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Rangoon's Half-Raters

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Yangon, Myanmar, is a river port, from where millions of cubic metres of Burmese teak has been shipped to innumerable ship-building yards and ports the world over. This teak has provided decking or perhaps hull planking, keelsons, and ribbing, cabinetry, trim, block work or beams for countless vessels, and almost every eminent sailing yacht that has been built.

Despite its significance to yachting, very few yachts have been built in Myanmar, particularly in recent history, and at this time no yachts grace its coasts. On the many rivers of Myanmar there still exist sailing canoes carrying fishermen and small sailing barges bearing pottery. These craft often are rigged and coloured according to expediency and their owner's whims. Only one sailing club exists in Myanmar - the Yangon Sailing Club, on an island on Inya Lake, Yangon. Upon entering this club its colonial origins are still apparent, though it has many fine and modern facilities. If one is fortunate enough to sail here, your boat will be brought from its mooring by one of the club's 27 *kalashies* (attendants), who will rig, tune, and stand by until you take the stroll from the bar and embark. On your return, you will be met and assisted by the same attendant, who will then inspect for any necessary repairs, de-rig, and moor the boat. The *kalashies* often race as crew members.

The clubhouse bar, which has no door (having only three walls, one would be redundant), opens on to Inya Lake, accepting the cooling and therapeutic northeast breeze of the dry season (November to May), and provides a welcoming lee against the stronger southwest monsoon of the wet season. Mounted behind the bar is a faded print of the Royal Yacht *Britannia* of 1932. It was gifted to the club by Lord Mountbatten of Burma, in his capacity as Commodore of the Royal Thomas Yacht Club and bears his signature, and that of the artist Mr Norman Wilkinson.

The adjacent Honorary Life Members board, carved from a broad piece of teak, is an exotic mix of prominent colonial and Burmese society. Its members include four knights, two naval commanders, a Major General, a General, and a Colonel. The club's origins, longevity, and tenacity are best exemplified by its cherished and enduring fleet of 17 Thames River Half-Raters, five of which date from the club's founding fleet.

The Rangoon Sailing Club was founded in 1924 by Mr D.E. Thomas, from whose house on Inya Lake the first races were held. Eight gunter-rigged raters had been

acquired from Cochin, India. These boats had been constructed to a Linton Hope Thomas River half-rater design for a Mr H.C. Tower called *Black Cap*. It is evident that expediency, availability, and compromise all played a part in the choice of design. It would be difficult to argue, 80 years later, that the choice was inappropriate for the often squally lake conditions encountered here.

