

Dunkirk Regatta

One difference between the First World War and the Second was that everyone could see the Second one coming. For the British, this meant plenty of opportunity to engage in the national pastime of hand-wringing about lack of preparedness, inadequate equipment, blinkered politicians and idiot officials. And for *Motor Boat & Yachting*, still led by the man who had seen the magazine through the last war, the obvious and pressing problem was the Navy's lack of fast small craft.

As early as October 1938 the editor, A.P. Chalkley, wrote: "There can be no denial of the absolute necessity for the provision of a large number of fast, high-powered motor patrol boats for the protection of the coast of Great Britain and our overseas dominions. When the emergency arises, we should need 1,000."

Time would prove him right, but when war did break out on September 3, 1939, Britain didn't even have 100 such boats, let alone the thousand Chalkley called for. Strenuous efforts were under way to build more. In the meantime, the recall of

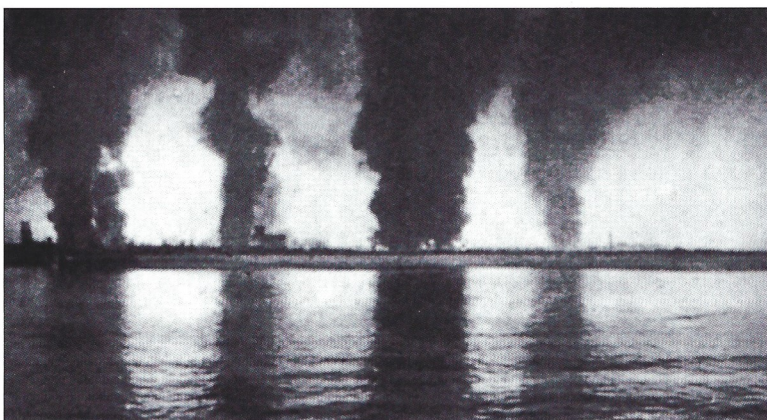


The London fireboat Massey Shaw returns after helping out at Dunkirk.

the 1st MTB Flotilla from the Mediterranean – 12 British Power Boat Co 60-footers (18.29m), six of which made the trip under their own power through the French waterways – almost doubled the available strength in home waters.

If only as a stopgap, private motor boats, and their owners, were sure to be needed. “In 1914, through the instrumentality of *The Motor Boat*, hundreds of men were drafted to various activities on the water, and there is no doubt that there is need for much larger numbers in a war under present conditions,” Chalkley wrote in his leader in the issue of September 1, 1939, two days before war broke out. “In the meantime we suggest that no motor boats should be laid up.” He went on, “Many may be temporarily required – at any rate, those which might be rendered suitable for some military or naval purpose.”

A view of Dunkirk from a British destroyer.



The long winter of the ‘Phoney War’ came to an abrupt end with the rapid German advance through Belgium and into France in May 1940. On the 14th, the BBC announced: “The Admiralty have made an Order requesting all owners of self-propelled pleasure craft between 30ft and 100ft (9.15m-30.49m) in length to send all particulars to the Admiralty within 14 days from today if they have not already been offered or requisitioned”.

Chalkley had been right, but was in no mood to sit back and take the credit. The Admiralty were dilatory buffoons. “It seems to us that unnecessary delay is occurring, at a time when the matter is obviously of the utmost urgency,” he wrote in the June 1 issue (under another item announcing that from next week the magazine would switch frequency from weekly to monthly publication, owing to the “complete cessation of supply of paper from Scandinavia”). Warming to his broadside, Chalkley went on: “One yard with more than 50 boats moored or laid up wrote to the Admiralty to ask what information they required, and at the time of going to press had received no reply.” He quoted several other examples of Naval incompetence and indifference before suggesting his solution: “a simple form” on which each boat’s characteristics and capabilities could be listed, along with its current location and the owner’s details. “By this means, we believe that the Admiralty would, within a week or ten days, be in possession of complete details of 90 per cent of the motor boats which they require.”

