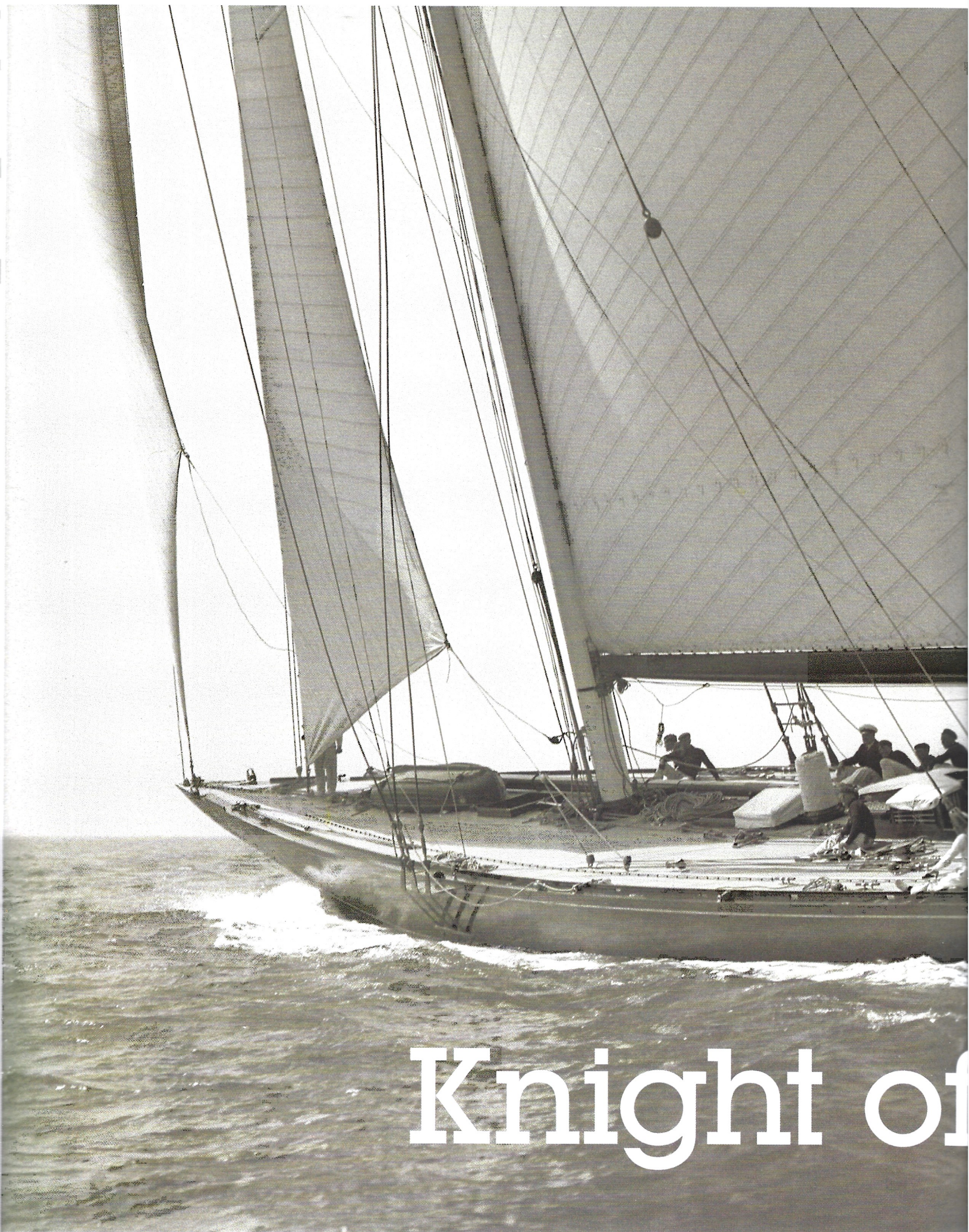




Knight of

IT SEEMS TOO MUCH TO FIT INTO ONE LIFE, EVEN A LIFE AS LONG AS HIS. BUT FOR THOMAS SOPWITH, NOT ONLY WAS NOTHING IMPOSSIBLE, EVERYTHING WAS FUN

Words • Alan Harper

achtsmen know about his America's Cup challenges during the 1930s. Aviation enthusiasts speak about the immense contribution his aircraft made, and of pioneering adventures during the earliest days of powered flight. Powerboat historians recount exploits in Edwardian-era Harmsworth races, when he wrested the trophy from the Americans and then successfully defended it in home waters. He was also a businessman whose rare acumen was rewarded with phenomenal success.

