

The Vertue

One of the most enduring of Jack Laurent Giles's designs, the Vertue has been praised since the 1930s for her performance when the going gets tough. Adrian Morgan, owner of Vertue no x Sally II, talks about the design – and the legends

You must tread carefully when talking about the Vertue, among the most enduring of Jack Laurent Giles's designs. To speak ill of a Vertue is akin to criticising the Queen Mum (Gawd Bless Her!). So much has been written about her qualities, so much praise heaped upon her performance, especially when the going gets tough, that it's almost refreshing to hear anything disparaging of the heavy displacement, long-keeled 25-footer. After all, this was the boat that Humphrey Barton – having sailed *Vertue XXXV* across the Atlantic in 1950, surviving a hurricane and knockdown in the process – called “the best designed, built and equipped small ocean-cruising yacht that has ever been produced”.

“Jack's boats were always a bit narrow,”

Peter Anstey, a former Giles partner told me some years ago. Ian Howlett confirmed what I, as an owner, knew from sailing my own *Sally II* for many years: “She's about a foot too narrow.” Alan Roy, a Laurent Giles director from 1968 to 1986 told me: “There was nothing magical about her. In general character she was similar to a number of boats he produced, certainly pretty.”

The design seems to owe as much to ease of building as cunning naval architecture, her body plan drawn for simplicity and to enable the builders – Moody's, in the case of the first, *Andrillot* – to run the full-length Oregon pine planks more easily 'from stem to sternpost along the garboards or round the turn of the bilge with almost parallel seams, thereby saving much waste in the

Dimensions

LOA	7.7m	25ft 3in
LWL	6.56m	11ft 6in
Beam	2.18m	7ft 2in
Draught	1.34m	4ft 5in
Sail area	35.35m ²	380ft ²
Displacement	4.5 tons	
Ballast	2.045kg	4,500lb



cutting of timber'. Further in the cause of economy, Guernseyman Dick Kinnersly's *Andrillot*, the class forerunner, had an unfashionable – indeed old-fashioned – transom stern which saved hugely on shipwright's time.

So here we have her: a pretty boat, built to a price, a trifle narrow, heavy (the same displacement as a Contessa 32) – indeed the Vertue is probably the heaviest displacement yacht for her size afloat – and praised to the heavens by a man who survived a hurricane in the 35th to be built, albeit a Giles partner with an eye to future sales in America.

For Jack Giles, Magdalene College engineering graduate, apprenticed to Vickers-Armstrong, first prize winner in a *Yachting World* design competition (which secured him a place in the drawing office of Camper & Nicholson) the 5-tonner Kinnersly asked him to draw in the winter of 1935 was welcome but not exactly white heat. His later racing boats *Maid*, and then *Myth of Malham*, were rather more cutting edge. *Andrillot*, in Giles's own words, was simply "shaped to maintain the general outward character of the pilot fishing boat, but having the benefit of the concentrated thought on the design of seagoing yachts that the activities of the Royal Ocean Racing Club had then fostered. A straightforward little boat with a modest forward overhang, full displacement, outside ballast, moderate beam and a reasonably cut away profile."

And yet there was method in Giles's simplicity. "Jack used the concept of the symmetrical master diagonal," Anstey told me. "His pet scheme was that used by Maldon Heckstall-Smith, a model yacht designer's system, not a theory, but a study of a great many lines plans, empirical, and never widely published."

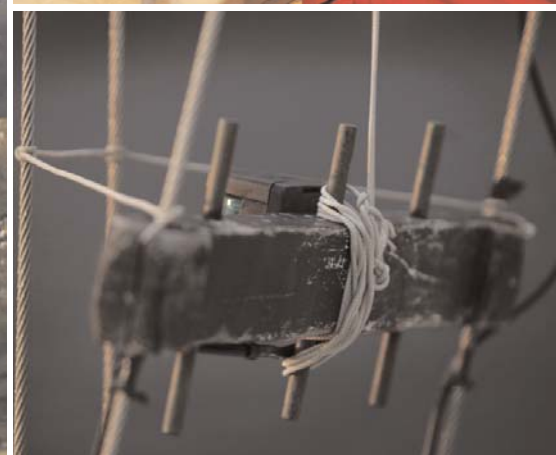
So, she was a kind of miniature *Jolie Brise* – fast, weatherly and easy to build, balanced like a model yacht, admired by Uffa Fox as "an example of simplicity", but not especially innovative. And she was for an owner who wanted a yacht that would "spin on a sixpence, and sail single-handed if need be", as Kinnersly told me when I interviewed him eight years ago at his home in Alton.

