

The Wise Man of the West - Alec Stone

by Dougal Henshall 5 Mar 12:00 GMT



Father and son Jim and Alec Stone sailing a Yawl together at Salcombe © Jessica Barker, Stone Family Archive

One only has to look at the latest developments in the fleet of America's Cup yachts (do they qualify as yachts?) or the choice of equipment for the Olympic Regatta (not a lot of yacht content there either) to see just how far and how fast the sport of sailing has changed since that golden era in the late 1950s through to the 1970s. It has only been 75 years or so, but in that time, just three generations, dinghies have gone from incremental, evolutionary developments of hull shapes that were around 100 years ago, to the fully radical, revolutionary but stunning boats we have today.

It is little wonder that the names of the great architects of the sport 'as was'... Fox, Holt, Proctor and others are now increasingly just entries in the history books. Sadly, as sailing rushes forward at an ever increasing speed (see [The Greed for Speed](#)) it is leaving behind those who laid the foundations: an incredible group of sailors who were out there finding what was possible and all too often, what was impossible.

Today, there are few remaining links to that golden past, with the news last week that yet another of our first generation 'greats' has left us. The name of Alec Stone is hardly an oft featured favourite, yet he should not be forgotten as he was one of the great links to an era of sailing and boatbuilding that is now long past.

It is fair to say that Alec enjoyed a long life, well into his mid-90s, but his passing in early February means that sailing hasn't just lost an essential link to the past, but is all the less colour-filled as Alec was certainly one of those larger than life characters. In fact, larger than life was a good

description for Alec as he was stockily built, but like most people who are involved in daily manual work, his burliness camouflaged both strength and endurance. The manual work went back to his early days as Alec grew up with the sea and boatbuilding in his very DNA.

To hear Alec talk you knew at once that his background was not just boats and boatbuilding, but the South West, with the rich 'burr' in the voice being a dead giveaway. It is no surprise then to find that Alec had been born in East Portlemouth, on the shore of the Salcombe Estuary, in 1927. In dinghy sailing terms that year would be highly significant, with Uffa Fox, Avenger and the new Prince of Wales Cup dominating the International 14 class, which itself was the driving force in the nascent dinghy racing scene.

Alec's father, Jim Stone, was a well know Salcombe boatman and boatbuilder, with the family boat being 'Blackbird', a 14ft gaff rigged early version of the Salcombe Yawl which was moored close by the house. As a lad Alec taught himself the rudimentary skills of tacking by sheering back and forth whilst still on the mooring, before the fateful day when he released the boat and sailed on up through the estuary.

Saying that it could have been fateful was by no means an exaggeration as Blackbird didn't possess any reserve buoyancy and Alec couldn't swim, a factor that would become important to him later in life. Just how important this would be would become clear when Alec and crew Pete Thorning were sailing at a very windy Dartmouth Regatta. Like so many of the narrow estuaries, the River Dart has a bar that is dangerous at certain stages of the tide and as the pair sailed back in, they were caught by a wave and capsized.

Thankfully Peter was able to save the day - and Alec - but the closeness of the call would see Alec taking swimming lessons at his local pool! Growing up during the wartime years Alec went to work in one of the boatyards in Salcombe where he would master the art of building strong but beautiful boats in wood. The post-war years would see him still sailing Yawls, often with Kath, his favourite crew, who he would go on to marry in 1948.

By now he was an almost instinctive sailor in the tricky wind and tide conditions that make Salcombe such a testing venue to mere mortal sailors, but his growing success would bring a focus down on the boat he was sailing, prompting him to build himself another Yawl that would tick all the boxes and bring him even more wins.

Sometimes our future direction can be determined just by being in the right place at the right time, which would happen to Alec when Jack Holt brought some early Solos down to Salcombe to see how they managed the conditions there. Jack was still closely associated with the Merlin Rockets and would have heard about Salcombe, given the growing numbers of boats from the class that would head south-west for the famed Town Regatta. Quick to tack and with an advantageous sail area to wetted surface area ratio, the Solo was perfect for not only Salcombe but for Alec.

Not only was he sailing in the class, he was soon becoming established as a highly regarded builder. One top Solo sailor from these early days paid tribute to his Stone-built boats, telling how they were beautifully built, down to weight and always "felt nice to sail".