But things were moving faster – and the Admiralty, fortunately, was a good deal more efficient – than the editor knew. By the time his diatribe hit the news stands the Army had given up on the idea of holding the Germans back and a full-scale evacuation had already been in progress, unbeknown to the public, for four days. In Dover Castle and Dunkirk a small team of naval officers was masterminding one of the greatest feats of improvisation in the history of warfare, and the fleet of fishing boats, harbour launches and private cruisers which Chalkley had been convinced may be “temporarily required” was being assembled to do its bit off the beaches.

The idea that boat owners leapt into their craft on hearing the Government call is a myth, but like





A heavily-loaded Thames cruiser returns from the Dunkirk beaches.

The Skipper

In the 1930s and 40s *Motor Boat & Yachting* was fortunate to have an excellent columnist who, in the gentlemanly and undemonstrative style of the time, remained anonymous throughout his tenure. 'The Skipper' was a man of parts, combining some wit with a great deal of erudition, and presenting his ruminations with a kind of accidental authority.

He wrote about *The Riddle of the Sands* author Erskine Childers from personal acquaintance. He had corresponded with Kipling. Once, feeling that *The Times* obituary of his boating friend, the Cambridge academic Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, was inadequate, he contributed his own to *MBY*.

He clearly had much seagoing experience, and had certainly served in some capacity in the armed forces, for he begins his first column of the Second World War with a reminiscence about convalescing on the Isle of Wight after the First. In this he remembers pleasant chats with his boat-mad doctor, and recalls a little boat he bought himself while down there, which he admits wasn't much, but recognises as just the right boat for him then: "She taught me no end of things – about yachts, about the sea, and, odd as this may sound, about myself."

For his generation, the advent of another war was a uniquely grim prospect. "I expect all of us are finding that one of the most precious things in life is to have memories such as these," he observes mildly. "The world is a good place... The memory of that is better than having money in the bank. What we have found good once we shall find good again. Peace succeeds every war, as day succeeds every night."

Finally, by way of some diffident borrowings from Shakespeare ("So foul a sky clears not without a storm") and Psalm 15 ("He that sweareth unto his neighbour, and disappointeth him not... shall never fall") he rounds on the matter in hand: "I hate a tyrant, and I'm glad I'm English."

all great stories there is a germ of truth in it. While most of the private pleasure craft requisitioned for the task were manned by the Royal Navy, *Motor Boat & Yachting* tracked down several owners who had managed to remain in command of their own boats. In its new, monthly, frequency, the magazine's first opportunity to tell the story came in the issue of July 1940. But what it was conscious of lacking in topicality it more than made up for in depth and quality of coverage in a superb seven-page feature illustrated by a watercolour and many excellent photographs.

Dr B. A. Smith, owner of the 24ft (7.32m) *Constant Nymph*, reported receiving a call from the Admiralty at ten past midnight on Monday 27 May, asking him to move down the Thames from Isleworth to Sheerness as soon as possible. He had already signed Form No. T.124, which enrolled him in the Navy as a temporary charge hand at £23 a month, plus rations. By Wednesday he had been passed along to Ramsgate, given a crew of Naval ratings, and attached to a Navy-manned Dutch motor vessel, the *Jutland*.

"On Thursday morning the *Jutland* left Ramsgate with *Constant Nymph* in tow, also a whaler and a cutter. The Dunkirk beaches were reached about dark and a ferry service was established between the shore and the *Jutland*. *Constant Nymph* would tow the whaler and cutter as close to the beach as possible; these two boats and *Constant Nymph* were filled up with troops,

"The Motor Boat and Yachting," October, 1943.

