

Hall of Fame - Pete Hill

by Graham Cox

Pete Hill: 1950 -

Ocean voyaging is no longer the exclusive domain of a bunch of legendary sailors whose names are widely known to anyone with an interest in the subject. If you include rallies, there must be thousands of yachts making bluewater passages every year, and their crews remain largely anonymous. However, there are a few voyagers who defy this trend, who come to attain the legendary status of earlier times. Some of these sailors produce books or films of their exploits, but others become known solely on the strength of their achievements.

Pete Hill is one of the latter. Descended from solid seafaring stock, and introduced to sailing at a young age by his father, he was soon reading the ocean voyaging classics and dreaming of distant horizons. After a brief stint in the Royal Navy, he began building his first boat, *Stormalong*, a 28 foot Wharram catamaran, which must be just about the most minimal boat one could contemplate living aboard and crossing oceans.

He took time off from its construction, in 1972, to make a transatlantic delivery trip, bringing *Aloha VII*, an OSTAR boat, back to France from Newport. Despite being only 22, he sailed the last leg of this passage, from Alicante to France, alone, after the designated skipper had to return to England. Pete returned to his boatbuilding project with renewed enthusiasm.

However, by the time *Stormalong* was nearing completion in 1974, Pete had met Annie, which made the catamaran seem ridiculously small. Nonetheless, the decision was made to sail her to the West Indies and back. After a hasty marriage (they would have preferred to spend their time and money on the boat), they set out in August 1975 and completed a classic North Atlantic circuit. Despite the lack of space, being wet for significant periods, being dismasted twice, and largely living on tinned sardines during the homeward passage, they thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

After a couple of false starts, they then built a 34 foot, plywood, junk-rigged Benford dory, *Badger*. She was



Pete aboard China Moon off Cape Horn

meant to be a budget boat but they got a bit carried away, even giving her laid teak decks and spending £11,000 by the time they launched. Despite the quality build, which paid off with many years of trouble-free cruising, *Badger* was a very simple boat.

Being a junk, they were able to save on the rig. The entire rig, including masts, cost less than £300. They built the sails from cheap canvas for £18. These lasted for more than a year, during which time they sailed 8,000 miles, before being replaced by a more durable



Badger running under bare poles



Badger in Disko Bay, Greenland 1991



Badger off Coronation Island, South Orkney

acrylic set. Pete and Annie also sailed without an engine initially, which saved more money.

Embarking in 1983, they spent most of the next two decades exploring the far-flung reaches of the North and South Atlantic Oceans. Setting the pattern for voyages to follow, on *Badger's* first trip, in 1983-5, the return passage eastwards across the North Atlantic was made via Nova Scotia, Iceland, and Arctic Norway. In 1991, they visited the west coast of Greenland, venturing well into the ice north of the Arctic Circle.

Later, in the South Atlantic, they visited the South Orkneys, circumnavigated South Georgia, and then sailed to Cape Town via Tristan da Cunha and Gough Islands, managing to land briefly on the latter. After sailing as far north again as icebound Baffin Island, which lies above the Arctic Circle west of Greenland, they returned to Cape Town via the Azores, Portugal and Brazil.

For some time, Pete had been thinking about another boat. *Badger* was perfect, in her own way, and had carried them safely for more than 110,000 miles, but

Pete enjoys building things and also wanted another catamaran. Nobody could describe *Stormalong* as comfortable or spacious, but she demonstrated the potential of a boat that did not roll and yaw the way monohulls do. A bigger catamaran would provide both comfort and cargo capacity.

Pete designed *China Moon* himself, using the *Plyboats* computer program, basing his specifications on empirical observation. She measures 37 ft LOA, with a 23 ft beam and 3 ft draft, displacing 7 tons. She has a junk-rigged mast in each hull, and initially had a small mizzen amidships, to help in stays and to keep her head to the wind at anchor. The masts are timber and the battens aluminium tube, 38mm x 1.5mm, sheathed in epoxy and carbon fibre. The battens are hinged. Initially Pete used wooden, internal hinges that failed almost immediately, and then tried an external tube hinge, as recommended by Arne Kverneland, which proved robust and reliable. The sails are acrylic. She was built in Port Owen, just north of Cape Town, and launched in November 2001.

