



[The Coronation Boat Race (1902)]

In the hey-day of Stornoway as a herring fishing port, the Coronation of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra was commemorated by a regatta or race in which three classes of sail fishing boats took part on Friday 12th September 1902.

Major Matheson, the Lewis proprietor donated three handsome and valuable silver cups for the competition, one for each of the three classes of boat that took part in the race, as well as substantial money prizes.

The race was arranged to take place after the east coast fishing season and although there were hundreds of fishing boats registered at Stornoway at that time, the fishermen were reluctant to take part in the race because of a hitch with the insurance cover. Many of the boats were therefore moored away and their gear and sails put ashore in the usual way for the winter, before Major Matheson stepped in and offered to make good any broken spars etc. in order to overcome the insurance problem, but for that, there would have been many more boats forward to take part in the race. Perhaps however, it was providential that there were not many more boats in the race as there might have been more accidents due to the congestion.

The race took place over a triangular course of about 28 nautical miles plotted accurately from admiralty charts, starting at the timing yacht near King Edward wharf, Stornoway. The first leg of the triangular course took the contestants round 'Tabhaidh' Island in the mouth of Loch Erisort, thence to windward round 'Chicken Rock' off Swordale, Point and finally to the timing yacht where they started.

The boats which took part in the race were mainly the big Class I 'Zulu' design fishing boats and their usual length at that time was 54 to 56 feet keel. Later on some of the Zulus were 60 feet or more keel. The Class II boats that took part were under 50 feet keel and the Class III were about 30 foot keel.

There was a delay in the start of the race because some of the boats were in difficulty. One was aground, while others were short-handed. It was about noon when the first class boats were ready to start and by that time there were heavy rain squalls and a rising north-north-west wind. The fishermen were attired in their usual thigh high leather sea boots, yellow oilskins and souwester hats. A large crowd of spectators lined the wharves and streets facing the harbour. The heavy rain squalls and the rising wind were actually welcomed by these hardy fishermen who rubbed their hands in glee as they gazed out to sea, contemplating the prospect of a good contest.

The skippers were given to understand that they must observe the rules-of-the-road governing their charges, which was entirely different to the steam-boat rules-of-the-road at sea because sailing boats or ships are dependent on the wind and therefore they have a set of rules in easily remembered form as follows:

A close hauled ship, you'll never see
Give way to one that's running free.
It's easier running free to steer
That's the reason she keeps clear.

With wind the same side, running free
One's windward, one's to lee
The leeward ship goes straight ahead
The other alters course instead.

Both close hauled or both quite free
On different tacks, we all agree
The ship that has the wind to port
Must keep well clear is what we're taught.

At other times the altering craft
Is that which has the wind right aft.

It was an everyday occurrence for these skippers to be governed by these Board-of-Trade sailing rules-of-the-sea, and no one knew better than they did, the necessity of carrying them out to the letter or suffering the consequences. On the day of the race however, they were handicapped in carrying them out accurately because all the fishing gear, nets, ropes etc. were already put ashore at the end of the fishing season, and minus that

ballast, the boats trim and stability were badly affected and some of them steered badly, narrowly missing disaster on one or two occasions. To counteract the absence of fishing gear, some of the boats shipped barrels of salt herring, which proved more of a hazard than a help because of faulty storage.

To the casual onlooker on the quay the crews in the various boats appeared to lounge unconcernedly about the decks of their boats. When suddenly the 'Ready' gun signal was fired and as the minutes ticked away, men were silently and unobtrusively placing themselves and their boats in position. Suddenly the scene was transformed into orderly action and bustle as the starter signal pealed out. Up went the huge main sails among the squeaking and the snorting of the steam capstans. The 'Morven' SY1217, Skipper Alastair Macleod, Knock, chose to hoist their main sail by man-power with brawny hands hauling on the halyard falls. In certain circumstances it was quicker to hoist the sail by hand than using the steam capstan. It was however, very heavy work requiring all available hands. They were the first to hand-head their canvas but the others followed in quick succession, as they were cheered enthusiastically by a large crowd of onlookers.

The first boat to get away was the 'Majestic' SY136, Donald Mackenzie, Knock, Point, with a pure white new sail. It was followed by the 'Bloom' SY182, J Maciver, Shader, Point. In the narrows off Goat Island disaster was averted by the narrowest of margins as the boats manoeuvred for position. On rounding Arnish Point up went the mizzen and jib sails. The contestants sailed on an even keel with a strong tail wind and ebb tide in their favour on the first leg.

