

Arthur Ransome and Hillyard Yachts

With special reference to his first *Lottie Blossom*, now *Ragged Robin III*

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Like all cruising yachtsman, Arthur Ransome (AR) had to square a circle. How to afford the "perfect boat" that combined sea-going qualities with ample accommodation for comfortable living aboard. In addition, AR had to satisfy his Russian-born and formidable second wife, Evgenia. She had strict requirements to enable her to be his perfect "mate" and to entertain on board!

Out of his six cruising yachts (ie excluding *Slug*, *Kittywake* and other sailing dinghies), three were Hillyards: *Nancy Blackett* (1935 - 38), *Lottie Blossom I* (1951 - 2) and *Lottie Blossom II* (1953 - 4). In addition, he chartered another Hillyard - *Barnacle Goose* - on the East Coast in the summer of 1951.

While his maxim was "fools build and wise men buy", AR had built his last two Hillyards, the *Lottie Blossoms*. Why? Reading his diary, logs and biographies, it is clear that it was his best chance of squaring that elusive circle.

His earliest and probably happiest cruising with Evgenia was in their ungainly but very roomy 30 ft gaff rigged ketch *Racundra* (1923 - 4) in the North Baltic. Their next yacht and first Hillyard, *Nancy Blackett* (1935 - 38) originally named *Spindrift* when launched in 1931 was (and still is) an excellent sea boat, but heavy to sail short handed and with impossible accommodation from Evgenia's point of view. She "took against *Nancy* from the start because of the basic simplicity of the little tailor paraffin stove to starboard of the companion way, and a little white earthenware housemaids bowl to port into which water had to be poured, but she still crewed for Ransome regularly on short trips" (Notes). Next came *Selina King*, a 35 ft 12 ton cutter built at Harry Kings Yard in Pin Mill with a little stove and coal locker, writing table and a more substantial galley. Significantly, the internal accommodation was planned by Evgenia "who guaranteed that if I built it, she would take up her old job as in *Racundra*". Unfortunately, after a short season in her, Ransome had to give her up on doctor's orders.

After the war, he commissioned a "ketch rigged bath chair" from Laurent Giles, again built in Pin Mill by Harry King: *Peter Duck* (1947 - 49). Unfortunately he lost confidence in Giles' design and in the boat's construction, compounded by his cracking his head on a low beam on sitting down! Evgenia shared AR's disaffection - under sail "she looked ridiculous". In rain she leaked from everywhere, especially the main hatch. Various experiments with the sails and ballast were unsuccessful in enabling her to go about readily.

It was in July, 1951, that his attention returned to Hillyards. He saw *Norvad*, a Hillyard five-and-a-half ton centre-cockpit yacht at Birdham Pool (she is now in Ipswich Haven Marina). On 21st July he decided "one of these would do" and by the the following day had already decided to name the future boat *Lottie Blossom* (after the PG Wodehouse character). Evgenia wanted "the boat as a summer annexe to which to escape from the [London] flat during the noisiest times". He had a trial sail in *Norvad* the following month in a hard offshore wind. Evgenia said "if she will stand this she'll stand anything we shall put her into". They decided to get one. They put in an order for that year's Boat Show model, ie a production boat. By 30th October they had applied for registration and given Tom Jeffers, David Hillyard's foreman, a list of things they wanted done to the boat. By November 5th, somewhat ominously - but significantly if they were to cruise together - Evgenia was "already settling the internal arrangements". (These look as if they included a bathroom cupboard in the focs'l, a second cupboard over the starboard bunk in the saloon instead of shelves, and possibly a larger galley space). The agreed launch date was April 1st (1952)! However, David Hillyard "kept his promise". "This is the first time I have ever known a boat-builder keeping, so to speak, an appointment." In the event, AR's health problems delayed their first sail to 15th April. Outside Littlehampton harbour they shut off the engine and sailed. "Quite good. Sailed herself, but, of course, does not point high. Comes about admirably. Heaves to quite well." (A significant comment in



Figure 1 Arthur and Evgenia on board *Lottie Blossom I* in Hillyard's Yard, Littlehampton

relation to his experience with *Peter Duck*). Between 19th April and 12th May, 1952, they had sailed her to Birdham Pool in spite of AR's prostate problems. Evgenia said "she likes *Lottie* as much as ever". In a letter to Colonel Busk on 21st April, 1952, AR commented that "Genia keeps on considering our chances of bringing *Lottie* to the East Coast before the winter".