By the time *China Moon* was afloat, Pete was single again, as he and Annie went separate ways. He then sailed for Brazil, via St Helena Island, in company with Shirley Carter on her ageing *Vertue*, *Speedwell of Hong Kong*. From Jacaré, Pete headed south, with Shirley Carter aboard. *China Moon* sailed to Uruguay, Argentina, Magellan Straits, Beagle Channel, Cape Horn and Staten Island, where they sustained damage at anchor, having been struck by fierce williwaws that made the anchor drag.

On the passage north towards Mar del Plata, they had to deploy the parachute anchor twice. They were swept by a huge wave that tore off the lashed dinghy and damaged the rudder head when *China Moon* surged backwards. They also found it difficult to recover the parachute anchor, as the trip line, with buoy attached, streamed off to the side beyond reach. Eventually Pete managed to snag one of the guy ropes and capsized the parachute.

Shirley then sailed off for warmer climes on *Speedwell*, while Pete returned to the south on *China Moon*, after fitting a cuddy cabin to the centre deck and removing the mizzen, which had proved to be unnecessary. Sailing alone, he cruised Argentina and the South Shetlands, but couldn't get to the South Orkneys due to the presence of heavy pack ice.

At Elephant Island in the Antarctic (part of the South Shetlands archipelago, and the place where

Shackleton's men sought shelter), the trim tab fell off the rudder and Pete had to link the windvane directly to the rudders via a whipstaff on the crossbar. This proved quite successful and was used all the way to South Africa. He then went on to South Georgia before sailing back to Cape Town. This time, on the third visit, he managed to get ashore at Tristan da Cunha, before arriving at Port Owen on 31st March, 2004.

A winter was spent in Port Owen, during which time Pete built a mast for Shirley Carter, who wanted to convert *Speedwell* to junk rig. With Shirley's mast on deck, he departed Cape Town in September 2004, sailing to Trinidad via St Helena Island and northern Brazil. After helping Shirley convert *Speedwell*, the two



China Moon off Elephant Island, Antarctica, 2004



China Moon leaving Bermuda, 2005

boats cruised in company through the Caribbean to Bermuda.

Here, Pete made a momentous decision. Having read about the Inaugural *Jester Challenge*, scheduled to start from Plymouth in June 2006, he decided to sell *China Moon* and get a small yacht suitable for this event. *China Moon* was sailed to Baltimore, where he found a

Dufour 27, which he named *Mooneshine*. The boat was neglected and suffering delamination of the decks, and Pete was able to buy her for a couple of thousand dollars. He immediately set about repairing the damage and converting her to junk rig.

Then a buyer turned up for *China Moon*. Simon Fraser is Australian, and his offer was subject to the boat being delivered to Australia. The most cost-effective option was for Pete to make the delivery, and he was keen to do it (it sounded like fun, he says). This created problems, however, as far as timing for the *Jester Challenge* went. It would have been impossible get back in time to complete *Mooneshine* and cross the Atlantic to the start line, and yet the whole reason for selling *China Moon* was to enter the Challenge. So Pete rang up Robin Blain in England, looking for another boat, and Robin secured a Kingfisher 22 for him called *Shanti*.

Pete intended to sail *China Moon* directly from Baltimore to Cape Town, pick up Simon, sail on to Australia, and then fly to England, with enough time, hopefully, to do a quick refit of *Shanti* before the start of the *Jester Challenge* on 3rd June. After the race he would decide what to do with *Mooneshine*. It was going to be a tight schedule.

China Moon departed Baltimore on 8th November, 2005. On 20th November, after a southwest gale, Pete found water in the engine compartment, coming from screws into the skeg. Looking over the side, he noticed cracks in the starboard skeg. By 23rd November, the starboard rudder was wobbling and there were serious cracks in the fibreglass reinforcement around the skeg. Obviously, the damage sustained at Staten Island, when *China Moon* was driven onto the rocks, had been more serious than initially thought.

Although Pete was still west of the Cape Verde Islands in the North Atlantic, he decided to head towards Jacaré in Brazil, which has a good boatyard where he could haul the boat for repairs. He sailed on with reduced canvas, at times with just the top of the port sail up. They crossed the doldrums and entered the Southeast Trades on 29th November. Despite the starboard rudder eventually breaking off completely, *China Moon* arrived at Jacaré on 19th December, having sailed 4,563 miles in 41 days.

