

William Crealock

1920-2009



Author, lecturer and one of the world's most experienced and respected designers of offshore sailing yachts.

Profile by Rod Kulbach

W.I.B. Crealock: Designer And Gentleman A quiet, distinguished man who speaks the Queen's English, Bill Crealock does not give the impression of one who shared a hot dog with Jane Russell or taught Rock Hudson how to sail. When teased about his wild Hollywood days, a twinkle comes to his eye as he denies any impropriety, and his dry wit makes light of the circuitous road leading from Scotland's Glasgow University to a celebrated design business in California.

Having grown up sailing "open boats in open waters round the British Isles," young Bill wanted to study small-boat design at university. But because Glasgow was one of the world's shipbuilding centers, his choice was limited to naval architecture on a scale larger than he would have preferred. Still, it was good training. "They used the sandwich system," he says of Glasgow's curriculum. "Winters were spent at the university and summers at the design office in a shipyard. Also, some time had to be spent in the trades-as a plater, carpenter or loftsmen. It was a very good mix of the practical and theoretical, and I still believe strongly in the apprenticeship system."

Before long he discovered a college in Glasgow that offered evening yacht-design classes. He then designed for a few years at a yard building small commercial craft.

In 1952, perhaps restless and itching to see the world, he answered an ad in the paper calling for members to join "an expedition planning for a voyage to Australia via Madeira." Although that particular plan fell through, he made new friends in the process. Soon four young men pooled their meager funds, bought the ancient cutter "Content" and set out "to study the behavior of boats at sea." Crealock described the ensuing adventures that took him from Morocco's minarets to Guyana's jungle rivers in his first book, "Vagabonding Under Sail",

published in 197 by David McKay, Inc.

Other adventures followed aboard the ketch “Arthur Rogers”, including a lengthy cruise to the South Pacific, about which Bill wrote his second book, “Cloud of Islands”. Both books are out of print now, but they may be available at libraries or on the used-book market.

During a brief visit to England, he reunited with one of his pals from the “Content” days, Ernest Chaimberlain. Ernest had just met a wealthy businessman at the Explorer’s Club in New York, a man given a curious ultimatum by his doctors: “Take at least three months a year off or you’re going to die.” His idea of time off was to finance and join a shell-collecting expedition to the Western Pacific, with Ernest and Bill in charge. Soon the two friends located a schooner in California: 105-foot LOA, built of nickel steel and needing a complete re-build from the deck up. The price was \$25,000. Over the next few months, the “Gloria Maris” circumnavigated the Pacific while her crew dredged for shells in Palau, New Guinea and Japan.

Always the designer, Bill rigged light pivoting yards for the vessel’s foremast on which the crew set a square sail and raffee, a rig he had helped pioneer years before. “A marvelously docile rig when you’re shorthanded,” he recalls. Approaching Japan, Bill met his first typhoon at sea - a big one. “I don’t know how close to us the center came, but it got pretty breezy-and in fact we lost our mainmast.” Cutting the rig free, they stepped a jury mast, and in settled weather they sailed for Okinawa and on to Kobe-the first place able to build them a new spar. Two months later they continued the trip across the Pacific, heading home.

Back in California, Bill Tighe of Willard Boat Works gave Crealock his first commission, a powerboat using an existing set of frames. Soon came another request for a powerboat, the “The Lady Claire”, a husky, 56-foot trawler yacht to be built for actress Claire Trevor’s husband. To learn how things were done in America, Bill worked in the yard during the day and spent evenings designing more powerboats and sailboats, all in the 30- to 45-foot range.

By the early 1960’s, a great wave of boat building had swept over Southern California. Everywhere you looked there were boats, molds, masts and yards full of projects. Jensen, Columbia, Ericson, Islander - it was a golden age of production fiberglass boat building. Bill’s entry into this market was with the 26-foot Excalibur, a fin-keel sloop that raced well and still maintains a loyal following after 30 years.

Around 1965 the Westsail saga began with a builder named Larry Kendall, who came to Bill and asked if there was anything out there in the way of a market for cruising boats. Bill thought Larry might be able to sell “a dozen or so.” Larry decided on the Atkin Thistle, a husky 32-foot double-ender with a flush deck, and began tooling. After years of work, turmoil and bankruptcy, the plans and tooling were picked up by Snyder and Lynn Vic, who named the boat Westsail and began serious production. The flush deck of Atkin’s original design found little appeal, so a trunk cabin version modeled after another Atkins design called Eric was created.

Crealock drew the rig and some of the interior, before long, many people credited him with the hull design as well. "I did not touch the lines," he assures me. "We wanted to keep the basic Atkin design." Thereafter, "Time" magazine ran a lengthy piece on cruising as a lifestyle and one of the boats featured was a Westsail. The corporation hit big time and talked to Bill about a larger boat. This led to the Westsail 42 and 43 (identical hulls), one of the first boats based on the input of potential buyers. "Strong" was the operative word, and "overkill" best describes the hull layout. Lookers loved to thump on the topsides at boat shows, and salesmen eagerly showed core samples virtually inches thick. But after a massive advertising campaign and a frenzy of building, the fast rise led to a steady decline despite a string of reincarnations.

