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INSET: BEKEN

THE FIRST OF THE MAXIS

Six decades after a sensational line honours win, she took on the Fastnet again in 2021. We trace the story of *Stormvogel*

WORDS ROB PEAKE



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Day one of the August 2021 Rolex Fastnet Race – brutal. The fleet banged its way up the Solent into 30-knot headwinds, then as the tide turned off the Needles, a wind-over-tide situation developed that none of the sailors there will forget. By mid-afternoon the recent winner of the Vendée Globe had turned for home, a 70ft round-the-world multihull limped in with an exploded winch drum, a 60ft racing catamaran dismantled, a glut of the latest, out-and-out race yachts turned tail and headed for the nearest port. Thirty boats retired by nightfall and many more were to follow suit. One of the oldest boats in the fleet, meanwhile, ploughed on.

At the helm was the man who has owned her for four decades. By his side stood her long-time skipper, pleased to see the recent refit was standing the old girl in good stead. Her international crew, a collection of first-class, mostly amateur sailors, worked her hard, despite the conditions.

She was *Stormvogel*, on a mission to mark the 60th anniversary of her winning Fastnet line honours in 1961, when she was navigated by Chichester.

“We weren’t throttling back, we were pushing her all the way,” says skipper Graeme Henry. “Off Hurst the waves got steeper and you had to be careful, but we had the power and she pushed her way through. A lot of boats retired, but here you’ve got a 60-year-old boat and we were still racing.”

DESIGN TRIUMVIRATE

Stormvogel, though, is more than just a great boat in heavy weather. She’s a step forward in yacht design history, as radical in the early 1960s as the latest foiling Vendée Globe yachts are today. She was the brainchild of her owner, a Dutch construction timber manufacturer called Cornelius Bruynzeel, and she was the product of not one but three great naval architects – Ericus ‘Ricus’ van de Stadt, Laurent Giles and John Illingworth. If a collaboration between such talents seems doomed to failure, on this occasion the three cooks did not spoil the broth, but *Stormvogel*’s build and her subsequent maiden year afloat, when she stunned the yachting world, were achieved against the odds. Perhaps like the petrel she is named after, *Stormvogel* revels in living life the hard way.

Certainly there would have been easier places to build a state-of-the-art yacht than rural Stellenbosch, South Africa, in 1960. Cees Bruynzeel had moved there after WW2, having left his Dutch family business making plywood kitchens. He replicated the plywood factory at Stellenbosch, where his wife Titia, a Dutch Reformed Calvinist, loved the Huguenot vineyards. Bruynzeel was a keen sailor and had won the Fastnet Race in 1937 on corrected time in *Zeearend*, a Sparkman & Stephens heavy displacement yawl. He subsequently did further Fastnets in small, light displacement boats designed by Van de Stadt, namely the 12.5m *Zeevalk* and 9m *Zeeslang* in 1956. Both yachts were hard chine construction, built of Bruynzeel plywood. He became convinced that light displacement was the key if you wanted to



KURT ARRIGO/ROLEX

Opening spread: Approaching Cherbourg in the 2021 Fastnet

Above: Rounding the Fastnet Rock in the 2021 race

Opposite: Racing at Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez 2021, with post-refit shots taken at British Classic Week

Below: Ray Hartman with the Khaya mahogany log, Stellenbosch, 1960; Bruynzeel preferred Sipo but after tests for the 3/8" thick veneers, changed to Khaya, which was also a more accurate match to Laurent Giles' specified 'African Mahogany'

be first boat home. But to win an offshore race like the Fastnet, one that would almost certainly see heavy weather?

Bruynzeel resolved to build light, but big. A radical, ‘planing’ yacht, capable of surfing downwind at high speed in strong winds. He wanted a boat with the longest waterline length allowed – 70ft (23m) – under the rating rules of the Royal Ocean Racing Club and the Cruising Club of America.

“He was not an engineer or even a talented sailor, but he had evolved a conceptual idea, for what we would now call a Maxi,” says Michael Trimming, who became an integral part of *Stormvogel*’s build and first year afloat. “Cees had an iron will and indomitable determination. He was a loner, abrasive and inflexible at times, but capable of silently conceding.”

Trimming was 19, the South African Naval Academy’s Seaman of the Year, but with no boatbuilding experience, when he found himself on the build site in Stellenbosch, one of three people who would oversee the realisation of Bruynzeel’s dream.

