

People power

Almost any story can be improved by the addition of a little human interest. Or so we think now. It was not the style of Edwardian journalists – at least not specialist Edwardian journalists working in a burgeoning new field ripe with developments in engineering and design – to go looking for the human angle. If it had been, early issues of *The Motor Boat* would have been full of stories about a quite remarkable young man by the name of Thomas Sopwith.

Famous today as a pioneering aircraft manufacturer and owner of the two *Endeavours* which so nearly won the America's Cup between the wars, Sopwith was also a champion powerboat racer who somehow found the time – in between breaking records, setting up his flying school and establishing the Sopwith Aviation Co – to win the Harmsworth Trophy for Britain not once but twice, in 1912 and 1913. But although driven by Sopwith, the finest unlimited hydroplane of its day – the mighty Saunders-built, 55-knot, 800hp *Maple Leaf IV* – was owned by the oil and cotton magnate Sir Edward Mackay

**Double Harmsworth
Trophy winner and
aviation pioneer
Thomas Sopwith.**



Edgar. Edwardian journalists did not question the order of things – like the parable of the talents, they gave credit to those who already had it. So archivists scouring early issues of *The Motor Boat* for any other name associated with the boat will look in vain.

**Like father, like son:
Tommy Sopwith's
Thunderbolt on the
way to victory in the
1961 Cowes-Torquay.**

When, nearly 50 years later, another Sopwith started to make his mark in competitive powerboating, the world was a somewhat different place. People were important. Human interest was legitimate, and *Motor Boat & Yachting* was able to allow the personality into the story.



This was fortunate, because an event had just been established which during the next few years would attract the finest crop of characters and personalities the boating world had ever seen: the Cowes-Torquay offshore powerboat race.

"Sopwith Wins" blared the headline in August 1961. "Severe But Successful 156-Mile Fast Boat Test." The great man's son, Tommy Sopwith, had proved himself a chip off the old block by winning the very first Cowes-Torquay. "The wind was WNW Force 5, gusting six, and the sky cloudy," the magazine reported. "To the west of the Isle of Wight the waves were 4ft to 5ft high, with an occasional bigger one... There were some who held that the race should have been postponed, but we think the organisers were right to hold it. It was designed as a seagoing test for fast motor boats and if calm conditions had been insisted on, this purpose would not have been fulfilled." It was the first European offshore race of modern times, and the magazine understood the point of it all perfectly.

Young Sopwith's chosen mount was the 25ft deep-vee *Thunderbolt*, built by Bruce Campbell on a Hunt-inspired Fairey hull, which pounded gamely through the unfavourable conditions for more than seven hours to win at an average speed of 21.4 knots. "He drove with one hand continually on the throttles," reported the magazine incredulously. "Mr Sopwith, a noted motor racing driver, said: 'Motor boat racing of this type is basically like motor racing. You have to be constantly ready to meet the hazards of each moment – the difference being that they are vertical instead of horizontal.' He was full of praise for the boat and her builders." Sopwith went on to win the race twice more, in boats designed by the up-and-coming Don Shead.

The stated aim of offshore racing was to 'improve the breed' of powerboats, a mission in which it was singularly successful. The man responsible for importing the idea to the UK was Max Aitken, who had seen Sam Griffith's Miami-Nassau race in 1960, and with remarkable despatch organised the Cowes-Torquay for the following summer. That seems quick work, but as proprietor of the *Daily Express* he could deal with all promotional and sponsorship issues with a stroke of a pen. Virtually all that remained to do

