



# *Mariquita* The history of a legend

She might look majestic now, but *Mariquita* spent years languishing in the mud at Pin Mill in Suffolk as a house boat. Here's the story of her landmark restoration and how her 2014 owners and crew are respecting her heritage by continuing to race her hard and fast...





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G.L. WATSON

Above: *Mariquita* (in the foreground) racing *Corona*, 1912  
Right: John Caulcutt helming in Cannes - summer 2013



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As the only remaining 19-M in commission, *Mariquita* is widely regarded as one of the rarest and most beautiful classic yachts sailing today. Designed and built for industrialist Arthur Stothert by William Fife III, she was launched in 1911 at Fairlie on the Clyde in Scotland. As a gaff-rigged cutter *Mariquita* is a direct link to the historic Big Class and a precursor to the J-Class that would follow in the 1930s. *Mariquita* is one of the most iconic yachts in the history of the sport and her career spanning over a century is one of the great maritime stories.

In May 1911, *Mariquita* joined three other 19-Ms, *Octavia*, *Norada* and *Corona*, in a new class that caught the imagination of the sailing public in the years leading to World War One. The new 19-M class fulfilled the aspiration to have a matched class of big cutters. The three great British designers of the day were represented with Charles E Nicholson and Alfred Mylne contributing a design each and the leading designer of the day William Fife III contributing two. *Mariquita* combined Fife's design with the high build quality of his celebrated yard.

The 'Great 19s' travelled far and wide: The Clyde, Cork, Harwich, Cowes, Dartmouth and abroad to Kiel and Le Havre. *Mariquita* performed admirably in the three seasons from 1911-1913, especially in light winds. Not only was the arrival of the 19-M class unexpected, but the quality of racing was astonishing: after five hours, the yachts often finished within seconds of each other.

The threat of war in 1913 stopped competitive sailing in its tracks. William Burton, the owner of *Octavia*, put her up for sale, marking the end of the 19-M class. *Mariquita* was sold in 1915, ending up in neutral Norway where she spent the war years. *Mariquita* returned to Great Britain after the war, but her time as a top-flight racing yacht was over. George V, The Sailor King, brought back the iconic yacht *Britannia* – and a new Big Class eclipsed the 19-Ms. Although *Mariquita* raced against her old rivals *Octavia* and *Norada*, under reduced rigs, it was in the handicap classes. It was the beginning of the end.

It's said that a crew is a ship's lifeblood. Over the years, *Mariquita's* captains and crew were drawn from the creeks of Essex and Suffolk, from villages like

Rowhedge, Wyvenhoe and Brightlingsea. Captains such as Edward Sycamore and Robert Wringe were local men who had learnt their craft on the fishing boats of the East Coast before graduating to yacht-racing. It was perhaps a sad irony that, in 1938, *Mariquita* returned to this area to end her sailing days. She was brought to West Mersea by Arthur Hempstead, whose firm undertook the decommissioning. Her fine mast was chopped away above the deck, her keel bolts let go and 40 tonnes of lead cut into scrap on the Mersea Hard. After a spell in Tollesbury, in Essex, the hulk of the once-beautiful yacht was towed to Woodbridge on the River Deben, where she served for a decade as a houseboat. *Mariquita* was then moved to Pin Mill, on the River Orwell, in 1958. This was expected to be her final resting place. One by one all the 19s had turned their bows inland to expire in the mud – to decay and vanish.

After 30 years as a houseboat in Suffolk, *Mariquita* appeared doomed. However, the timely intervention of William Collier and Albert Obrist in 1991 led to her landmark restoration at Fairlie Restorations. Although *Mariquita's* original structure had stayed intact, a

Above from top: Launching from the beach at Fairlie; Edward Sycamore (inset) and at the helm; languishing in the mud at Pin Mill waiting for better times





DAN HOUSTON

For more photographs of *Mariquita* visit [www.classicboat.co.uk](http://www.classicboat.co.uk)

and very important to us. I don't think you can take on a boat like *Mariquita* unless you are prepared to embrace that spirit of tradition, that legacy and heritage and pedigree – everything that William Fife epitomised. He designed her and she was built as a race boat. We took her on as a race boat. That has been our focus this year – to take *Mariquita* on as a race boat – to compete on the classic circuit.”

The new syndicate embarked on an ambitious season in the Med including five of the Panerai events plus the Puig Vela Classica in Barcelona, Monaco Classic Week and Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez. It was a steep learning curve as John Caulcutt explains: “Helming *Mariquita* is unique. To race this gaff cutter as she was intended to be sailed, without winches or any other power, is a defining experience. It's a huge responsibility, with a crew of 23 and no guard rails. Like any boat, she has a sweet spot. For *Mariquita*, it's in 10-12 knots of breeze going to windward – and the boat has a groove and it feels absolutely fantastic when you're there. Get her in 25 knots of breeze, let alone any more, and the whole thing becomes a very different experience. When the boat becomes loaded up, it's a handful – I mean a real handful! You have 25ft (7.6m) of boom overhanging the transom. If you come to the weather mark and you want to bear away, unless that mainsheet is dumped, you don't have a hope. You cannot physically move the wheel. It's not a question of strength... it's a question of dynamics.”

