

Obituary: Ian Proctor

STUART ALEXANDER

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Ian Douglas Ben Proctor, yacht designer and writer, born 12 July 1918, Joint Editor Yachtsman Magazine 1948-50, Yachting Correspondent Daily Telegraph 1950-64, Chairman Ian Proctor Metal Masts Ltd 1959-76, 1981-86, books include Racing Dinghy Handling 1948, Racing Dinghy Maintenance 1949, Sailing: wind and current 1950, Sailing Strategy 1977, married 1943 Elizabeth Lywood (three sons, one daughter), died Hayling Island 23 July 1992.

THERE IS a gentle poignancy to the fact that Ian Proctor died while helping to launch from the beach at Hayling Island a Wayfarer dinghy taking part in a world championship series.

Proctor designed the Wayfarer - one of many small boats which flowed from his prolific drawing-board - in 1958, and its sturdy qualities have endeared it to many families and to students at sailing schools. Nearly 10,000 Wayfarers have been produced, and over 35,000 singlehanded Toppers, another Proctor design, have kept young people happy when learning to sail.

Proctor had to overcome the handicap of being partly paralysed by polio when still a young man, but throughout his life he was able to call on an aptitude for innovation, a harmonious friendship with business rivals in the boat world, a gregarious nature in his tight family circle, and, always, a sense of humour. In everything, he was partnered by his wife, Betty, who was both an accountant to his business and manager of his business life, leaving him free to concentrate on his area of strength, the development of innovative and practical ideas. He was a member of the Association of Industrial Artists and a Royal Designer for Industry, while the Ferry House, his home of the last 15 years, on the River Dart, in Devon, was a striking combination of concept and detail.

Proctor was born in 1919 and learnt to sail at his school, Gresham's, in Holt, Norfolk. He bought his first boat, a Sharpie, when he was 18, and followed that by sailing an International 14 at Aldenham Sailing Club in Hertfordshire. He was fortunate enough to crown his 21st year with the gift of a National 12 from his parents and with being elected the rear-commodore of his club. But he was less comfortable with being a medical student. He abandoned his studies to join the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, and commanded a launch with an air-sea rescue unit in the Mediterranean during the war.

While in the Middle East in 1944 he contracted polio. He fought the disease for two years but was left with a paralysed right arm and chest muscles and was invalided out of the RAF in 1947. After a short spell managing a boatyard in Portsmouth he became joint editor with Adlard Coles of Yachtsman Magazine and then, in 1950, sailing correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, a post he held for 14 years.

Proctor wrote books on dinghy racing and maintenance while continuing to race and starting to design dinghies. He was a formidable competitor, winning many races and championships. The most notable of these was the breakthrough in the Merlin Rocket class, in which he won the 1952 championship sailing his Cirrus design with a crewman, Cliff Norbury, who was to become his long-time friend and business associate. The following year Proctor came up with another design, the Osprey, which won the Isle of Wight Coronation Round the Island Race by one second, and was one of two Proctor designs that were considered by the International Yacht Racing Union (IYRU) for use in the Olympic Games.

On that occasion a rival design, the Flying Dutchman, won the day, and is still in use at the Olympics, but in 1965 Proctor's Tempest design was accepted for the 1968 and 1972 Games, and there are those who feel that it could still be used as an Olympic class.

Proctor was interested in more than just hull-design. He also led the way (helped by the then IYRU president, Peter Scott) in the use of trapezes, with which crews remain attached to a boat while leaning out to use their weight to counter-balance the pull of the sail. Proctor also saw early in the day the way in which new manufacturing processes and materials - plastics, glass-fibre and resins - could be used to produce small boats in large numbers.

While Proctor's name is associated with some of the best-known dinghy designs in Britain, he is even more widely known as a mast-maker. Proctor believed that the way forward lay with tapered aluminium alloy masts, extruded, or drawn out, rather than cast in a mould. This technique meant that a mast could be produced with a bend in it that would marry with the shape of new sails with curved rather than straight edges. He experimented with two masts, one for his Rocket, one for a National 12. After some setbacks, he persuaded what is now a division of British Alcan to manufacture what became known as the 'bendy' mast.

The business that was started has supplied everyone from local dinghy sailors to round-the-world and America's Cup yachtsmen. Proctor was a director of Ian Proctor Metal Masts from 1959 to 1986 (and chairman of the company for most of that period). He remained fascinated by the design detail throughout, but latterly he largely left the running of the business to others.