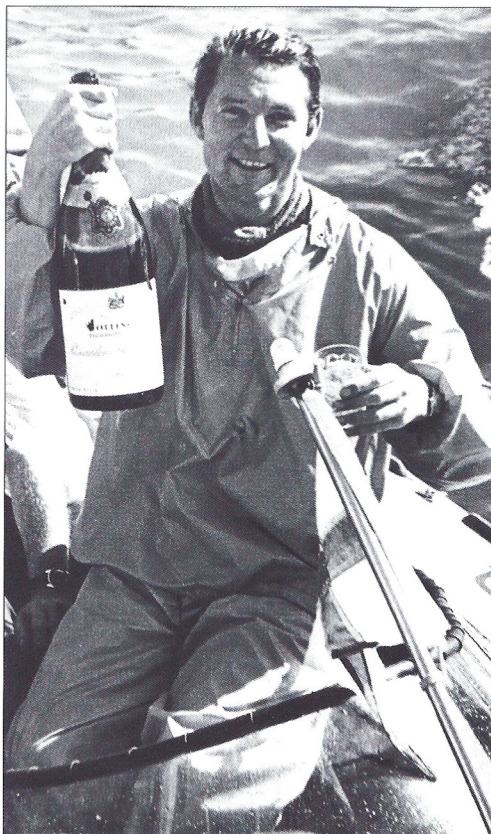
was book some berths at Groves & Guttridge and warn the Imperial Hotel that there might be a few extra for dinner. The entries read like a guest list to one of his garden parties.

In spite of living much of his life, as he saw it, in the shadow of his domineering father Lord Beaverbrook, Aitken was an exceptional man of action in his own right. At a time in history when anyone who had counted paperclips in the RAF in 1940 could bask in the reflected glory of 'The Few', he was the genuine article, having flown Hurricanes in France and in the Battle of Britain, Beaufighters in the Mediterranean, and Mosquitos over the North Sea. By the time of his DSO in 1942 he had shot down at least 12 German aircraft. The citation in the *London Gazette* described him as "a brilliant pilot and a gallant leader". He was also an accomplished yachtsman and gifted newspaperman, and well known around Cowes.

The first races were full of aviators. Sam Griffith himself, described in *Motor Boat & Yachting* as "the late lamented American ace" in the preview for the 1963 Cowes-Torquay after his untimely death of cancer, had been a transport pilot during the war with one of the most dangerous jobs going: ferrying fuel across the Himalayas into China. With his friend and fellow pilot Forrest Johnson and promoter Red Crise, he had thought up the Miami-Nassau race in 1956, and it was the legendary, rough-water encounter of 1960, when the only two finishers were Ray Hunt hulls, that convinced Aitken of the power of offshore to improve boat design.



Max Aitken, patron of European offshore racing.



Tommy Sopwith after his 1968 Cowes-Torquay victory in Telstar.

A regular 'hired hand' in the early days was Jeffrey Quill, who as a Supermarine test pilot had worked on the famous Spitfire from its 1936 prototype right through to the late Griffon-engined marks at the end of WW2. Although somewhat older than the average front-line pilot, he volunteered for squadron service in the RAF in order to gain first-hand combat experience. He helmed the 2,300hp Vosper-built 1962 Cowes-Torquay winner *Tramontana* for Dick Wilkins, and was back again in 1963 with *Tramontana II*.

Peter Twiss was another speed-obsessed nautical airman. A naval fighter pilot who had seen much wartime service from aircraft carriers and catapult-equipped merchant ships, he went on to become Fairey's chief test pilot. In 1956 he set a world speed record of 1,132mph in their Delta II. With his Fairey colleague, the Olympic yachtsman and ex-naval officer Charles Currey, he threw himself enthusiastically into the company's boatbuilding enterprise and drove several Fairey boats for clients in the early Cowes-Torquays. Twiss was Billy Butlin's driver in the



Tramontana II
pictured in the 1963
Cowes-Torquay,
helmed by test pilot
Jeffrey Quill.

first race, and it is hard to imagine a man of his experience turning a hair when hull damage forced them to beach the 28ft Huntsman on Hayling Island. In 1962 he was out again in a 23ft Huntress owned by Mr C.G. James, and the following year did the honours at the helm of the Huntsman *Here and Now*, owned by Fairey MD Mr Chichester-Smith – while Charles Currey looked after Mr James.

The rough and tumble of offshore racing seemed to appeal to such men. No doubt the aura

of heroism around them helped to attract the millionaires who flocked to this new sport like moths. And wherever there's a millionaire, there is always a boatbuilder in the wings awaiting a commission.