Meanwhile, Bill had generated other projects. Though Taiwan was the country of choice for Americans building overseas, a company named Tiburon settled in Costa Rica and came to Bill in 1974 for a husky cruiser that would sail well. So was born the Tiburon 36, later given a counter stern to become the Cabo Rico 38. Additionally, large numbers of trailer sailers found a ready market and Bill designed a line of them for Clipper Marine. This went from a broad-transom 21-footer (capable of planing under power) to the Clipper 30 and 32 among the longest legal trailer boats.

Though Clipper Marine had a rocky business history, it was not without its bright spots. One of them, a twin-keel 23-footer whose keels became sophisticated asymmetrical sections, was to primitive twin-keels what airplane wings are to 2x12s. Before Clipper faded, its builders began tooling for a 37-footer - a Spartan, capable but economical blue-water cruiser. None were built, and in 1976 the molds were passed on to Cruising Consultants who subcontracted their work out and sold about 20 boats.

Pacific Seacraft took over the tooling and the Crealock 37 came into its own. Bill spent an enormous amount of time on the underbody of the 37, developing his ideas on steering and control in bad conditions. "I've always felt it is a mistake to transfer a racing underbody to a cruising hull," he explains. "Their purposes are so different. There were some fairly subtle features in the afterbody of the 37 intended to come into play when running at high speed. You never know for sure... maybe they worked...but something very unusual happened. Two owners of 37s, 3,000 miles apart, called me with almost identical stories. Both had surfed at well over 10 knots and both had made the same remark: They wished they'd had a tiller instead of a wheel because this boat was so easy to steer."

In the late 1960s, Bill married Lynne Banner, a woman he'd met while fitting out the "Gloria Maris". Since the early 1970s, Bill, Lynne and their daughter Anne have lived on the coast north of San Diego.

As for pure racing boats, Bill feels it's something he would have to devote full time to-or not do at all. "In racing," says, "the object, above all, is to get there first. Safety, comfort, ease of handling are all secondary. But in a cruising boat there are so many fascinating requirements and variables."

Yacht design is an odd mixture of art and engineering and engineering today means computers. When it comes to crunching numbers, there's little talk of going back to the old way. But the lines are a different story. "The tendency on the computer seems to be to say, 'That's close enough'. But I'm constantly looking for little improvements in transition areas, anything that gets away from smooth, flowing lines. I find that I can do that just as quickly by hand as with the computer."

"With cruising boats you seldom have the luxury of tank testing, so you must develop your ideas conservatively, a small step at a time. You say to yourself, 'Well, that one didn't sink, perhaps we can take it a step further...' "And on top of that it's more difficult to design boats today. People expect so much. They need to cram everything in--water makers, electronics, insulation, machinery, stabilizers. All good things in themselves, but tough to squeeze into the hull."

Bill Crealocks' office is unique in that the ratio of sail-to-power is about 50/50. His 20+ knot powerboats are similar in concept to his cruising sailboats--designed to maintain their speeds in safety and in relative comfort amid rough conditions. The Offshore 48, built in Taiwan, is a good example, as is the 36 mile-per-hour Cabo Sportfisherman. He shares his office with J. Richard Jacobs, who Bill says is the best draftsman he has ever known, and Bill Luther, a former instructor at the Yacht Design Institute who has taken over much of the exacting detail work involved in planning systems.

Is there one boat he's really proud of, one that came alive just as planned, a functional, beautiful "yacht" in the best sense of the word? After reflecting for a bit, Bill surmises, "Perhaps the 65-foot schooner "Kaiulani" She is such an unusual boat nowadays - she had to be strictly gaff schooner above the waterline, but below, she is quite slippery. She is cold molded, and her builder has made a work of art, both inside and out. I believe her current jaunt is taking her around Cape Horn."

Bill may be quiet, but in his polite way he projects competence. His clients understand that they are dealing with someone who has been designing boats a very long time, someone whose life is inseparable from designing boats and someone who has never questioned his ability to design boats well.

But beyond the professional sphere, there is Bill Crealock the man. Unfailingly polite and civil, his friendships and business relationships go back a long way. He still keeps in touch with those he's cruised with; he still believes in the reliability of a handshake over the intimidation presence of a lawyer. Those of us who have worked with him sometimes feel frustration when, in the middle of a project, someone calls about an ancient Clipper 21 they've just bought. Can he tell them how to fix the drop keel, and can he send a sail plan? Bill will dig through the files, come up with what they want, and get in the mail, even as a deadline clock ticks over his head.

Bill's stature as a naval architect is indisputable. But beyond that, he remains a living example of the perfect gentleman.

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