an ideal racing course.

The race itself was full of incident. There was a hectic few moments round the first buoy which had to be turned sharply, after a run for a beat back up the river, and some of the boats which had started badly seized the opportunity to pick up a few places. After that, several terrific duels were fought out, especially on the beat, where coming to grips with your opponent meant not only making your boat go fast through his dirty wind, but judging the distance from the bank to a matter of inches. The winner, No. 7 steered by Fred Sewell, an amateur, who made the best start, sailed in copy-book style, and got away with the cup by over a quarter of a mile.

It was really a stirring sight to see these big boats cracking on as hard as men could drive them, heeling with decks well under, and flinging about in close tacks up the river as they fought for position. Remember, too, that every boat was at the end of a hard season of being let to holiday-makers who are scarcely expected to observe all the niceties of sparing sails and gear the worst that variable weather and winds can do. Even then, and in that wind, there was only one casualty. Walter Woods, steering Friday's winner, No. 8, was forced to retire with his jib halyard carried away.

For the rest of the field, John Arrow's No. 4, which started last finished second, notching another success for the amateurs; and she was closely followed by No.6, steered by George Gibbs, a professional. Bill Fowler, NO. 1, took the fourth prize.

Once more the party met at the Thurne "Lion", where a most convivial evening was spent. On this occasion, though, each boat had to feed itself; in fact the provisioning of the boats was quite a test of organisation by the various crews, who had to plan their grub beforehand and save their rations for this occasion.

On Sunday morning, the wind had fallen light again, and a slightly shorter course was ordered. George Gibbs claimed his No. 6 was pretty good in light airs, and he proved it conclusively by getting home ahead of the rest of the fleet. Walter Woods, his jib halyard set up again was second, and John Arrow in No. 4, fought off a series of fierce challenges from Fowler's No. 1 to retain third place.

That was the end of three days rattling good sport. Everybody had got to know everybody else; each ship was a happy ship; and all hands were saying that if next years "do" was anything like so successful, they'd be satisfied.

As the boats were towed home - for the wind had fallen away to nothing - sails were being taken off for the last time. In a week or two the "Perfect Ladies" will be out of the water till next spring. And after yet another gruelling season, just about this time next year, they'll be manned again for a second instalment of this inaugural series of races for "The Cup".