

JRA Hall of Fame

by Graham Cox

Mike Richey

(1917 - 2009)

When Blondie Hasler sold *Jester* to Michael Richey in 1964, he could not have found a more suitable candidate to take the helm. Mike eventually became so closely associated with the legend of *Jester*, that the vessel's legacy has as much to do with him as it did with Blondie.

Mike was already an accomplished navigator at the time he bought *Jester*, having learned his craft in the Royal Navy during the Second World War. (He joined the Navy despite being a pacifist, believing that Nazism represented the greater evil.) In the RN he discovered he had a flair for navigation. Recognizing this, the Navy enrolled him in the long navigation course aboard HMS *Dryad*. He was then assigned to specialist navigation duties, including preparations for the D-Day landings.

When the War ended, the Royal Geographic Society asked Mike to set up the Institute of Navigation (which became the Royal Institute of Navigation in 1972). He served as its director for 35 years, playing an influential role in many of the debates about safe navigation, retiring from this post in 1983. He also established and edited the *Journal of Navigation*. Mike took up ocean racing in the 1950s, racing with many top skippers such as John Illingworth and Rod Stephens and developed a reputation as the navigator to beat. On several occasions - such as during the 1959 Fastnet Race aboard *Anitra* - his star fixes made the difference between winning and losing. He went on to become a legendary singlehanded sailor, aboard *Jester*.

Despite making 13 solo crossings of the Atlantic (and numerous shorter passages), in what can only be described as a simple, Spartan vessel, Mike Richey was a sophisticated and complex man. He was profoundly religious, intending initially to become a monk and spending some time with a Trappist Order on Caldey Island, South Wales, before choosing a secular life. He was apprenticed to a famous sculptor, Eric Gill, in 1936 and worked on some of his installations, personally cutting the lettering on two of Gill's most famous edifices, the United Nations building in Geneva and the Oxford Playhouse.

Ashore, he counted Francis Chichester (who encouraged him to buy *Jester* and take up solo sailing) and the novelist Graham Greene as friends, among many others. Graham Greene considered Mike to be an accomplished writer, who could make even a non-sailor like himself get a feeling for crossing oceans alone in a tiny boat. In 1942, he was awarded the inaugural *John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for Literature*, for an article about being blown up by a mine aboard HMS *Goodwill*. (This prize has since been awarded to every major English novelist under the age of 35.) He also wrote for the *Journal of Navigation*, the Royal Cruising Club's *Roving Commissions*, *Cruising World* and *Yachting Monthly*. His *On Reflection* articles for *Yachting Monthly* developed a cult following. A selection of them can be read on the *Jester* Challenge website (www.jesterinfo.org/mikerichey.html). They are all interesting, but the article entitled *Jester's Ultimate Storm* is one of the finest accounts ever written of surviving a major storm at sea.

Despite having no electricity, motor or refrigerator aboard *Jester*,



Mike perfected the art of elegant simplicity. He dined on air-dried hams, reindeer, spicy sausages, tomatoes, onions and garlic, on a bed of rice, lentils or spaghetti, washed down with a glass or two of his favourite red wine, drunk from a silver goblet. He was famously photographed at the start of one OSTAR with one hand on the whipstaff and the other holding his goblet, the very image of a laid-back sailor. When not dining in style, navigating or contemplating life, Mike enjoyed reading or listening to music. His library included works by Gibbon, St Paul and Conrad. It is perhaps fitting that this one-time trainee monk, should indulge in long periods of solitary contemplation during his mature years.

Jester came last in every OSTAR, something that pleased Mike, for he was not in the least bit competitive. He jokingly called the OSTAR "a race for every animal in the zoo". The race merely gave his voyages a purpose and a structure, which he preferred to just sailing about aimlessly. He was more interested in the personal and technical challenges involved. In an interview with *Cruising World*, he noted, "you spend a lot of time wishing you were somewhere else. But it is fun, a nice way of life. We spend much time looking for reality. It gives a sense of reality." He professed to not having much interest in the technical aspects of sailing, although he was obviously adequately competent. His main technical interest lay in the



Mike aboard *Jester*

challenges of navigating across the Atlantic.

One of those challenges was what route to take. Like Blondie, he studied the available routes carefully. Although he made very different decisions, they agreed that the direct route was the least suitable for a small boat. In 1968, he took *Jester* on the southern, or trade wind route, going down to 25°N and sailing along that latitude until 65°W, before angling up for Newport. He had a very pleasant voyage, surging along in the trade winds under a squared-off sail in warm sunshine, but this route is considerably longer than the direct course (5000 miles as opposed to 3000), and the passage took him 57 days. In later races he attempted the intermediate route via the Azores, with mixed results. In 1972, taking this course, *Jester* finished in 58 days.