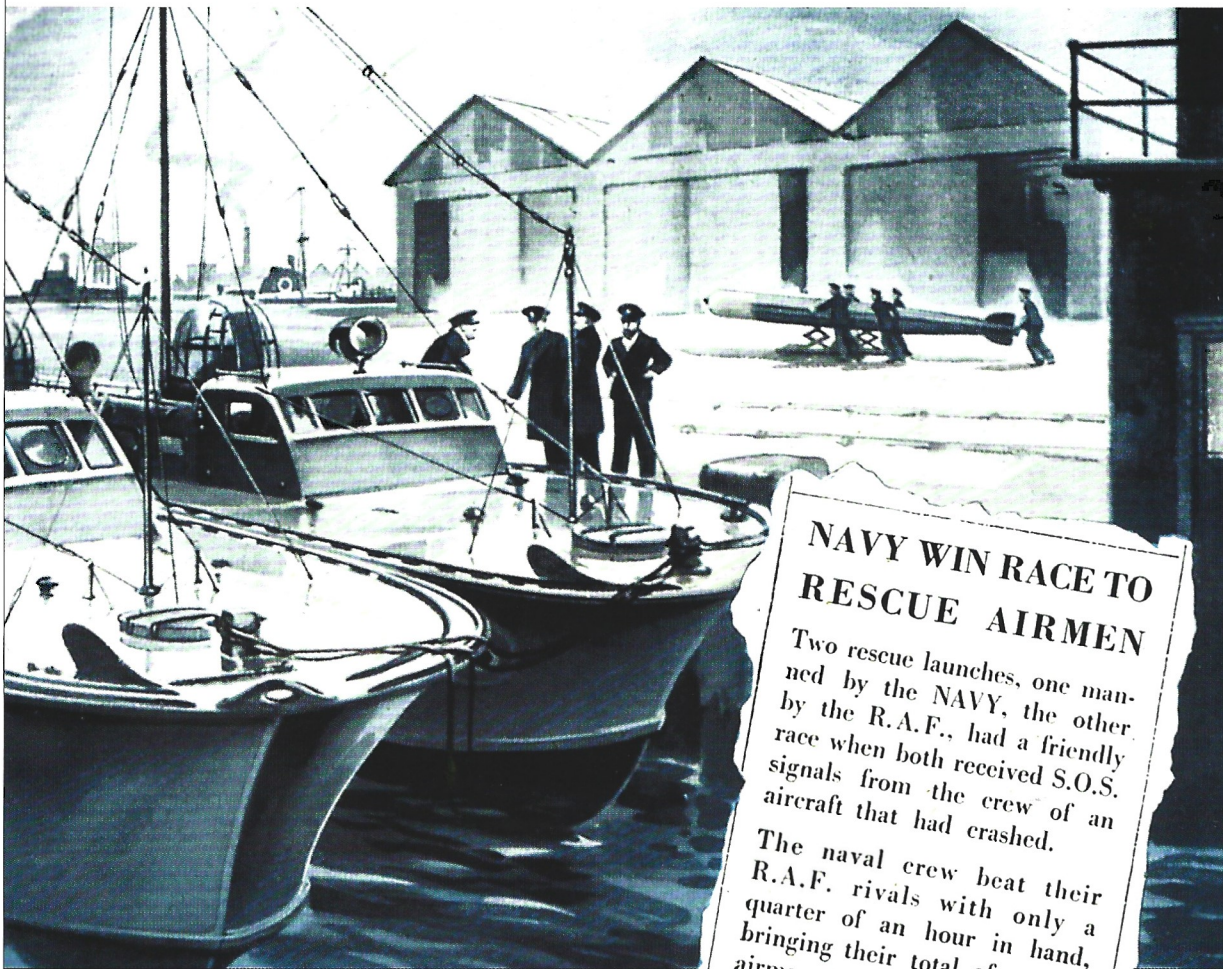
LARGEST
CIRCULATION

1/-

The MOTOR BOAT and YACHTING

OCTOBER, 1943.

Vol. LXXVI. - - No. 1912.



NAVY WIN RACE TO RESCUE AIRMEN

Two rescue launches, one manned by the NAVY, the other by the R.A.F., had a friendly race when both received S.O.S. signals from the crew of an aircraft that had crashed.

The naval crew beat their R.A.F. rivals with only a quarter of an hour in hand, bringing their total of rescued airmen to 12 in a fortnight.