Dick Bertram was among the earliest Americans to make the transatlantic trip to have a crack at the Cowes Torquay, and in 1965 he became the first American to win it. His original wooden 31ft *Moppie*, designed by Ray Hunt in 1960, was to become one of the most influential



Sam Griffith, founder
of modern offshore
powerboat racing.



Fairey Marine's Charles Currey (left), Olympic
silver medallist in the Finn class in 1952.



hulls ever built. She won the Miami-Nassau that year with Bertram and Sam Griffith as crew, and many famous fibreglass boats moulded from her took part in the Cowes-Torquay: *Glass Moppie*, driven by Griffith in the 1961 race and later campaigned by Max Aitken; *Blue Moppie*, second in 1962, again with Griffith at the helm, and second again in '63; Bertram's own *Lucky Moppie*, which nearly won the 1964 race; and the Gardner brothers' *Surfrider*, which did. Bertram always said he never intended to be a boatbuilder, but after that Miami-Nassau race, "there were so damn many yachtsmen waving chequebooks at me that I had to go into business". In the early 1960s, he was top of the pile. It was usual for the Cowes-Torquay entry list to feature as many as ten Bertram-built boats, from a diesel 38 for Max Aitken (*Vivacity*), to the 25ft (7.62m) *Yo-Yo* for Jim Wynne – all designed by Ray Hunt.

Jim Wynne was campaigning in races all over the world at that time to publicise the new 'Aquamatic' outdrive concept he had sold to Volvo Penta. Except for a few forward-looking designers like Sonny Levi, who adopted the new idea almost immediately and installed it in his Trident raceboats, the boating business proved a tough nut to crack after the product's launch at the 1959 New York boat show. But Wynne was a talented



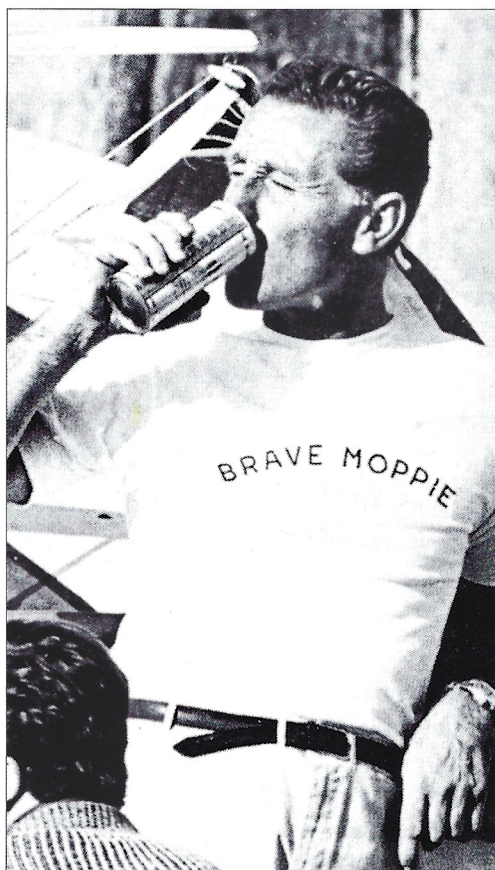
Improving the breed: the Fairey Huntress also found favour with the Royal Navy. Left: Peter Twiss.

and aptly-named competitor, as well as no mean designer of hulls himself, and gradually the new invention established itself.

Now, of course, the outdrive is recognised as perhaps the most important development in recreational boating since WW2, and Wynne is



*The legendary 31ft (9.45m) Moppie.
Right: yachtsman, boatbuilder and the first American to win the Cowes-Torquay – Dick Bertram.*



credited with its invention. But in fact it was originally thought up by his former Mercury colleague Charlie Strang, who allowed Wynne to go ahead with its development and sell it to the Swedes. Strang elected to stay with Mercury and so could not, of course, admit the truth to his fearsome boss Carl Kiekhafer. Their secret was kept for nearly 40 years.

