

JRA Hall of Fame

by Graham Cox

Donald Ridler & Erik the Red

Donald Ridler.

1941 -

In the northern spring of 1970, while Bill King was sailing *Galway Blazer* from Gibraltar to England, another junk-rigged yacht was setting out on the same passage in the opposite direction. Donald Ridler, aboard his small, home-built ketch, *Erik the Red*, was bound for the West Indies via Gibraltar.

Unlike the dapper, retired naval commander, Donald was a child of the sixties, long-haired, bearded, attired in scruffy jeans, and something of a dropout by his own admission, although he was an Oxford graduate and the son of a clergyman.

Apart from having junk rig, their vessels were also very different. *Galway Blazer*, built by Souters, one of the best boat-building firms in England, had cost more than £14,000 and was superbly finished, right down to the last detail. She always looked sleek and uncluttered. *Erik the Red*, built with demolition timber and driftwood from nearby Chesil Beach, cost the astonishing sum of £165, plus another £60 for anchors and other gear, and £30 for navigation equipment. The majority of the wood was old, three-quarter inch floorboards. The boat looked a bit dilapidated and cluttered right from the start, something Donald cheerfully conceded.

The voyage was also somewhat more precariously financed. When Donald set out, he had £20 in cash, £50 invested in stores (mostly porridge, corned beef, curry powder and rice), and a rainy day fund of £50 in traveller's cheques.

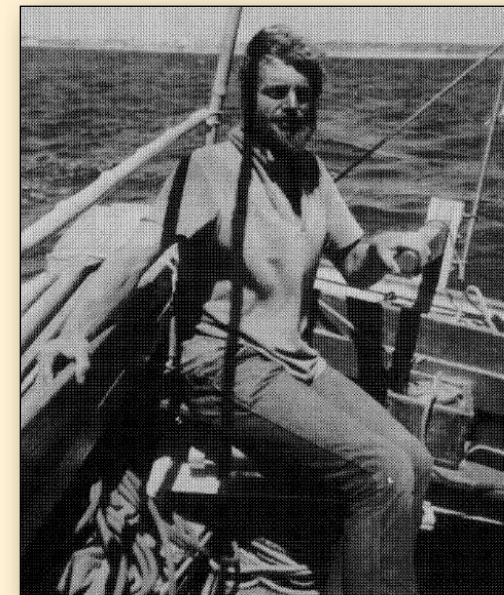
The boat had taken four years to build, in the back garden of his father's rectory. A lot of time was spent scrounging materials or waiting for suitable weather. When it rained he had to cover the boat with sheets of plastic. He also hid it from view whenever his father had visitors, as he was rather ashamed of it.

Unable to find or afford suitable timber for the frames, Donald sawed some of the boards into strips and glued them together. He had very few clamps (or other tools), so had to use Spanish windlasses to clamp the strips together. His only power tool was a small drill with a cutting attachment. In his book, entitled *Erik the Red* (which contains some excellent droll humour), Donald wrote, *If the boat could have been built out of twigs, the birds in the village would have had no nests.* However, unlike many dreamers, he had a fine knack for knowing just how much he could get away with. Besides the glue, which cost more than the timber, he also used bronze Gripfast nails, so that the boat, despite its alarming, ramshackle appearance, was actually quite strong. An old shipwright, Ernie, who had retired to the village, came by and gave

his seal of approval, as well as some invaluable advice.