There was an unfortunate delay of one month here, because the boatyard proprietor was away on holiday. Simon then flew to Brazil and they left Jacaré on 4th



Shanti at the start of the Jester Challenge

February, 2006, to sail directly to Albany, Australia. The decision was later made to continue on to Launceston, on the Tamar River in Tasmania, Simon's homeport. They arrived after 73 days at sea, having sailed 9,700 miles. They still had some fresh tomatoes on board, which were confiscated by the Australian authorities.

They did not deploy the parachute anchor once on this trip, although they perhaps should have in one bad gale in the Great Australian Bight. They both had urgent schedules, however, so pressed on. One wave was so steep that Pete, who was at the helm, began to fall down the deck, and Simon, who was in his bunk, found himself standing on the forward bulkhead. However, *China Moon's* buoyant bows lifted the ship up and they carried on. Apart from this, the only damage during the passage was a couple of broken battens and trouble with the starboard rudder hinges, constructed of plaited rope in the Wharram style, which stretched, requiring the tiller bar to be disconnected.

Pete flew to England in early May, launched *Shanti* on the 18th, and crossed the starting line of the *Jester Challenge* on 3rd June, 2006. During the preparations,

he epoxied *Shanti's* bottom, replaced the windows, restitched the sail with Mandy Blain's sewing machine, and converted the straight timber battens to hinged ones, using a box-sectioned alloy tube for a hinge, into which the original timber battens, cut to suit, were inserted. It was a frantic few weeks.

Winds were light at the start of this passage, but Pete was pleased to discover that the bilge-keeled *Shanti* sailed well to windward. The hinged battens undoubtedly contributed to this. Off the Lizard, he crossed tacks with Roger Taylor on *Ming Ming*, and then headed south towards the Azores. Most of the other boats elected to sail closer to the rhumbline, which was to have serious consequences later.

For *Shanti*, after a brief south-westerly F7 at the end of the first week, the southerly course paid off handsomely, with F3-5 northerlies for several days. Two weeks out of Plymouth saw them in the middle of the Azores Islands, having made good 1,250 miles. This was followed by F3-4 easterlies for the next week, which gave them a good shove to the west. The boats further north were to experience less clement weather and, unknown to Pete, all but one retired.

Shanti experienced light winds for the rest of the passage, F1-3, occasionally from forward of the beam, but managed to keep moving, averaging 50 miles a day on this stretch. The boat may have been surprisingly fast for a 22 foot bilge-keeler, but one also has to take into account that by this stage of his sailing career, Pete had already clocked up close to 200,000 miles at sea, and almost all of them have been in junk rig.

There were a few days of good easterlies later in the passage, bringing the daily runs up to 100 miles, but then the wind went light again. *Shanti* crossed the finish line on 17th July after 44 days and 3,620 miles, coming in second (and last, as Pete laconically puts it). Pete was looking very relaxed and sporting a good tan, but a few days later the first hurricane of the season swept north, making everybody involved glad that there were no more participants at sea.

In the spirit of the original OSTAR, a one pound bet had been made between Pete Hill, Roger Taylor and Bill Churchhouse, to be won by the first boat home, and after the race a commemorative plaque, with the three pounds glued to it, was presented to Pete. He also received the Inaugural *Jester Medal*, which is awarded by the Ocean Cruising Club, at their discretion, for an outstanding contribution to the art of singlehanded sailing.



Jester Challenge commemorative plaque

Shanti was sold to a sailor from California, once again with the assistance of Robin Blain, and Pete finished *Moonshine's* conversion, giving her a Reddish style sail made from green PVC, and hinged alloy battens sheathed in unidirectional carbon fibre and epoxy. He may have kept her for a few years but accepted an offer from his friend Grahame Rendell instead, delivering her to Bermuda, where he spent Christmas and saw in the 2007 New Year.

