

A PARADIGN

After Humphrey Barton had written another chapter of the Vertue legend into the history blazing new trails across the oceans of the world — and piling up ever more heroic Vertue voyager said of his craft: 'she was comfortable as an old sea-boot'. In the



DAVID JACKSON SMITH

Left: *Vertue XXXV*, photographed in 1950 with Humphrey Barton at the helm, as she headed down a misty Solent en route to America. The voyage — in which the boat was damaged in a knockdown — earned Barton and his crew the Vertue Cup, and helped to establish the Vertue legend. **Above:** Dick Rutishauser sets off from San Francisco aboard *Coppelja*, heading for Hawaii. He had to turn back when the boat sprung a leak. *Coppelja* was built by Cheoy Lee in Hong Kong in 1964 — her sail number should be V137. **Right:** *Raumati*, rail under in the Solent in 1962, soon after her launching by Elkins in Christchurch. Note the dinghy lashed to the fore-deck — a standard Elkins option.

The Vertue Story

Part 2: Hands across the oceans

IN 1945 ten Laurent Giles 5-tonners emerged from mud-berths along the South Coast, more or less unscathed from the blitzing of the Channel ports, to face a new era. Two laid down in 1939 were joined by six more by 1946. If the brief, but highly formative, pre-war story of these hardy vessels was all about ambitious voyages down-Channel, to Brittany and across Biscay, Vertues soon gained a reputation after the war for ocean passage-making — and once again it was Humphrey Barton, as much as the boat itself, who was responsible for building that reputation.

In 1950 Barton was still a partner of Laurent Giles and keen as ever to promote the design whose progenitor *Andrillot* he had sailed to Biscay and back in 1936 to win the RCC Founder's Cup. A highly acclaimed yacht skipper, he had been booked that month as sailing master on Jack Rawlings' *Gulvain* in the Bermuda Race. Instead of tak-

ing the steamer, which he called "a dull method of transport", he chose to "combine business with pleasure" and deliver a newly-built Elkins Vertue to the USA, ostensibly to earn much valued dollars for his firm.

The evening of 26 May 1950 found Barton and his crew, Kevin O'Riordan, at sea. To be more precise, in the open Atlantic, 41 days out from Falmouth bound for New York in *Vertue XXXV* and just pouring the coffee. Their position at noon the previous day had been about 180 miles NNE of Bermuda, on the edge of the Gulf Stream. By 2200 the wind had backed and was freshening. "It is a simply foul night with blinding rain," Barton recorded. "The yacht is tearing along at a frightening speed." By 0400 the next morning the mainsail was deep-reefed to trysail size and the wind, when Barton handed over to O'Riordan, between Force 8 and 9. By 0605 *Vertue XXXV* was under bare poles, the sea "all white. The crests... fairly torn off." At 1300 the wind had "reached a state of senseless fury. It became difficult to make out where the surface of the sea began or ended."

By late afternoon things were so bad that Barton decided to stream a 21in-diameter sea anchor from the starboard quarter. At 1930 they had just finished their supper — fried sardines and potatoes followed by

M OF VERTUE

books with his epoch-making transatlantic passage in 1950, others followed his example accounts of the Vertue's seakeeping and passage-making abilities. As one seasoned second of his two-part class history, Adrian Morgan brings the Vertue story up to date



tinned peaches. Barton was making coffee. "It came with devastating suddenness; a great fiend of a sea that picked the yacht up, threw her over on her port side and then burst over her. There was an awful splintering of wood, a crash of broken glass and in came a roaring cataract of water."

By dint of hard pumping, and his customary seamanship, Barton lived to tell the tale: Lizard to Sandy Hook in 47 days 11 hours, of which 23 days were into headwinds — bare poles on three occasions. It was an outstanding achievement for the time. A best-selling book duly appeared, and another chapter of the Vertue legend was written: a second Vertue Cup was heading for the mantlepiece.

The post-war Vertues were very different in profile to the ten early

ting headroom below. "The pilot fishing yacht of 1936 became the smart yacht of the 1950s," wrote Phillips-Birt in 1960. "Not a middle-aged lady with her face lifted, but the middle-aged lady's daughter..."