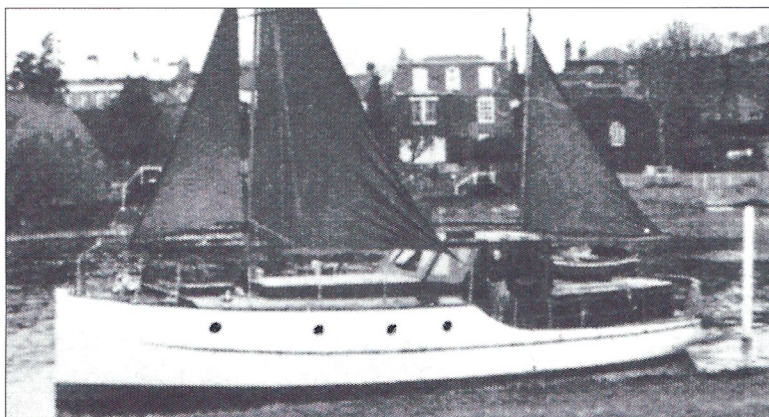
From the *EVENING NEWS*, Friday, June 18th, 1943

The development and construction of the modern high-speed motor boat into an efficient fighting vessel is one of the achievements of

THE BRITISH POWER



BOAT COMPANY LTD.



*The 43ft (13.11m)
Thames cruiser Sea
Roamer and her
owner, MBY reader
J. E. W. Wheatley
(centre).*



which were then transferred to the *Jutland*.”

The *Constant Nymph* and her two smaller consorts carried on until the *Jutland* was loaded with between 450 and 500 exhausted troops, which were apparently a fairly equal mix of French and British. When the *Jutland* left, the operation was repeated on a sister ship, the *Laudania*. After ten more hours of ferrying, *Constant Nymph* was handed over empty to a Naval drifter and her owner returned to England aboard the now full *Laudania*.

“No casualties were sustained by the vessels with which he was connected, in spite of intense efforts by German aircraft, and the only damage was due to the nature of the embarkation and was of a minor character.” Dr Smith was told that his services were no longer required, and he was paid for the days he had worked and given his three days’ ‘Dunkirk leave’. Then, the magazine

continued, “Dr Smith returned to his chartered accountancy business in the City. On the whole he seemed to have enjoyed his experiences, which he had found a welcome change from office work.”

There were others. The 38ft (11.58m) river cruiser *Kayell*, owned by Mr J. H. Senior, was handed to a London stockbroker, along with another yachtsman, an ex-P&O officer and a Naval rating and sent off towards France, armed with a Lewis gun, on the evening of Sunday, June 2. Finding a troop of 70 French soldiers marching down the quay they put them in an abandoned ship’s lifeboat and towed them home, arriving at noon on Monday.

Sixty students at Capt O.M. Watts’s yachting navigation school volunteered en masse. “They ‘downed sextants’ and went off to the scene of operations just as they were. Luck was with them, and they all returned safely.” Also, “one yacht was reported to have fetched down a German aircraft. She had taken troops aboard from a derelict vessel. A bomber then appeared and sank the empty derelict. The yacht’s Bren gun and rifle fire from the troops on board caused the bomber to crash into the sea.”

MBY reader J. E. W. Wheatley contributed a two-page account of his adventure in command of his own 43ft (13.11m) *Sea Roamer*. With a “young and enthusiastic” RNVR lieutenant and a squad of four Naval ratings embarked as crew, he set off from “a South Coast harbour” on the evening of Sunday 2 June with orders to go to the beach north-east of the harbour by midnight, and locate and take off troops. “The sight of Dunkirk, as we approached, was unforgettable,” he wrote. “The whole place was a wall of flame, stretching for miles... The green light on the end of the mole was still gleaming, as were several buoys in the roadstead and the Dunkirk Channel.

