

# My Life With Frank Dye and Wayfarer *Wanderer*, by Margaret Dye, DCA Member Number 5

*Selected from Margaret Dye's Introduction to 'Sailing to the Edge of Fear', by Frank Dye; a book which is dedicated to 'the other halves of the partnership': Margaret and Wanderer. Reproduced here by kind permission of the author.*

**I**t was definitely love at first sight. It was the spring of 1963 and *Wanderer* was sitting inconspicuously in a corner of the Earl's Court Boat Show. Tired of milling between aisles of shiny, faceless GRP boats, I decided to escape and spend the second half of my boat show day in a London art gallery. About to leave by a side door, I walked by this wooden, scruffy 16-foot dinghy. Her varnished decks were salt-crusty and scarred; inside, old stained sails, warps, piles of worn crumbled charts, Wellington boots and anchors lay on her smelly floor-boards. On the thwarts sat a small dark-suited man reading a book; he barely glanced up as people crowded around the Wayfarer dinghy – and he answered questions in a shy diffident manner. The publicity, charts, and route maps told of the offshore voyages of this dinghy. I marvelled that so tiny a boat could sail from Scotland to Iceland and across the North Sea to Norway. Eventually, I plucked up enough courage to ask if women crew were ever required. The answer was an emphatic 'No.'

However, I stayed by *Wanderer* all day, elated by the challenges, toughness, and individuality she and her skipper presented in such an unpretentious manner. By the time I left, I had examined *Wanderer's* every scar, screw, and piece of equipment in rising excitement.

A year later I met Frank again. He was a tutor in an Easter sailing course and I was an elementary student sailor intent on improving my self-taught sailing skills. Although we were born and had lived only 20 miles apart, I had never met Frank, although the headlines that he and *Wanderer* had made on his sailing exploits over the years were well known to me.

'Don't sail with that man; he'll kill you!' said the instructor of my dinghy course after overhearing Frank's invitation to me to crew for him on his Wayfarer the weekend following the course.

Fortunately, I didn't even entertain heeding my instructor's advice.

The rest of the season gave me wonderful days afloat in *Wanderer*. I was introduced to day cruising the Norfolk coast and harbours and I marvelled at the gentle and sharing qualities Frank showed to a completely green crew. Because of my inexperience, I took for granted that whatever Frank told me to do on his boat was normal procedure, and my learning curve was extremely steep. Since he did not complain when we had to reef and unreef half a dozen times in a day's sail, or pull the dinghy over sandbanks because we had missed the tide, or feel our way into an inlet harbour many hours after I thought I should be soaking in a hot bath, I believed everybody else sailed like this and an eighteen-hour day was the expected cruise routine.

Over the next few months we talked about sailing to St. Kilda for our summer holiday. Each Sunday we pushed out into the frothing tide, and I became

familiar with Frank's sea methods, and *Wanderer*, a 16-foot double-chine wooden open dinghy, became a magical carpet. When we erected the simple canvas tent over the boom, lit the lantern and ate our meal, the materialistic world seemed far away; and no fitted kitchen could have given me half as much pleasure as our small petrol Optimus stove in a plastic bucket with its watertight lid.

On the way to St. Kilda we waddled into the boat dressed in more than seven layers of clothes beneath oilskins. I found that washing hair, teeth, or skin was a luxury – fresh water was kept for drinking. One could only carry four gallons on board, and one never knew when supplies could be replenished. Surprisingly, I found one's hair and skin seemed to rectify a natural oil balance after several days without washing, and living in the open air, bodily smells were dissipated anyhow. Rubbing skin with meths before a cruise prevented pressure boils.

A year later we married, and towed *Wanderer* down to Devon to share our honeymoon. It was December, and the sailing was good, but never before had I known what it was to be so cold. On the last night, we sailed to a waterside restaurant for dinner. We were dressed in many layers of clothes, and as I struggled into oilskins at the end of our banquet, a fellow diner leaned over to me and said, 'I'll drive you home. Let your old man sail his own boat home!' But that night we had the most wonderful moonlit sail down the estuary, phosphorus dancing from every wave, and a silence rarely enjoyed in this noisy, busy world.

