

JRA Hall of Fame

Mike Ellison & Ilala

by Graham Cox

Mike Ellison. 1936 -

The inaugural Observer Singlehanded Transatlantic Race (OSTAR) started very quietly from Plymouth on June 11th 1960. The organisers struggled to find a yacht club willing to host the start, the yachting press were largely critical, the general media showed no interest and the public knew little about the race. The OSTAR, however, went on to become an iconic event. The five participants who crossed the starting line all made successful passages (the only time that ever happened in an OSTAR) and went on to become famous names in the history of singlehanded sailing, Blondie Hasler, Francis Chichester, David Lewis, Val Howells and Jean Lacombe. Three of the contestants wrote popular books about their voyages. There has probably been more written about the 1960 OSTAR than any other single sailing event. By the time the race was run again in 1964, it was a media circus.

What is less well-known is that there were another three entrants in the race who failed to make it to the starting line. One of those entrants was 24 year old British merchant seaman, Mike Ellison. He had read about the race in 1958 and was determined to participate. His initial idea was to find a British yacht manufacturer who would lend him a yacht as a promotional vehicle but in the end he had to borrow money to buy a small yacht, the 35 foot Blue Haze, an old West Solent restricted class yacht, with

low freeboard and good windward ability. Unfortunately he failed to get the boat ready in time, due, he later stated, to an unsuitable choice of boat, a poor survey and a lack of experience.

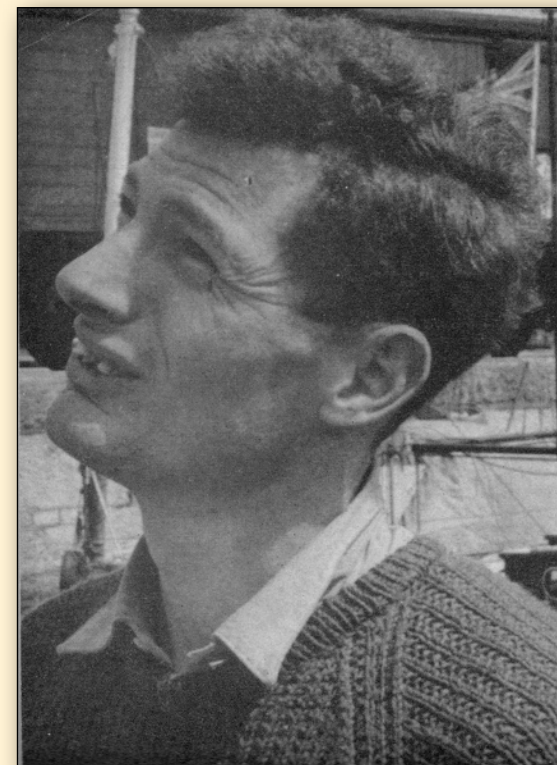
Mike recalls approaching Francis Chichester for advice and receiving a frosty reception. Chichester was not amused by Mike's suggestion that Gypsy Moth's black hull might contravene the race rules, which stated that boats should be painted bright yellow to enhance visibility. This rule was later dropped because 'one of the contestants', to quote the AYRS, refused to paint his boat this colour! Chichester later wrote disparaging comments about his young visitor, unaware, perhaps, that Mike was a professional seaman. Mike says that he might have succeeded in crossing the Atlantic in Blue Haze but the outcome would have been far from certain. Unlike Chichester, he was a professional seaman, not a professional adventurer, and his instincts were to withdraw.

In 1964 Mike decided to enter Blue Haze in the second OSTAR, having spent time gaining more sailing experience and preparing the boat. A short time before the start, however, in the journal of the Little Ship Club, he read of an offer to loan the junk-rigged Nicholson 36, Ilala, to a member who wanted to enter the race. The vessel's owner, Mrs Barrington, had built the vessel for a world cruise, fitting it with a rig

designed by Blondie Hasler, but the cruise had been aborted.

