

Chris Ashley-Davies (1955–2021): His sailing life

Chris and his family were first introduced to sailing in the summer of 1967 by his great uncle, Harold Norrington, who raced Brightlingsea One Designs. While in Brightlingsea they heard about a club near their home in Ickenham where people were sailing Mirrors. This was the club set up by the International Publishing Corporation who ran the Mirror newspaper at the time: IPCYC at Iver, Bucks.

Over the winter of 1967/8, Chris's father built a Mirror dinghy in their garage. The parcel of parts cost £69 and 11 shillings and was stored in their hall in the first instance. Chris recalls coming home from school to find his father working away in the garage with the strong smell of glue. In order to understand how the boat might sail to windward they made a model boat with paper sails and moved it around in front of a fan heater – laying the foundation of Chris's analytical approach to sailing. Once the Mirror was complete they joined IPCYC and started racing. Chris took over the helming after the first season. They went back to Essex on several occasions and took part in Brightlingsea Sailing Club's Pyefleet week. In the race up the river to Wivenhoe and back, Chris got his tacks synchronised with the bends in the river thereby giving them an advantage over other boats in the fleet. They won the race. They also found that the more precise sailing required on the small lake at Iver gave them huge gains to windward against people used to sailing on the sea.

During the first COVID lockdown, Chris was googling and came across three photos in the Mirror Group photo archive of Mirror dinghies sailing at Iver in April 1969. "This is interesting as we would have been sailing around that time." He zoomed in and found that he and his father were indeed in the photo, sailing their Mirror 10729. Further googling revealed that the boat was being raced as recently as November 2017.



Arthur Sidey, Mirrorpix

This Mirror was not just the start of Chris's interest in sailing. Between school and university, Chris spent a year as a student apprentice with GEC-Marconi in Chelmsford. He was in the Marconi Social Club bar one night with a group of apprentices when one of them volunteered, "If you bring your Mirror down [to Marconi Sailing Club] I'll crew for you." Chris took Ros up on her offer and thus began a 48-year friendship that had sailing at its heart.

They enjoyed three seasons sailing on the Blackwater, returning to work at Marconi on consecutive summers just for the sailing that was on offer. After the first season they upgraded to a 420 and enjoyed some excellent racing. On one occasion they capsized on a falling tide and had a complete inversion. They spent a while recovering the boat and when they eventually got back into the boat and looked about them, the shore looked very unfamiliar. They had drifted half way to Bradwell power station.

Following a work move to the Bristol area, Chris and Ros joined Frampton-on-Severn Sailing Club in 1982, where Chris sailed a Laser; Ros a Topper. Chris's first races in the Laser were at an Open meeting. He sailed around at the back of the fleet for the first race. When he came in for lunch, Ros, who had been watching the teenage pundit at the front of the fleet, suggested he switched to dagger grip and used both hands to pull in the mainsheet. This resulted in him moving up the fleet with each race. And who was this pundit? None other than Chris Goldhawk visiting from one of the Cotswold clubs!



Ken Elsey

When their sons William and Robert were old enough, it was time to have a Mirror again, then an Optimist, an additional Topper, a Lightning and another 420.

The year 2000 proved to be another pivotal moment in Chris's sailing life. As a result of taking both Toppers on the Southwest circuit, he realised the delights that Chew Valley Lake Sailing Club had to offer. "Besides," he would say, "the lake at Frampton is really too small for a 420." Then one thing led to another. As soon as he and William saw Tim and Jo Johnson's RS800, Chris changed his tune to, "We're really too big for the 420. We need an RS800." Ros and Robert inherited the 420 for a season and the Mirror was sold. However, it wasn't long before they thought the 800 sailors were having far too much fun and they should be sailing skiffs too. Consequently, the family traded in the 420 for a 29er.

Once William and Robert went off on their gap years and then on to university Chris suggested selling the 29er. Ros wanted to have one more season... and it wasn't before long Chris was hooked and the boat was never sold. They would choose between the RS800 and the 29er depending on the weather. Chris would always launch irrespective of how light the breeze was and would enjoy making the skiffs move when there was almost no wind at all, as evidenced by this photo taken by Ann Belcher in January 2019. On another occasion the RS800 was moving so quickly across the glassy water that someone watching from the balcony asked if the boat had a motor.



Ann Belcher

In 2012, Chris was inspired by the London Olympics and Paralympics to think about offering sailing to the disabled daughter of someone Ros had met at antenatal classes 26 years before. Family commitments on both sides meant it took a while to set up, but in 2016 Chris bought a Hansa dinghy. He and Nikki enjoyed many outings over the four years prior to COVID, taking the boat out in a wide range of conditions including gusty winds, pouring rain, and flat calm. It worked out better than Chris had imagined because Nikki, although severely disabled, was able to steer the boat and keep it on the wind or on course to a buoy.

Anyone who spoke to Chris about sailing would have realised that whilst he eschewed racing in favour of free-sailing the skiffs at optimum wind angles at a time of his choosing for as long as he wanted, he was in fact very knowledgeable about all things sailing and yachting: inshore, offshore, round the world, dinghy development, racing, controversial issues and so on. As far back as 1993/4 he used the BT Race Results Service on dial-up to download tracks of the Whitbread 60s every six hours. At the time this seemed amazing.

In recent years he enjoyed offering people advice when he felt a simple tip could improve their enjoyment of sailing. His favourite phrases included: sit further forward, try using dagger grip, active mainsheet hand, let the kicker off downwind.

He was active in many of the yachting forums and would prompt enthusiastic comments from Julian Bethwaite when he mentioned he and Ros were sailing 29ers into their 60s. Julian once suggested meeting Chris for a beer the next time he was in the UK – Chris was too modest to accept. Next to his armchair he kept his two favourite books: a signed copy of *When Dinghies Delight* by Robin Steavenson (1955) and *High Performance Sailing* by Frank Bethwaite (1996).

When they retired in 2017, Chris hit on the idea of getting permits to sail at Llandegfedd where the lake is open seven days a week. They toyed with the idea of getting a National 12 but decided the two Toppers that had been stored in the garage for 10 years would provide sufficient entertainment. Chris loved sailing by the lee and was often faster than Ros downwind in spite of his four stone weight disadvantage.

During the 2020 COVID season they sailed only once at Chew preferring the COVID safety at Llandegfedd. To make up for this loss of 29er sailing, Chris hit on a plan in February 2021 to move the old 29er to Llandegfedd so they had the opportunity to sail skiffs any day of the week, and to buy a second 29er to sail at Chew. This plan became a reality when they bought Ted and Rupert's 29er on Facebook during Lockdown 3.0 and took delivery of it on the day restrictions were lifted.

Alas, they had only sailed each of their 29ers three times before Chris had an overnight diagnosis of inoperable liver cancer – his only symptoms for 10 days prior to this being itchy skin then waking up with jaundice on the eleventh day. One dose of chemotherapy made his condition worse so he was discharged to palliative care in the community and passed away peacefully 12 weeks later.

Chris's philosophy on life was based on the words of Chay Blyth when he was asked why he had rowed the Atlantic in 1966:

"Why did I do it? Because at the end of my days, I'm going to be lying in my bed looking at my toes, and I'm going to ask my toes questions like 'Have I really enjoyed life? Have I done everything I've wanted to do?' And if the answer is no, I'm going to be really pissed off."

Recently, when Ros checked with Chris what his answers to these two questions were, he gave a resounding "Yes" to both. He remained positive to the end, choosing to think about the 66 years he had enjoyed and not the years ahead he would miss. He leaves his wife Ros, their two sons William and Robert, four grandchildren and his fleet of seven dinghies and two kayaks.