"I told Jack I didn't mind a transom, but wanted a fine entry, a boat in which a couple could go cruising, sleep and cook in some comfort." *Dyarchy*, perhaps the most admired of Giles's larger cruising boats, designed in 1939, is essentially a scaled-up Giles five-tonner. Not, perhaps, the kind of yachts the young Cambridge graduate had hoped to design.

And yet the Vertue, as the post-war Giles five-tonners became known, secured Giles's reputation. Apocryphally, a sign on Durban's seafront forbids any yacht to put to sea in winds over Force 7, without the harbour master's permission, unless she's a Vertue.

It's just one of the myriad legends that have grown up about the boat. ▶▶

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“All she wants is the right amount of sail area and she just keeps going and seems to love it”

Testimonials to her weatherliness are legion. Just one will do, from Claude Wyatt, owner of *Dawn*, built by Cheoy Lee in 1965. ‘In 30 years of owning various sailing craft this Vertue is the finest little vessel I’ve ever sailed,’ he wrote in 1971. ‘The more I sail her, the more I’m amazed at her ability. As you know, we have normal winds in this area of 20-40 knots. All she wants is the right amount of sail area and she just keeps going and seems to love it, and balances like a dream. In other words ‘a real thoroughbred.’”

Speaking as an owner of *Sally II*, the second of the ‘class’, built in 1937, for the past ten years, I can’t fault that description. She does indeed get better as it gets windier. Under deep-reefed main and working jib, she’ll jog along in perfect equilibrium, the helm light, that deep, easy hull bounding along like a docile labrador, never slamming, and seldom shipping any water. Recently, on a trip back from Stornoway on Lewis, *Sally* averaged nearly six knots under just such a rig, in a Force 6, a delight from the moment the Hebrides faded to the sighting of Coigach and the approach to Ullapool.



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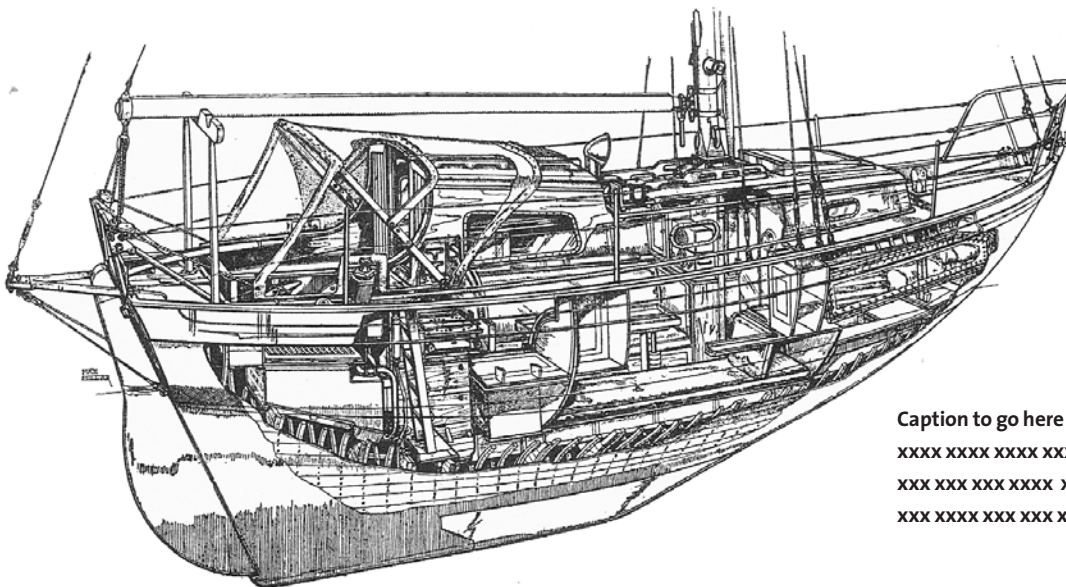