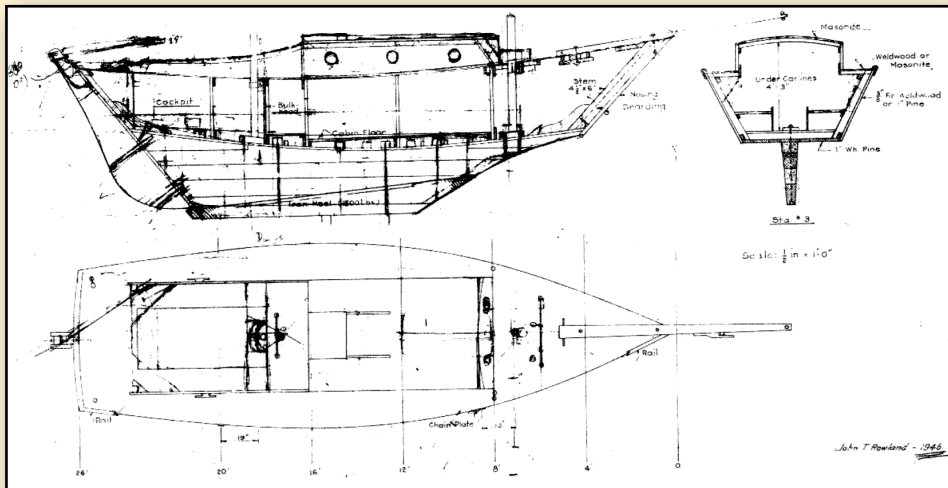
The keel was of concrete, with stainless-steel reinforcing, and he took professional advice on the construction of this. The masts were Douglas Fir trees, planed smooth and smeared with linseed oil. Later, when the parrels rubbed the oil off, the masts developed deep cracks. The mast steps were cut from railway sleepers. Sails were made from unbleached cotton, that Donald bought cheaply, and were sewn on his mother's sewing machine in the space of one week. Some of his blocks were old electrical insulators that he found on a rubbish tip, others cheap industrial pulleys with steel sheaves.

The boat had been designed by an American, John Rowland, some 20 years earlier, based on a traditional Cape Anne dory. It was a small boat by any standards, only 26 feet 10 inches LOA, made smaller still by its very large, open cockpit, leaving a cabin that was only 8 feet by 5 feet, with 4 feet 6 inches of headroom. Donald changed the rig from bermudian ketch to junk ketch, with spars of the same height and in the same location as the originals, drawing a junk sail plan over the existing one. He thought it would be fun to sail, and also rightly deduced that it was the only rig



he could build on his budget that would still be seaworthy.

He had no contact with Blondie Hasler, or others involved in junk rig in England at the time, but appears to have copied details from Chinese working junks. There is no doubt he could have benefited from some advice. For instance, his sheets did not have enough drift, so that he had to sheet them to the windward rail, shifting them from side to side in the Chinese fashion. This might be acceptable on a working junk with a large crew, but it gave Donald many difficult moments. Reefing or gybing



Eric the Red - Plans and sections

downwind became a bit of a nightmare. On such a short boat with two masts, it is difficult to gain sufficient drift, particularly on the forward mast, but using double sheets might have improved the handling of his sails.

His battens were bamboo, with thinner keep battens on the opposite side, originally tied together with twine. He soon reverted to the Chinese method of tying them together with wire. He used short batten parrels, with chopped plastic hose threaded onto them like beads, and very long Hong Kong parrels, with the lower end tied abaft amidships. He found it important to keep just the right amount of tension on these, so that only the parrel on the boom (or lowest batten, as Donald called it) had any strain on it. This allowed the sail to go up and down with minimum friction, provided there was no wind in the sail.

The topping lifts were also arranged in the Chinese style. They were not attached to the boom, but to the next batten up. The lowest sail panel was reefed by tying it up to the batten above, then the rest of the sail was reefed or furled into the lifts as usual. The theory behind this is that you can get the maximum sail area for a given mast height in light airs, but lift the sail up in rough weather to avoid breaking seas.

The boat had no engine or electrics, a paraffin lamp and stove, a sextant, wristwatch and transistor radio for time signals and entertainment. There was no self-steering device, but Donald soon developed novel, if not particularly efficient, ways to make the boat steer itself.

He named the boat *Erik the Red* because he came across a supply of cheap red paint. He was launched into Bridport Harbour in late December, 1969.

Erik the Red left Bridport in February, 1970, bound for points south. Donald knew it was a bit early to leave, but Bridport Harbour proved a dangerous place to keep a boat in winter. Having already sailed as crew on a yacht delivery to Gibraltar, he was not entirely without experience, but he gained a great deal more over the next 10 days, tacking back and forth across Lyme Bay in a severe gale. He made it into Falmouth eventually, where he decided to take the Harbourmaster's advice and wait until May before proceeding.