Although the hull Giles drew for *Andrillot's* owner, Dick Kinnersly, in 1936 always had the power to carry the taller Bermudan rig, she had been gaff-rigged. Now bermudan and small auxiliary engines, 4hp Stuart Turners mostly — some of them on centreline shafts — were becoming *de rigueur*. After *Andrillot* there were also to be no more bowsprits. A jaunty bumpkin appeared to carry the backstay clear of the mainsail leech. There was almost universal adoption of the slutter rig, whereby the two forestays are landed near the same point at the stem. A few had no bumpkins, higher aspect mainsails and jumper



Above: Mike McKeon's boat, *Austral Vertue*, leaving Melbourne. Later in the voyage, while her skipper was ashore on a Pacific island, she sailed herself out of the lagoon and into oblivion.

Right: The current secretary of the Vertue Owners' Association, Matthew Power, took *Chinita* across the Atlantic in 1992 to win the Royal Cruising Club's prestigious Challenge Cup.



Vertues. What the well-informed yachtsman in 1936 wanted from his designer was no longer quite so fashionable. A yacht built for coastal cruising in and around the Western Approaches had proved capable of extraordinary passages, albeit in the hands of a less than ordinary seaman. With advances in navigation techniques due to the war, *Andrillot*, *Monie* and *Epeneta's* feats, if not commonplace, were becoming more accepted. But first something had to be done about the accommodation. The "sternly seamanlike" deck structure that author Douglas Phillips-Birt called "low enough not to be offensive, but a box none the less", was replaced by a doghouse which "bashfully appeared" in 1945. Ironically it was this doghouse which caught the brunt and was split open by the force of *Vertue XXXV's* knockdown.

The following year Lloyd's approved a less costly construction using bent timbers in place of grown (sawn) oak frames. The deck-stepped mast, designed by Giles and sea-tested by Barton, opened up the accommodation. Then, in 1949, what Phillips-Birt called "the ebullient swing of the sheerline" was flattened. It smacks of sacrilege to those who now marvel at the glorious profligacy of that Giles curve, but it at least masked the increased height of the doghouse and gave more sit-

struts, but the class had stabilised. By May 1960 100 Vertues had been launched, the underwater lines identical to *Andrillot's* for, as Giles said some years later, he had not found a way to better them.

Here endeth, in effect, the first and most prolific, evolutionary phase of the Vertue story. From now on accounts of the yacht's ocean prowess begin to pile up. Many of them are well known, some unsung. In 1952, for example, Dr Joe Cunningham sailed *Ice Bird* from Ireland to the West Indies, thence to Newfoundland before returning home. In 1953 AG Hamilton sailed *Speedwell of Hong Kong* 14,000 miles back to Portsmouth, a six-month voyage that took 140 sailing days. Later he took *Salmo* from Scotland to Quebec, then to Panama and Tahiti via Pitcairn, ending up in California.

Among the more renowned exploits was that of Dr David Lewis in 1960 who sailed *Cardinal Vertue* to third place behind Francis Chichester and Blondie Hasler in the first OSTAR. Sold to Australian Bill Nance, she made one of four circumnavigations, three of them single-handed, recorded by Vertues. Once, for 53 days, Nance logged 122.5 miles average, a record until beaten by Chichester's larger *Gipsy Moth IV's* 131.75 miles for 107 days during his circumnavigation. *Cardinal*

Vertue was the smallest yacht at that time to have rounded Cape Horn.

Ambitious voyages abound. For example, in 1968 John Ryle sailed *Sekyd* from Woodbridge via the French canals to the Red Sea. John Struchinsky's *Bonaventure de Lys* was a prodigious world voyager in the 1970s. One of the most recent circumnavigations was by Russell Heath's *Kainui*, in the mid-1980s. Certainly the challenge of a transatlantic holds fewer terrors in these post-Bartonian days — *Easy Vertue* (Dan Robertson), *Aotea* (R Montgomery), *Stelda* (Peter Woollass), *Charis* (Peter Pike) have all followed in 'Hum's' wake, and more recently Vertue Owners' Association secretary Matthew Power in *Chinita* to win the 1992 RCC Challenge Cup.

There are long tales — Ed Boden's incident-packed 14-year circum-

Cheoy Lee were responsible for the vast majority of the wooden Vertues, she is a typical example from the great post war years, commissioned by Charles Trinder, later Lord Mayor of London. Her layout is traditional: galley to port, Taylors' paraffin stove and heater, quarter-berth under chart table, two settees. In Matthew's words: "Commodious for one, convenient for two, passable for three, possible for four". He sailed from Kimelford to Ullapool with one crew, then solo round Cape Wrath to Kyle of Tongue, over to Stromness, through the Pentland Firth to Inverness, through the Caledonian Canal to Fort William, then back to Ullapool — in effect a Highland circumnavigation.