Most of the competitors in those far-off Corinthian days of offshore might have been amateurs, but not all of them were gentlemen. Where there's brass there's muck, and over the years powerboats have attracted their fair share of villains. In the US in the 1970s and 80s the sport was legendary for its links to drug smugglers and other ne'er-do-wells, and more than one American raceboat is said to have made its way to British shores with an ulterior motive: contraband concealed in its mouldings. Obviously, with one eye on the libel laws and another on their own well-being, none of the magazine's reporters ever saw fit to say so – at least not in print.

Among the first wave of Americans to come over to Europe to race in the early 1960s was a

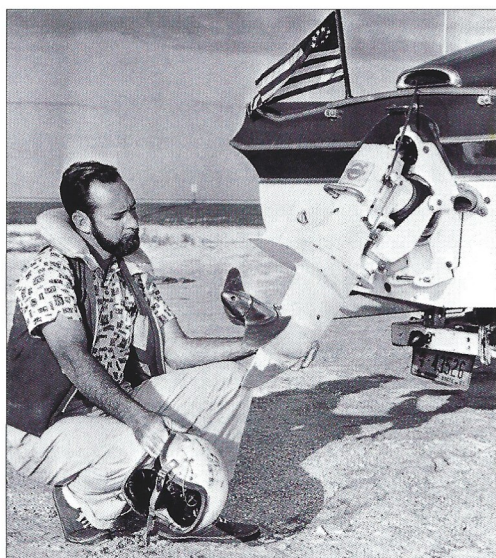


young boatbuilder by the name of Don Aronow. It took *Motor Boat & Yachting* several years to get the spelling right, but when he came third in the 1964 Cowes-Torquay aboard the 27ft Formula *Claudia II*, he was already well on his way to eclipsing even Dick Bertram as the greatest

builder of offshore raceboats that there has ever been. Having retired from the property business at the age of 34, Aronow moved from New Jersey to Florida in 1961, and then proceeded to found, set up and sell Formula, Donzi, Magnum, Cigarette and USA Racing Team, all on 'Thunderboat Row', NE 188th Street in Miami Beach. He was handsome, rich and talented, and a great businessman and manager. He took another third place in 1967, this time in the outboard-powered *Maltese Magnum*. Then in 1969 he took the offshore world by storm in his iconic 32ft Cary-built *The Cigarette*, winning the Cowes-Torquay at a fastest-ever 66mph, and going on to take the world championship. Through the 1970s, he ruled American offshore racing.

However, it was with good reason that Miami in the 1980s had a starring role in a TV cop show. Drugs powered its underworld economy, and a lot of them came into the city at night aboard fast offshore powerboats. Aronow might have sold boats to presidents, kings and Hollywood stars, but at a time when raceboats could sport names like *Dirty Laundry*, the man who called his most famous boat after a Prohibition-era rum-runner

Moppie lives on: the Gardner brothers' Surfrider, Cowes-Torquay winner in 1964.



Engineer and designer Jim Wynne.



The 27ft (8.23m) Formula Broad Jumper, designed by Jim Wynne and Walt Walters, on her way to ninth place in the 1965 race.