He was thrilled, nonetheless, to know that *Erik the Red* could withstand storm-force winds. The only problem had been the loss of his halyards due to weak mast strops on the upper blocks. He rigged temporary halyards with the lifts and carried on with reduced sail. Before he left again, he made sure he had spare halyards on both masts.

In Falmouth he met the first of many ocean voyagers who gave him advice and assistance. On this occasion it was the legendary boatbuilder, designer and artist, Paul Erling Johnson, on his 28 foot, engineless, gaff ketch, *Venus II*. Paul's first *Venus* had been an ancient, clinker-planked fishing boat from the Shetland Islands: 18 foot LOA, which he'd sailed to Norway and across the Atlantic singlehanded. Originally an open boat, he had decked it and rigged it as a gaff ketch, largely with scavenged materials.

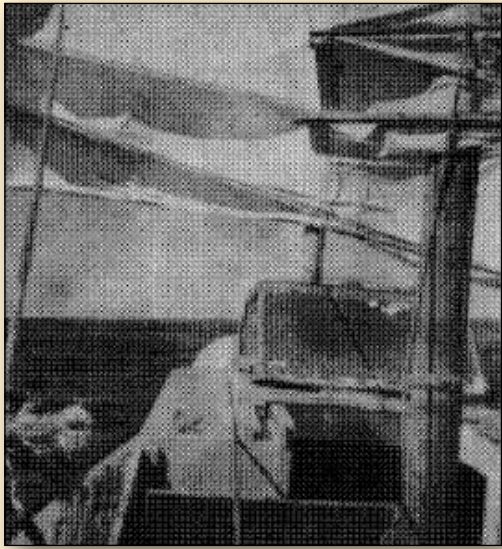
Donald left Falmouth on 10 May 1970, bound for Gibraltar. He was afflicted by calms in the first week, and was run down in the Bay of Biscay by a fishing boat, that did not see the weak glow of

his paraffin lantern. Luckily the mizzen absorbed most of the blow and *Erik* only suffered a small dent in the transom. After this he hoisted an old biscuit tin to the masthead. It soon became a rusty eyesore but hopefully increased his radar image. It also gave a satisfying clang every time the boat rolled. He said it reminded him of the bells outside Eastern temples, intended to ward off evil spirits, and hoped it might provide a similar service.

When the northerlies freshened off the coast of Portugal, he began to experiment with ways of getting the boat to self-steer downwind. He had already discovered it would sail itself happily to windward, albeit very slowly, with the helm lashed. Off the wind, he eased the mizzen until the leech was pointing forwards and spilling some wind from the sail, then took the sheet to the tiller with shock cord on the opposite side.

He discovered that he could make incremental adjustments to the course by tensioning or easing the mizzen halyard. Eventually he also set the mainsail this way and took its sheet to the tiller opposite the mizzen sheet. This was not particularly efficient, as both sails were spilling some of their wind, but the boat still managed to sail at 3 - 4 knots. This arrangement, however, did have other drawbacks, as he was soon to discover.

Like many sailors before him, he ran into a moderate easterly gale as he approached the Straits of Gibraltar and lay ahull for 2 days. *Erik the Red* behaved impeccably, bobbing up and down and riding the breaking seas quite



Erik running

to shift the mainsheet to the other side, this was always a bit frantic.

On this occasion it proved more traumatic than usual. When the boat gybed, the mainsail suffered a fan-up, the battens lying up along the mast. One of the drawbacks with easing the sails so far forward is that you cannot haul the sheets in without first spilling wind from the sail, as there is too much compression of the battens, which are liable to break. (*Practical Junk Rig* (PJR) specifically cautions against gybing in strong winds with slack sheets.)

Donald then tried to round up to get the battens to come down again, but instead the whole sail blew up to the masthead. His system of tying the topping lifts to the second batten meant he did not have a tack downhaul fitted. It took some time fishing with the boathook before he hooked one of the lifts and dragged the sail down. This was to be an ongoing problem, and Donald came to dread squalls and reefing downwind, especially at night.