Blondie noted that the Azores route might be effective in one in five years. There are two inherent

problems with this route, the possibility of prolonged calms near the Azores High and, later, being driven north of the course by a combination of SW headwinds and an adverse Gulf Stream. Both expose the inherent weaknesses of junk rig, especially in the days before cambered sails (insufficient canvas in light winds and windward ability). I would dispute that junk rig is inherently slow in light winds. Certainly, my *Badger* ghosted at least as well as most other cruising yachts.

There have been some successful passages on this route however. In 1968, Tom Follet came third aboard the proa *Cheers*, not far behind two much larger monohulls that sailed the direct route. He covered fewer miles than any other competitor. Pete Hill also had a spectacular passage in the 2006 Jester Challenge, aboard the junk-rigged *Shanti*, coming second, in an elapsed time of 44 days. One could do worse than simply follow

Shanti's daily positions, (I'm not sure exactly what Graham means, here.) recorded on the Jester Challenge website. Mike's best result came in 1992, aboard the new *Jester*, arguably a better performer with its cold-moulded hull and improved ballast ratio, with an elapsed time of 45 days. He also celebrated his 76th birthday at sea.

Jester started in every OSTAR during Mike's ownership but she did not always finish. During the stormy 1976 race, when half the fleet did not finish and two competitors died, he sensibly retired in favour of a summer cruise in Ireland. In 1984, driven north by gale-force headwinds and the Gulf Stream, he retired to Halifax with a damaged sail. In the 1988 OSTAR, 470 miles east of Halifax, *Jester* was abandoned at sea after suffering severe structural damage. Mike never forgave himself for abandoning her, but sympathetic friends formed the Jester Trust and built a replica, which Mike sailed for a further 12 years.

He announced his retirement after the 1992 race but his replacement skipper did not find *Jester* to her liking, so he entered again in 1996, coming 42nd (and last), in a time of 57 days. He had his 80th birthday at sea and earned a place in the Guinness Book of Records. In 2000 he started again but retired to the Azores with a faulty stove. *Jester* was then sold to JRA member, Trevor Leek, who continues to campaign her in singlehanded events.

Jester's 1984 retirement led to the incident described in *Jester's Ultimate Storm*. In 1986, on passage back to England, *Jester* was knocked down and broke her mast on the continental shelf, 25 days out of Halifax and 300 miles west of Land's End. Mike, who was standing in the hatch at the time, was bent over backwards and damaged three vertebrae in his spine. This injury forced him reluctantly to activate his EPIRB. After suffering further structural

damage from a Spanish trawler, who wanted Mike to abandon *Jester*, the yacht was rescued by a ship, being winched aboard without further damage. Considering that there was a 15-foot sea running at the time, this was a remarkable achievement. The structural stresses endured in this incident may have contributed to her loss two years later.

Mike Richey died in 2009, aged 92. When he abandoned *Jester* in 1988, one of the reasons cited was that he didn't want yacht club worthies to raise their glasses to him, saying that it was the way he'd have

wanted to go. "No fear," he said, "I want clean sheets, a whisky and a priest." As it turned out, he died suddenly from a heart attack at home, and didn't get them, but the sentiment was typical of the man: modest, sane, and with a well-developed sense of propriety. He was also one of the most extraordinary ocean voyagers of all time, held in awe by the not-so-easily-impressed French skippers. His voyages and writings made a significant contribution to public awareness and technical knowledge of junk rig. In 1979 he was awarded the *Gold Medal* of the

Royal Institute of Navigation, in 1986 he received the Royal Cruising Club's *Seamanship Medal*, and in 1993, the Ocean Cruising Club's *Award of Merit*.

In 1989, the Museum of Yachting at Newport, Rhode Island, inducted Mike Richey into their *Single-Handed Sailor's Hall of Fame*.



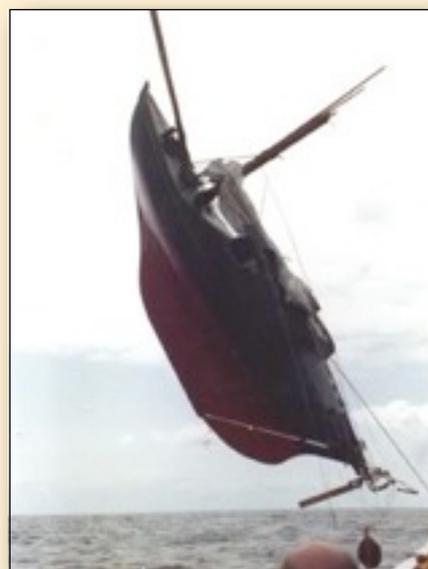
Leaving Armdale 6th July, 1986



Enduring the ultimate storm



With Captain Boon aboard "Geestbay"



Jester Being Hauled aboard ship