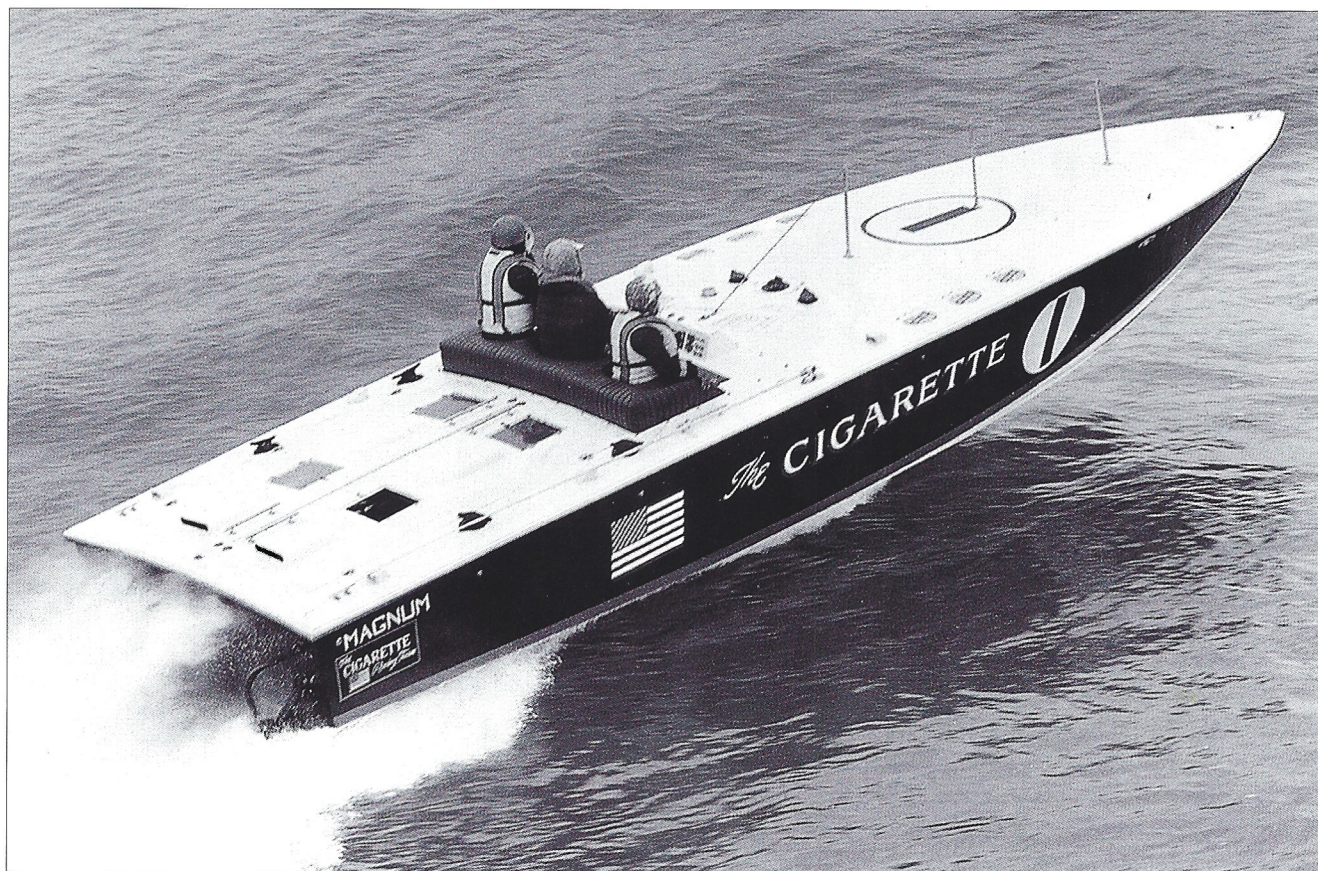


Racer, boatbuilder and all-round offshore legend Don Aronow.

was also no stranger to the seedier side of the city's waterfront. In Ben Kramer – powerboat racer, money launderer, drug smuggler and business rival – Aronow made one enemy too many. He was shot dead outside his USA Racing Team factory in 1987. Kramer is serving life without parole.

British offshore's most famous villain came from more traditional stock. Richard Bingham, the Earl of Lucan, showed spectacularly poor judgement in many areas of life, but he did display a sophisticated taste in boats. He entered the 1963 Cowes-Torquay in *White Migrant*, a 25ft Christina similar to Tommy Sopwith's *Thunderbolt* of two years earlier. She too was powered by twin 400hp Ford Interceptors, and Bruce Campbell himself was signed on as crew.

It was a formidable combination. Lucan led the fleet out of the Solent and all the way round the Isle of Wight, "at a speed of no less than 42 knots," reported *Motor Boat & Yachting*. But "*White Migrant's* brave effort was soon to come to an



end. Off the Needles (for the second time) she was holed and sank, Lord Bingham and her builder Bruce Campbell, who was with him, being picked up."