In a sail on 16th July round Chichester Harbour, AR commented that "*Lottie* is inclined to have a little too much weather helm but with full main and foresail sailed very well, close hauled as well as reaching. In 10 to 12 breeze, force 4 or more in the harder puffs. *Lottie* liked it. Manoeuvred well under main alone". In the log is the entry "*Lottie* inclined to gripe, rather too strong weather helm, but sailed well with a 10 - 12 knot breeze, mod about force 4. This suited her well but she would not have carried full sail if it had strengthened. Hardish steering. We both found wheel steering rather unpleasant, but both were delighted to find how well *Lottie* would sail."

On 17th July, contemplating a future hospitalisation, AR noted in his log: "at least this time I know *Lottie* can sail and sail very well. In fact she is not a 50/50 boat but a 75/75. We thought first 75 per cent motorboat on coming round from Littlehampton and after yesterday's good sail thought her at least 75 per cent sailing boat."

As with all his yachts, AR had misgivings. He palpably did not like the wheel steering, nor the centre cockpit. Dennis Cullingford recalled Evgenia's fury when AR enveloped her in the lowered mainsail!



Figure 2 AR in Fore-hatch of Lottie Blossom I, at Littlehampton

By 8th September 1952, the log entry records them "talking of *Lottie minor* with identical hull but tiller steering and a real single-hander which *Lottie* be can never be" (but see later!).

By October 7th, they were again in Hillyards Yard looking at another aft cockpit five-and-a-half tonner, being built. Theirs would be next. "She would be something like *Goblin* (*sic - Nancy Blackett*) and *Genia* said she would be fighting tooth and nail, inch by inch for the accommodation she wanted particularly for oilskins. We do not want 4 berths. That should allow for a hanging cupboard and oilskin cupboard". At the beginning of December, they were back in the yard again looking at the predecessor to their new aft cockpit *Lottie 2*. "The new *Lottie* will have a main cabin 10 ft long with cupboards at the foreword ends of the bunks as in *Lottie 1* and it will be possible to sleep feet foremost or head foremost because there will be no need to tuck their feet under the cupboards". In actual fact, apart from this, the interior was very similar to *Lottie 1*.

In December 1952, AR sold *Lottie Blossom* to Sir William Paul Mallinson on condition that he (AR) retained the name. She was duly renamed *Ragged Robin III*. Of her subsequent 10 owners, one was another author (Anthony Rushworth-Lund) who wrote a lovely account of his family's voyage in her to and from the Mediterranean in his book "*By way of the Golden Isles*". Another owner, Peter St John Howe, confounded AR's views on her by sailing her *single-handed* over a 1000 miles, concluding his account in the Hillyard Owners Association Newsletter 31 with the words: "*Ragged Robbin* was a splendid partner but this was to be our last voyage together. I had no doubt that her first owner, Arthur Ransome, who had inspired my love of sailing, would have approved of our time together not least our 1000 miles sailed *single-handed* between September 1991 and July 1992".

For our part, *Ragged Robin* offers the splendid qualities of a Hillyard centre cockpit vessel: safety at sea and, for a couple more used to a Hillyard 4 tonner - *Twinkler* (1922) - luxurious accommodation for living, sleeping and entertaining! She is practically unchanged from AR's day, apart from a new engine and the addition of discreet sheet winches. She has the same leaks in the same places (over

the bunks!), and the cabin door lock (not "clock" as in Roger Wardale's transcription of AR's log) still sticks. We are about to fit her with a new suit of sails and will return to the original tan colour.

But, for the Ransomes, the new *Lottie Blossom* did live up to its promise. As on the first *Lottie*, Evgenia was able to crew and entertain again, recapturing the happiness they had enjoyed in their first build, *Racundra*. They had two very happy seasons in her, sailing her comfortably on their own, including two voyages to Cherbourg. The second voyage, in 1954, at the age of 70, was to be AR's last long passage: at the end of the season, he "swallowed the anchor" and sailed on in his memories.

Why did Arthur Ransome keep the name *Lottie Blossom*? To retain happy memories of the first *Lottie*? We can only guess. In his diary entry opposite 25th April, 1952 he wrote:

"A yacht is a pleasure boat, a boat that gives pleasure... This pleasure is given in so direct and personal a way that we feel discomfort until we can thank the boat for the pleasure she gives, so that she must have a name. And this name, whatever it is, gathers to itself associations till it has a magical power of evocation, like the name of some scrubby human being, which for its mother has angelic attributes perhaps perceived by no one else".

I am indebted to the Ransome Archive in the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds for access to AR's diaries, logs and photographs and to them and to the Ransome Estate for permission to reproduce the figures.

Likewise to Hugh Brogan's Life of Arthur Ransome (Cape) and Signalling from Mars: Letters of Arthur Ransome (Cape), and two excellent accounts of AR's sailing by Roger Wardale: Ransome at Sea: Notes from the Chart Table (AR Society Publication), and Nancy Blackett: under sail with Arthur Ransome (Cape).