He had intended to stop in Casablanca but missed it due to poor navigation. From then on he determined to take the subject more seriously, and eventually became an extremely competent navigator. Most of the passage to Las Palmas passed uneventfully and he dropped anchor in that port on 26 September, joining a zany bunch of fellow voyagers anchored in the outer harbour.

Those were the days when the majority of ocean voyagers were memorable

characters, sailing a fascinating collection of vessels - people such as Christian, a Swede with a derelict Brixham trawler, built for the salt-fish trade in Africa. He was an artist with very little money and he was refitting his boat with bits and pieces salvaged from other wrecks, most of which were on the harbour bottom. Anything you want, he said, it is down there. Donald and *Erik the Red* fitted perfectly into this crowd, a lifetime away from the smart yachts of the Solent.

They departed Las Palmas for Barbados on 17 October. *Erik* had 30 gallons of water aboard, enough for 60 days he hoped. Besides porridge, corned beef and rice, Donald had a small quantity of fresh fruit and vegetables, and hoped to collect some flying fish, *those obliging creatures which jump out of the sea and onto your plate*. In this he was to be disappointed. Apart from some tiny specimens, the only one he got, came aboard on the last night at sea and he threw it back. Food was always carefully rationed as he had so little aboard. He did not find this depressing, however, noting that hunger sharpened his appreciation, and that eating sparingly was good for his health.

The winds were light at first and he saw ships every day for the first 7 days, which kept him on high alert, napping for short periods. Then the ships disappeared and he settled into a comfortable routine. He reefed most nights in case of squalls and went to bed, sailing happily without lights, since other, more experienced voyagers had told him there were no ships out there.

He always reefed the mainsail first, as he found this large sail, so far forward, had a tendency to depress the bow and make the boat round up. He usually just dropped one or two panels, but, if necessary, the boat would sail quite happily under full mizzen with just a scrap of the main up to assist in self-steering.

(This possibly makes a good argument for schooner rig, with the added advantage that the foresail can be used as an effective storm sail. It can also be argued that a small boat like *Erik the Red* is more efficient with one mast, but self-steering with the sail would have been challenging, if not impossible.)

Donald went on deck at dawn and checked the rig, raising more sail if conditions warranted it, prepared breakfast, did some exercises, made celestial navigation observations. In the afternoons he read. He learned Shakespeare by heart and recited it to the birds. At dusk he cooked a curry and read by the light of his lamp for a couple of hours before turning in. These rituals helped him ward off lethargy, which he found to be a constant risk of singlehanded sailing.

Once, in light airs when the boat hardly seemed to be moving, he jumped over the side and was alarmed to discover that he could barely swim back to the boat. After that he hove-to and lashed the tiller down when he swam. Later he gave up swimming or even washing in salt water, because he began to develop salt water sores on his skin.

In unsettled weather, he set his alarm for every 2 hours, otherwise he left it for 4

comfortably. He dropped anchor in Gibraltar 24 days out of Falmouth. It was a slow passage, he did not cook much en route and his navigation left something to be desired (he was still having trouble establishing longitude), but he was satisfied. Both skipper and boat had proved they were capable of making a singlehanded ocean passage.

They departed Gibraltar on 16 September, bound for the Canary Islands. On the first night out, off Tarifa, Donald discovered the shortcomings of his downwind self-steering arrangements. Running wing and wing with the sheets tied to the tiller, he found he needed to reef in rising winds. That meant first gybing the mainsail in order to spill the wind from the sail. Because he had to let go of the tiller in the middle of the gybe and rush forward

hours. He would lie in his bunk, listening to the boat rushing through the seas, sounding like a rocket-ship blasting through space. Through the hatch, he watched the moon and stars wheeling across the sky.

Sometimes the boat would suffer an accidental gybe and he would have to scramble on deck, untangle everything and re-set the self-steering lines. This inevitably meant sail repairs, as the sheets would tear the leech of the sails, but, having junk rig, he could usually keep sailing until dawn. Eventually he tied rope between the batten ends, as an external bolt rope, which helped support the luff and leech.

