

Peter Deeth

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ANN AYRES

TOP RIGHT: *The Antigua Yacht Club dock in October 1989*

TOP LEFT: *The Antigua Yacht Club dock in December 1989 when Carlo began building his Antigua Yacht Club Marina.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANDY MAIR

BOTTOM RIGHT: *The totally underdeveloped and exquisite English Harbour in the very early days.*

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PETER DEETH.

On a spectacular Caribbean day in December 2016, I sat with Peter Deeth in his sailor's dream of a home at the entrance to English Harbour, overlooking Fort Berkley and the sparkling open ocean beyond the Pillars of Hercules. We were sitting together in the spot where I used to finish the Guadeloupe Race in the 70s when I worked with him on Antigua Sailing Week. Peter was a major player in the instigation and development of this Regatta, about to enter its 50th year, and it was my aim to interview him about the early days and how it all began. What follows is a wonderful recollection of the origins of the Antigua Yacht Club and Antigua Sailing Week. It is all in Peter's own words but unfortunately without his wonderfully infectious and unique laugh that filled the morning as he brought the beginning back to life.

Peter's first love was flying. He began flying aged 17 in the RAF during World War II. However, it was much later that, as a commercial pilot with the Trinidad airline BWIA, he became captivated by English Harbour, then totally undeveloped and exquisite. Nelson's Dockyard was about to open officially, with much fanfare and international press. Peter decided that this beautiful spot at the entrance was perfect for a hotel and this was the ideal moment to do it. So Peter and his wife Ann built The Inn at English Harbour, bringing many jobs to a then isolated and poor area when cotton and charcoal were the only employment. The Inn was built mainly from the lovely local green stone in eight short months, a miracle in those times (as it would be today!) with such primitive facilities. There was no road, no electricity, no water and minimum funds. But the hotel rapidly became well established and increasingly popular. However, Peter, along with Desmond Nicholson who managed the Admiral's Inn, needed entertainment and activities for their guests, and so the precursor to Antigua Sailing Week was conceived in the embryonic English Harbour Yacht Club.

Here is the wonderfully funny description Peter wrote for the Antigua Yacht Club of how yacht racing was born in Antigua: (it is easy to see from this how the idea of sailing as a way to extend the very short Antiguan season seemed to be the obvious solution to both Peter and Desmond).