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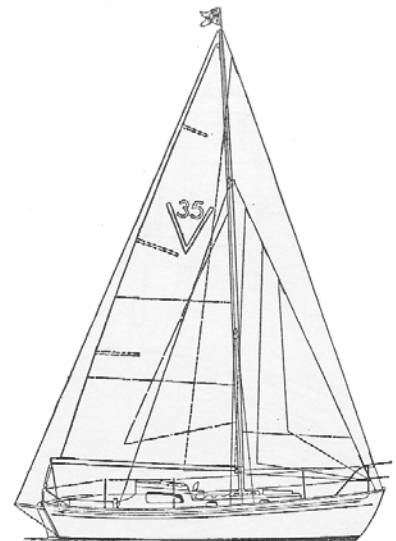
In the only Round the Island Race we entered, she placed 12th in class, and would have been in the top five had we not driven her onto Ryde Sands in the closing stages of the race. In light airs that huge displacement – around 4.5 tons in normal trim – keeps her going, provided her bottom is clean, and there is indeed a vast area of bottom to clean at scrubbing off time. Under Yanmar 9hp

diesel, driving a 15in propeller through a 3:1 gearbox, she’ll make six knots in flat water; just don’t ask her to go astern with any predictability.

No one can pretend a Vertue is spacious, unless your name is Humphrey Barton. He managed to squeeze himself, a companion and stores for 3,000 miles aboard XXXV for his epic 1950 transatlantic, and praised her



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stowage. On *Sally II* we've pared everything to the minimum, and anything that's not used in two seasons is jettisoned. Early Vertues such as *Sally* are restricted in headroom, lacking the extra 9in top strake that Giles drew post-war. *Sally's* canvas sprayhood means you can cook standing up, and is essential for protection at sea.

These early examples are like pre-war sports cars, MGs, Alvises, Bentleys – open-topped, cramped, stripped out. The cruising comforts, the headroom, self-draining cockpits and higher topsides came later. It makes the likes of *Andrillot*, *Sally*, *Monie*, *Charis*, *Epeneta*, *Francolin*, *Kawan*, *Caupona*, *Candy* and *Almena* sleeker and faster than those built post-war and not, to be honest, quite so practical for long-distance sailing.

And it was, of course, for long-distance sailing that the Vertues became renowned. Again the list of epic voyages is endless: *Cardinal Vertue*, 3d in the first OSTAR, in 1960, behind Chichester and Hasler; smallest yacht (at the time) to round Cape Horn; many circumnavigations, at least four solo; transatlantics two a penny, hurricanes

weathered numerous including *Dione*, encountered by David Robertson in 1956, and the severe storm that James Burdett survived in Biscay aboard *Mary* (V9) in 1993, which earned him the RCC Seamanship award. When, in 1956, John Goodwin sailed *Speedwell* from Gibraltar to Barbados, his 27-day voyage, at an average of 100 miles a day, was the fastest single-handed transatlantic.

In June 1984 David and Daniel Hays sailed the engineless glassfibre *Sparrow* round Cape Horn, becoming the smallest yacht for over 20 years to do so. The voyage is related in their book *My Old Man and The Sea*, one of many Vertue-related books.

A more typical, modest voyage was Matthew Power's Atlantic circuit. In 1992 he sailed *Chinita*, one of the sought-after Cheoy Lee-built Vertues, largely single-handed to the West Indies and back. "I'd have been so lonely on a Bénéteau," he says. "It's the boat that does it. There is something fundamentally romantic about crossing oceans in an old wooden boat."

Chinita (V119) was "built like a cathedral" in iin teak on ipol frames, to Lloyd's 100A1 in

Kowloon in the mid-60s. Including Ratsey sails, teak cradle, engine and full inventory, she cost £3,000.

Power's description of buying *Chinita* from her long-term owner is typical of many. "I stumbled on her with an hour to spare between business meetings on a wet November day in 1984," he says. "She seemed rather like a down at heel actress who had seen better days. I was hooked." There followed a tense meeting with her owner. "It was a bit like asking for his daughter's hand in marriage."

Maintenance is all about keeping on top of jobs. "The romance can go out of it after a while," says Power. »



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“It’s all wonderful for a while, then it’s time for a Bénéteau, with a big, powerful engine that goes astern. Owners willing to keep wooden Vertues year in year out are hard to find.”