Erik covered 1,000 miles in the first 11 days, and then had a spell of 120-mile days. The boat had a fast, quick roll which he found exhausting, but eventually he realized he could go a few degrees off a dead run and the rolling stopped. More troubling, was that the masts began to move about, loosening their wedges and banging around. The noise almost drove him crazy until he jammed an old chisel into the mainmast partners.

Donald was initially enchanted with the voyage, looking about him with a keen eye, hoping for interesting sights, sea monsters perhaps, or at least the odd whale or sea-bird. Mostly, though, he just saw an empty ocean and fell to musing. *What a strange feeling it is to sail a small boat alone in the middle of an ocean! It is a feeling of such unreality. The boat himself seems to have purpose enough but what of you? What are you doing here being carried endlessly over surging waves in a world of nothingness?*

The weather became squally in the second half of the crossing, a common phenomenon on this passage, and from then on his nights became very trying. It was with considerable relief that he dropped anchor in Carlisle Bay, Barbados, after 31 days at sea. The waters of Carlisle Bay were so clear, with the bottom looming up, that he feared he would run aground until he saw some of his cruising friends from Las Palmas anchored up ahead of him.

After a pleasant few weeks in Barbados, enjoying the company of hospitable locals and other voyagers, he began to think about what came next. Most of the other voyagers were in no hurry to go anywhere, having spent a lifetime dreaming of the West Indies, but Donald astonished them by declaring he intended to sail back to England. The trip out had been just too easy, he decided. He felt that crossing the Atlantic in the Westerlies would be more of a test.

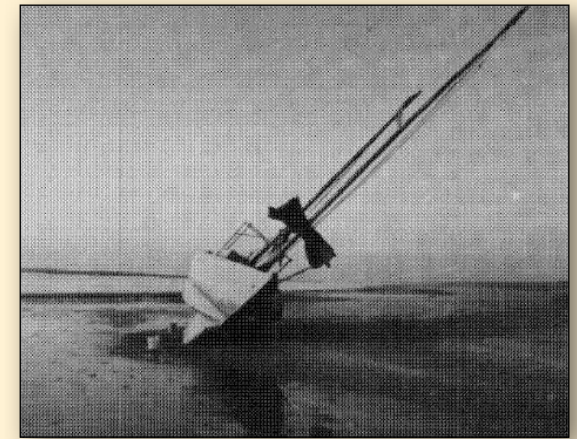
However, first of all he had to get some money together so off he went looking for work in the charter fleet. He worked for a month in Grenada, made a few memorable friends but found the political atmosphere oppressive. He then sailed to English Harbour on Antigua, where he worked for 6 months. The political climate on Antigua was much the same as Grenada, but the charter boat fleet of English Harbour, existed in a world of its own. In the end he decided it was too close-knit, riven with rivalries, affairs and feuds. He was glad when he'd made enough money to set sail once again.

Erik the Red sailed from Antigua on 14 June 1971. Amusingly, Donald though he'd left on the 7th: somewhere along the way he'd lost a whole week! This was to cause some navigation problems as he approached Bermuda, but initially, with the sun high overhead in the tropical summer, he did not notice any differences between his DR and celestial fixes.

He broke a batten on the first day out, once again as a result of sheeting his sails out beyond 90° for self-steering purposes. He continued to experiment with the best arrangement for self-steering, this time setting both sails to leeward but running the mainsheet to the windward side of the tiller. It worked, but if possible he preferred to lash the tiller.

On this homeward passage, he decided to sleep in the day and stay awake all night, due to being close to shipping lanes all the way. The first week provided easy sailing with steady beam winds, but then they ran into squalls. One of these damaged the main and he lowered all of it except for the top panels. *Erik* continued sailing at the same speed but was much easier on the helm, with less tendency to depress the bows.

They arrived in Bermuda on 29 June, discovering that they were 9 miles out in longitude due to his error with the date. Apart from the broken batten, a broken halyard and a near collision with a whale (he was alerted by the whale slapping its tail on the water), it had been an uneventful passage. He had no



Erik careened

charts of this reef-beset island, but tacked in by eye, lamenting how reluctant *Erik* was to come about when on starboard tack.