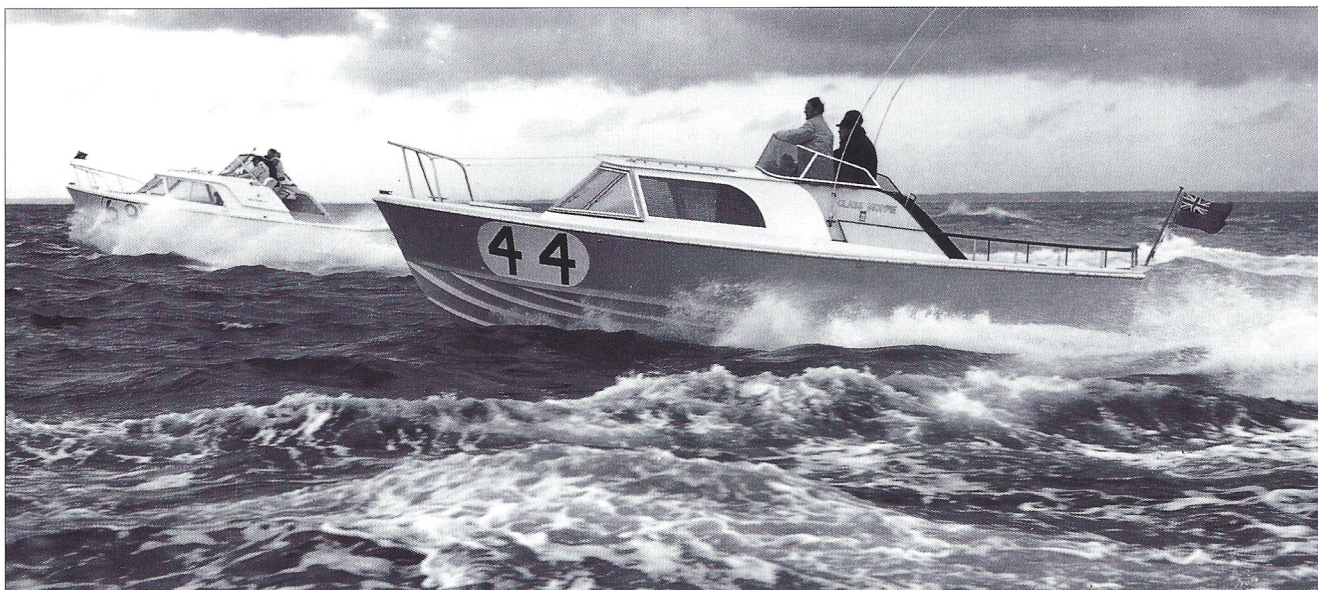
Lucan's first appearance on the scene had ended inauspiciously, but the noble lord was not discouraged. His new *Migrant* for 1964 was a Formula 233 – built by Aronow, designed by Wynne – powered by a single 380hp Daytona V8. The weather was warm and the pace was hot in 1964, the year of *Lucky Moppie* and *Surfrider's* famous duel, which was only resolved when Dick Bertram went the wrong side of the marker boat at the finish, handing victory to the Gardner brothers. *Migrant* was in the leading group all the way, eventually finishing in sixth place at an average speed of 38.6 knots.

Lucan posted an even more impressive performance in the 1965 race. "A Bingham ordered the Charge of the Light Brigade, and our contemporary Bingham chieftain was to the fore of the light brigade in today's race," reported the

magazine somewhat tortuously. It was a rough one, and the smaller boats had a punishing time of it. Lucan was back in his 23ft (7.01m) Formula and giving his all once again. This time it was Bertram's turn – the 36ft (10.98m) *Brave Moppie* was the first diesel winner of the Cowes-Torquay. (Bertram had spent the summer cruising in the Mediterranean. He brought her up for the race through the French canals.) In seventh place overall, Lucan's *Migrant* was the smallest boat in the top ten.

Less successful in that race was another of the magazine's favourite characters, the Sri Lankan-born insurance swindler and self-styled 'doctor', Emil Savundra. He later became famous for being hung out to dry on *The Frost Programme* and went on to serve six years in prison, but in the early years of the decade he was just another larger-than-life millionaire who liked to play with powerful raceboats. His *Jackie S* of 1963 was an extraordinary beast, re-engined from its triple-Chrysler configuration of 1962 with no fewer

One of the greatest of all Cowes winners, Don Aronow's legendary The Cigarette of 1969.