Of all the comments heaped on her head, the most apt to describe the Vertue's qualities was made by Peter Woollass whose book about

The Vertue II

IN THE 1970s enormous debate within the class centred around the viability and ethics of a glassfibre Vertue. "I cannot help but feel," wrote one aggrieved wooden Vertue owner, "that any such project could only result in the production of a yacht very different from the present Vertue... I think it would be very wrong to attach the title of Vertue to any such craft."

Notwithstanding, in 1976, after over 176 timber and two steel Vertues had been built, Laurent Giles drew the GRP Vertue II. Around 8in (203mm) wider and 5in (127mm) longer, her Thames measurement decreased from 4.94 to 4.1 tons, resulting in slightly smaller sail area on a new, single-spreader masthead rig. A subsidiary of Westerly made the moulds, and the first boat, *Vertue Voyager*, built to Lloyd's 100 A1, was fitted out by Tim Bungay at a cost of £22,000. A second was built by Rossiters, and three by Westerly.

A subsequent re-design, to a more realistic specification, to Lloyd's Requirements (not Classification) was made in 1986 by Barry van Geffen of Laurent Giles. Bossom's of Oxford quoted £18,860 for the prototype, and have built

the majority of the 30-odd glassfibre Vertues produced since, both for the UK and abroad. Fred Barter had *Merikala II* (right) built by Bossom's in 1994 and fitted her out below (right, bottom) with an airy white finish, rather than the more usual woody look (see next month for a full coverage of the building of *Merikala*).

Vertue IIs lived up to their wooden sisters' world-girdling reputation. The engineless *Sparrow*, owned by David Hays, sailed from Connecticut in July 1984 through the Panama Canal to Easter Island, around Cape Horn and back to New England. She was the smallest yacht to round the Horn for over 20 years.

In 1989 Laurent Giles designed a version of the Vertue II for cedar strip construction, sheathed in quadraxial E-glass, the first of which, *Ocean Rambler*, V216, was built by Consort Yachts in Hamble.

Vertue plans (both versions) cost £180, plus a £544.43 keel charge from Laurent Giles. Secondhand wooden Vertues change hands for between £8,500 for a very early one to £20,000 for a teak 1960 Cheoy Lee. A traditional wooden Vertue would cost at least £45,000 to build from new.



PAUL JAMES

navigation on *Kittiwake* — and, inevitably, sad tales, such as *Austral Vertue*'s, whose skipper, Mick McKeon, spent one night too many ashore sampling the local hospitality on a Pacific Island and returned to find his yacht had sailed herself out of the lagoon into oblivion.

Kawan, one of the early boats, was lost in the Red Sea having survived an earlier stranding on a Tahitian coral reef; *Epeneta*, which won the Vertue Cup from which the class took its name, sank in Biscay, dragged under by a ship which had persuaded her crew to accept a tow.

Stories abound of the sea-keeping qualities of Jack Giles's baby. In 1993 lawyer James Burdett survived a Biscay storm in *Mary*, Vertue No 10. Despite her cockpit being swamped several times, much of the water finding its way below, she escaped unscathed. Burdett never for a moment doubted her ability, a feat for which he won the RCC Seamanship Trophy.

But ambitious, classic home waters cruising is still the Vertue's true forte. Last year, 56 years after Lawrence Biddle's *Epeneta*, John Matthews sailed V25 *Melusine* round Scotland, single-handed for much of the way, to win the fourth Vertue Cup awarded to a Vertue. Built in 1949 by RA Newman & Sons of Poole, who with Elkins and

the class, sadly out of print, is the starting point for any research. In the account of his transatlantic, *Stelda*, *George and I*, he described her as "comfortable as an old sea-boot".

To modern eyes the Vertue does indeed have a comforting, boaty look. But there's more to it. Under the water lies what Uffa Fox first spotted in 1936: clean, exceptionally fine lines that slip with minimum fuss through the water. Given a narrow beam and 47 per cent ballast ratio, it is no surprise that the Vertue also proved an exceptional seaboat.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, she was fortunate to have a nursemaid and marketing genius like Humphrey Barton to bring out her early promise. Other little 5-tonners, such as the *Luke*, *Yachting World* and *Harrison Butler* were equally fine, but none of them inspire people to walk over, peer down and say, smugly: "She's a Vertue, isn't she?"

■ The author would like to thank David Jackson-Smith, the former secretary of the Vertue Owners' Association, for his help with both information and photographs for this article.

■ The Vertue Story concludes next month with a detailed look at the methods and materials used in building Laurent Giles' 5-tonner.