Bermuda was far too expensive for penniless ocean vagabonds, despite the generous assistance of a local tourist operator, and he left after one week. He headed north, looking for the Westerlies, and in order to skirt around the Azores High that lay on the direct route.

Donald soon settled back into his ocean routines. Although his logbooks were just ordinary exercise books, arising, he said, from the English law of *Not Taking Things Too Seriously*, he was a good navigator by this stage and kept an accurate record. At night he listened to the radio and read, looking out every 15 minutes. He kept the lamp burning all night, in the cabin, ready for immediate deployment on deck if needed. When he was sleepy he used an alarm to make sure he kept to his regular lookout.



Erik in the Azores

rust. He then used methylated spirits in a tin until he began to run out of that. Later in the voyage, after he left Horta for England, he resorted to using candles, then just the candle grease.

Unsettled weather continued, with winds gusting to Force 6. *Erik* ran along at 3 knots, buffeted by large, confused seas, and Donald began to cast a jaundiced eye over his vessel. He noted that the boat always appeared to be extremely untidy, above and below. He took, rather too enthusiastically at times, to throwing things overboard. He looked around at his rough workmanship and felt, he wrote, that they were riding on the rims.

In Antigua he had made a new suit of sails from an old cotton genoa that was given to him. They were better than the original bed-sheet sails but now they, too, began to suffer from hard usage. He tied lines between the after batten ends of both sails to take weight off the leech.

He also noted how hard it is to work on a junk sail at sea. *PJR* recommends lowering the sail bundle to the deck and, if necessary, removing a few of the battens, but Donald concluded that the best way to work on it was to hoist it, although sewing can then become precarious. He decided that next time he would take an office stapler and just staple temporary patches on.

Squalls and fickle winds kept driving them south out of the Gulf Stream. Their daily average fell from 80 miles to 50 and he became exhausted from

incessant boat handling. One night he fell asleep and had a close shave with a ship. Despite the lively motion and tiredness, however, he completed a temporary repair of his gunwale which was showing signs of opening up.

As his food supplies dwindled he ate less and less, foregoing breakfast altogether. He might have been somewhat hungry when he arrived in Horta on 3 August, but he was well-looked after here by the legendary Henriques and his son, Peter, at Café Sport. He loved Horta, but the risk of autumn gales and dwindling funds sent him back to sea on 20 August, on the last 1,600 mile leg, which turned out, surprisingly, to be the longest passage of the voyage.

Erik immediately ran into a NE gale, and then was beset by squally, variable winds. In one vicious squall he cut the mainsheet to stop the boat being overwhelmed (once again, his ungainly mainsheet system proved to be dangerously inefficient). They made good 480 miles in the first 10 days and then had a run of 400 miles before SW winds for four days, before the wind went into the east and stayed there.

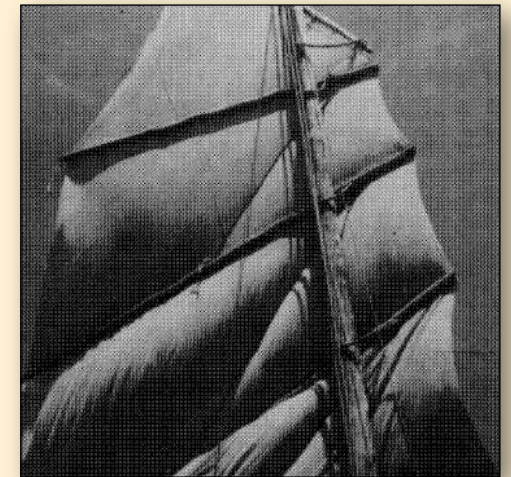
Donald awoke one morning to the sound of a dog barking. It sounded almost overhead and he leapt on deck to discover a large trawler alongside, attempting to salvage *Erik*. When he made his appearance they withdrew somewhat ungraciously.

The SE wind drove *Erik* up to the coast of Ireland near Fastnet Rock, where he was almost run down by a passenger liner in misty drizzle.

Things were getting desperate. He was down to using candles for light and cooking, making a lamp out of a candle in a glass jar, although it was too weak to alert other ships to his presence. The mainsail was in bad shape. He had to lash several battens together to take out the top three panels, which made the boat sail even more slowly.