He recalls: “I was engaged on 1 July, 1960. Only the hull lines had been lofted onto a scribeboard. A big khaya log was being rotary veneer peeled for the hull planking. Only the afrormosia keel was in place. Not much progress. Launch date was scheduled for February, 1961, with departure mid-February with the last of the strong SE winds, before the adverse NW arrived in April.”

They had eight months to construct the most advanced ocean racing yacht ever built.

In their favour was the fact that Bruynzeel’s factory was adept at manufacturing industrial wooden laminated beams and plywood, and it employed many experienced woodworkers. Similarly, timber-sourcing was not a problem. The factory’s trusted timber agent selected prime logs: khaya mahogany came from Nigeria for the hull planking; sapele from the Ivory Coast for the interior veneer panels; American White Oak came from the Appalachian mountains in Virginia for the laminated and steam-bent frames; afrormosia from Cameroon for the keel; spruce from northern Finland for the longitudinal stringers; sipo from Nigeria for the



MAIN IMAGE: JAMES ROBINSON TAYLOR/INSET IMAGES: © GRAEME HENRY

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plywood bulkheads, longitudinal girders and hull ceilings; and Kiaat, a rare South African wood, for the elegant toerail cap and wheel.

But as Trimming remembers, the undertaking was far from straightforward: “Deliveries of equipment from USA and Europe were slow and it was a nerve-racking experience. Very little could be sent by air. Most came on mail ships, which had varied schedules and sailing times of two weeks from Europe.”

Bruynzeel had initially asked Van de Stadt to design the boat. However, Van de Stadt’s Zaandam drawing office was busy at the end of 1959, so Bruynzeel turned to Olin Stephens. He, however, was not interested in the light displacement, planing idea. He proposed a variation of *Bolero*, a 72ft heavy displacement yawl.

Bruynzeel declined and went instead to the English designer Laurent Giles, who did have experience of building large, lightweight wooden hulls. While Giles was still working on a preliminary design, Bruynzeel by chance met Illingworth. Bruynzeel ended up with two very different designs, from Giles and Illingworth. He asked Van de Stadt for his preference, but the Dutchman appeared not to be enthusiastic about either, so over the following weekend laid down his own basic lines, giving Bruynzeel a third option.

Bruynzeel had models of each tested in the Sanders-Roe towing tank, at the University of Southampton. The Van de Stadt round bilge design had the best characteristics, but still the Dutch office had no time. So it was that Bruynzeel decreed that Van de Stadt would design the hull, the keel and the rudder, Illingworth would work out the rig plan, and Giles would take care of the construction plans and the overall co-ordination.

“This proved to be a flawed decision,” Trimming says, “which left all three designers perplexed and

Above left:
Skilled Cape Malay carpenters at work in Stellenbosch

Above right: Cees Bruynzeel, the “plywood pioneer”

Below: Van de Stadt’s original lines plan of 1960

STORMVOGEL

LOA
74 ft. 6 in
(22.72m)

LOD
73 ft
(22.25m)

LWL
59 ft 4 in
(18.10m)

BEAM
16 ft 4
(4.88m)

DRAUGHT
9ft 3in
(2.82m)

SAIL AREA
2,589 sq ft
(238 m²)

DISPLMNT
31.2 tons
(31.7 tonnes)

caused some considerable interface problems and delays. They formally collaborated, but it soon became apparent during the build process that there should have been just one lead designer.”

The young Trimming dealt personally with the designers, at times having to work out the right way forwards through conflicting technical information – and hampered all the time by slow international communications. Meanwhile he sketched dorade vents, hatches and more for the local craftsmen to construct.

The build team was led by Bruynzeel, with Ray Hartman and Trimming on site. Key components came in locally from Cape Town and from all over the world, not least the keel, rudder, standing rigging and Sparcraft masts, a total of 17 sails from Ratsey & Lapthorn and the Merriman coffee-grinder pedestal winch, all of which arrived less than a fortnight before departure from Cape Town. “It was,” Trimming recalls drily, “a major assembly challenge.”

It is credit to the build team and skilled Cape Malay craftsmen that the project was completed at all. In fact, it was completed in exemplary fashion. In 1993, *Stormvogel* was surveyed by Seabird Consultants of Singapore, who issued a General Condition Survey Report and Valuation. The report said: “There is no doubt that this yacht was built to the highest standards by craftsmen one does not often find these days.”

Stormvogel was launched on 25 April, 1961. There was a three-hour sea trial to test one set of sails (“and primarily to do a photo shoot for the press”, adds Trimming), before the crew of 15 departed Cape Town on 3 May, heading for Europe.