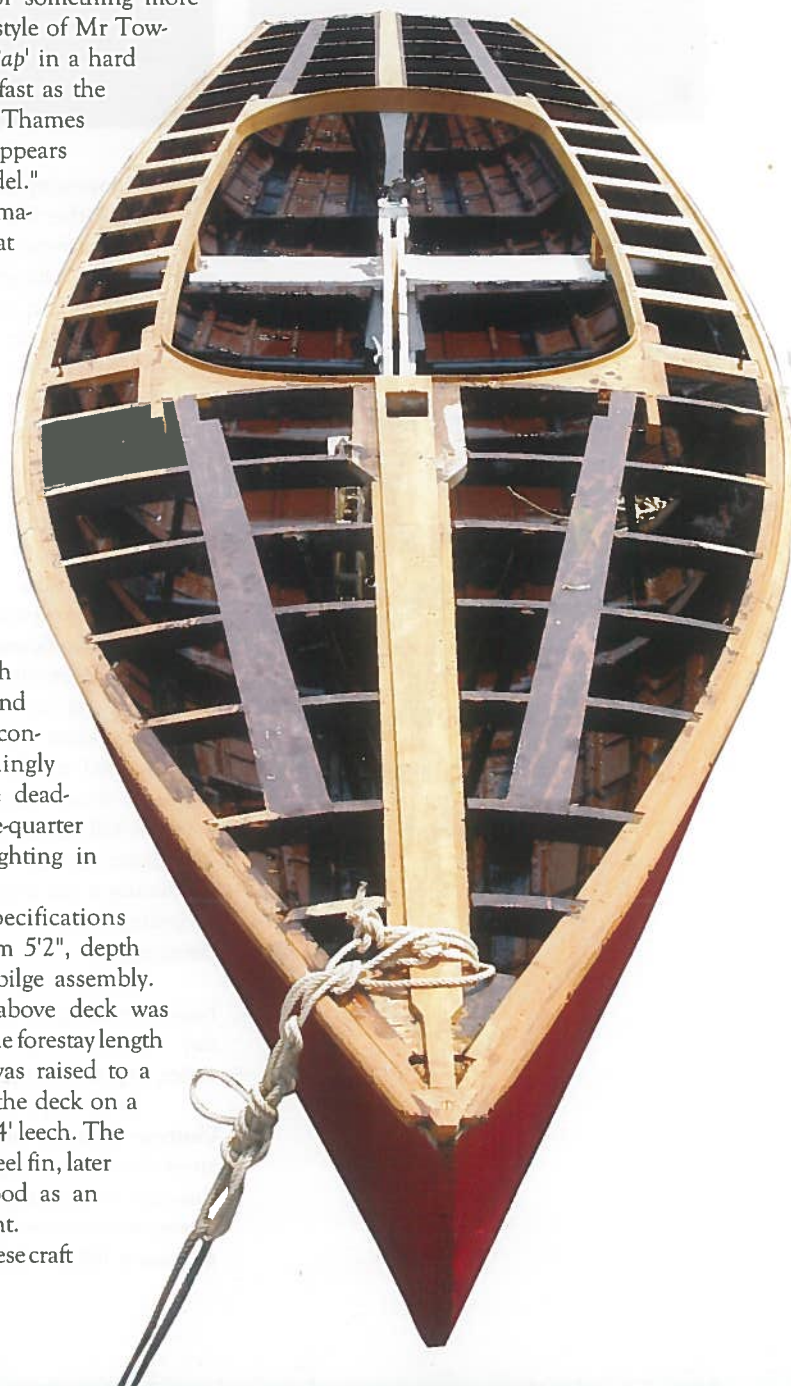
The September 1907 issue of *Yachting Monthly* reported *Black Cap* to be "one of the most notable racing boats on the Upper Thames this year... She is a distinct departure from the existing river boats, and the type is to be highly recommended. It represents the healthy type in river sailing. Many Thames racing men... complain that canoe sailing and scow hiking become tiring. There appears to be, therefore, room for something more comfortable, after the style of Mr Tower's half-rater. '*Black Cap*' in a hard wind proved quiet as fast as the river scows, and for a Thames one - design class she appears to be a very suitable model."

From this information, it is apparent that *Black Cap* was a distinct departure from the Thames River skimming dish design that Linton Hope had initiated. She may be best described as a cross between the Thames River "B" Rater, and the "C" Rater, or Gig. She was finer at the bow, straight stemmed rather than spoon shaped, with very flat under-sections and of narrow beam. The construction had exceedingly light framework, little deadwood aft, and was three-quarter decked for ease of righting in event of capsize.

The initial specifications were: LOA 18 ft, beam 5'2", depth 22" of Carvel round bilge assembly. The height of mast above deck was 14'8", (bamboo), and the forestay length 14'8". The mainsail was raised to a height of 26'6" above the deck on a 14' gunter gaff with a 24' leech. The keel was a retractable steel fin, later changed briefly to wood as an unsuccessful experiment.

The arrival of these craft

Only one sailing club exists in Myanmar - the Yangon Sailing Club, on an island on Inya Lake, Yangon.





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caused some excitement in Rangoon, initially on a social rather than competitive basis. The Sunday races from Mr Thomas's were a local event, with drinks afterwards at the Thomas veranda being "on the house". This had the obvious result of attracting many new members and became so expensive for the founder and host, that a chit system for drinks was introduced. This proved so successful that by 1925 sufficient funds existed to acquire the island, and build the first clubhouse.

As the club membership flourished, the original fleet of raters were enlarged by locally built boats. In the late 1920s the original gunter rig was replaced by the Bermudan rig, once sufficient quantities of Canadian Spruce had been obtained. Further modification to the rig occurred in the early 1930s, when the boom was shortened, and 3 feet being added to the masts, using double-diamond short shrouds at the masthead to keep the tall rig rigid. The masts now stood 27' above the deck with an 11'8" boom producing a sail area of 199.9 sq feet, and according to the Dixon - Kemp formula, a rating of 0.6.

By the mid-1930s the club had 19 half-raters competing in three races each Sunday. Courses were seldom less than eight miles, with the first gun at exactly 8am.

