

BREWPOINT

SAILING BREW

Brewer Charles Wells fell under the sea's spell when he shipped out to India aged 14. In later life, he and son Richard would have adventures on yachts of their own

WORDS **MIKE WELLS**

Bedford boy Charles Wells was not in line to inherit the family furniture business: he had an older brother. So in 1856, a few weeks after his 14th birthday, he shipped as midshipman in the Blackwall Frigate *Devonshire*, one of Money Wigram & Low's elite liners, on a round trip to India which seems to have taken 23 months.

Over the next 13 years he sailed to Melbourne and back 15 times in the Blackwallers, usually the *Kent*, built at Blackwall Yard in 1853, but also aboard *True Briton* and *Sussex*. In 1862 Wells had his second mate's ticket, and by 1868 he was an extra master, passed in Steam. Dr Grimbly, the Banbury surgeon, declared his daughter Josephine would not be marrying a sailor, so in 1872 Charles returned from Melbourne for the final time and they were married.

Famously, the Blackwallers made fast passages, shipping emigrants out and gold home: perhaps first officer Wells had done a little investing himself? *The Times* of 13 October 1862 had reported *Kent* arriving off Start Point with 400 bales of wool, 100 tons of copper,

and among other freight "78,191oz [2.2 tonnes] of gold in bars, valued at £312,000, besides a quantity (unknown) in the hands of her 174 passengers". Twenty eight tons of sperm oil had been jettisoned to calm the sea during two hurricanes she'd encountered. In 1875 Wells bought a small Bedford brewery and set about expanding it. A believer in vertical integration, Wells bought every local brewery and pub that he could. It helped that he was no snob, a good mixer who got on with everyone, which locals attributed to his years at sea. But he did run a tight ship at his brewery; he disliked debt and paid back his start-up loans as fast as he could.

Twenty-five years later Wells bought the 43ft (13.1m) gaff cutter *Eudora*, 18 tons TM and with a centreboard, built by Camper & Nicholsons in 1896 for Fred Hewett, to a design by Charles E Nicholson. No drawings survive but a classic Debenham of Ryde photo shows her with all five sails drawing in the Solent. Wells's sons brought their friends to sail, and he would take out his old skipper from the *Kent*, Captain Dawes, whose salty-dog yarns of the Melbourne run captivated young Richard.

Above left: An advert for Charles Wells Special IPA

Above right: Painting of Charles Wells with *Kent* in the background



Main: Eudora in the Solent

Above: Charles Wells on Eudora with sons Richard (r) and Hayward (2nd left) and friends



FROM BASIL LUBBOCK "THE BLACKWALL FRIGATES" 1922



"KENT" AMONGST THE ICE IN 1861.

From a Painting by Captain Clayton.



NMM VIA ANCESTRY.COM

WELLS ARCHIVE



DUVER, MR. BUCKLE, SARAH, DICK, GEORGE, & MARY.



PETER MILBURN

The brewer who'd rounded Cape Horn 15 times refused to instal an engine to help him get him around the Solent, which wasn't very popular with his crew when the wind dropped. Wells died in 1914 and *Eudora* was sold. Research by Camper & Nicholson archivist Jeremy Lines shows her registered in Benodet, Brittany thereafter: from 1914 as *St Cadoc IV*, in 1930 as *L'Oiseau Bleu* and from 1932 onwards as *Falk*. M Griset was *Falk*'s owner from 1947-54, but her subsequent fate is unknown.

WINDFLOWER

Charles's son Richard – later Sir Richard Wells Bt, for 23 years Bedford's MP and a great oarsman – had loved sailing with his father and in 1936 he bought the EP Hart-designed 45ft (13.7m) gaff yawl *Windflower* from Colonel Buckle. She was faithfully cared for by 'Skipper' Frank Mussett, a West Mersea oysterman, and she survived World War Two intact despite bomb damage to the yacht in the next mud berth.