Pete's next boat was a Freedom 33 called *Pelican*, bought on the east coast of the USA. She had a number of problems, including engine issues and waterlogging of the balsa-cored topsides. After repairing the engine, Pete bought all the epoxy and glass needed to repair the core and began the messy task (he was living aboard for the duration), but an



expired visa forced him to set sail before completing the work. Luckily, the inner and outer skins were still bonded together, so it wasn't as risky as it may seem.

Pelican sailed directly to Jacaré in Brazil, sailing a more direct route than he had in *China Moon*, which made the route considerably shorter. He intended to complete *Pelican's* repairs here but the boat fell off the cradle during slipping. Luckily it was only half out of the water when the cradle collapsed, and the boat suffered no damage. Pete then cancelled the slipping and sailed on towards Uruguay.

On 22nd May, he heard some clanking coming from the foremast and discovered the rubber wedge had fallen out due to faulty work by the boatyard that had re-stepped the masts. It was impossible to reinsert the wedge without removing the mast but Pete put thinner wedges in around the top of the metal mast-partner flange. On 29th May, at 0500 hours, the carbon fibre mast broke at the partners.

Winds were up to southwest F7 and *Pelican* suffered a knockdown, being forced to lay a course due north. Luckily, the wind then went easterly and moderated, so Pete set off for Santos under mizzen. He was forced to motor towards the end when conditions went light.



Moonshine



Whoops! Pelican slipped of the cradle.

In Santos, he repaired the broken spar, and then swapped the masts, putting the mizzen forward and using the repaired mast as a new mizzen. It was still taller than he needed to carry the new junk rig, which was based on drawings by Alan Boswell. The sails were made from blue polytarp material and the battens hinged.



Pelican's broken mast - 2007

Pete then flew to England for a brief visit, where he met Carly du Preez, who agreed to join him aboard *Pelican* in Brazil. In November 2007, Pete recrossed the Atlantic aboard *Speedwell* with Shirley Carter, who was en route, once more, to South America. On 5th January, Pete and Carly took *Pelican* for her first sail under junk rig, eventually departing Rio in July for Argentina, then on to Cape Town the following summer, where they arrived on 8th March, 2008.

This was Carly's first ocean passage, something she had been uncertain she wanted to do, and it tested her

thoroughly. Three days into the passage, *Pelican* was knocked down in a F7 south-westerly, during which Pete flew over the lee cloth on the windward berth and landed on top of Carly to leeward. He had equipped *Pelican* with a Jordan Series Drogue for this passage but had not thought conditions were severe enough to warrant its use.

It was too rough to land at Tristan da Cunha or Gough Island, as hoped, and they later deployed the series drogue twice. After the first time, in a F7-8 north-westerly, 25% of the cones were damaged, due to the warp stretching and the straps securing the cones being too tight. The drogue was therefore less effective during the second deployment, when the wind was blowing from the south at F8-9, allowing the boat to yaw and suffer several 60° knockdowns. Three dozen eggs were broken, the dodger was dislodged and books thrown around the cabin.

Pelican arrived in Cape Town on 17th April, having taken 40 days to sail 3,920 miles. Despite the knockdowns, there was little damage, and the polytarp



Pelican's junk rig

sails stood up well. They then took the boat up to Port Owen, hauled and completed the repair of the soggy core along with other maintenance tasks.

They departed Port Owen on 27th October, 2008, cruising up the west coast of South Africa as far as Walvis Bay, before returning to Brazil via St Helena and Ascension Islands. Here, they began research for an RCC guide to Brazil. After sailing out to the island of Fernando de Noronha, they spent six months researching the coast, getting as far as Vitoria, just

north of Rio. When their visas ran out, they returned to Argentina, tying up alongside *Speedwell* in Buenos Aires, before ascending the Rio Paraná and Rio Paraguay for 1,600 km, reaching Asunción 44 days later.

It was during this trip that Pete began planning the construction of another catamaran. On 10th January, 2010, they returned to Jacaré, before researching the north coast of Brazil, getting as far as Sao Luis, just south of the Amazon River. From here they cruised to Devil's Island, Tobago, St Croix, the British Virgins, Bermuda, Flores Island in the Azores, and on to England, arriving in May 2010.

