

'SUVRETTA'

by

Ivan and Colin Nelson

Suvretta is a West Solent Restricted Class sloop built in 1924 to the designs of Jacobs and May. She was one of a class comprising some 39 vessels which raced out of the Royal Lymington YC on the western Solent, and also at Aldeborough on the east coast of England at the Royal Burnham YC. The West Solent class were 35 feet overall length, 23 feet 11 inches on the waterline, seven feet seven inches beam and a draft of five feet three inches. Headroom was limited under the coachroof to about five feet. Displacement was 4.25 tonnes. They were regarded by some as 'an elegant yacht for gentlemen', and by others as a 'fatter 6 metre'. Being a restricted class, and in order to keep costs down, they were limited to one paid hand and one new mainsail per annum! Eventually the class broke up and Suvretta ended up in the Irish Sea owned by the Smith brothers, one a solicitor, the other a medical consultant, members of the Royal North of Ireland Yacht Club at Cultra.

In the late summer of 1962 the Smiths sailed Suvretta from Belfast Lough to Whiterock in Strangford Lough. Whilst there she was driven ashore in a storm and suffered considerable damage to her port side. The planking and mid-section ribs were stove in from the cockpit to the chain plates. However, the beam shelf - a plank on the join between hull and deck - was only slightly damaged.

Suvretta was recovered and taken to Whiterock Boatyard, then owned by Billy Smith. The yard started to replace the broken ribs using the ribs on the starboard side as templates. They also recovered the lead keel which lay for a long time at the end of the slipway, untouched despite the high value of lead. It weighed 39 hundredweight. The boat was shored up next to the boundary fence where she was seen and purchased by Colin Nelson.



Ready to launch - the repaired port side

Colin knew that he and his friends, all under 25 years of age, had the necessary skills to repair her and so acquire a fast and elegant cruiser. He was assisted by Ken Cooper, Joe Campbell, and Harry Blakely, all members of Royal Ulster Yacht Club or Holywood Yacht Club. They worked throughout the winter of 1962-3. Colin and Ken worked every evening Monday to Thursday, and Saturday and Sunday afternoons weather permitting. They were in the open air most of the time and had only hand tools although Colin seems to think they had an electric drill. Ken was an experienced woodworker, so they knew what they were doing, and of course, it helped that they were all bachelors! They received no assistance from the Boatyard after the sale.

They replaced the broken ribs, steaming them when necessary, and all the damaged planking. Then they borrowed the trailer of a well-known cruiser-racer and refitted the keel, bolting it back to the hull. The mast and standing rigging were in good order but they replaced the running rigging. The sails were cotton. When launched, according to Colin, Suvretta didn't leak a drop, and of course she sailed like a witch



Ready to launch - L to R Colin Nelson, Harry Blakely, Ken Cooper, Joe Campbell on deck

Suvretta had a Coventry Victor 6hp 4 stroke petrol engine with sail drive and a hand start. It never gave any trouble although it did go on fire once. Colin and his friends cruised Suvretta usually to Scotland. On one such cruise, including a transit of the Crinan Canal, the cost to each member of the crew was eight pounds! On another, returning from Portpatrick to Bangor, they had an engine fire when off Donaghadee. Ken Cooper grabbed a blanket and smothered it in double quick time.

In 1965 Colin sold Suvretta to Stoup Corry, and later she sailed across the Atlantic to the West Indies. The class has been resuscitated at the Royal Lyngington, and Suvretta was restored again in 2008. She is a beautiful classic yacht a joy to sail.



At sea