The two men were to have an unlikely bond: Singapore. Major Tom Wells was killed defending the island in 1942, the third of Sir Richard's sons to die in action, while Skipper's gunner son Elgar Mussett got away to Sumatra but was captured there by the Japanese. Elgar managed to survive forced labour on the Burma Railway and returned home safely. In 1945 the family found Skipper had *Windflower* all ready to sail again, gleaming with new paint and varnish, and Lady

Clockwise from top left: The Blackwaller *Kent* among the ice in 1861; Charles Wells's Master certificate; Illustration of Lady Wells falling in as *Windflower* runs aground 1953; *Windflower* in 1936, pros and amateurs. Skipper Mussett standing rear, with Wells family and the son of previous owner Colonel Buckle

Wells wrote to the family that she'd found in the lockers "all sorts of sorts of treasures" after the six-year layup, "including four pairs of perfectly good gym shoes! They are priceless, being quite unobtainable now."

Windflower drew only 5ft (1.5m), measured 33ft (10m) on the waterline with just over 12ft (3.6m) beam, and felt roomy thanks to her 6ft 2in (1.9m) headroom below decks. The hard chine meant she worked well to windward. Oddly there was no companion ladder from the cockpit: the stateroom's large handbasin meant the saloon had to be accessed by a vertical ladder on the port side amidships – potentially wet on starboard tack and decidedly acrobatic on port tack, surely not as originally designed.

Unusually for a yacht of this size she had tiller steering, and the saloon's only communication with the fo'c's'le was a little serving hatch from which Skipper passed out bowls of burgoo. Her pretty sheer, counter stern and leg-of-mutton mizzen can be seen sailing downriver in one of the remarkable colour movies from the late 1930s on the BFI's website, shot by the Harrison family who likewise kept their yacht *Elver* at West Mersea.

Windflower has a page in Maurice Griffiths' 1937 classic *Little Ships and Shoal Waters*, and with her shallow draught was offered for the Dunkirk evacuation, but declined as too slow. Sir Richard's children and grandchildren loved *Windflower* too, and his son-in-law,



Above: 1954 with Sir Richard and Lady Wells, and Skipper Frank Mussett with pipe

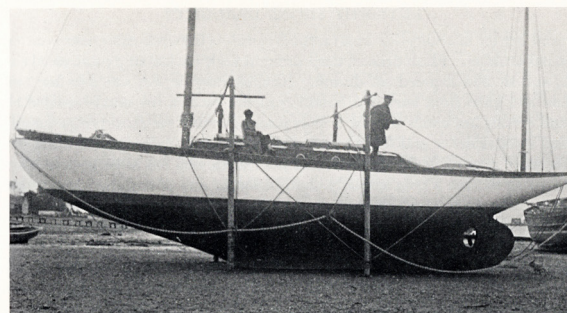
Left: *Windflower* in the 1930s showing the good headroom in the saloon

Right: *Windflower*, 1930s



GEORGE, TITTA, DICK & MART, BELOW





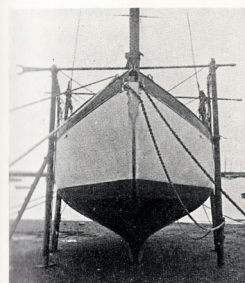
Windflower has a long leading edge despite her shoal draught

WINDFLOWER, 21 TONS

WHAT can be done on a limited draught is shown by these photographs of a very handsome 45-ft. keel yawl which was built at Emsworth, Hampshire, in 1928. Designed by E. P. Hart, *Windflower* has the long forefoot with the slight knuckle in the profile at the forward end of the keel associated with this designer (cf. *Har Jeff*) and although this ship is 33 ft. WL and 12-2-ft. beam, her draught is only 5 ft. Rigged as a gaff yawl, her working sail area is 1,055 sq. ft. Unfortunately her plans were destroyed some years ago in a fire and cannot be reproduced here.