I was privileged to crew Frank and *Wanderer* for over 25 years, and the happiest and most hellish times in my life have been spent afloat with them both. Yet, I have no real idea of the compulsions which drove Frank to continue year after year, to make those wonderful, dangerous, and rewarding dinghy cruises. Thirty years on I finally left *Wanderer* 900

miles into his American cruise. I had lost all joy and willpower, and sadly realised that a devoted partner of three decades was simply not good enough to crew such an amazingly determined seaman with such driving ambition. After that we single-handed our own dinghies and still found dinghy cruising the best occupation, religion, obsession, and pure delight that had come our way.

When this world got too much; when noise, materialism, or sadness threatened to defeat us, we could quickly retreat into our memories and find optimism, fun, and faith in life again, and were ready to plan the next sail.

Luckily, one soon forgets the terrors, hardships, and boredom of long sea passages, and the wonderful memories remain most vivid. Times like flying over the waves, deep-reefed, before a force 7 wind, sparkling sun, blue waves, white foam, and up on a plane for many hours running along the Outer Hebrides, *Wanderer* going like a train. Times like being enveloped in a warm deep darkness with the constellations sparkling above our heads so brightly that one could almost touch them and pick a star out of the velvet blackness to place on *Wanderer's* decks as we lay anchored off a creek at Ras Al Khymer in the Arabian Gulf separating Arabia from Iran. The starlight patterns on the curling waves, and the plaintive murmur of the prayer call from a far-off mosque set in the distant sands beneath the gigantic mountain ranges, was a night never to forget.

Times like Christmas Day spent in Key West, trying to sail around Florida, where we rushed before a fierce northerly having battled into huge, cold, breaking seas as the gale swept in. 'Marina full' said the notice as we eased *Wanderer* into a crack between two enormous powerboats, and tied her to a palm tree whipping wildly in the rising storm. An hour later, after a rest and a hot shower, we decorated *Wanderer's* tent with cards, balloons, and Christmas roses (plastic!), ate nuts, dug our Christmas cake out of wet bilges, and said that this was the best Christmas Day we had ever known. Later, American yachtsmen collected us, gave us battery 'winking' haloes and we joined in the carol singing to each yacht.

Every night after the labours of the day, with the tent secure, we would creep into our sleeping bags, lie down on the floorboards and enjoy our home. 'Take a last look,' Frank would say as he leaned over and turned out the swinging candle lantern tied on to the boom. Then we'd listen to the night sounds – wind in the mangroves or pine forests, hoot of a night bird, call of the seabird or wolf – until we fell asleep.

I have a sad and sentimental memory too of Frank urging me to 'take a last look.' After 20 years cruising in *Wanderer*, she was a frail old lady, waterlogged and very soft in places. Frank decided we should give her a Viking funeral on Morston marshes, but somehow Greenwich Museum heard of our plans and asked for our beloved boat. I felt that her old age would be a happy one in the company of other boats and so, one cold Easter, we sailed her down the Thames.

On that last night that we slept on board moored off Greenwich. Frank woke me at dawn with a cup of hot tea. 'Take a last look,' he said, as so many times before. Outside the tent it was snowing, and *Cutty Sark* and *Gypsy Moth* stood, silhouetted in the snow flakes in that cold grey dawn. There was great pride that *Wanderer* was to join them, but we were swept away in the sorrow of parting.

We took her into Greenwich wearing our sailing clothes, and were rather surprised to find everybody else was in reception suits and frocks, so we slipped off our smelly rubber boots and did full justice to the elegant buffet lunch. I lost my composure when Basil Greenhithe asked me to make a speech as we gave *Wanderer* away. I wept. He comforted me gently, saying, 'A boat is an extension of oneself.'

Frank had bought her in 1959 without even sailing her, using the experienced engineer's maxim, 'If it looks right it is right.' It was hard to imagine life without her.

Home is where the heart is. That a small-tented dinghy was our favourite home was no accident of fate. What a wonderful church, travelling companion, magic carpet to foreign cultures, and stimulating friend our dinghies have proven to be: no wonder Frank continued to journey. **MD**

(Right) The design which has become synonymous with the name of Margaret Dye – the *Wanderer*. Named, of course, after Frank's ocean-crossing *Wayfarer*, No 48.