Trimming, who was also on board for the trip north, says: “Cees was desperately anxious to sail, because he was already convinced that we would arrive too late to participate in Cowes Week and prepare the boat for the Fastnet Race. Cees reminded us that *Stormvogel*’s 1961 Fastnet Race would be the fulfilment of his life’s dream, and that we must not waste the money, time and effort by arriving late for our ‘date with destiny’.”

Skipper Gordon Webb ran a tight ship, the dual aim of the voyage being to train up the race crew for the Fastnet. With him was wife Jenifer and their four-month-old baby Linda, kept safe in a hammock cot.

Trimming recalls: “Life on board in 1961, without the equipment and luxuries of 2021, was reasonably



comfortable. Food was well-organised by Jenifer and we relied on a paraffin stove, which was an evil smelling beast, but functioned okay. Food was mostly divided into tinned cans, which had been dipped in varnish to avoid rust and stowed in the bilges. Salami hung in the crew quarters. Regular breakfasts were the flying fish which landed in the mainsail overnight.

“We had one magnetic compass (not swung due to our hasty departure), a towed Walker log, which picked up weed, and a sextant. The new HF-SSB radio had been installed the day before departure and did not function. We were meticulous with noon sights for latitude and assumed GHA longitude.”

One of the crew, Matt, fell overboard eight days out from Cape Town. Trimming says: “He was retrieved after 20 minutes. Lifejackets were bulky Board of Trade Java cork and kapok, terribly uncomfortable, so were stowed away and never worn.”

As *Stormvogel* headed past west Africa, a debate ensued between Webb and Bruynzeel over whether to leave the Cape Verde Islands to port or starboard. Bruynzeel was keen to save time by cutting the corner “in conflict with the pilot book”.

At 2340hrs on 28 May, *Stormvogel* was hit by a violent line squall to the west of Sierra Leone, which laid her down on her beam-ends with the head of the mainmast underwater “for an interminable time”.

“Seawater poured in down below,” says Trimming. “It’s hard to portray the severity and drama of it – suddenly being at 90 degrees to the horizon, the fury and unearthly noise, and overpowering violence of the event, in the pitch black dark of night. There were two hand-operated bilge pumps. Not operative when you are at 90° of heel.”

The rig held and nobody was badly injured, although crew were thrown out of their bunks. Baby Linda remained unflustered in her hammock. Trimming reflects: “Without a functional radio, we had no means of sending a Mayday. For a critical few minutes *Stormvogel* was in real danger of sinking.”

They sailed on and after a maiden voyage of 7,000nm and 60 days, the boat and all crew arrived at Zaandam in Holland, healthy, in excellent spirits and well-trained for the race that lay ahead.

Above right:
Restored navigation station where Chichester worked and the young Trimming made plots, under the old master’s eye

Above left:
Jamestown St Helena, first waypoint on *Stormvogel*’s maiden voyage

Below: One of many articles on the boat at the time, this from South African Yachting in May/June 1961



Francis Chichester, famous after winning the 1960 OSTAR, was the obvious choice to assist with *Stormvogel*’s ‘date with destiny’. Bruynzeel was race skipper, with Webb the sailing master, Chichester the navigator and Frans Hin on weather. Trimming was assigned to carry out navigational tasks for Chichester.

Like the 2021 edition, the 1961 Fastnet Race started with steep wind-against-tide seas off the Needles. *Stormvogel* sailed up the Solent ahead of the fleet of 91 starters, but took one heavy pounding which resulted in a broken wire main halyard. The crew anchored in the lee of Old Harry Rocks, to reeve a new main halyard. Four hours later they rejoined, at the back of the fleet.

They made up ground, but after passing the Longships Lighthouse, Bruynzeel decided to follow the big boats north into the Celtic Sea. Trimming takes up the tale: “Chichester and Frans Hin had been tracking a deep depression forming down in Biscay. The BBC had the depression passing south of Longships, but Hin predicted a more northerly track. Chichester advised Cees to tack out west.”

It proved to be a race-winning move. “Unknown to us at the time, *Stormvogel* passed all the other leading competitors during the night. We never saw another boat after passing Longships.”