In buying a Vertue the usual wooden boat caveats apply: pitch pine or teak on oak, with bronze strap floors and lead keel in preference to mahogany planking and cast iron. Be wary of boats built too soon after the war when timber quality was poor and labour expensive. Boats built in the 1930s and 1960s are as a rule better than those built in the ‘50s. Retired surveyor Eric Adams wrote: “They are extremely well designed structurally. You do not often find fractured timbers or signs or planking working on a Vertue.”

Glassfibre inevitably caught up with the predominantly pitch pine, and latterly, mahogany on oak-planked Vertues in the 1970s with the arrival of the Vertue II. Some owners were less than happy with the development: “I think it would be wrong to attach the title of Vertue to any such craft,” was a typical comment. Barry van Geffen, by then at the helm of Laurent Giles, pressed ahead nevertheless, and the moulds were constructed. Slightly beamier, and with

accommodation more in tune with the competition, it achieved some success until price – around £50,000 at the last count – made it uneconomical.

A new, professionally built wooden Vertue would cost around £150,000. Second-hand wooden examples appear on broker’s lists from time to time between £14,000-£21,000. Vertue IIs command prices up to around £45,000 depending on inventory. The pre-war Vertues –

eight of the ten still exist – are more for the purist: low, lean and faster.

There is no such thing as a stock Vertue – indeed *Epeneta*, which gave the class its name, was stretched to race under RORC. Until the advent of glassfibre, they are all one-offs, designed and built to order by relatively wealthy men, so layouts differ widely. *Sally II* has a simple two-berth saloon, with a third berth in the forepeak, and sharing space with warps, anchors, fenders and sails. The Vertue sail plan, as drawn by Giles, features eight headsails, spinnaker, main and trysail, although working jib, yankee, storm jib and genoa are enough for most people. Storage for the full inventory would take up most of the forepeak.

Jack Giles was clearly delighted by the success of his little five-tonner and never saw any reason to alter her lines. ‘I had not found a way to better them,’ he wrote. And those who sail them agree. Matthew Power: “Point a Vertue’s nose to the horizon and she just says ‘where shall we go?’”



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Famous Vertues

Ten Giles five-tonners were built before the war, and before the class was called the Vertue. The name derives from the cup donated by the Little Ship Club’s librarian Michael B Vertue in 1927. In 1940 the cup was won by Col Lawrence Biddle and Tony Hills for a 16-day cruise from Christchurch in *Epeneta*, covering 745 miles, and rescuing, en route, the owner of a motor cruiser afire off Start Point. *Epeneta* sank off Cape St Vincent in 1972 during a storm.

Mary – In 1993 James Burdett was caught out in a Biscay storm which sank a freighter nearby. Despite being swamped several times, Burdett brought *Mary* (ex *Candy*) home safe, never doubting for a moment her ability.

Vertue XXV – A stock Vertue, built by Elkins of Christchurch, skippered by Humphrey Barton and crew, 60-year-old former Indian Army officer Kevin O’Riordan, and carrying 52gal of water and 3cwt of tinned food, set sail from Lymington in summer 1950, arriving off Sandy Hook, New York 47d 11h



later. During that time they faced 23 days of headwinds, sailing under bare poles on three occasions. Fittingly they won the Vertue Cup, as did David Lewis for the 1960 OSTAR and V25 for a round Britain in 1995.

Humphrey Barton

In 1937 Humphrey Barton won the RCC Founder's Cup for an 855-mile West Country, Channel Isles and Brittany voyage that took in 22 places in 23 days – some going even by today's frantic standards. He was later to write of *Andrillot's* performance: 'She certainly did go.'

Her owner, from whom Barton chartered her for £15 said: "Barton's voyage was impressive, and caused great excitement around Lymington. But then only professionals like Humphrey

could afford the time to do long cruises."

Barton also delivered *Monie*, V3, from Lymington to Pwhelli anticlockwise just for the hell of it, 1,056 miles in 25 days. At the mouth of the river he was said to have asked his crew "left or right?"

In print

Many accounts of Vertue voyages have been published over the years, the most famous being that of Humphrey Barton's *Vertue XXXV*. Others include *The Restless Wind*, AG Hamilton (Wm Blackwood & Sons); *The Ship Would Not Travel West*, David Lewis (Rupert Hart-Davis); *Stelda George and I*, Peter Woolas (Arlington Books, London) and countless articles in *Yachting World*, *Yachting Monthly*, *Classic Boat* and overseas journals.