

JRA Hall of Fame

by Graham Cox

Peter Crowther

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In the northern spring of 1972, while *Galway Blazer* was being repaired in Australia, Peter Crowther was preparing his old gaff cutter, *Golden Vanity*, for that year's OSTAR. A yachting journalist and part-time fisherman, he had already sailed the boat out to the West Indies and back. He was under no illusion about the boat's suitability for the race - the best he could get out of her to windward was 3-4 knots - but she was the boat he had, and sailing in the OSTAR was a dream that could no longer be postponed.

Golden Vanity took 88 days to reach Newport. She still holds the record for the slowest vessel to finish the race. His logbooks show that he tacked 89 times, reefed 5, made 71 sail changes and blew out a jib and the topsail. After the race he sailed to the West Indies, where he stranded on a coral reef in St Croix and suffered extensive damage. After patching the boat up in Antigua, he limped home across the Atlantic in 1973, pumping all the way. He then put the boat on the market and looked around for a more suitable vessel.

One of the boats listed was *Galway Blazer*, fresh from her circumnavigation with Bill King. Peter was mostly just curious when he went up to look at her but fell in love with the boat. In his book, *Singlehanded Sailing in Galway Blazer*, he wrote, *I...looked at the empty interior stretching right forward to the bows, bulkheadless. It was so simple, so beautiful, and I was captivated.* Although he had not yet sold *Golden Vanity*, he offered 10,000 pounds for her and it was accepted.

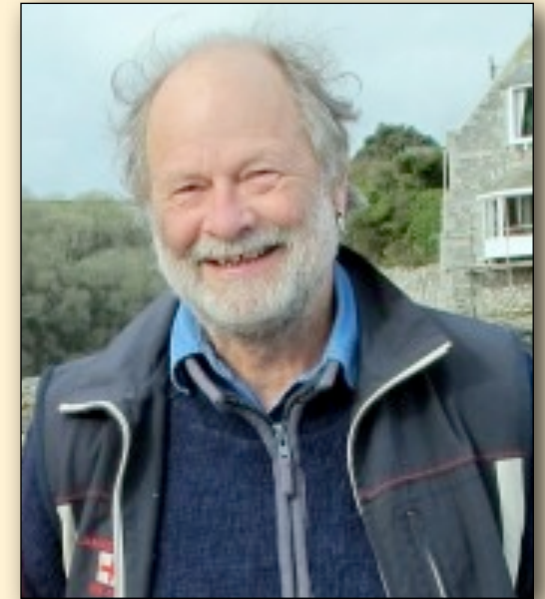
In 1974 *Galway Blazer* competed in the Round Britain Race, with Peter's old shipmate from *Golden Vanity's* first transatlantic voyage, Tony Addis, as crew. While doubling Barra Head the boat fell off a wave, sustaining an 8 inch crack in the hull alongside a frame. In their next port of call, Castlebay, they patched it with a copper tingle on the outside and a plywood reinforcing patch inside. They were not competitive overall but recorded the 11th fastest time on the last leg, sailing 163 miles in 24 hours. They had so much fun that they repeated the experience in 1978.

In 1976 he entered *Galway Blazer* in the OSTAR. Astonishingly, there were 5 junks in the race that year. Jock McLeod was sailing *Ron Glas*, considered the boat to beat (by the other junks) with a reputation for being

very fast. Tony Lush was there on *One Hand Clapping*, a home-made boat he had sailed over from America for the event, John Christian was sailing *Et Soeki* and Mike Richey, as always, was there on *Jester*.

Tony Lush had set up a private competition within the race, called the *Comfy Prize*, the rules of which included such things as starting the race in a jacket and tie, growing a plant en route, sleeping between sheets, wearing slippers, the least number of times you wore waterproofs, how many times you changed your underpants, and how many bad meals you made. Jock McLeod was declared the eventual winner, for only putting his waterproofs on once, to dock the boat in Newport after the race, and because he wrote his log in verse.

1976 was a very rough year. Mike Richey retired in favour of an Irish cruise, two competitors disappeared at sea, and numerous boats retired, broke up or sank. Of 125 starters, only 78 reached the finish line. At times *Galway Blazer* was reduced to jogging to windward with four reefs in the main and three in the foresail. There was no damage apart from some chafe requiring the renewal of the downhauls. They sailed the rhumb-line



route, seeing one iceberg off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, and were the 51st boat to finish in an elapsed time of 39 days. Peter made a fast passage home, still alone, sailing 3000 miles in 23 days, before being becalmed for several days in the English Channel. It was to be 12 years before they lined up again for another OSTAR.