Thomas Sopwith lived several lives. To achieve what he did just in just one of these areas would be enough to earn an entry in the history books. He seems to have combined Victorian can-do spirit with an Edwardian adventurism, and was blessed with a thoroughly modern appreciation of technology. Nothing was impossible.

On top of it all he was, in his youth, a daredevil balloonist and no mean racing driver. And he lived to 101.

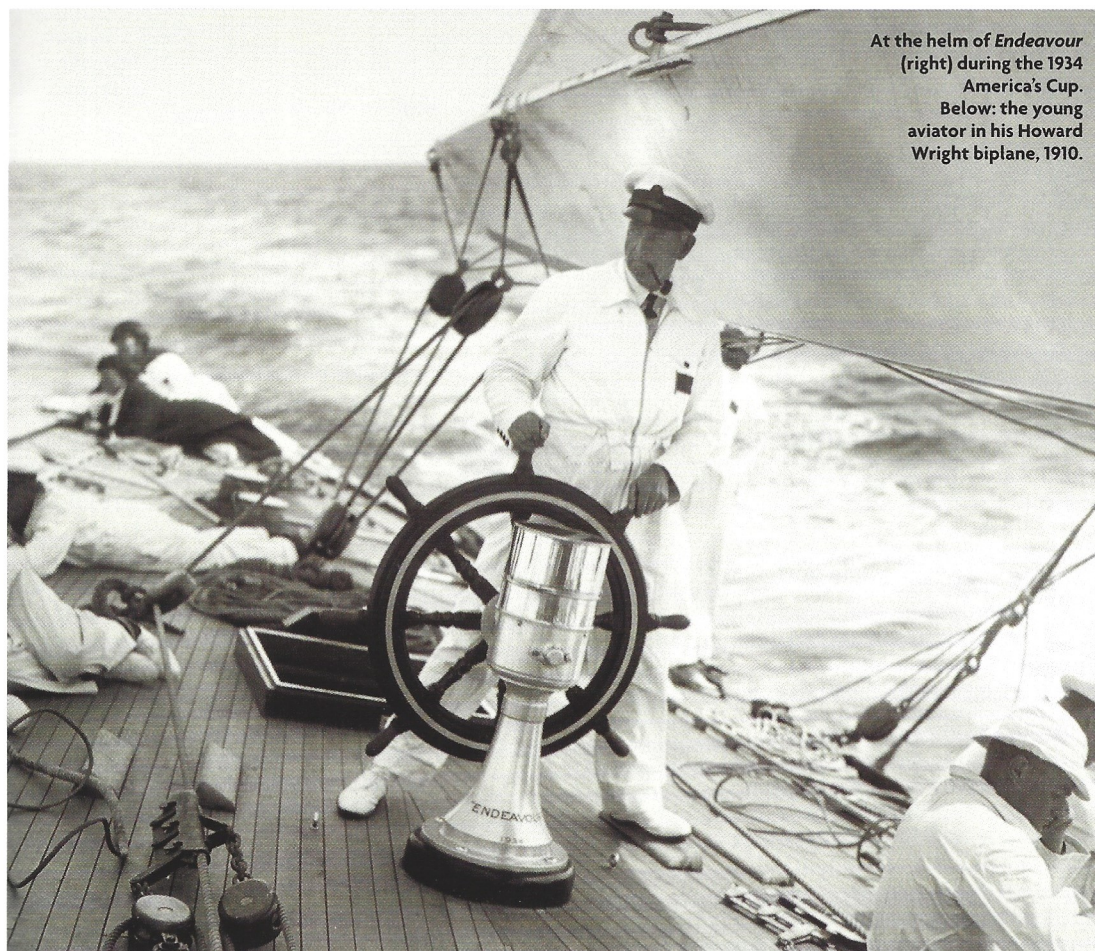
The yachtsman

The man who would become Sir Thomas Sopwith was born into comfortable middle-class circumstances in London in 1888, the son and grandson of eminent engineers. He was originally destined for the Navy, but failed the interview. "They didn't think I was clever enough," he said, "and they were probably right." ➤