Alec's prowess in one of his own Solos would soon become legendary as he won successive National Championships, though he remained a wonderfully generous character ashore, helped by a plentiful supply of wonderful sayings, along the lines of "I sailed past him like he was moored up." Some of his other comments related to his inability to swim, relevant in the Solo, a boat that



When not in the front of a Salcombe Yawl, Kath would be there ashore and supporting Alec with his sailing, no matter the class. As his reputation grew, so did Kath's presence as the 'first lady' within the Solo fleet! - photo © Jessica Barker, Stone Family Archive

in strong winds and big seas can be a handful even for the best of sailors. At one event where the winds blew every day and the seas were huge, Alec admitted in the dinghy park that he was "bloody terrified".

Another good description of Alec was that he was a 'no frills' racer and although he was quick, canny and tactically astute, he still had time to see what his competitors were doing. He was representing the Solos at a light airs Endeavour Trophy weekend up at Burnham-on-Crouch, when his attention was drawn by crew Richard Lovett to a boat that, to quote Alec, was doing "posey roll tacks". After watching for a while he told Richard not to worry as "they're not going any faster than us, although it does look good."

By now Alec had recorded eight Solo National Championship wins, to which he added the Solo Worlds, whilst still remaining essentially the same, jovial west-country 'lad', complete with an irrepressible naughty grin. Along the way he had also collected a special Mini Cooper that had been 'hotted up' at a local performance car tuner's workshop.

One performance enhancing change had been to take all the baffles out from the exhaust, making the car the loudest Mini in the area. You could be on the town side of the estuary, yet still hear Alec fire his car up across the water at East Portlemouth, before following his progress up



Alec would put his well-practised boat building skills to good effect by building Solos that were strong, light, fast and that 'felt just right' for the sailors. Here he is being helped by his father as they complete another Solo hull - photo © Jessica Barker, Stone Family Archive

the hill, and if the conditions were right, you could hear him changing back down as he left the village!

The Mini Cooper was an important part of the Alec Stone story as by now he had branched out from just being a Yawl and Solo sailor to race in the super-competitive National 12 fleet, where he enjoyed further successes and came close to winning the 'big' one when he finished second in the Burton Cup. This would bring him in yet more orders, which at its peak saw his workshop turning a beautiful N12 out on a monthly basis (in the same period Solos were being completed at the rate of more than one a week!).

Out afloat though Alec was happier in the bigger dinghies, mainly because he was physically far from being an athletic 'racing snake' of a helm. This was just his natural build. He wasn't a big drinker but loved a couple of pints of scrumpy; if he had more than that he could certainly be a 'live wire'. His friends in the Solo fleet responded in kind. When at a Hayling Championship sailmaker Mike Mountfield and a handful of other like-minded souls lifted Alec's Solo right up onto the roof of the Race Box before decorating it overall with toilet paper.

The following morning Alec was busy looking for his boat, fearing it had been stolen, when



A west country sailor, in a west country boat winning at a west country venue, Alec in yet another iconic Solo, 'Whitehall' (if you can't make the connection between the sail number and the boat name then Google will get you there!) - photo © Jessica Barker, Stone Family Archive

someone told him to look upwards. His laconic response was pure Alec Stone: "How the bloody hell did that get up there?"

With success in the Solo and National 12 Alec next looked to other classes that he could not only build but promote through wins out afloat. He would put some time in with the Albacore, but the Wayfarer would see him mount a full blown challenge that would bring him yet another National Championship. Through his connections with Jack Holt, he would also be impressed with the Hornet, which at the time boasted strong fleets at Salcombe and other top west country clubs.

Like so many of his generation, having built an enviable reputation at a top domestic helm, Alec would then take the opportunity to try his hand at not just the international scene, but would explore the possibility of an Olympic campaign.

At Thorpe Bay he would attend one of the 'Finn-Finder' events, set up to search for new and exciting talent, but it would be a wild and windy weekend and one that he didn't enjoy. He did though give the Finn a second chance at another event in Cowes, where he would join up with the irrepressible Uffa Fox. The two men, both wonderful characters would enjoy evenings of sailing talk, aided by liquid refreshment at Uffa's waterfront house, until the evening they had to find another location as Prince Phillip was 'at home' that night!

With Alec being so in tune with events down in the South West, it was hardly a surprise when he put in quite a determined period of sailing in another class that was so very strong in the area, the



Alec's onshore persona continued alongside his ebullient character afloat, with his beloved Mini Cooper (not to mention how he drove it) just an extension of how he approached life! - photo © Jessica Barker, Stone Family Archive

Osprey. Having mastered the art of making a long, lean performance boat fly, it was not that big a step for Alec to return to the Olympic scene with a Flying Dutchman and although he enjoyed the boat his attentions were being captured by yet another of the Olympic fleet.