In June, 1979, *Galway Blazer* departed Dartmouth to attempt a non-stop, singlehanded circumnavigation. Peter had been married to his wife, Alix, for just 12 weeks. His ambition was *to sort myself out and to get GB to complete the mission she was built for.* With his long, curly dark hair and pearl earring, Peter Crowther was a striking contrast to the dapper Commander King, but he was



Galway Blazer

the way of a traditional interior, being mostly open. There were 25 gallons of paraffin for cooking, 88 gallons of water in 3 tanks, and a further 50 gallons in containers. He measured out the water with his kettle, averaging 2 pints a day. Peter Crowther is a man who enjoys food and usually sat down to a hearty meal with all the trimmings at least once a day.

He also had over 300 books aboard, mostly easy reading, once again in contrast to Bill King's deeply philosophical library. One thing that was not on board was Bill King's religious shrine that he made over the chart table, with sayings such as *Oh Lord, my ship is so small, thy ocean so great*. It was the first thing that Peter Crowther ripped out when

he bought the boat. In times

of crisis, such as the occasion when a school of killer whales cavorted around *Galway Blazer* for hours, he is more likely to turn to a bottle of Glenlivet.

Sailing down the Atlantic, Peter worked on preparing the boat for the hard days ahead, putting crab-pot netting over lockers and shelves and putting together his survival pack,

consisting of food canisters, water jugs, a lifebuoy and a flashing light, all roped together. His approach to voyaging was to *never do any advanced navigation, plan ahead. I wait until the boat and I are feeling a little togetherness*. The forepeak became his workshop, where he re-glued a number of the hickory battens, broken in a couple of accidental gybes while running.

The frequency of broken battens worried him, and he wondered if he would have enough material aboard to complete a non-stop circumnavigation. On later voyages he tried other types of batten, from plastic pipes with wooden inserts to 16mm thick, flat carbon fibre extrusions, but they were all too flexible. He came to prefer wooden battens, despite the need to repair them regularly. He did not try tubular carbon fibre or aluminium.

The south-east trades proved boisterous, getting up to 35 knots. *Galway Blazer* thumped along, keeping pace with her earlier passage times on this route. He had fun comparing his progress to others who had made this voyage, Alec Rose, Robin Knox Johnston, Naomi James. They were all closely matched. The motion unseated his masthead navigation light. He thought briefly about going up to fix it but it fell into the sea before he could do so. After he came through the trades, he spent one calm day re-tensioning all the parrels, checking the lashings, and tallowing every rope in sight.

All too soon he was in his first Southern Ocean gale, which lasted 6 days. He had to go on deck twice, once to rescue the mainsheet which had been washed overboard and wrapped around the self-steering paddle, and once to secure the mainsail after the lashings on the main yard chafed through. After this, *Galway Blazer* lay to under a reefed foresail only, jogging along at 70 degrees to the wind, suffering a knockdown that pushed them sideways rather than capsizing the boat.

This gale was followed a frustrating period. The self-steering gear began to play up, the boat gybed several times, the main boom broke, the mainsail split, the yards fouled the topping lifts in squalls, and he began to think he would not be able to complete the voyage non-stop. Like Robin Knox Johnston on *Suhaili* before him, he was finding that the Southern ocean in spring can be an unfriendly place.

A few days later they were capsized completely but without losing the masts. The mainsail, however, was badly damaged, the sheet spans tearing away from the leech of the sail. Later, while replacing the sail with his spare main, he let go a topping lift and had to climb the mast in a force six wind with the boat rolling heavily. While he was up there, he accidentally swung around the mast, trapping a delicate part of his anatomy against the spar, which made him scream in pain and frustration, but he captured

to prove equally determined when faced with imminent disaster.

The boat was also very well-stocked, in contrast to Bill King's spartan diet. There were 188 packets of vacuum-packed meats, 600 assorted tins, rice, potatoes, 240 cans of beer, 48 bottles of spirits and 36 bottles of wine, all stored in kit bags tied to the sides of the boat, as *Galway Blazer* had little in

the errant lift and made it back to the deck.