In 1936, a keen club member, Mr Guthrie Penman built a 15 ft Sharpie for single-handed sailing, and the popularity of this class allowed the half-raters to be spelled during the gusts and squalls of the southwest monsoon (May - October). The raters were

stored in boat sheds for six months each year, sparing their masts, rigging and hulls the harsher wet season conditions and adding to their longevity. Always, however, the first glorious Sunday of November, with its cool northeast winds, clear conditions, and first rater races of the season, was eagerly anticipated.

In 1941, the Second World War arrived in Rangoon. As the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company denied the Japanese by scuttling the largest civilian fleet the world has ever seen in all 550 vessels were sunk — so too the members of the Rangoon Sailing Club denied the invaders their treasured raters. Individual owners removed their masts, took their boats upon the lake, transited their positions, and sank them. They then dispersed to wherever the war took them, or the Japanese invasion forced them. The clubhouse was used as a convalescence home by the occupying force, and was burnt to the ground as they departed.

After the war, returning members advanced loans for the construction of a new clubhouse and the scuttled raters were salvaged and restored as their owners returned. In all, 12 were reclaimed from the lake, and soon competition ensued, with club membership bolstered by service personnel.

One of the clubs original and most successful boats, *Kingfisher*, was retrieved by its owner, Mr Nicholas White from Meikthila Lakes, some 400 miles north of Yangon, where it had been transported by the Japanese. It was in very sorry condition, and was arduously restored saving all of the original framing, and much of the carvel planking.

Assisting Mr White on the restoration was Noor Ahmed, who joined the club in 1929 at the age of 13, and worked there continuously until he retired in 2001 at the age of 85.

In 1949, in order to make the raters uniform within the one-design class, the club decided that Messrs. Cranfield and Carters of Bunnham on Crouch, Essex, would supply all of the clubs sails. In the years after the war, army *desootee* cloth was used for sails, and some individual members ordered sails from Australia, England, and America, creating definite advantages within the fleet.

By the early 1950s, the spruce masts were exhausted. Lengthy correspondence resulted between Uffa Fox with Col. J.P. Waime (honorary life member, and club captain), and Guthrie Penman on the use of teak for masts. From this consultation, hollow teak masts were decided upon by elaborate splicing and gluing, creating a craft wholly of

Burmese teak. The rig was stayed by two shrouds and a 2/3 fractional forestay.

In the 1960s, the club assumed ownership over the previously privately held raters, and commenced chartering them on an annual basis to experienced club sailors. At this time racing recommenced year round. With Myanmar already experiencing economic and political isolation, the strenuous year long racing season and lack of improvement funds and material meant a period of poor maintenance, and the raters fell into disrepair. By 1990, the fleet was again in need of serious restoration and under the enthusiastic energy and dedication of Commodore Michael Moe Myint, revitalization of the rater fleet commenced.

Also at this time a number of foreign oil companies had initiated exploration in Myanmar. They provided a new infusion of members, with the ability to import materials such as glue, resins, marine ply (still unavailable in Myanmar), paints, and fastenings. The new round of restoration brought the fleet up to a standard it had seldom seen. Older boats which were languishing forgotten were saved and some new crafts were built.

The club now employs a full time carpenter, Mr Ko Pu Sa (who worked on the *Moonbeam* restoration, and Peter Wood's replica of the Fife schooner *Sunshine*) to restore, maintain and rebuild the existing raters, with the venerable *Kingfisher* being next in line for restoration. The class is so popular now that he also builds new raters for members who have become impatient waiting for an old one to become available. Each boat receives an overhaul and repaint at least every 18 months.

The Thomas River Half-Raters of the Yangon Sailing Club have an assured future on Inya Lake. They have been the stalwart racer of the club - indeed its backbone since its founding, and being the property of the club, they are destined to remain together as a fleet. This is significant, for only two half-raters remain in sailing condition in Great Britain. As a class, they compete in over six races in the Myanmar National Championships annually. They retain their heritage of bearing the names of seabirds and the boats of the original founding fleet - *Kingfisher*, *Oriole*, *Osprey*, *Cormorant* and *Shearwater*. The new boats remain competitive as their perpendicular stems giving a slightly longer waterline and they have a flatter aft hull shape. (*Osprey* recently placed second in the 2004 National Championships.)

By way of an epilogue, when Col. J. Peter Waine (also a founder member of the South Staffordshire Sailing Club) returned home to Wolverhampton in the 1950s, he acquired the Thomas River Half-Rater *Black Cap* - the signature design for the Myanmar half-raters, from the Upper Thames Sailing Club. He continued to sail her until the mid 1970s. In 1983, he donated her to the National Maritime Museum. ■



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