Due to the lack of ballast, some of the boats steered badly and in a wild sheer the 'Nellie' SY48, accidentally carried away the mizzen boom of the 'D L Mackenzie' SY137. Fortunately however, they carried a replacement boom and little time was lost replacing the broken boom. A short while later, the 'Baden Powell' SY134, carried away the mizzen boom of the 'Morven' SY1217, as they rounded Tabhaidh Island. As the 'Morven' had no spare boom she was therefore left with only one sail, and the crew felt that they were out of the race and they went to the assistance of the 2nd class boat, 'Swiftsure' SY868, which was demasted, and towed her into Loch Quirn, (Gravir). The 'Majestic' SY136, maintained her lead and she was the first boat to round Tabhaidh Island but on her close haul second leg of the triangular course towards Chicken Rock, she tacked too far out into the Minch and in the excitement to maintain her leading position, the steel tie of the main sail fouled in the hurry to get underway while putting about in the tack.

The down part of the halyard was always towards the stern and the steel tie attached to the cumbersome yard was always before the mast when the sail was lowered, and then it was swung or dipped to the opposite side of the mast. It was the duty of a particular person of the crew to unhook the tie and bring it round afore the mast and re-hook it on the yard before giving a signal to hoist the sail. On this occasion the main sail was half way up the mast while the rest of the crew was busy attending to the mizzen sail, before it was realised that the steel tie was not brought round the mast. It was then too late to make amends and that cost the 'Majestic' the race. Up until then she had put up a good show and there was therefore no cause for regret, nevertheless, the careless member of the crew that forgot his duty never did excuse himself for his temporary lapse.

It was on the second and longest leg of the course from Tabhaidh Island to Chicken Rock with the sheets inboard in a rising wind which suddenly veered round to north-east with a rain shower, very much to the contestants' disadvantage, as they had to tack against wind and tide that the race was won or lost. All the skill and experience of the sailors had to be brought into play in these conditions in order to gain position to round Chicken Rock off Swordale Point, with the minimum of tacks.

Fast handling was essential when tacking in a strong wind with these tremendous sails flapping about. First they were lowered down to the deck, then unhooked from the travellar and hooked on to the burrtan and swung round to the other side of the mast, then unhooked from the burrtan and re-hooked on to the travellar and hoisted again. During all this time the mast stood on its own, being completely un-stayed and therefore unsupported until the halyards were hooked on the weather side, and the burrtan set up. Speed was essential and it was all very heavy work, even with the falls of the halyards taken to the capstan. In the smaller boats the travellar was an iron ring made of two half hoops for flexible movement, and placed round the mast in order to hold the sailyard close to the mast. In the big Zulu boats the travellar consisted of bead parrels, being the large round wooden beads strung on a rope and loosely tied round the mast.

The ebb tide which had given contestants wings, with the wind, on the first leg of the race was now against them and was inclined to carry them out to sea with a consequent loss of position as well as valuable time. As a rule the big Zulu boats were second to none in working to windward, but on this occasion their skippers and crew were well aware of the vital factor of trim in determining their sailing qualities. Although every effort was made to counteract the lack of trim, some of the boats were down by the head, making them very wet boats and sometimes requiring two men at the steering wheel to keep their head out of the wind.

The rules laid down that beside the crew, only two men in fishermen's garb, 'peitein mor' were allowed on board any of the competing boats, but as many as they could accommodate were allowed on board so long as they were dressed as landlubbers (with jackets). Therefore, the big Zulu boats had a fair quota of sightseers and some of them were more of a hindrance than help because many of them had spent too much time in the hotels before they sailed. On the outward bound first leg of the triangular course towards Tabhaidh Island, the landlubber

sightseeing complement of barbers, tailors, bakers and shoemakers etc. full of buoyancy and in a festive mood, enjoyed the run with the boats travelling fast in a tail wind with a grand view from the empty net hold, out of the way of blocks, ropes and slating canvas, without too much lurching and rolling. Some of the passengers got hold of empty bark boxes and up-ended them and place net board in between them to form more comfortable seats from which to view the nearest rival boats. The crew was too busy to notice the precarious perches on which their guests sat as the boats were rounding Tabhaidh Island. The guests themselves were oblivious to the danger to their own safety until disaster struck.