Carly went off to work in Saudi Arabia for a year (she was a nurse but could not work in the EU) and Pete began building *Oryx*, based on a Bernd Kohler design, the KD 860, lengthened to 10 metres, plus other modifications. *Pelican* was sold to another JRA member, Roy Denton. Soon, Pete was living aboard *Oryx* in the shed, before he'd even put the deck on.

Oryx was launched in July, 2012. She has a mast in each hull and was rigged with half-wishbone battens and a split-junk rig, as developed by Slieve McGalliard. Instead of keels, Pete fitted anti-vortex panels to the hulls, as specified by the designer. She has a small diesel engine in one hull, linked to a saildrive unit, and Bill Belcher designed self-steering windvanes at the stern of each hull, linked directly to the rudders.

Oryx carries 200 litres of water and about 50 of diesel. Like a number of current voyagers, Pete has switched to methylated spirits for cooking, usually carrying about 60 litres. There is a 100 amp battery which powers lights and a GPS chartplotter. There is no refrigeration and the autopilot has never been installed.

In September, they sailed to Brittany, where they visited Bertrand and Marie-Hélène Fercot, who were just finishing off *Grand PHA*, their Wharram Tiki 46 catamaran, which is fitted with junk-rigged wingsails. *Oryx* then sailed to Brazil, via Spain, Portugal, the Canaries and the Cape Verde Islands.

Upon arrival in Jacaré, on 17th March, 2013, they immediately hauled the boat for modifications. They removed the anti-vortex panels, having found that *Oryx* had severe weather helm, and fitted low-aspect ratio keels. They also modified the rig, converting the split-junk sails to wingsails. This was achieved by



Oryx 10th July, 2012

cutting the half-wishbones in two, to make a full-wishbone forward, then adding a straight, articulated after section. They were delighted, afterwards, to discover that the boat was now well-balanced, though Pete suspects that it was not necessary to change the rig.

Leaving Jacaré, they continued their research of the Brazilian coast, and then went on to Uruguay, returning to Brazil after six months, exploring the coast south of Rio. They sailed for Cape Town on 11th November, 2014. The early stages of the passage saw them battling strong easterly headwinds, F4-5, then north-easterlies of F5-6-7. On the 17th, with a south-southwest wind of F7 and large beam seas, they deployed the Jordan Series Drogue.

The drogue is attached to horizontal chainplates on the inboard sides of the hulls' afterdecks, to keep the bridle clear of the rudders. With *Oryx's* wide beam, the boat lies very steadily and little water comes aboard.



Oryx's first rig



Oryx's new rig

Occasionally a crest slops into the cockpit but it is harmless. Recovering the drogue was much easier than recovering the parachute anchor. Pete hauled in the slack when the boat eased into the troughs, with Carly tailing on the winch and snubbing it firmly when the boat surged through the crests.

The rest of the passage was sailed in variable winds. They covered 170 miles in a north-westerly F5-6 on 3rd December, followed by a number of good runs of between 130 and 170 miles, arriving in Cape Town on 12th December, after a passage of 3,734 miles in 36 days. When they later slipped the boat at Port Owen, they were shocked to discover the starboard keel was missing. They remembered one day when they had heard a large bang. The keel, which was glued but not bolted on, must have struck a submerged object and sheered off. A new keel was built and the existing keel strengthened.

Oryx left Port Owen on 6th May, 2015 and sailed to Durban via Simonstown, Mossel Bay and East London. They left Durban for Madagascar on 18th June. The next morning they were about 50 miles north of Durban and 6 miles offshore in moderate winds and smooth seas. While Carly was washing dishes in the galley, Pete put his head down for a short sleep. When he awoke two hours later, Carly was not on board.

He immediately turned *Oryx* around and motored back down the track on the electronic chart, until he was south of the position they'd been at when he last saw Carly, but found nothing. He then went inshore to get phone and radio reception and called for help,

before returning to search. Two helicopters, a plane and several fast vessels joined the search, which was continued the next day, but no sign of Carly was found. This tragic event remains a painful mystery. Usually, Carly never left the cockpit while Pete was below and it is impossible to fall out of it.

Pete then returned to Durban for the inevitable police inquiry and a memorial service with her family and friends. It was hard to know what to do next, but remaining in Durban was hardly an option. On 28th July, *Oryx* sailed for Mauritius. Pete had decided to continue on to Australia, but mid-winter is not the time to cross the Indian Ocean in southern latitudes.