On their 99th day, *Galway Blazer* suffered another, violent capsizing, breaking both masts, the main snapping off at deck level and the foremast half way up. He later found cracked paint along the centerline of the deck, from the force of being slammed upside down into the sea. He dug out the instruction manual for hoisting the jury rig a-frame, written for Bill King by Blondie Hasler. It was, he said, so clearly and succinctly written that you could not fail to succeed in hoisting it, if you followed it step by step. 30 days later he sailed unaided into Cape Town, although he was so frazzled by this time that he could not remember his own phone number.

In Cape Town he decided to re-rig the boat and sail back to England. It would be rather late to carry on for Cape Horn once he had re-rigged, and he also wanted to sail in the 1980 OSTAR. Somewhat ambitiously perhaps, they were already officially entered, since he'd intended to complete his circumnavigation before the race started. He came to regret this decision to abandon the circumnavigation, realizing that his obsession with the OSTAR had clouded his judgment and let his dream of doubling Cape Horn slip away.

However, as it turned out, it would not be until 1988 that *Galway Blazer* again lined up for the OSTAR, Unbelievably, on the way back to

England for the 1980 start, sailing with Alix in moderate trade-wind weather, they were dismayed yet again, due to faulty workmanship by the mast builder in Cape Town. The glued scarfs in the new mainmast and the repaired foremast both failed. After their return, the birth of two children, a mortgage, and a new career as a publican all took their toll of the years.

The 1988 OSTAR had 95 starters (and a new name, but everybody still called it the OSTAR unofficially). *Galway Blazer* came 69th out of 73 finishers, in a time of 33 days. They sailed the rhumb-line course once again, across the Grand Banks. There was a lot of fog and several close encounters with whales. Another contestant, the wryly named (in retrospect) *Hyccup*, sank after being attacked by a pod of up to 50 or 60 whales, which had surrounded the vessel for three days prior to ramming it.

The most serious incident on *Galway Blazer* was the sheering of the bolt securing the foremast to its step, allowing the mast to move alarmingly and leak at the partners. This was the year that Mike Richey lost the original *Jester*. They had dinner together in Newport, a sad occasion, before *Galway Blazer* sailed for home with a friend as crew, in a very fast time of 25 days. On the way, the topping lifts broke and Peter had to go up the masts twice.

They sailed again in 1992, one of 67 starters. A large hatch was cut into the cabin top to make entry easier, another crack in the hull, possibly caused by

the movement of the foremast in the last race, was repaired, and rot cut out of several stringers and frames. This time Peter decided to try a more southerly route, following the waypoints used by the 1980 race winner, Phil Weld, on *Moxie*, thus avoiding the cold temperatures, fog and potential icebergs of the more northerly route.

This resulted in a fast, comfortable passage, until one night near the end of the voyage. While crossing the Gulf Stream, *Galway Blazer* was caught by one of that area's infamous northerly gales. Beating to windward in steep breaking seas, the hull developed a 10 inch split that opened and closed as the boat flexed. Peter had to make two attempts at patching it before the leak subsided enough to make pumping manageable. He said it was the first time at sea that he'd felt lonely and seriously frightened. To add to his woes and exhaustion, his GPS packed up and he had to resort to navigating with a sextant, always a challenge in those fog and tide-affected waters. He crossed the line in 49th place, with an elapsed time of just under 33 days.

If all this was not enough, on the way home *Galway Blazer* collided with a whale, luckily without further structural damage. Although he claimed to have no overwhelming urge to sail in the OSTAR again, that event that had once so obsessed him, *Galway Blazer* was there again at the 1996 start. It was partially because no one else had ever successfully completed five consecutive events.

He'd had to undertake extensive repairs, fixing the split from the last race properly and cutting out some rot around the portholes and in the decks and deck shelf. The boat was also re-fitted with new gear and electronics.

8 days after the start, Peter was standing at the chart table when he heard a small thump. It wasn't very dramatic but, looking forward instinctively, he saw green water pouring into the hull. He only had time to make a hurried mayday call on his SSB radio before scrambling into his liferaft. 6 hours later he was rescued by a passing ship, the *Atlantic Compass*.

After 20 years, his love affair with *Galway Blazer* was over. He still misses her, but has continued to make ocean passages. This year, sailing a Swan 38 called *Suomi Kudu*, he undertook his ninth OSTAR race at the age of 71. His finish time was 30 days, 14 hours, 13 minutes. Very consistent! His times on GB were only a couple of days slower.