Although to eyes accustomed to deep yachts her underwater body may appear inadequate for windward work and deep sea cruising, she has proved herself a fine, able craft, and her former owner, Colonel Buckle, writes:

"In seven years of cruising I found *Windflower* absolutely perfect on every point of sailing. She stood up to her canvas extremely well and sailed at a moderate angle of heel. She is a good sea boat, dry and buoyant and carries her way well through the short seas on the East Coast. In my opinion she is a magnificent example of what we East Coast men know full well, our smacks are fine boats on about 4 ft. 6 in. draught. *Windflower* exemplifies very well the argument one frequently sees in print, that a good designer can produce a light draught hull much more suitable for yachting. If I am ever to have another ship, I could think of nothing better than to go to Hart and ask him to design another *Windflower*. Her draught is not an inch over 5 ft. at the deepest, but she was designed so that her inside lead could be added to the keel making the draught 6 ft. if it was found she wanted it. She certainly doesn't want it for cruising purposes and although I had it in mind to make the alteration, I became convinced that I should lose more than I gained by so doing. What always struck me as the really clever part of *Windflower's* design, apart from her beautiful lines, was that without any excessive freeboard she had 6 ft. 2 in. of headroom everywhere and gave the impression inside of a deep ship."



Firm bilges make up for a shallow keel

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the destroyer captain Cdr Peter Milburn, drew cartoons in the yacht's visitors' book, which survives though wrinkled and salt-stained. Among the signatures are Sir Richard and Lady Wells's great friends Arthur and Evgenia Ransome. They first met when *Windflower* anchored for the night in the same Essex creek as the Ransomes, and was able to help with fresh milk for Arthur's ulcer. Thereafter he sent "the Windflowers" every new book in his Swallows and Amazons series when it was published, to the family's delight.

Skipper was steady and unflappable as well as a non-swimmer, so when *Windflower* ran aground outside Heybridge Basin and Lady Wells fell in, he just drew on his pipe and declared "Thar she gool!". Fortunately the river was shallow; and one of Peter Milburn's cartoons records the moment. Another shows Sir Richard trudging ashore with his trousers rolled up while his grandson Barnaby minds the tender.

In 1948 Charles's grandson Oliver flew vital supplies on the Berlin Airlift for several months, landing his Sunderland flying boat on the Havel See. Flying boats were essential because only they had the corrosion-proofing needed to carry salt to the blockaded city. When off-duty, his squadron sailed confiscated Nazi yachts, something much encouraged by RAF Coastal Command because with its huge fin the Sunderland sailed rather than flew the moment it put down, and a captain who wasn't a yachtsman could quickly get into trouble: Oliver's early experience on *Windflower* was useful. While at school, his grandson James was to crew

Top left: Aboard *Windflower*, 1937. Oliver, Dorothy, George and Mary Wells, with bathers drying in the rigging

Above left: Tangvald's arrival in *Windflower* in 1958 at San Diego, California

Above right: *Windflower*, p5 of Maurice Griffiths *Little Ships and Shoal Waters* (1937)

square-riggers with the Tall Ships Youth Trust, the mid-Atlantic 3am call to man the yards and take in sail giving him an idea of life in the old *Kent*, albeit with floodlights to help.

WINDFLOWER GOES OVERSEAS

On Sir Richard's death in 1956, *Windflower* was sold to the Norwegian solo yachtsman Peter Tangvald, who set off from the Canaries on 20 November, 1957 for the first singlehanded east-west transatlantic race – prize, one Dollar – against Edward Allcard in *Wanderer*. They had agreed that engines were allowed, but *Windflower's* packed up, and Tangvald lost the Dollar by two days. He arrived with *Windflower* in California in December 1958, and reportedly sold her the following year. Her fate thereafter is unknown. Tangvald had a small speaking part in the Howard/Brando movie *Mutiny on the Bounty* while living in Tahiti, and was lost with his seven-year-old daughter after hitting a reef off Bonaire in 1991.

The Wells family are still brewing in Bedford, and at Brewpoint, their new state-of-the-art brewery, they have hung the Ship Inn of Bedford's original sign. Naturally it depicts the *Kent*, which Basil Lubbock's 1922 book on the Blackwall Frigates – with its charming dedication to "The Blackwall Midshipmite" – records was then still afloat as a hulk on the USA's West Coast.



Readers with information on either of the family's missing yachts are invited to visit the brewery and claim a free pint.