As they rounded Tabhaidh things changed dramatically when the boats tacked for Chicken Rock in a rising sea and wind. It was no longer comfortable and some of the unwary sightseers were thrown about unceremoniously into the herring lockers under the side deck as the boats leaned over at what seemed a perilous angle with the gunwales awash under the stress of canvas. To add to the discomfort of the guests they were lashed unmercifully by the spray from the weather bow as the boats lurched and pitched. The clumsy looking Zulus they had boarded at Bayhead in the morning had become lively, obstreperous monsters of the deep. For most of the guests the race was at an end as they succumbed to sea-sickness and were helped by the crew to retire below to the aft cabin, where they wanted to die, but couldn't. After that, only an odd person had sufficient courage to go up the cabin ladder to peer out on the scuttle hatch, hanging on for all he was worth, like many a young coiler before and after them. Also, the aroma of the salt water that sizzled on the hot 'T' shaped funnel of the steam boiler that fed the steam capstan, now engaged on the straining sheets, nauseated the guests below in the cabin.

Once the bigger boats were on their way, classes two and three were started and by that time the sea was running fairly high, and they got a hearty cheer from the onlookers because there were fears that the deteriorating weather conditions might prove too much for the smaller boats. In actual fact, some of the smaller boats fared a lot better on the second leg of the race, considering that the big boats were by then a long distance ahead of them.

The 'Good Hope' SY1224 Class II was handled particularly well by Skipper Sandy Macfarlane, 10 Marvig. Because of his intimate knowledge of the Loch Erisort area and his ability to navigate the narrow channels in his native area, Sandy decided to take a chance and save time as well as gain a good tacking position for the start of the second leg of the race by sailing through the very narrow channel between Stack-a-Tabhaidh and Tabhaidh Island. The official course only laid down that the contestants were to go round Tabhaidh Island and Sandy complied with that and it was therefore quite legitimate for him to sail close to the Island rather than waste valuable time and position going round Stack-a-Tabhaidh unnecessarily. None of the other boats risked that precarious manoeuvre and doubtless it saved valuable minutes for the 'Good Hope'.

When the smaller boats got the change of wind with the rain squall on the second leg of the race, some of them were able to gain a position of advantage. Not only did Sandy Macfarlane of the Good Hope, gain on the big boats but he left them all behind him in a stern race in which he was the first boat to round Chicken Rock well ahead of the nearest of the other contestants, the first of which only caught up with him eventually at Lamb Island, not far from the entrance to Stornoway harbour. A newspaper reported at the time stated that Skipper Macfarlane achieved the best time of the whole race at 2 hours 20 minutes 25 seconds, by exercising good judgement. Of the larger Class I boats, it was the 'Nellie', the 'D L Mackenzie' and the 'Bloom' that were the first three to round Chicken Rock.

There was great excitement on the shore and at the flagship as the brown sails of the leading boats were appearing over the land at Holm and speculation as to who was in the lead set all on tip-toe. When the white sail of the 'Majestic' did not appear among the first boats there was a certain amount of disappointment among those who had backed her to win. Then there was some confusion as the signallers reported the leading boat to be the 2nd Class 'Good Hope'. The starters challenged that information as not being credible. Telescope holders were pressed to furnish the correct information. In due course the signallers confirmed that the three leading boats now were the 'Nellie' of Garrabost, the 'DL Mackenzie' of Shader and the 'Good Hope' of Marvig for which cheers went up from the Committee boat. Onwards pressed the contestants towards the finishing line and excitement became intense as the 'Nellie' was the first to sweep past the line.

The timing of the various boats in the race was as follows:

Class One

'Nellie' SY48	Skipper John Campbell, Garrabost, winner of the Coronation Cup, 1st Class with a time of 2 hours, 31 minutes, 23 seconds and £12 prize money for the crew.
'Bloom' SY182	Skipper John Maciver, Shader, Point, time 2 hours, 35 minutes, 22 seconds. On time allowance this boat secured 2 nd place in her class with a cash prize of £8 for the crew.
DL Mackenzie SY137	Skipper R MacKay, Point, time 2 hours, 32 minutes, 29 seconds.
'Handsome' SY1123	Skipper M Campbell, Garrabost, time 2 hours, 35 minutes, 20 seconds.
'Baden Powell' SY134	Skipper Mr Smith Aird, time 2 hours, 38 minutes, 56 seconds.
'Majestic' SY136	Skipper D Mackenzie, Knock, time 2 hours, 44 minutes, 17 seconds.
'Morven' SY1217	Skipper Alastair Macleod, Knock, Point, dropped out of the race with a broken Boom.