It took 24 days to sail the 1,800 miles to Port Louis, Mauritius. The drogue was deployed a few days out of Durban in a F6 southerly. Recovering the drogue alone was much harder than it had been with Carly tailing. Pete took a turn around one of the davits when the boat surged on a crest and snapped it off. This created momentary havoc as the dinghy, usually stowed on deck, had been left in the davits. It had to be unceremoniously hauled into the cockpit, where it remained for the rest of the passage.

During this storm, a quartering sea hit one of the raised rudders and broke the tiller. Pete also broke several battens and had to glue them up in the bridge-deck saloon. After clearing into Port Louis, he moved *Oryx* to Grande Bay, where he rested and prepared for a passage to Albany, Western Australia.

He left Mauritius on 18th September. It was another rough trip. Once, while lying to the series drogue, a wave filled the cockpit to the seats, allowing a little water to come in over the sill of the cabin door, which was closed at the time, but it was only the crest of the wave and carried no weight.

On 17th October one rudder snapped off below the cassette. Pete turned it over and reinserted it, completing the voyage with one and a half rudders. One boom and several battens broke, and the yellow wingsail started tearing.

One day, after rushing out to reef in a squall, Pete returned to the cockpit to find that the cabin door had slammed shut and locked him out. After some effort, he was able to squeeze his fingers into the edge of the opening window in the aft saloon bulkhead and release its catch, allowing him to climb in like a thief. Singlehanded sailing has its perils! *Oryx* arrived in Albany on 29th October, after 3,728 miles and 41 days.

There was a lot of work to do. Pete spent 6 weeks in Albany. He built new, fixed, semi-balanced rudders, restored the split-junk rig, and made new, full wishbone battens, along the lines of Paul McKay's aero-junk rig. The low-angled, short yards are also full wishbones, and the sails do not require yard or luff hauling parrels. Each sail has just a halyard and sheet, plus a pair of downhauls rigged to spans to help tension the luff. Pete received invaluable assistance here from an old cruising buddy, Darren Russell, whom he'd met 30 years earlier in Falmouth.

Oryx left Albany on 18th December, experiencing a mix of fresh following breezes and headwinds, arriving in Launceston 15 days later, after a passage of 1,460 miles, with just two days left to spare before his pre-booked flight to the JRA rally in New Zealand. *Oryx* was left on a mooring alongside Simon Fraser's *China Moon*, and Pete and Simon later sailed *China Moon* clockwise around Tasmania.

Oryx then sailed up the east coast of Australia to Southport in Queensland, with the intention of sailing into the SW Pacific in July 2016, then down to New Zealand for the southern summer. After that, who knows? Pete has some ideas but likes to keep his options open. *Oryx* is an exquisitely built, elegantly simple boat that has been well-tested, but Pete is still interested in building boats and may consider another project in the future.

Whatever he does, there is little chance that he is going to hang up his seaboots any time soon. He remains enthralled by the sea after more than 40 years and an extraordinary number of deep-sea miles. He has certainly sailed further under junk rig than anyone else

is ever likely to, and in the process has become one of the true legends of the ocean voyaging fraternity.

Over the years, Pete has received numerous sailing awards in recognition of his extraordinary seamanship and voyages. They are listed below:

- 1990 - (RCC) Irish Cruising Club Decanter
- 1991 - (RCC) Goldsmith Exploration Award
- 1993 - (RCC) Romola Cup
- 1995 - (RCC) Challenge Cup
- 1995 - (RCC) Goldsmith Exploration Award
- 1997 - (RCC) Juno's Cup
- 2003 - (RCC) Juno's Cup
- 2004 - (RCC) Founder's Cup
- 2006 - (OCC) Inaugural *Jester* Medal
- 2013 - (RCC) Founder's Cup

Pete Hill is the author of *Cruising Guide to the Coast of Brazil, Vol 1 & 2*. (Vol 3 coming shortly), published by the RCC Pilotage Foundation, and also *Building Badger and the Benford Sailing Dory Designs* (With Jay Benford), published by Tiller Publishing.



Pelican's crew



Oryx wingsails