“As we turned eastward and came across the mouth of the harbour a destroyer was just gliding in to take off her load of French troops lined up on the quay. Suddenly her Bren guns spouted streams of coloured tracer bullets into the sky. A second later all the ships in the vicinity, invisible to us, followed suit and in a minute or so the sky was pierced with a shower of golden rain like firework night at Henley. In the noise and darkness I could neither hear nor see the enemy

Coastal Forces

The Government was far more propaganda-conscious in the Second World War than the First, and understood the importance of feeding the media exciting action stories from the front line. For *Motor Boat & Yachting* the 'front line' was the southern North Sea and English Channel, where there were frequent, vicious night-time encounters between British and German gunboats and MTBs, and the magazine took to publishing these brief accounts in virtually every issue. Heroes were created, and young commanders became household names. These are from May 1943's *MBY*:

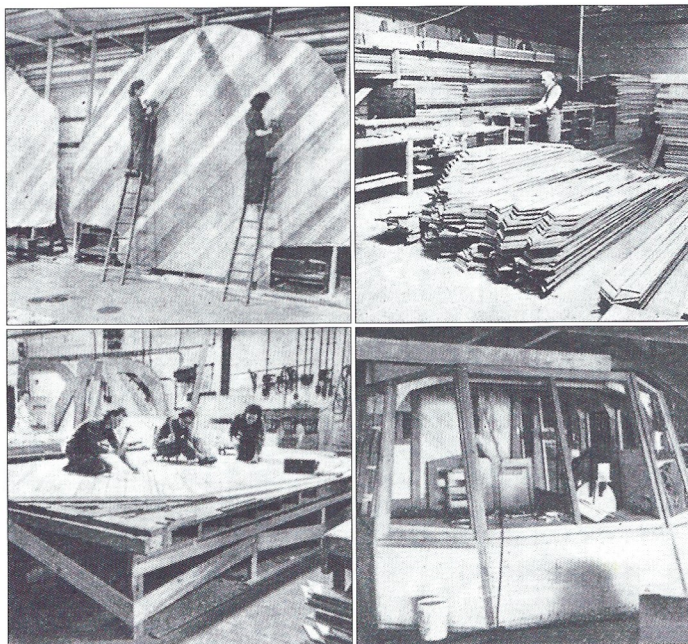
"April 13: Light coastal forces have had short, sharp engagements with enemy patrol craft close to the Dutch coast. Considerable damage has been caused... During the course of last night's engagement it is regretted that Lt Cdr Robert Hichens, DSO, DSC, RNVR was killed...

April 16: Last night light coastal forces under the command of Lt Cdr Peter Scott, MBE, RNVR, engaged three armed enemy trawlers about 20 miles west of Le Havre. Fire was concentrated on the rear ship of the enemy line... she was left stopped, silenced and burning...

April 19: Early on Sunday morning light coastal forces under the command of Lt Peter Dickens DSC, MBE, RN intercepted and engaged three enemy armed trawlers off Scheveningen... pressed home their attack in the face of considerable gunfire and torpedoed one of the trawlers, which sank in three minutes..."

Nevertheless, the editor's scathing criticism of the Government during the lead up to and the early months of the War had been justified. The Royal Navy was fully stretched, and a fleet of small coastal craft for convoy escort and home defence was sorely needed. But at the outbreak of WW2 it could muster just 11 boats – two of them ageing CMBs from the last war.

A build programme was under way. One of the most vocal proponents of small fast craft was Hubert Scott-Paine, whose British Power Boat Co at Hythe, Southampton, was an important advertiser to *MBY*, often booking the front cover site and sometimes the back as well. Given his talent for promotion and