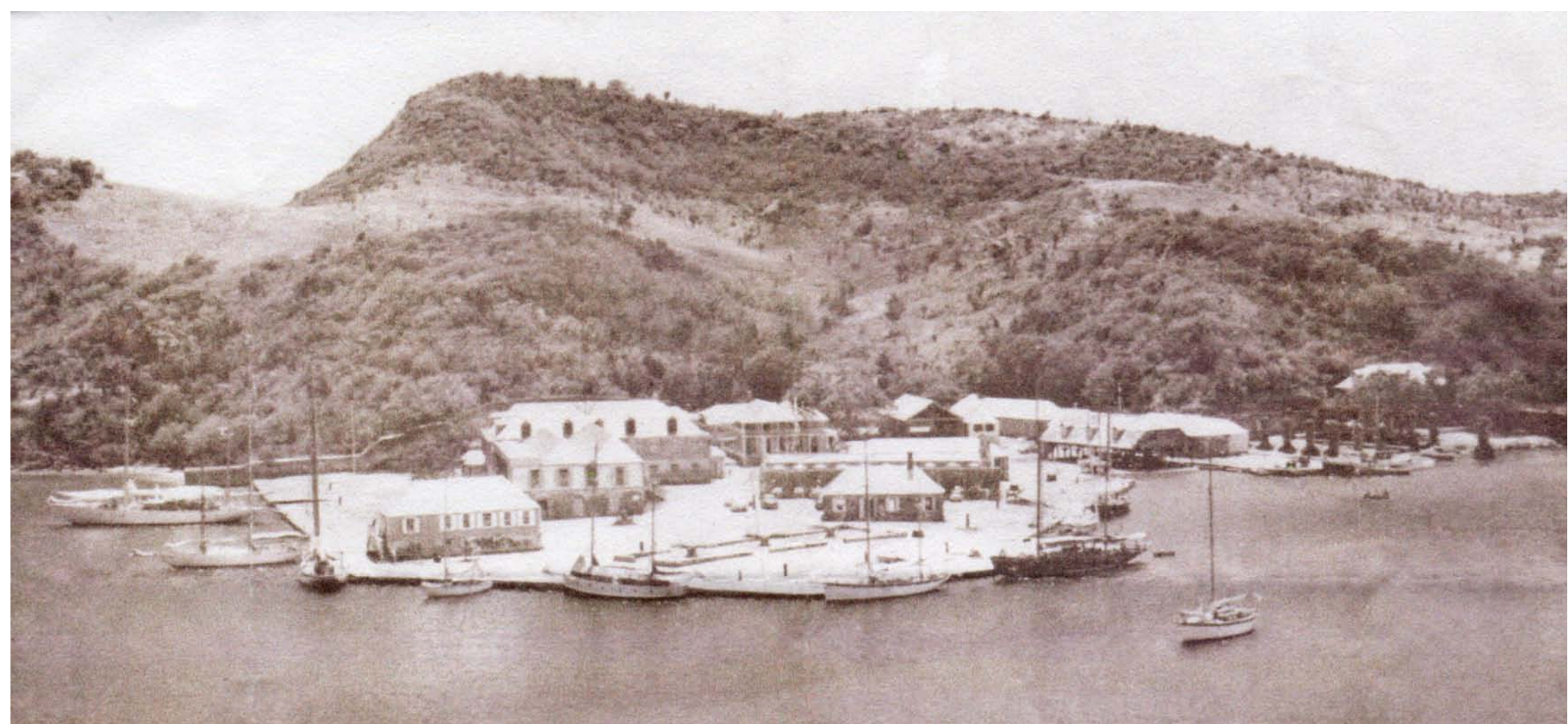
The Origins of the Antigua Yacht Club

In the mid 1960s, two new hotels – The Inn at English Harbour, owned by myself, and the Admiral's Inn, a leading light of which was Desmond Nicholson, started to race against each other on Sunday mornings, using the hotel Sailfish (predecessor of the Sunfish). Each hotel had three Sailfish and team racing took place in Freeman's Bay off The Inn beach. Competition was fierce, a trophy was obtained, and at the end of racing each Sunday the victorious team carried off the trophy, which then sat in a place of honour in the bar at The Inn or Admiral's Inn until the following Sunday. The trophy spent most of its time at the Admiral's Inn as they could always field a team of "hotshot" helmsmen such as Jol Byerley, Peter van der Sloop and Richard "Hot Screws" Scott Hughes. From this successful activity the

idea was born of starting a local sailing club or yacht club.

In 1967, a small informal meeting of just a few people took place one early evening in the Admiral's Inn bar. Present were Desmond Nicholson, Andy Copeland, John Clegg, myself and one or two others. It was decided to form a club to hold Sailfish races in English Harbour and to start recruiting members. This was done with enthusiasm, word spread, and we soon had a goodly number of sailors and supporters who all became members of what was to be called "The English Harbour Yacht Club" and I was elected the first Commodore.

Membership fees must have been very low – the "Club" had little to offer. No clubhouse, no boats and only the opportunity to race or watch races on Sunday mornings.



OPPOSITE

TOP LEFT: *A young Peter Deeth*TOP RIGHT: *Peter and Ann Deeth.*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF PETER DEETH

BOTTOM LEFT: *Ann Ayres.*

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ANN AYRES

BOTTOM RIGHT: *The Admiral's Inn and Nelson's Dockyard.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY GILLY GOBINET

The Admiral's Inn was at that time the social centre of all things nautical in Antigua and Ethelyn Phillips, the Manageress, gave us permission to start our races from the dock at the bottom of the Admiral's Inn lawn. We were even allowed to run our own bar down the dock and the revenue from this, plus entrance fees for racing and membership fees, became the foundation of the Yacht Club finances.

Our Sunday morning racing soon became the social event of the week in English Harbour and we could easily have a hundred or more people turning up to chat, enjoy the scene, and in some cases to actually race. The "Clubhouse" became a large box on the dock in which we kept all our paraphernalia for racing plus essentials for the bar. The Club was run entirely by enthusiastic volunteers. We had no expenses and ever increasing revenue. Eventually, our finances became strong enough to enable us to think to actually having a proper clubhouse and better racing in more open water.

Falmouth Harbour was the obvious choice. In 1969, an Extraordinary General Meeting was held on the lawn of the Admiral's Inn and a proposal was made to move the Club to Falmouth and build a clubhouse there. Despite considerable opposition, the vote was carried. The Commodore negotiated with V.C. Bird, [who later became] the Prime Minister, to obtain a site in Falmouth and this was eventually granted. In 1970, Jack Paterson, a member and a contractor, was subpoenaed to build the clubhouse, and when it was up many enthusiastic volunteers turned out for a "painting party" to finish it off. Racing continued every Sunday – all day now. We ran a barbecue lunch and the Club continued to be a great social, as well as sailing success. Everything was run by volunteers. We had no paid employees whatsoever and thus the Club finances continued to prosper. Before long, we were racing Sunfish and then a string of six 420s were bought in Guadeloupe and towed over to Antigua by volunteer yachtsmen. In 1972, the Club's name was changed to the Antigua Yacht Club and we were on our way.

Antigua Sailing Week: how it all began

In the late 1960s, the Antigua Hotel Association was searching for ways to lengthen the only too short winter season – December to March. One idea was to hold an annual regatta in April to attract visitors and prolong the season. This idea actually came in to being and Antigua Sailing Week was born.

The early years were challenging but exhilarating. With problems galore, no money, but plenty of unpaid enthusiastic volunteers and all commercialism strictly banned, a great atmosphere was created.

From the outset, it was determined this regatta was to be fun. Serious, competitive sailing yes, but also lots of fun so that people would enjoy themselves and want to return. With this aim in view, the beach parties were created. After racing, there would be a non-stop beach party to go to with plenty of rum, music and a chance for everybody to get together and have a really great time.

Word soon spread about Antigua's new Sailing Week and the number of yachts sailing in from around the Caribbean to participate rapidly multiplied.

The early years were certainly creative but far from plain sailing, and many disastrous events occurred. Disastrous at the time they were, but often quite hilarious to look back on later. One such was the crash of a light plane carrying Sarah Nicholson, at that time our official photographer. Flying very low, about 50ft above the water to photograph a leading yacht, the plane stalled and crashed in to the sea. Fortunately, neither Sarah nor the pilot were hurt and were picked up out of the water immediately, but the plane was never to be seen again.

In many ways "Them were the days them was". Sailing Week very quickly became established as a great success, and happily it's a success that continues until this day.

Peter Deeth was Commodore of the Antigua Yacht Club in 1967, 1968 and 1976.