The Soling would become a boat that he enjoyed (possibly because of the exuberant three man crew that he sailed with) and they were soon showing sufficient potential to do some events abroad, with Kiel Week high on the list. The problem was, Alec only had the Mini Cooper, but that had a tow-bar so it was just a case of hooking up and going. The front wheels on the Mini tended to lift a bit as you dropped the trailer onto the ball hitch, but somehow they made it work. For Kiel, the plan was that the Royal Navy would ship the UK boats over on an assault ship, then take them ashore in a landing craft.

The welcoming Germans on the slipway were amazed when the ramp was lowered and first off was Alec, in his Mini Cooper, towing a Soling.

Alec's cheerful bonhomie would make him popular with the officers on HMS Fearless, who then found that they could make life easier for their guest. He was living on board for the event anyway, so why bother to go ashore, when he really wanted to be back on the Fearless. The solution was simple! After sailing each day Alec would head back to the Fearless, who would drop her aft ramp and Alec's boat would be brought into the well.

The following morning this would be flooded back down and off he would sail to the start area. Not so impressed were the Race Organisers, who struggled to reconcile the boats they had on



As well as being a virtual home to classes such as the Solo, Hornet and Merlin Rocket, Salcombe was also a hotbed of N12 racing, with Alec Stone again very much to the fore! - photo © Jessica Barker, Stone Family Archive

the pontoons in the Olympic Centre and the number of starters out afloat. In the end a 'wanted' poster appeared outside the Regatta Office, but Alec, his Soling (and his Mini) would be long gone.

Returning to his beloved Salcombe, Alec would continue his involvement with the Yawls, which would leave us with one of those iconic photos which showed Alec crewing for his father Jim in that original family boat, Y14 Blackbird. Alec would also retain his enduring association with the Solos, with this being recognised back in 2016 when he was the guest of honour at a dinner organized by the class.

As was said back in the introduction to this obituary, small boat racing has changed so much, yet incredibly Salcombe has remained a beacon of consistency, with the Harbour and estuary still home to fleets of Merlins, Solos and Yawls. In his retirement and later years Alec would still enjoy following the regular weekend racing from his vantage point at East Portlemouth, no doubt pointing out the ease with which the testing conditions can consign the best of sailors to that fate of being on the wrong side of the harbour.

Like all big characters, time would do little to dampen down the twinkle in Alec's eye and though few could catch him when out afloat neither he nor his wife Kath could outrun the encroaching issues of the years. Alec would lose Kath in the autumn of 2021 with Alec following her in February of this year, just three months short of his 96th birthday.

In other circumstances it would be a trite comment to say on the occasion of his passing that "they don't make them like Alec any more," but in this case it is all too true. From that old fashioned, traditional workshop, which could often be ankle deep in wood shavings and redolent



The irrepresible Alec showing how to get afloat for a race at Salcombe yet starting with dry feet! Simple... get someone to pull the boat out afloat for you! - photo © Jessica Barker, Stone Family Archive

with the smells of newly sawn wood and varnish, to that cheerful and ego-free approach to competition afloat, Alec was so very much a product of his time.

There are so very few links now left holding, that take us back to that golden era in our sport, but with Alec being one of the cornerstones of that time, it is only right and proper that we celebrate him today, truly, a 'Wise Man of the West'.



Alec and crew Richard Lovett, to leeward, buddy tuning with another FD. This was yet another boat that would appear at open meetings behind the Mini Cooper! - photo © Jessica Barker, Stone Family Archive



Three sailing legends (four if you include the location): Jim Stone, his son Alec, the Yawl Blackbird... all of course at - Salcombe! - photo © Salcombe Yawl Fleet



A sailing icon at an iconic location for sailing, the famed 'Watchtower' which marks one end of the Salcombe Yacht Club start and finish line. The occasion was the 50th Anniversary of the Yawls, so it was only fitting that would be on duty with the bell, who signal can be a winning success, or more likely, a place in the fleet somewhere - photo © Adrian Giffin



As the saying goes, you can tell the Champions by their score cards, or in this case, by their shirts! The best Solo fleet in the world may be subjective, but that run of victories is unquestionable - Alec Stone - photo © Mike Porter

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