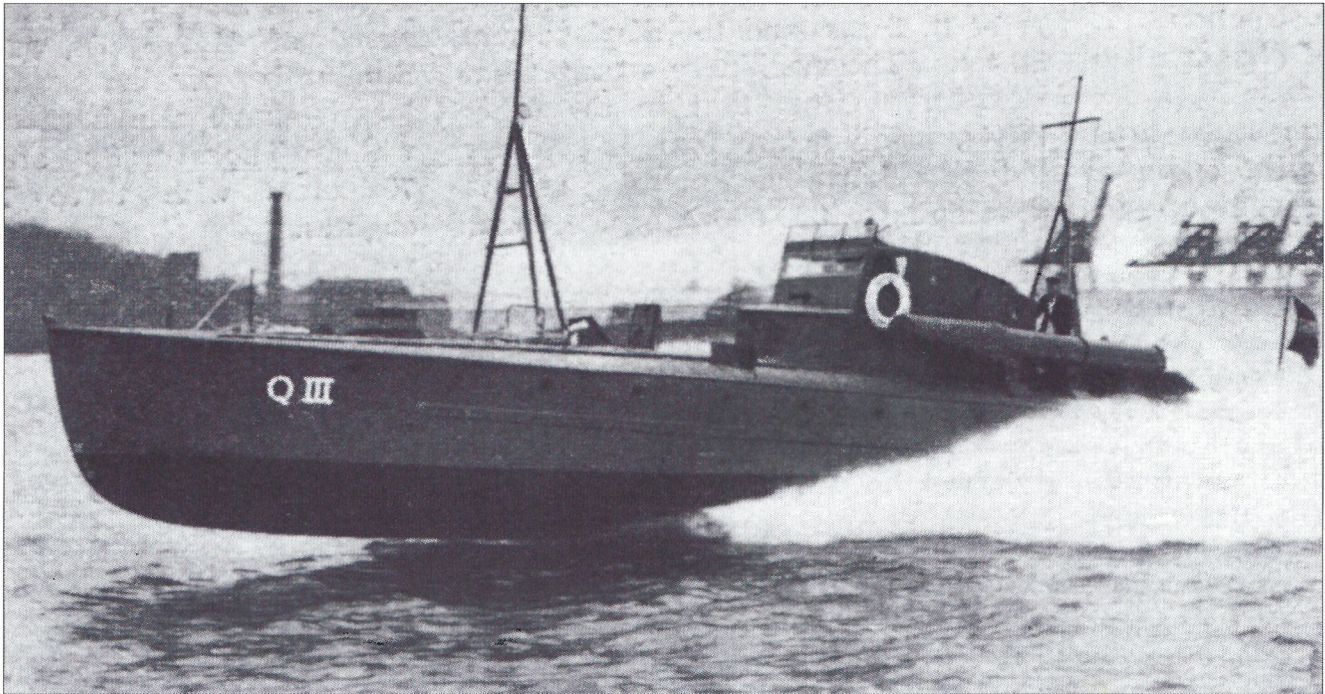
publicity, it is unsurprising that he managed to secure a good number of column inches in the magazine for his projects, and it is easy to imagine that he was also the main reason that the Editor was so well-informed about Government lethargy in the first place.

Scotty's relationship with the Admiralty was always rocky. Exasperated, he targeted the American market, and Elco licence-built over 326 BPB-designed 'PT' boats for the US Navy, while *MBY* reported in May 1941 on the factory he set up in Canada.

British Power Boats eventually became one of many yards that built hundreds of vessels for all branches of the British military. A review of MTB types published in *MBY* on September 15 1939 described vessels from Vosper and Thornycroft as well as BPB, and they were soon joined by Samuel White, Camper & Nicolson and others. The remarkable story of the factory-built, flat-pack Fairmile boats was told in a six-page photo feature in the August 1943 issue, outlining the ingenious and highly efficient production methods.

By January 1, 1944, the RN Coastal Forces fleet had grown from that meagre 11 to some 520 boats.

From a feature in August 1943 describing the prefabricated build methods of the Fairmile boats.



A 65ft (19.82m)
Thornycroft stepped-
hull MTB of 1939,
as supplied to foreign
navies.

plane, but better trained eyes than mine had found her and the whoof of hot air that pushed through the wheelhouse and rattled our doors told when she dropped her bombs.”