It took 6 days to sail from Fastnet to the Isles of Scilly. They passed the Lizard after 31 days at sea, but it took another 3 days, battling strong spring tides, to get into Falmouth. He ran completely out of food and fuel and had to resort to using amphetamine pills to stay awake.

In Falmouth they were met by family, friends and the press. *Erik* and Donald became briefly famous, appearing at the London Boat Show. Few people could have voyaged so far and so successfully with so few resources. But Donald refused to take the attention seriously. He gave the boat to Exeter Maritime

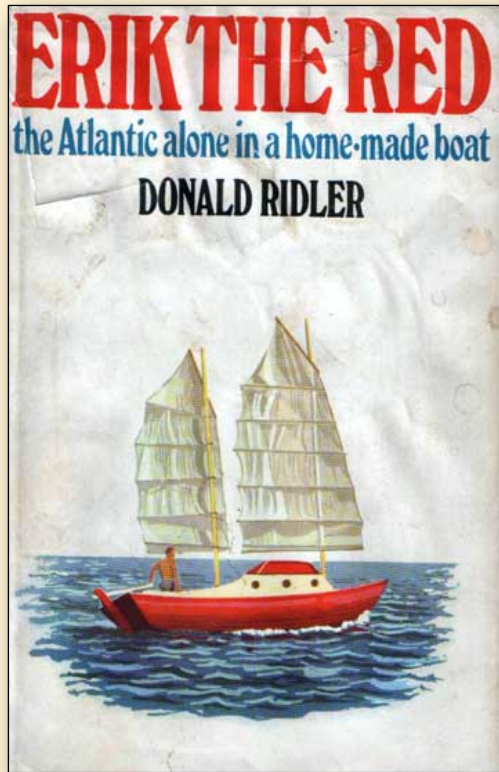


Erik's Mizzen Sail

Nonetheless, he did doze off occasionally and had a couple of scares.

On 12 July they ran into strong westerlies and driving rain. The cabin was soon soaked, as Donald had to leave a small gap open in the hatch, which was his only source of ventilation. *Erik* ran on under 2 panels of the mizzen plus a tiny portion of the main to maintain self-steering.

These days, whenever he went on deck, he tied himself to a rope that he kept attached to the mast, with the end in the cockpit. At least he could still prepare meals, as his galley had a large gimbaled shelf on which he placed stove, pots, cups etc. The stoves, however, were causing him escalating dramas. He broke the pricker in his Primus and reverted to using a solid-fuel stove, until it crumbled away from



The book cover has the best colour picture of Erik

real Chinese junk), then set off on a circumnavigation of the world.

Erik was seen in Darwin, Australia, some years later by fellow Englishman, Colin Martin. He was sitting in the cockpit, reading. He had a very long beard, a dark tan, and was wearing just a pair of old shorts. He told Colin about sailing across the Pacific using rudimentary Polynesian navigation methods, with a 'chart' made out of sticks, stones and string. He slept in a hammock (at least in Darwin, which is hot even in winter) and seemed to have only a few possessions.

He left for Bali the next day, rounded the Cape of Good Hope the following summer and was wrecked in the Cape Verde Islands in 1977. Still engineless, *Erik* was becalmed and drifted onto the rocks, a sad end for a gallant vessel that had almost crossed her outward track and circumnavigated the world.

Unfortunately, Donald did not publish any material about this later voyage (his logbooks may have been destroyed in the shipwreck) and the details of his subsequent life are unknown.

Note: All quotes in this article are taken from Donald Ridler's book, *Erik the Red*, published by William Kimber, London, 1972.

["Erik the Red" can be downloaded in PDF format from the JRA library]



Museum and quietly retired from the limelight.

When he left the West Indies, he said he was sailing home to complete the voyage, rather than drift endlessly on across tropical seas. He envisaged moving on to new challenges, now that he had the confidence to tackle them. However, just a couple of years later, he retrieved *Erik* from the museum, built a large cabin aft, over much of the open cockpit (which made the boat look like a