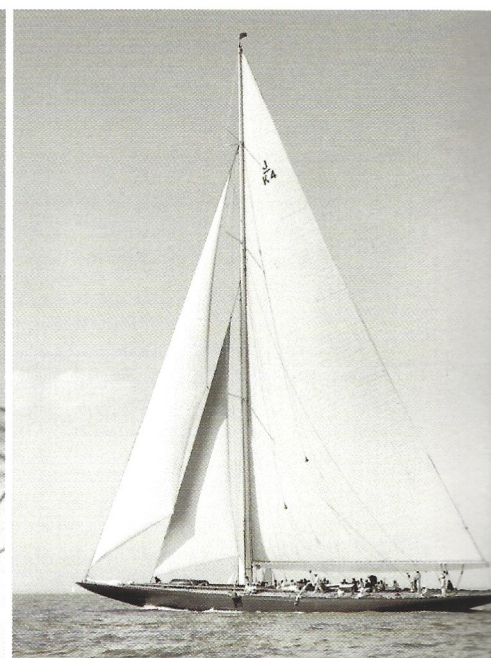


the air

The magnificent J-Class *Endeavour* pictured in 1934, with her owner at the helm.



At the helm of *Endeavour* (right) during the 1934 America's Cup.
Below: the young aviator in his Howard Wright biplane, 1910.



Endeavour, 1934

Length overall	129ft 8in (39.53m)
Length waterline	84ft 0in (25.60m)
Beam	22ft 0in (6.70m)
Draught	15ft 0in (4.57m)
Displacement	143 tons + 80 tons lead ballast
Mast height	152ft 5in (46.47m)
Sail area	7,761ft ² (721m ²)
Construction	Steel
Designer	Charles Nicholson
Builder	Camper & Nicholson, Gosport

Family holidays in Scotland taught him to sail, and the young heir bought his first boat for £100 at the age of 19. There were to be many more. His fascination for the internal combustion engine – in lieu of Dartmouth, he had been sent to engineering college – led him to acquire a succession of ever-larger diesel yachts, culminating in the magnificent 263ft (80m) *Philante* in 1937, in which he twice voyaged to the Galapagos Islands. It is now the Norwegian royal yacht.

But it was his challenges for the America's Cup that secured Sopwith's place in the annals of yachting. His second, in 1937, was a disappointingly one-sided affair, but his first came tantalisingly close. Already a well-known racing helmsman – he had been elected to the Royal Yacht Squadron after winning the national 12-metre championships three years in succession – he took his legendary J-Class *Endeavour* to Newport, Rhode Island, in 1934.

That Sir Thomas Lipton had tried and failed for more than 30 years was no deterrent. Neither was the fact that Sopwith's professional crew had struck for more pay, and his yacht was crewed by friends and amateurs. His was a scientific challenge. *Endeavour* bristled with technical innovations such as four-speed winches, rigging stress gauges, electrical indicators of wind speed and direction, and a mechanical log display.

The contest was played out in the gentlemanly way of the time. When Sopwith complained that differing interpretations of the rules meant that *Endeavour* was more heavily fitted-out than the American defender, *Rainbow*, he was permitted to lighten her. When the British boat was late for the first race – grounds for disqualification – the race

He came closer than any British challenger before or since, winning the first two races in the best of seven series – to the consternation of the Americans



committee exceeded its authority by postponing the start. Later, when the committee refused to hear a protest from the Englishman on the ground that he hadn't hoisted his protest flag in time, he accepted their decision, albeit reluctantly.

"My great regret in life is that I didn't bring home the America's Cup," he said years later. "I really ought to have done and I ought to have been allowed to do it." In the end, in spite of some brilliant helming – Sopwith won four starts out of six – he was simply out-sailed. But he still came closer than any British challenge before or since, winning the first two races in the best-of seven series, to the consternation of the Americans.

The aviator

Every Englishman of a certain age has heard of the Sopwith Camel. Some 90 years after it first equipped the hard-pressed squadrons of the Royal Flying Corps, it remains a household name. Yet the Sopwith Aviation Company itself existed for a mere eight years, between 1912 and 1920.