Stormvogel could not defend her Fastnet crown. She was second in the next edition in 1963, beaten by less than an hour over the line by the S&S *Capricia*. Bruynzeel may have been disappointed at the time, but over the next few years he claimed many more line honours victories all over the world – the Middle Sea Race, the Bermuda Race, China Sea Race, Sydney-Hobart, the Transpac and more. To make a modern-day comparison, *Stormvogel* was the *Rambler*, *Comanche* or *Wild Oats* of her era, adding a lustre to the international yacht races that she attended, very much the boat to beat. In between, she sailed around Cape Horn, survived a collision with a whale and did numerous ocean passages, covering 159,000 nautical miles in her first seven years afloat, an incredible 22,700 miles every year. Bruynzeel, indeed, was a keen yachtsman and he was able to assist by first-class skippers. He had built *Stormvogel* to mark his 60th birthday and passed the yacht on at the age of 75 to its second owner, Werner Mattman. By



then, *Stormvogel* was becoming outclassed on the racecourse and she enjoyed a quieter life, in the Mediterranean and Caribbean, owned by Adriano Goldschmit, until in 1982 she was bought by the man who owns her still. *Stormvogel* has had four owners.

She is lucky, too, to have come under the care of New Zealand boatbuilder Graeme Henry, a man who has been associated with the boat as skipper, on and off, since 1986. “You can really feel her pedigree,” he says. “*Stormvogel*’s got that history and an energy that you don’t get with many boats.”

Henry helped prepare the boat in Sydney when she took a central role in the movie *Dead Calm*, starring Nicole Kidman, shot in the Whitsunday Islands in 1987. Gradually, Henry and his team brought out more of the old performance characteristics. “She has a lovely hull form, reasonably narrow and nicely balanced,” he says. “In the early days, we pushed the boat up to 15 knots. Since the latest rebuild, we’ve had 22 knots. Impressive for a 60-year-old wooden yacht.”

A well-used boat needs upkeep. *Stormvogel* has had several major refits, the first overseen by Henry at the Keppel Shipyard in Singapore in 1993. He admits: “When you dig deep into these projects, you think ‘where do we stop?’ The question that I raised at the time was ‘is it worth saving?’

“The owner was adamant and said: ‘I will not let this boat die in my hands’. He has been prepared to put the money in to keep the boat alive.”

Stormvogel did the Panerai circuit in 2007/08, where her authenticity stood her in good stead under the CIM rating. When the most recent refit started, keeping the boat true to her original form remained a key tenet. Long-time skipper Ian Hulleman, a Kiwi boatbuilder like Henry, began in Finike, Turkey, in 2014, with some repairs to the mainmast bulkhead. The job grew, and two back-breaking years later, having done a significant amount of the work himself, the decision was taken to go through the whole boat. The stripped-out *Stormvogel* was motored 200 miles down the coast to Metur Yacht in Bodrum, a builder of the



Above left: In pieces, being wheeled into Metur Yacht, Turkey, for major work to begin in June 2017

Above right: Michael Trimming at the wheel, with Graeme Henry

Below: Then and now, 60 years on

Hoek-designed Pilot Classic range, and work began again, with Hulleman on site for another two years, overseeing engineering, deck work, joinery, spray-painting, stainless steel work, a new mast and systems upgrades. She was ready for relaunch in early 2020, but then the pandemic struck. She eventually made her way west towards Cowes for July 2021, where she took a star turn at the British Classic Yacht Club’s regatta, British Classic Week.

Being in Cowes was also a moment to reflect on the boat’s six decades afloat. Among the visitors was Linda Kayton, née Webb, who had last been on board as a baby on that maiden voyage of 1961. “She came with her sisters and uncle and it was very emotional,” says Henry. “There were a lot of people in Cowes from the boat’s past. We had Ondine and David Kerley, who were married on board in Phuket. We had British former skippers Chris and Graeme Lawrence.”

On board for the Rolex Fastnet Race was the owner, Henry and Hulleman, with the 16 crew including prominent Solent sailors Richard Acland, Lincoln Redding, John Santy, Richard Beardsall, Richard Sawle, Italian Figaro sailor Alberto Bona on tactics, US bowman Michael Champion and Thomas Ripard, of the great Maltese sailing family. Ripard is the grand nephew of Paul Ripard, who sailed on *Stormvogel* for the inaugural Middle Sea Race in 1968.

Stormvogel finished the Fastnet an extraordinary seventh overall, sixth in class in IRC1. She crossed the line after three days 19 hours – an hour quicker than her time for the shorter course to Plymouth in 1961. “Very good for a 60-year-old boat,” remarks Henry. “The owner was very pleased.”

Michael Trimming, now aged 79, who has gone on to have a successful career as a naval architect, reflects: “With her sensational line honours win and stunning heavy weather performance in the 1961 Fastnet Race, *Stormvogel* initiated a radical, high-speed, conceptual change and paradigm shift in the design and philosophy of offshore racing yachts. *Stormvogel* was the first of the Maxis.”