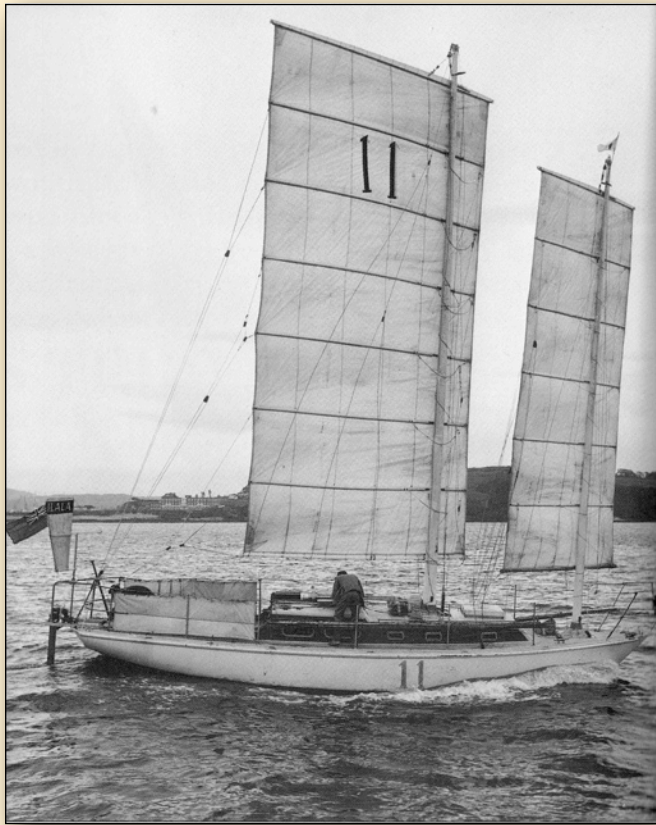
An understanding was reached and Mike sailed the boat from Cohb to Plymouth on April 28th, a distance of 240 miles in 36 hours in force 7 winds. He was alarmed to note that the foremast bent like a fishing rod in the stronger gusts. He was advised not to worry, just to shorten sail quickly, but decided to keep the engine and 80 gal of fuel aboard during the race, just in case it was needed. Preparations took on the usual hectic pattern. During the last week he and his team of volunteers were working 20 hours a day. He was persuaded to change his HF radio for one supplied by the Daily Mail but it did not have the RDF function of his old set, something he came to regret later. He shipped a 16 foot oar for rowing, emergency steering or jury rigging, something he did not regret.

The race started on May 23rd, 1964. There were 15 starters this year, 14 of whom completed the course. Mike had an easy start in light winds and slowly drifted out to the Lizard, where he was signalled that Gypsy Moth had rounded first. He enjoyed the light conditions, unlike some of his competitors who took things more seriously. Alec Rose, on Lively Lady, even threw a 56lb anchor overboard to try and sail a bit faster!



Mike Ellison

A few days after the start, fresh northerlies set in and the experimental battens of polythene pipe started breaking and tearing sails. The idea was to get some shape into the sail and improve windward ability but they proved too flexible. He acknowledged later that it was a serious mistake to set sail with an experimental system that had not been properly trialled. He proved resourceful in fixing them, gluing



Ilala before the race

lightweight multihulls, two of whom, Misty Miller and Folatre, did in fact suffer structural damage in this gale.

The following day he began a regular radio schedule with David Lewis on the catamaran, Rehu Moana, who was not far ahead. (Rehu Moana was a heavy catamaran, originally junk-rigged, that later completed a circumnavigation). They both enjoyed the contact and encouraged each other, though remaining competitive. David sounded delighted when Mike reported being becalmed. Once, Mike asked David if it was safe to keep eating green, mouldy bread. David assured him it was "though it might have a slight laxative

effect", leaving Mike to ponder whether he was being helpful or trying to slow his progress. He notes he was still eating the bread with no ill effects when he reached Newport.

On June 7th, just after midnight, the mainsail furling itself. The bronze eye on the masthead halyard block had been worn through by the stainless steel shackle it was attached with. He had a spare halyard but felt that hoisting the sail without a purchase would overload

the mast. He intended to hoist a rope ladder and climb the mast the next day but the wind was force 6 at dawn and increased to force 8 by sunset, making for a very rough sea. Instead, he carried on with just two panels of the foresail set. The following night the wind reached force 9 before dropping to force 2 in the morning.

Mike was preparing to replace the main halyard in a heavy, confused swell that morning. Ilala had two panels of foresail up to steady the motion but was essentially hove to and rolling heavily. Suddenly, without warning, the foremast broke and fell overboard to windward. After he retrieved the mast and sail, an energetic task in itself, he attempted to climb the mainmast but could only get halfway up. He then used the spare halyard to hoist the main halyard block with a rope strap around the mast. It took two attempts to get the strap to tighten around the tapered mast, but once it did he was able to set 4/5th of the mainsail. By the time he arrived in Newport the leech of the sail was badly damaged but the sail still functioned, one of the decidedly positive virtues of

junk rig. He used the oar as a jury rigged foremast and managed to set a small amount of foresail.