Sopwith's Royal Aero Club flying licence was number 31. He earned it at Brooklands in November 1910, when he was 22, and wasted no time in trying to recoup his expenses, entering his first flying competition two days later. He won. The following month he won £4,000 (about £275,000 today) for an endurance flight to Belgium, becoming only the sixth person to fly the English Channel as he did so. Hearing about the intrepid young aviator, the King invited him to fly to Windsor Castle, and the following summer was spent on a tour of America, giving demonstrations (including a circuit of Philadelphia City Hall),



Maker of fortunes, winner of wars: the famous Camel. Right: the Sopwith factory, Kingston-upon-Thames, December 1918.

Sopwith Camel F1

Length	18ft 9in (5.71m)
Wingspan	28ft 0in (8.53m)
Weight	1,453lb (659kg)
Engine	130hp Clerget
Max speed	115mph (174km/h)
Service ceiling	19,000ft (5,800m)
Designer	Herbert Smith
First flight	1916
Finest hour	1917-18

It was said that if you wanted to turn left by 90 degrees in a Sopwith Camel, it was quicker to do a 270 to the right – such was the torque effect of its rotary engine. Outstandingly agile and tricky to fly, the Camel gave the Royal Flying Corps a decisive advantage on the Western Front.



entering flying competitions (often winning), taking up paying joyriders (among them the president's brother), and crashing (several times).

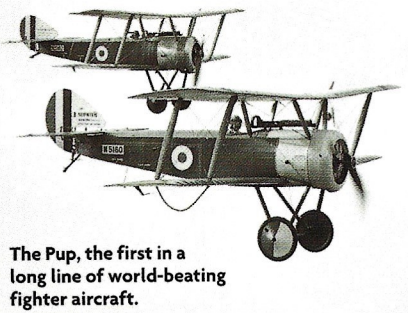
He mixed a talent for publicity with a professional approach to flying. He was also a diplomat, smoothing the Wright brothers' ruffled feathers by buying an aeroplane from them (they had alleged that his British-built machine, a Howard Wright – no relation – infringed their patents), and was already a gifted manager, having assembled a team for the trip that included the engineer Fred Sigrist, who worked alongside him for nearly 30 years. By the time Sopwith returned to England, he had amassed enough capital to set up in business – first with a flying school, at Brooklands, and then as an aircraft builder at Kingston. World War 1 wasn't far behind.

Sopwith fighter aircraft were among the best in the world. The excellent Pup and Triplane were succeeded by the legendary Camel, a fearsome opponent in the right hands, which accounted for more aerial victories than any other type. More than 5,000 were built. But with the end of the war, the government stopped sending orders and started sending tax demands instead, and in September 1920, Sopwith called in the receivers – making sure as he did so that his creditors (and the Treasury) would be paid.

Within a couple of months he began again, starting a new company named after Harry



Sopwith and passenger in his Bleriot monoplane.



The Pup, the first in a long line of world-beating fighter aircraft.

Hawker, his test pilot. With Sydney Camm as chief designer, Hawkers, like Sopwiths, built some of the most important aircraft in British aviation history, such as the graceful silver Fury of the 1930s, the crucial Hurricane of the Battle of Britain, and the vertical take-off Harrier of the Falklands War.

As the company prospered it expanded, buying out Gloster in 1934 – which later developed the Allies' first jet aircraft – then Armstrong Whitworth and Avro (of Lancaster and Vulcan fame) the following year, De Havilland in 1959, then Folland, and finally Blackburn. Sopwith was knighted in 1953.

When he retired as chairman of the Hawker Siddeley Group in 1963, aged 75, Sopwith's fledgeling concern of half a dozen employees in a shed at Brooklands had grown in 50 years into a multinational with an annual turnover, at today's values, of £5 billion.

Sopwith's biographer, Alan Bramson (*Pure Luck*, 1990) couldn't find anyone who had a bad word to say about him. Customers, colleagues, rivals and associates lined up to praise his character. "He had a curious mixture of sense, humour, attractiveness," said a senior executive. "He was loyal to all his people." One test pilot regarded his old boss as "a charming character in every respect."

Can so successful an entrepreneur have been such a perfect gentleman? "I think he probably was," says Sopwith's son, Tommy. "But it's very rare to go that far in business without stepping on a few faces. Winding up the factory after WW1, he paid everyone off, and got good marks for that. A lesser person would have walked away."