One Bertram against another: Chasseur and Glass Moppie (44) face off.

than four Jaguars, totalling 1,000hp. On the form card, at least, that made him joint favourite with the identically-powered *Tramontana II* – but that one was driven by Jeffrey Quill.

Savundra somehow managed to collide with the Needles Lighthouse, and later, after the circuit of the Isle of Wight, ran over a 30ft motor cruiser anchored off Yarmouth. These adventures led the notable yacht designer Uffa Fox to surmise that having all four propellers turning in the same direction must cause steering difficulties. Much later in *MBY* Tom Threlfall, who took part less noticeably in the same race, recalled that “The

jolly Dr S wasn’t blessed with 20/20 vision, and this disability – in conjunction with sea spray on his thick specs, some fairly heavy Solent traffic and the Lymington ferry, plus the distraction of one of his Jaguars overheating – had unfortunately resulted in him scoring a direct hit amidships on the poor innocent.”

There were those that felt both critics were too generous in their allocation of blame, but in fact Savundra was not a complete incompetent. In 1964 he was back, and charmed *MBY* into running a big profile feature, complete with cutaway drawing (p56), of his new *Jackie S*. It was an entirely new design, by a new designer: Fred Cross, described as an aerodynamicist. Lightly built of nylon-sheathed ply by R & W Clark in East Cowes, she was 35ft overall and fitted with just two 400hp Ford Interceptor V8s. The magazine clocked her at 48 knots on a sea trial in the Solent, and approved of her underwater shape: “The hull form is untouched by many of the latest fetishes. If a craft is to be at all happy in a head sea it needs a deep vee section forward. If it to develop something approaching its potential in calm water the vee must be reduced aft. Thus a hull with a chine sweeping up in a steady curve from transom to stem is indicated, and that is what we have here...” Savundra had already had a successful season, winning the Wills Trophy and the Poole Bay International, and the magazine



This charming man: MBY ran a four-page feature on Emil Savundra's new boat in 1964.



*Sonny Levi's
Speranzella IV
in 1964.*

was almost prepared to forget the humiliations of last year: "She is the only truly original craft in the race, and we wish her well."

Almost, but not quite. Elsewhere in that issue there is this warning note to readers: "Last year *Jackie S* struck the Needles Lighthouse at five knots, and went on to smite a converted lifeboat at considerably greater velocity. It would greatly contribute to our peace of mind if all spectator craft kept well clear of participants, which in certain circumstances may be regarded as lethal projectiles." Savundra acquitted himself well with a fifth placing in the 1964 race, nine minutes



*Emil Savundra's
ill-fated Jackie S
ends its race in 1963.*

behind Don Aronow and 11 minutes ahead of Lord Lucan. A few years later he met a lethal projectile of his own – in a television studio.

Golden Years 2: the 1960s Cowes Classic

Year	Boat	Driver	Designer	Speed (mph)
1961	<i>Thunderbolt</i>	Tommy Sopwith (GB)	Hunt/Campbell	25.33
1962	<i>Tramontana</i>	Jeffrey Quill (GB)	Du Cane	36.85
1963	<i>'A Speranziella</i>	Sonny Levi (It)	Levi	40.88
1964	<i>Surfrider</i>	Jimmy Gardner (GB)	Hunt	48.94
1965	<i>Brave Moppie</i>	Dick Bertram (US)	Hunt	39.75
1966	<i>Ghost Rider</i>	Jim Wynne (US)	Wynne/Walters	41.02
1967	<i>Surfury</i>	Jimmy Gardner (GB)	Levi	53.42
1968	<i>Telstar</i>	Tommy Sopwith (GB)	Shead	38.35
1969	<i>The Cigarette</i>	Don Aronow (US)	Cary	66.48
1970	<i>Miss Enfield II</i>	Tommy Sopwith (GB)	Shead	58.50