



RICHARD HILL

# Slippers, Shallops and Little Ships

Richard Hill visits the 20th Thames Traditional Boat Rally

WHEN the editor asked me to attend the 20th Thames Traditional Boat Rally at Henley, I jumped at the chance. "Slippers", he said, "I want slippers." It took me a while to work out whether the man had finally flipped and was sending me to Henley to buy him a pair of slippers, or whether there might be more to this assignment.

It was a beautiful day, it gave me the impression of always being a beautiful day in Henley. The first thing I needed to know was what constituted a traditional boat? It must be built of timber, or riveted steel (not welded) or canvas. Plywood boats also qualify provided the hull is planked clinker (overlapping



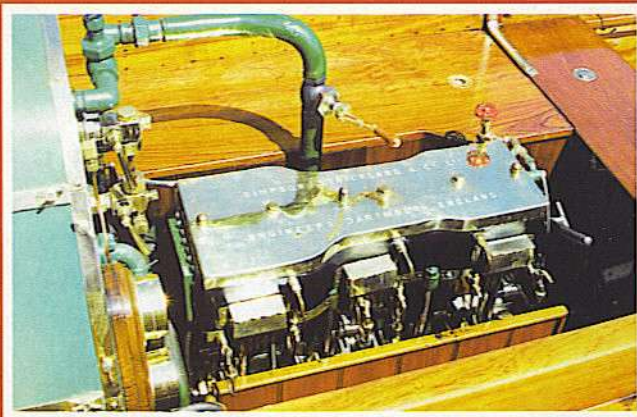
*Top: Slipper launches galore on the river bank at Henley. Above: Grace - E, a 1994 replica cabin launch built and shown by Peter Freebody.*

planks). There were hundreds such boats there, skiffs, gigs, punts, launches and a type of craft traditionally linked with the Thames, 'slipper' stern launches. At last I knew what the editor wanted of me.

Slipper stern launches have a unique characteristic, their sloping stern. Andrews of Bourne End were the pioneers of such craft; their trade name 'Greyhound' has been synonymous with them since 1912. The rally has a trophy 'The Andrews' awarded only to Andrews slipper stern launches, and this year was won by a 1937 slipper, the 'Baby Greyhound'. The unique style is enhanced at speed, up to 12 miles per hour, without a breaking wash.

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## ◆◆◆ TRADITIONAL BOATS



*Superbly restored and maintained, this Simpson & Strickland engine was originally built in Dartmouth.*

The highlight of the first day was the launching of *Royal Thamesis*, a replica of the 1689 Queens Shallop. The original shallop, now held in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, was last seen in Henley when it carried King George V and Queen Mary to the 1912 regatta.

One group of boats drew great interest, The Association of Dunkirk Little Ships including the 1937 motor torpedo boat MTB102, which was the Admiral's flagship at the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940. During her WWII service she also carried Winston Churchill and General Eisenhower to inspect the D-Day invasion fleet. Until 1977 she was used as a motor cruiser before being restored to her wartime appearance for the film *The Eagle Has Landed* in which she played a German U-Boat. President of the association is the television presenter and commentator Raymond Baxter. "The Association of Dunkirk Little Ships is the most exclusive yacht club in the world," he told me,

"which anyone can join provided they own a boat which is proven to have participated in 'Operation Dynamo', the Dunkirk evacuation."

Raymond Baxter, a WW II Spitfire pilot, had his own boat, *L'orage*, on display and he explained its and the other boats engagement at Dunkirk: "The role of the little ships, like my little 30 footer, was to ferry, from the beach, to the bigger ships lying offshore. They were all shallow draft boats, and would go in to 'touch' by the bar, put out a kedge anchor and then kedge off as the soldiers came aboard out of the sea. In just 9 days, 338 thousand soldiers were rescued from certain death or captivity."

As the sun began going down, a quiet calm came over the site as we patiently awaited the illuminated boat parade. A paddle steamer *The New Orleans* passed by which reminded me of an American who had compared the Thames disparagingly with the Mississippi in the Daily Mail in 1943, to which the liberal politician John Burns had replied "The Thames is liquid



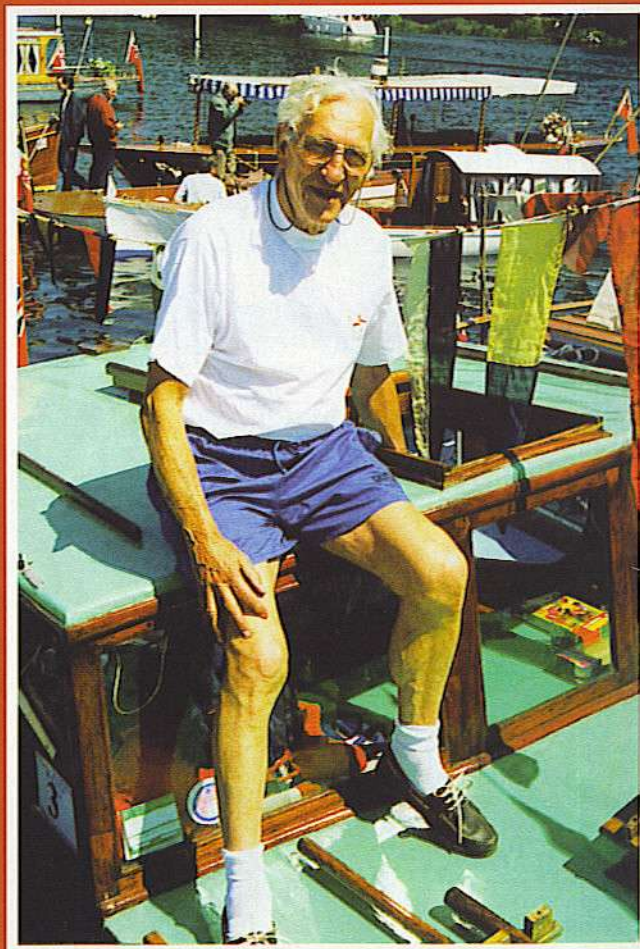
*The steam launch Hussar circa 1900 and shown by C. Henwood.*



*The Royal Thamesis, a replica of the Queen's Shallop was launched for the first time at the Rally.*

history". An American I met at Henley that day, Carol Antos, described the event as "graceful, more peaceful, evocative of a different quiet life." And so it was. I came away feeling the world a better place for the day I'd spent at Henley. The words of Kenneth Grahame, who relied so much on this stretch of the river for inspiration, came to mind: "There is nothing - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats." ↓

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*Raymond Baxter aboard his Dunkirk Little Ship, L'orage.*