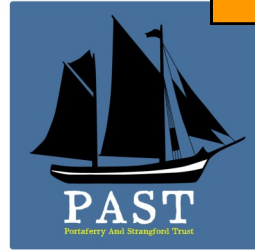


FREE

A wee bit of maritime history... 34



Weatherly Yachts and the Ruffian 23

Portaferry's shipbuilding heyday was in the early 19th century when there were three shipyards with 28 ships being built over a period of 40 years. Things went quiet for about 130 years and then, on 27th February 1973, the Brown brothers, Billy and Dickie, set up Weatherly Yachts. Two years previously they had launched *Ruffian*, a 35-foot yacht rated as an International One-tonner. It had been very successful on the Irish Sea racing circuit and further afield and they felt there was a market for a smaller boat of a similar shape. Fibreglass had become the material of choice because of its relative ease of construction and maintenance and there had been an increase in competitive sailing. Billy drew the plans and

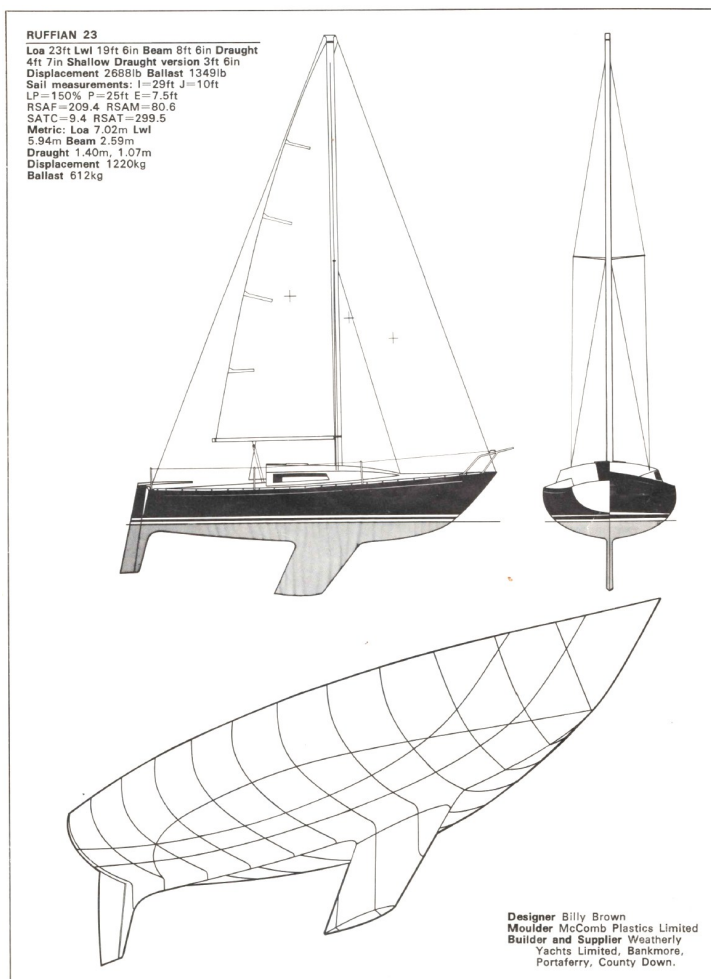
Dickie led the build. The hulls and decks were made in "The Piggery" at Bankmore just south of Portaferry and then transported to the factory at Ballyfinragh (Ballyfindra) on the Cloughey Road for fitting out. The Ruffian 23, a One Design based on the International Quarter Ton class, was born.



The maiden voyage of the first boat, *Muffin*, was on the 31st March 1973. Among the crew that day was William (Winkie) Nixon, well known yachting journalist. He was impressed and wrote "It was real March weather, a blustery and dense northeasterly which, in the Narrows at Portaferry, could change almost instantly from heavy gusts of 30 knots-plus to near calm. But out in the open water of Strangford Lough, with the seas enlivened by the weather-going tide and sunlit breeze strong and steady for a good slug to windward, the Ruffian 23 came into her own. She's a 'little big boat' in her style. With the main reefed and the No.2 genoa providing mighty power, she balanced a treat and went like a train."

The wooden plug was built by Dickie and the moulds based on it were initially produced by McComb Plastics of Lisburn allowing them to produce GRP (glass reinforced plastic i.e. fibreglass) hulls and superstructures. Dickie went on a course to learn the technique and brought it back so that the work could be done in-house.

They developed a reputation for being well made,





There were early successes in most races in the Irish Sea and the Clyde. The 1976 Dun Laoghaire Boat Show stimulated the establishment of the Ruffian 23 in Dublin Bay where they continue to be enthusiastically raced to this day.

They remain active in Carrickfergus and in many other clubs around the Irish coast - Dublin Bay, Wicklow and Clew Bay. Word reached Hong Kong and they remain an active class in the Royal Hong Kong YC with 10-14 still regularly participating in class racing.

One intrepid owner from Iceland collected a partially completed boat and sailed it from Portaferry home to Reykjavik. A number have circumnavigated Ireland, including *Ruffino* which came second in the first Round Ireland Race. Some have reached St Kilda, 60 miles west of the Outer Hebrides.

This success stimulated the production of other similarly shaped larger derivatives - Ruffian 30 half-tonner and the Ruffian 8.5. However, the bulk of the business was in the Ruffian 23s and Weatherly Yachts built approximately 100 with business in the 1970s being brisk. At the turn of the decade increases in VAT, consumer uncertainty and competition from mass-production by subsidised companies led to their closure. The moulds were sold to BJ Marine of Dublin and then on to Baltimore. The Baltimore yard is itself now in the process of closing and is currently looking for someone to buy the moulds. Approximately 200 have been built in total.

The Golden Jubilee was successfully celebrated in Portaferry on 16 & 17 June 2023 with seventeen Ruffian 23s attending.



Video of build



<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-the-ruffian-1974-online>

References

The Story of Ruffian (2002) by Billy Brown

Wm Nixon <https://afloat.ie/blogs/sailing-saturday-with-wm-nixon/item/57532-fift>



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