The syndicate was helped by inheriting some of the existing *Mariquita* crew, who had earned their stripes under the previous skipper Jim Thom. As John Caulcutt explains: “Inheriting such a fantastic crew with George Newman stepping up to the mark as skipper – being able to preserve that continuity that would have taken years, like it took Jim Thom years to create, we were able to pick up the baton and keep running. George, Matty Oates, Billy Butler, Tubby Brook – they were all there for us, fulfilling those key functions on the boat.”

With a yacht as complex as *Mariquita* where everything is done by hand, working as a team is

paramount. It took time for the new crew to bed in but by the fourth regatta in Barcelona the skipper George Newman was seeing signs of real improvement: “The teamwork is really beginning to come together. When we started the season in Antibes it was a shock to us how much we had to learn. All the crew now know their systems and it's starting to click.”

Despite some dramatic conditions in both Mahon and Cannes and some very close racing with her great rivals *Moonbeam IV* and *Cambria*, *Mariquita* arrived in Saint-Tropez for the final regatta of the season in good shape with six podium finishes under her belt. The Voiles de Saint-Tropez is always a fitting finish to the season and the 2013 event did not disappoint, as the final race on the Saturday unfolded. Crew member Matty Oates recalls “On the last approach to Saint-Tropez, there is a small dog-leg which the boats have to take, with a gate at the end. Sailing through the fleet (spectator boats everywhere), we're coming in on *Moonbeam IV* from weather; we're calling for water because we're about to hit the buoy. *Moonbeam IV* is calling for water because she is about to hit Seche rock. To

**“Big jackyard topsail up, totally overpowered, lee rail under, crew up to their waists in water...”**

have these two near identical boats gliding through this tiny gate at such incredible speeds on the final day of the season, with so much drama going around us, was incredible.” It was certainly a great way to round off a memorable first season for the syndicate. As John Caulcutt adds: “To be in Saint-Tropez with *Mariquita* with a forecast of 10-12 knots of breeze and suddenly finding ourselves in 25-30 knots, with the big jackyard topsail up, totally overpowered, lee rail under, crew up to their waists in water, was memorable stuff for everyone on the water. What an unforgettable day's racing to end the season.” *Mariquita*'s 2014 season is going well. Having won the Big Boat class at Argentario Sailing Week, she's well placed in the Panerai standings. With Vele D'Epoca di Imperia and Régates Royales Cannes left to go, this could be her year to win the coveted Panerai trophy.



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complete rebuild was necessary before she could carry a 38-tonne keel and more than 1,000sqft (93m<sup>2</sup>) of sail. After three painstaking years *Mariquita* finally appeared in 2004 and was recommissioned under the captaincy of Jim Thom. With *Mariquita*'s restoration, her owners sought not only to save a unique yacht, but also the quality ethos to which she was built and raced back in 1911. “The *Mariquita* Project” was one of the most professional and well-resourced classic yacht programmes ever undertaken. This was classic sailing pushed to a never-before-seen level. So started a highly successful nine-year campaign that saw *Mariquita* star at regattas throughout Europe from The Fife Regatta in Scotland, The Westward Cup in Cowes and countless regattas in the Mediterranean. However in 2012, *Mariquita* was unexpectedly offered for sale – and a new era for this remarkable yacht began. Her new co-owner John Caulcutt takes up the story: “I received this call from William Collier: the opportunity to own *Mariquita*. Gosh, that's not the sort of call you get every day. What an opportunity – the chance of a lifetime to own this thoroughbred of classic racing yachts; one of the most beautiful boats ever built and certainly one of the most beautiful still around today. To be given that opportunity by William was something that I wholly welcomed at the time and have absolutely no regrets at the end of our first season of having made that decision to put a syndicate together.”

Over a long career John has sailed a vast number of boats including Solings, Stars, Admiral's Cup Boats, Maxis and then *High Voltage* the America's Cup Challenge boat. He had always admired the big classics and when the opportunity came along in 2012 it seemed the right time. “Taking on the challenge of ownership of *Mariquita* was an easy decision for me to make,” he says. “It completed the spectrum of the wide variety of boats that I had owned and helmed over the years. It also completed the circle, as my first offshore boat *Mayfly*, a Mersea Bay oyster-catcher, was gaff-rigged. Going back to a classic gaff-rigged boat once again seemed like a natural way forward for me.”

After a brief meeting at the Royal Thames Yacht Club, John quickly put a syndicate of four like-minded yachtsmen together. *Mariquita* had four new owners: John Caulcutt, Stephen Hemsley, Nick Edmiston and Jamie Matheson. To prepare for the transition, the new syndicate was invited to take part on *Mariquita* during her 2012 season which included the Pendennis Cup in Falmouth, the Régates Royales de Cannes and Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez. “We had a lovely summer sailing season in 2012 on *Mariquita*, a bonus year if you like, getting to know the boat, getting to know some of the people, getting to understand better the type of deal that we would need to put together with the previous ownership into a format that we felt would preserve that spirit of tradition that was very important to the previous owners

**Top: racing at Naples in 2013**  
**Above from left: photo taken to mark *Mariquita*'s Centenary in 2011 with Jim Thom as captain; racing in 2010 during the Westward Cup off the Isle of Wight; three of the new owners, John Caulcutt, Stephen Hemsley, Jamie Matheson and skipper George Newman (2nd from left)**

**Below from left: her lifering; racing off St Tropez**



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