The beaches were deserted, the evacuation almost complete, but *Sea Roamer* cruised among the wrecks in the shallows, rescuing a group of French soldiers, and then met the London fireboat *Massey Shaw* engaged in the same pursuit. “It was now 2.45am and orders were to leave the vicinity by three. We passed the mole as a destroyer glided out crammed with French

soldiers.” With the tide now falling, Wheatley elected to follow the destroyer out through the channels. “In the dense smoke that hung over the sea on this side of Dunkirk most of the gas buoys were obscured. I think the destroyer must have smelt the mud for she suddenly came astern at speed. I swung the wheel hard over and just succeeded in avoiding the worst of the impact, but our taffrail was carried away and the boat we had in tow was smashed to pieces.” The damage was light, but the dinghy’s tow rope fouled *Sea Roamer*’s propeller, leaving just a small auxiliary engine to get her home. “But then a paddle steamer appeared, the last out of Dunkirk that morning, and offered a tow. So we came home, with a cargo of French soldiers, at high speed.”

Wheatley leaves us with an anecdote, which he ought to have suspected was apocryphal, but it was impossible to resist. “The French, it seems, were not always prepared to wade out and clamber into dinghies in the surf. A story was told me of a French officer who steadfastly refused to do this. Finally he sent a note to the anxious yacht skipper. It read: ‘I have just eaten and am therefore unable to enter the water.’”

The full energies of the Government’s propaganda machine were directed towards

Motor Boat & Yachting - June 1945

“In the House of Commons last month, after Mr Churchill had announced that the basic ration of petrol to motor cars and motor cycles would be resumed.

Capt Plugge asked whether a basic ration would be included for motor boats on the Thames.

Mr Churchill: Both motor boats and lawn mowers (loud laughter) will come within the ambit of this modest indulgence.

We can take Mr Churchill’s facetiousness without any resentment so long as we can, at the same time, take petrol for our motor boats.”

BOAT BUILDERS, 1943

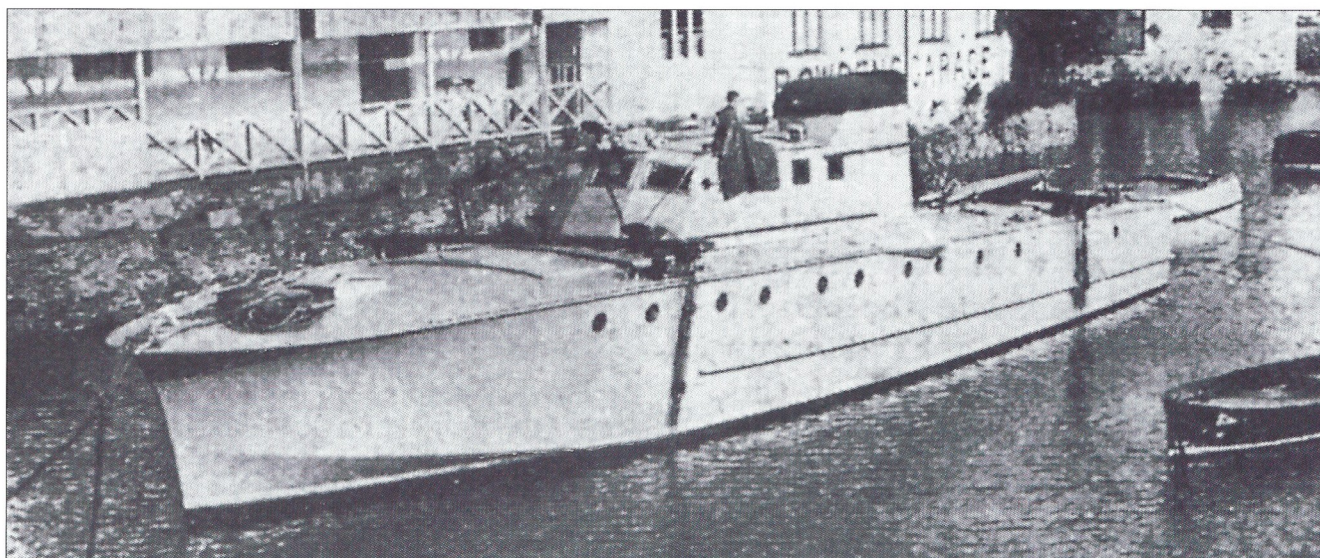
Two of many women workers in the ship- and boat-building sections of the Thornycroft Organisation.



