**JUNK YACHT “BOLEH”**

**Registered National Historic Ship No 2281** 

**Boleh – the ‘can do’ story.** You wouldn’t do it today. In fact, however determined, you couldn’t do it today.

It was different in 1947 when Commander Robin Kilroy found himself stationed in Singapore. The Second World War was over, the Japanese defeated and the prospect of the Royal Navy having to go in to action was zero. Consequently, the posting turned out to be a bit of a doddle. It allowed the young naval Commander time to indulge in nautical fantasies. With a love of the sea dating from childhood he watched the local junks and small craft plying back and forth. He started to design a yacht, first in his head, then sketches and plans on paper, and finally a scale model materialised. It was strongly influenced by local rigs and hull shapes.

The model was eventually fit to put on the water and with a fellow Naval Officer it was tested by sailing back and forth at knee height alongside the beach. Modifications were made until it performed in a seaworthy fashion. By then ambitions had grown and Robin Kilroy had located local boat builders with seemingly little to do. He worked out timber quantities, researched materials and investigated costs. By drawing on all his savings he reckoned it might just about be possible.

Commander Kilroy decided to call his boat **Boleh**, meaning **‘can-do’** in Malay, and over the next couple of years the yacht gradually took shape. The frames and planking were made from Chengal, a dense local hardwood. The sailing rig consisted of a quadruped mast with tripart mainsail and wishbone booms, together with foresails and boomed out sails for downwind. The petrol engine driven prop could be raised and lowered from the stern. From the start, the boat was a highly distinctive blend of the East and West nautical traditions. It was individual and unique but still very practical and aesthetically pleasing.

In 1950 the boat was complete and Commander Kilroy with three naval colleagues came to the end of their postings. Rather than taking the normal merchant ship to the UK they immediately set sail in **Boleh**, together with Chang, the Chinese cook – the only person short enough to fit in the galley! The voyage took them via Ceylon, the Seychelles and Mauritius, around the Cape of Good Hope and northward up the coast of Africa, eventually to the home port of Salcombe in Devon.

Commander Kilroy had made extensive notes and sketches on the voyage and very soon the book titled **“Boleh”** was published by Hodder and Stoughton recounting the complete story. Back in England, **Boleh** was used for family sailing, following which she was chartered to the Sea Cadets in the South West and to the Island Cruising Club in Salcombe. Later she was lent to the Royal Engineers at Dover for sail training before passing in to new ownership.

Her subsequent history is not fully documented but in the late 1970’s she ended up in Rye Harbour and whilst there suffered a serious fire. Fortunately, she had caught the eye of a local man, Roger Angel, who purchased the burnt-out hulk from the insurers and slowly set to work on restoration. After a number of years, **Boleh** was relaunched and many years of sailing were enjoyed. She ended up in Palma, Majorca, and was eventually advertised for sale. The advert was spotted by George and Henry Middleton, nephews of Robin Kilroy, who had sailed on **Boleh** in their youth.

It was now 2008 and all these years later they acquired their uncle’s old boat and had her brought back to the UK. This was the start of a new inspirational chapter in the **‘can-do’** story – the major restoration back to sailing condition. In 2009 the Boleh Trust was formed as a charity to safeguard **Boleh’s** future. A Heritage Lottery Fund grant and numerous donations enabled the Trust to set up an Apprentice School and complete her restoration as near as possible to Commander Kilroy’s original design.

Overcoming a number of setbacks on the way, **Boleh** was finally returned to the water in 2015 and is now, once again, fully operational as a historic sailing vessel and ready to pass on the **‘can-do’** message.

**What remains of the 1950’s Boleh?** After more than 60 years, how much of the **Boleh** you see around you was there when Robin Kilroy sailed her? Age and the 1978 arson attack have taken their toll but a surprising amount of the original Chengal timber and fittings remain. The original areas are:

* **Design**: externally, above and below the waterline, the look of Boleh, including her rig, is virtually unchanged; the exception is the MCA requirement to have only a single access hatch from the cockpit. Internally, the fundamentals of the 1949 design have been retained while incorporating 21st century systems which are largely hidden. The original Galley design, however, with its gimballed stove, table and bicycle seat for the cook, did not meet modern Health & Safety criteria, nor did the Stuart Turner engine and belt system in the after cabin powering the inboard/outboard stern drive!
* **Hull**: the Chengal timbers and frames forward of the mast survived the 1978 fire as did everything below the waterline. Aft of the mast, about 25% of the hull timbers above the waterline are original; the lost Chengal timbers and frames have been replaced with Greenheart (a timber of similar density). The 4.5-ton lead keel and bronze keel bolts are original.
* **Deck fittings**: the Japanese fighter windscreens on the foredeck and several of the bronze fittings and winches are original.
* **Rudder**: the rudder, rudder stock and lower fittings are original.
* **Mast and fittings**: the original Douglas Fir mast had to be condemned but the Columbian Pine spars which make up today’s quadruped mast and sliding yard create an exact replica of Robin Kilroy’s design. The darker areas of wood at the crosstrees are original as are the bronze mast tabernacles. The sails, though in modern materials, replicate the originals.
* **Boleh model, etc**: the original model, plans, drawings, and certain fittings are held in the Boleh archive. The website [www.bolehproject.com](http://www.bolehproject.com) contains a large amount of original material in digital form.

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