He decided, given the limited performance of his damaged rig, to stay south of any possible icebergs on the Grand Banks, which further slowed his passage. On June 14th he sighted a ship, the SS Mauritania, which confirmed his position and he groped his way onwards through the fog. He spent a lot of time on deck blowing his foghorn. As engine noises came closer, he said, the harder he blew. It was perhaps not that effective but very satisfying!

By June 17th Ilala had passed the iceberg zone and crossed into soundings. The wind now fell light and he experienced fog, calms and headwinds for the remainder of his



Mike and Ilala crossing the finish line under jury rig

broom and boathook handles into the pipes and splinting the joints with bindings. This method proved successful and only one of these splinted battens came apart again.

By June 2nd he was in a strong gale and feeling sea-sick, unsure of his position. This didn't bother him in itself, but he was concerned that if one of the other competitors needed help, he would be unable to find them. He was particularly worried about the



Mike and friends sailing out of Newport after the race.

passage, except for one short afternoon blow. He arrived off the finish at Nantucket Light vessel at 0300 hours, in thick fog with only 6 miles of visibility, which made finding the light vessel a delicate task. He sorely missed his RDF during these final days but made a perfect landfall. He completed the crossing in 46 days, coming in 8th, one hour ahead of 1960 veteran, Jean Lacombe, who was sailing Golif, a fibreglass 21 footer, and 19 days behind the 1964 race winner, Eric Tabarly in Pen Duick 111.

Mike felt that he had not performed well, but he can be commended for completing the course, given his problems with the rig. His elapsed time was excellent, given the circumstances of his passage. It is a good example of how forgiving the junk rig can be. Perhaps junk rig is not the most competitive choice for a long ocean race against the prevailing winds, but it is hard to imagine a vessel completing the course with any other rig after breaking one mast and suffering significant damage to the remaining sail.

Ilala's rig was also an early example of Blondie's junk rig designs, before he developed, along with Jock McLeod, their standard sail profile with a higher peaked yard. If Ilala had had this improved sail plan, as well as reliable battens, they may well have done better. Mike noted that the boat's windward performance was very poor, particularly when the sails were to windward of the mast. He also felt that the fine bows of the Nicholson 36 did not have enough buoyancy to support the weight of the foremast, and noted that the boat seemed to stop on every wave when hard on the wind. His inadequate battens didn't help, as their forward sections bent to leeward in fresh conditions.

He also disliked the amount of running rigging, which was stowed in deck

boxes, but which washed out and trailed astern in heavy weather. He also felt the rig was subject to too much chafe, with the sail constantly moving against the mast. He stated after the race that he thought unstayed masts would need a lot more development before they could be considered reliable for ocean passages. It must be remembered that Ilala was one of Blondie's pioneer junk-rigged vessels and that the experience of people like Mike were crucial to developments in design and engineering. Later, vessels like Galway Blazer, Badger, Roamer and Tystie were to sail many thousands of ocean miles (discounting pitchpoling in the Southern Ocean). It would be interesting to take Mike sailing on a boat fitted with cambered sails and register his opinion, or to campaign a boat like Marie G in the OSTAR today (hint, hint).

Mike spent three weeks in Newport, partying with other contestants and preparing Ilala for a return passage to England. He replaced the foremast with an aluminium lamp post, bought for \$10, though it was too short. It had the same taper as the old mast, however, and they inserted the top section of the old mast in the bottom of the aluminium one and shoved it up to make a timber topmast. When it became firm it was secured with a stainless steel pin. The base of the old mast was inserted in the bottom of the aluminium spar, held in place by wedges set in cement. Ilala thus became the first boat to carry a composite timber/alloy mast, something that has recently become popular in the junk-rig community.

A new mainsail was made and all battens replaced with ash, then Ilala set off back across the Atlantic with Mike's brother and a friend for crew. They sailed 2200NM to Horta in 20 days, sighting the volcanic peak of Pico island while still 64 miles out, then sailed on to Cohn in a further 12 days, averaging 4.5 knots for the entire passage. Ilala broke no gear on this passage, demonstrating what a superb rig this can be for cruising, especially when sailing with predominantly following winds. In Cohn, they unloaded the boat and Mike noted that the waterline came up 8 inches! It was another reason, perhaps, why he'd had such a slow passage. As he said with some amusement in his AYRS article (AYRS Journal no 71), different ideas of fully equipped!

After the race Mike became the Director of the Amateur Yacht Research Society (AYRS) and competed in the 1966 Round Britain yacht race. He did not sail extensively under junk rig again but has remained an interested observer of later developments. His voyage on Ilala provided valuable feedback to Blondie and Jock and contributed to their understanding of how to improve the rig.