Class Two

- 'Good Hope' SY1224 Skipper Alexander Macfarlane, 10 Marvig. This boat won the 2nd Class Coronation Silver Cup as well as cash prize of £10 for the crew. It also had the best time of the whole race at 2 hours, 20 minutes, 35 seconds.
- 'Swift Sure' SY868 Skipper Roddy MacKay, Garrabost. Cash prize £7. This boat was demasted and towed in Loch Quirn.

Class Three

- 'Masterpiece' SY272 Skipper D. Maciver, Swordale. This open boat won the Coronation Silver Cup 3rd Class on time allowance. Time 3 hours, 19 minutes, 30 seconds.
- 'Mary' SY150 Skipper Donald Macaskill, 9 Gravir, cash prize £6. Time 3 hours, 11 minutes, 52 seconds.

An eyewitness newspaper correspondent at the time of the race gave a graphic pen-picture of the winner of the Class One Silver Cup, John Campbell of the Nellie SY48. We believe that these words are a suitable tribute to all fishing skippers, not only those who took part in the Coronation Race, but indeed all fishermen then and now.

Skipper Campbell was a sight of great interest, a weather beaten, low set sturdily built man, standing at the wheel which both hands grasped with an iron grip as they approached the finishing line. His eyes were fixed on the sail and steadily ahead. He was calm and cold as if carved in marble, no emotion, no excitement, only actuated by one purpose, to win. Even when the cheers of the onlookers and his crew were ringing in his ears, he just carried on as the man at the wheel. The ideal of the fishing skipper, so intent was he on his work that from the beginning of the race until the sail was lowered after crossing the finishing line he never uttered a word, except to give an order.

In presenting the prizes, Major Matheson, the Lewis Proprietor, said he initiated the race for two reasons, firstly, in commemoration of the Coronation of King Edward. Secondly, out of sympathy for the Lewis fishermen whose hardy calling merited every encouragement, for he had a high opinion of their endurance and the hardships they go through nightly in following their calling and that without the least brag. It was a great pleasure to witness the day's proceedings. He could not have imagined a finer sight than those beautiful large boats coming into the harbour under full canvas with a stiff breeze such as there was today. Provost Anderson moved a vote of thanks to Major Matheson for giving such handsome cups and valuable money prizes.

The solid silver cups they raced for in 1902 (valued at that time at 15 guineas each) with the names of the skippers and the winning time engraved on them, subsequently found homes in various parts of the world. The Class I Cup was taken to Canada by Skipper Campbell's son Murdo when he emigrated before the First World War. It was there for upwards to 60 years until another of Skipper Campbell's sons, Alex John returned home recently with the cup. The Class II Cup is in the possession of a grandson of Skipper Sandy Macfarlane, Marvig, Alistair Smith, Caros, Cromore, now Roderick Maciver, (Ruaraidh Gash) Stornoway, son of the winning Skipper. Roddy Maciver was himself a leading Lewis skipper, his last boat was the 'Golden Sheaf' but he commenced his fishing career in the family Zulu Sailing boat 'Main' SY24, which they had from 1913 to 1928 when they got the converted Zulu Motor boat 'Corona'. Roddy got a lifesaving medal in the early 1930s when a crew member of the 'Corona' fell overboard, without hesitation Roddy went in after him and took him to the side of the boat, but both men went under the boat in the rough seas and Roddy lost his grip and was scarcely able to save himself after surfacing on the other side of the boat.

It is said that when reports of the race appeared in the press, professional yachtsmen from Cowes in the Isle of Wight came all the way to Stornoway to confirm the distance of the course, in the belief that there was an error in the distance or the reported time, but they reckoned without experience of the Zulus in action in suitable weather conditions.

Exciting though the Coronation Race undoubtedly was, it was not a fair test of these boats. They were at their best coming from the distant fishing grounds in a fairly strong wind when, it is said, and they could achieve a speed of 16 knots.

The Coronation Race was a grand performance the like of which we shall never see again because that class of fishing boat passed away for ever, as did that splendid race of fishermen with their unique skills. Who can doubt that many of these old Skippers would have adorned the bridge of large ocean going ships with distinction, had they got an opportunity? All the boats in the race gave a very good account of themselves and their stalwart skippers and crews plodded their way home, satisfied with the result of the race, with only seconds separating most of the boats at the finishing line.

Today we have the same breezes blowing, and the same sea breaking upon our shores. Our present skippers and crews are very much the same as their forefathers, except that they require different skills to operate different kinds of boats and gear.

We acknowledge the following sources of information regarding the Coronation Race:

The Stornoway Gazette
The Highland News
Local oral tradition, etc.

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