

History of Jackrat DB168

Jackrat is a clinker YW 14' Dayboat built to a very high standard with a hull of cross-grained mahogany by Benson of Caerleon in 1959.

She has had three owners. The first was Col J Hamilton-Baillie of Chepstow who was the Commandant of Beachley Army Apprentices College. Tony Rees acquired Argie May as she was then known in 1987 after she had been laid up in a garage for a number of years. He stripped her to the wood and used the West epoxy system on the outside of the hull. This dealt with her reputation as a boat which tended to sink as the close-grained wood did not swell in the water. Tony raced her for a couple of years in Chepstow during which the wooden mast broke and he replaced it with an aluminium mast and boom.

In 1990 Tony and DB168 now named Amie Lou, moved to Solva in Pembrokeshire and raced there for a number of years. In 1995 she was sold by Tony Rees, who was then Assistant Harbourmaster at Solva, to John Rattenbury who renamed her Jackrat in memory of his father who, although never a sailor, loved to paint boats as an artist. She came with the benefit of a mooring on the trot in the summer months, a considerable advantage as moorings for non-residents of Solva were limited. She participated in races and events held by the Solva Sailing Club and the Solva Rowing and Watersports Club.

Solva is one of the most picturesque harbours to sail from, but not the easiest for a novice. The Inner harbour runs NE-SW curving S towards the entrance. The large tidal rise and fall means that the mooring dries at half tide and the harbour entrance is guarded by Black Rock and St Elvis. Further out in St Brides Bay is the large rock, or more of an island, called Green Scar. Races from Solva were usually routed around this. Winds roll over and are reflected off the harbour cliffs with frequent changes of direction when sailing in and out of the harbour.

As with all wooden boats, maintenance features large. Jackrat spent a good deal of time being worked on. Apart from paint and varnish, at one point roves pulled out of the stem post with some strakes springing out. They were then drilled and screwed back under clamps onto a flexible adhesive. Later on some split planks and ribs were repaired with epoxy after a trailer mishap, see later.

Events

John sailed her as a novice throughout the autumn of 1995. The dinghy sailing season at Solva ends traditionally with the 'Icicle Race' on or about New Years day. That year it lived up to its name with a hard overnight frost (uncommon in Solva) and an air temperature around zero at the time of the race which is held within the inner

harbour. While manoeuvring to the start, and after a couple of tacks on which she inappropriately heeled over, she capsized on the third one. Compared with the air temperature, the water felt positively warm – until removed from it onto the quayside! Factors contributing to the capsize included a gusty wind and inexperience but the main cause, realised too late was that the main sheet which had been lying in the boat overnight had frozen stiff and would not run through the block. Old hands in the other boats had dipped their sheets in sea water before starting.

In the summer of 1996, Jackrat was passing out of the harbour to join a race when the starboard shroud chain plate parted and we were dismayed. The kindly neighbour who towed us back also re-brazed the plate. The boom had taken some damage but was put right with a couple of clouts from a mallet.

There was some excellent sailing in 1996 but in early October Solva was struck by storm force winds and a tidal wave overnight. Several boats detached from their moorings and were lost or wrecked. Jackrat was swamped, most of the deck ripped away and the mast bent. The hull was undamaged, a tribute to its construction. It took several weeks in the boatyard for the damage to be repaired, fortunately covered by insurance. The mast was not replaced and more or less straightened itself when the shrouds were tensioned. Thereafter she probably tacked more readily one way rather than the other. In subsequent years Jackrat was taken out of the water in October to avoid the winter storms and to dodge the Icicle Race.

In 1998, Jackrat was one of two dinghies racing with cruisers round Green Scar. The cruisers had returned to harbour when John (and his daughter as crew) noticed that the other dinghy was missing. We turned round and found it upturned with the 10 year old crew on the hull and the 70 year old helmsman in the water and unable to right their boat. The latter was known to have a heart condition. On the second pass, the lad was recovered but the helmsman was hoisted into Jackrat with difficulty as his waterproof saloppes were waterlogged and weighing him down. His condition was worrying so a smoke flare was set off and spotted by an air sea rescue helicopter on another mission. In no time the inshore lifeboat was alongside and escorted Jackrat back to Solva and an awaiting ambulance. The rescued crew recovered and were none the worse for their experience apart from some shock and dismay at what had happened.

In subsequent years, Jackrat participated in Association events at Poole (the 50th Anniversary in 1999) and at Fishguard. Unfortunately en route to the second Fishguard meeting, the boat trailer hit a kerb, some planks were split and ribs broken. Jackrat filled with water when moored, was unable to join the races, and was towed back to the dockside. Thereafter Jackrat was only sailed occasionally with a mounting toll of repair and maintenance.

In 2016, after a few years of storage, Jackrat was advertised for sale. There were a couple of replies but no takers so in 2018 she was offered to the West Wales Maritime Trust in Pembroke Dock where volunteers have been refurbishing her. Unfortunately it was decided recently that she could not be made seaworthy and will be restored as a display boat. A far better outcome than scrappage.

*John Rattenbury & Tony Rees
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