Born in 1932, when Sopwith was 44, young ➤

By the time he returned to England, he had amassed enough capital to set up in business – first with a flying school, then as an aircraft builder

Maple Leaf IV, 1912-13

Length overall	40ft 0in (12.19m)
Length waterline	40ft 0in (12.19m)
Breadth	8ft 5in (2.56m)
Draft	3ft 0in (0.91m)
Displacement	5.25 tons
Engines	2 x 380hp Orleans-Austin
Top speed	50+ knots
Construction	Copper-sewn mahogany
Designer	S.E. Saunders/Fauber
Builder	S.E. Saunders, Cowes



The mighty *Maple Leaf IV*, winner of the Harmsworth Trophy in 1912 and 1913, with Sopwith at the helm.

Tommy probably knew his father as well as most boys of his class and generation, after being sent off to boarding school and evacuated overseas during WW2. "He was a typical English father," he says today. "He wasn't an extrovert with his emotions. But he was always there to help, always ready with advice. I was devoted to him."

Yet the easy-going demeanour of the man hid a terrible secret. On a shooting trip when Sopwith was just ten, his gun went off, killing his father. "It was just an accident in a boat," says Tommy. "He just put it to the back of his mind – I don't think he ever forgot it." Sopwith never spoke about the incident, even to his son. "I wanted to ask, but was warned off by friends and relations," he recalls. "I got close to the subject once, and I got the reaction I was expecting. He just went quiet."



Sopwith pictured in 1934 with his second wife, Phyllis.

The powerboat champion

When Sopwith lamented his failure to bring the America's Cup back to Britain, he spoke from a unique perspective. Not only had a Sopwith aircraft won the Schneider Trophy from France in 1914, but Sopwith had personally succeeded in bringing another famous prize home from America – powerboat racing's equivalent of the 'Auld Mug', the Harmsworth Trophy.

Thanks to his youthful obsession with all things fast and mechanical, he was already familiar with the East Cowes yard of S.E. Saunders, builder of some of the fastest speedboats of the Edwardian era. One day in early 1912 – perhaps while discussing the hull design for the forthcoming Sopwith flying boat – the young aviator was introduced by Sam Saunders to Sir Edward Mackay Edgar.

The Canadian oil and cotton magnate was looking for a driver for his new Saunders raceboat, *Maple Leaf IV*. No-one knows exactly what was said, but although busy with his flying school and nascent aircraft-building business, the 24-year-old Sopwith was not one to turn down a challenge. He won the trials in the Solent that July, at an average speed of 40.4 knots – which *The Motor Boat* confidently asserted was "a world's record for the distance" – and September saw him hammering around a 30-mile course at Huntingdon, in Long Island Sound. Against one other British challenger and three American boats, Sopwith won two out of three heats, and the trophy was returned to the

Royal Motor Yacht Club.

Mackay Edgar's 40ft (12.19m) *Maple Leaf IV* was built to a Fauber-patented multi-step design, much improved by Saunders, and powered by a huge pair of 380hp Orleans engines. The boat spent the winter at the Saunders yard, and emerged the following summer even faster. Off Cowes in September 1913, against six other boats from Britain, France and the US, Sopwith again won two out of three – and although one of the French boats, *Despugols I*, recorded the fastest lap of the meeting at 50.94 knots (Sopwith's best was 50.78) *The Motor Boat* was still able to hail his 49.2-knot average in the second heat as a new world record.

Sopwith's son Tommy proved himself something of a chip off the old block as winner of the first Cowes-Torquay powerboat race in 1961. The 156-mile open-sea marathon can hardly be compared with the closed-circuit inshore races of the early Harmsworth years, but still the old man enjoyed teasing him about his 21-knot average speed. "Is that all?" he queried innocently. But Tommy had the last laugh, winning the event twice more, the third time at 51 knots.

Sopwith died in 1989. He told an interviewer that his secret for a healthy and happy old age was "hobbies; and business has always been a hobby for me". Asked about his youthful passions for yachts, powerboats, aeroplanes, balloons and racing cars, as well as the country pursuits of his later years, he added: "I tried all these things for fun. I should hate to be in business if it wasn't fun."

His easy-going demeanour hid a terrible secret. He never spoke about it. "I broached the subject once," said his son, "but he just went quiet."