It is amazing how women have adapted themselves to work in our factories and shipyards, successfully holding their own in many jobs, from the highly-skilled to the heaviest, previously thought to be the special province of man. More power to their elbows!

THORNYCROFT

JOHN I. THORNYCROFT & CO., LIMITED, LONDON, S.W.1
Designers and builders of High Speed Naval Craft, Motor Boats and Marine Engines



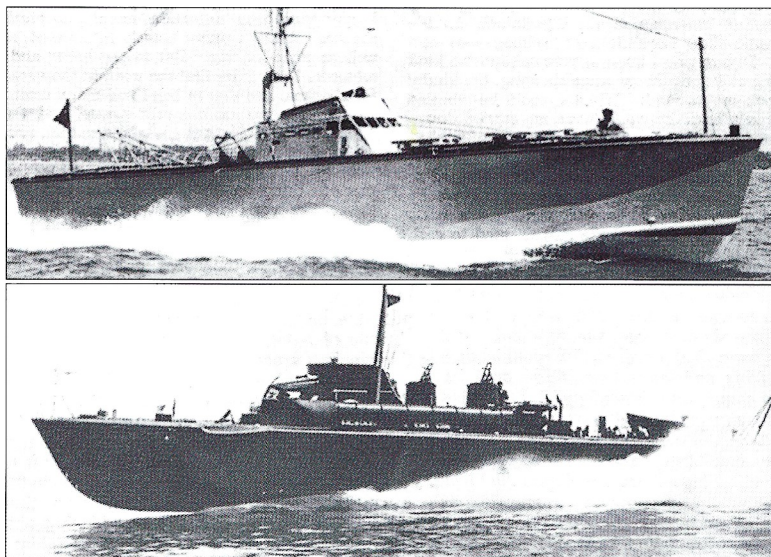
A 1939 round-up of MTB types: 65ft (19.82m) French design built at the Curtis yard...

creating a morale-boosting feelgood story out of the rout and retreat of a British army, and the population was encouraged to believe in 'the miracle of Dunkirk'. Newspaper editors were instructed to blame the French for not fighting and describe the British Expeditionary Force as undefeated – shameless lies both – and the first public announcement of the evacuation was issued by the Ministry of Information on 30 May – when the evacuation had been on for five days and three-quarters of the troops were already home: "Men of the undefeated British

Expeditionary Force have been coming home from France," the BBC announced in its 6pm news broadcast. "They have not come back in triumph, they have come back in glory."

Given this background it would perhaps have been understandable if *Motor Boat & Yachting* had indulged in a little myth-making of its own. But its treatment of the extraordinary tale of the Dunkirk evacuation, and the 'little ships' whose usefulness Chalkley himself had predicted before war broke out, stands up to critical scrutiny more than 60 years on. "The part they played has been exaggerated in some quarters," said the magazine. "There was no need for this; it was great enough without any such exaggeration. Actually, the majority of the troops – reports put the figure at 250,000 out of a total of 335,000 evacuated – embarked from the one pier in Dunkirk harbour which was still useable, fairly large vessels being employed for the purpose."

But *Motor Boat & Yachting* noted with approval the respectful tone of the Admiralty signal issued after the evacuation, which read: "The ready willingness with which seamen from every walk of life came forward to assist their brother seamen of the Royal Navy will not readily be forgotten." The magazine allowed itself and its readers a modest pat on the back: "Co-operation amongst seamen of every walk of life – that just about sums it up. Such was 'Dunkirk Regatta', the greatest yachting event of all time."



... a 60ft (18.29m) British Power Boats type (top), and a 70ft (21.34m) Vosper.

The **MOTOR BOAT** *and* **YACHTING**

