



TOM CUNLIFFE

A JOLLY BREEZE

Life's a breeze on *Jolie Brise*, thanks to the relaxed teachings of her skipper

ILLUSTRATION CLAUDIA MYATT

Some things never change. Whatever it is you're sailing, if you're a fly on the bulkhead of the mess room you'll hear the hands grousing about the ship. They'll complain about the food, the skipper, the designer, the owners and throw in a few choice words about the paymasters too, but if any outsider dares to criticise their vessel, they're on him like a whirlwind. Not being a psychologist I can offer no reason why this should be, but yesterday I was sailing on a boat that I've never known anyone curse, even in her earlier incarnations. I'm talking about the Le Havre pilot cutter, turned racing yacht, turned sail-trainer, *Jolie Brise*.

When I found myself in charge of her 40 years ago, her galley was up forward. Cooking was on an ancient coal stove manufactured by a respectable company called Esse, whose creation had fought the good fight for too long and which now generated more noxious fumes than heat. It's true that the crew offered some choice comments as they staggered out of the fo'c's'le clutching their throats, but nobody ever widened the complaints to the ship as a whole. So glorious was her progress through the water that we forgave her even the poison gas.

That was back in 1980, not a lot short of six decades since she had won the first of her three Fastnet races. Now, four decades on from the moment I took her long tiller, I was back aboard, this time with a different hat on. Along with my friend Steve from Seeing Eye TV we were there to film 'Day One' of the sail-training programme that is the heart of her life with Dauntsey's School. Dauntsey's has owned and operated her since my day and before. Under their far-sighted guidance, she has become a legend in the Tall Ships world. Whatever the race, be it transatlantic or short-range, she is the boat to beat, and few are those who manage it.

Scratch her how you will, 'JB' is a big, powerful craft. Built for serious work by Paumelle in 1913, she is so well maintained that she is as strong as ever she was. This is no bad thing because Toby Marris, skipper and head of sailing, with his mate and co-skipper Adam Seager, love to drive her as if she were new. A 55-tonne gaff cutter with 2,500 sqft (232m²) of fore-and-aft sail and not a winch

to be found, needs to be operated with understanding, anticipation and timing.

Muscle is useful too, but the first three are the key because, however well a 14-year-old young lady may be trained, she isn't going to have the heft of the 6ft 8in (2.03m) EG Martin, the visionary who lifted the boat from a working life to release her potential as an ocean racer.

Steve and I arrived at Port Hamble an hour before the students. We went into a bit of a confab with Toby while Adam and the three old hands that made up 'Team Jolie Brise' set about prepping the boat.

I hadn't the foggiest notion of how the half-dozen total novices about to join were going to manage, or even survive, but Harriet, Ollie and Daisy have grown to young adulthood through the 'JB' system. Having recently left school, each is every inch a sailor. I watched their smooth deckwork and quiet confidence out of the corner of my eye and realised that, if need be, these three could sail the boat on their own with the afterguard. Every student in the school has to make one trip. 'First voyagers' are fully involved from the word go. Many then take the opportunity to join the sailing club and become part of the ship.

Dauntsey's School has a fifty-fifty intake of boys and girls. This time, all our new crew were to be in one 'Covid bubble', so they had to come from a single boarding house. This meant all one gender, and it was ladies.

It is so long since I drove a training vessel that, to be frank, I had forgotten what to expect. Six young teenage girls coming over the rail with no clue about which way was forward and which way was aft, was an alarming prospect to me. Not to *Jolie Brise*, however. Toby sat them down on the coachroof and gave them a quick chat about the history of the boat. Somehow he slipped in a proper safety brief. I was hardly aware that he'd done it, but watching the girls as the day went on it was clear he had hit the spot. Briefings can be dire, negative experiences and I can think of many an instructor who would do well to go on Toby's correspondence course.





c. Myrth

What came next was so well practised it had clearly happened many times before, yet it was so effective it seemed unreal. You'd expect the tyros to be nervous and to hang back when a volunteer was asked for. Not a bit of it. Quite what magic Adam had worked on them up forward I can't imagine, but they were jumping to it from the moment we slipped our lines. Working a big, tiller-steered boat like JB out of a marina berth, hampered by a quarter propeller and not a huge amount of horsepower, is a sharp reminder of how boat handling is a subtle mix of art and science. Toby casually handed the tiller to a girl who had never before been on a boat. The gear and throttle were soon in the hands of her chum. Toby stood by to make suggestions as Adam and 'Team JB' organised the others to work the ropes. Fifty-five tons hung on a creaking springline, a brand-new crew member lay back on her turn like an old pro, then threw it off on the command, and away we went, threading through the expensive yachts with our steady helmsgirl standing on the seat for some sort of view ahead.

And that was the order of the day. The girls hove up the mighty mainsail, learning how to sweat a halyard as they pulled; the topsail followed, straight from the bag. By the time we were rattling past Calshot we were under all working sail, logging a comfy seven knots and overtaking everything in sight except the Open 60 that sizzled by trying out her Code Zero.

It was at this point that I looked aloft and noted with astonishment that one of our young crew had nipped up the ratlines and was now sitting on the spreaders enjoying a fine view

of the proceedings. She was, of course, clipped on and had been safe from the moment she stretched up to the sheer pole to start her climb. She couldn't really come to harm, but I've seen grown men freeze halfway up a cutter's ratlines and the confidence that the JB crew had instilled in her shook me rigid. Ten minutes later she came down and another one shot up, laughing all the way. Meanwhile, in the netting under the bowsprit, a further two were grinning their heads off.

The thrill-seekers were dragged back on deck as we made a few tacks and finally docked in Cowes. Here, they sampled the time-honoured sailor's tradition of strolling ashore to explore the delights of Cowes on a grey, mid-week October day, with strict orders to be aboard by 1400. They all showed up, and now came the revelation.

"You watch this," said Toby as we got ready to hoist the main. "The message will have gone home." That huge sail with its 38ft (11.6m) boom went up in creditable time with minimal assistance from the professionals. It was hard to credit what most of the girls had learned in one short morning. A new generation of top-drawer 'Team Jolie Brise' sailors was being born before my eyes.

As we sailed up-river past Warsash with everything up bar the topsail and jib-top, the harbourmaster videoed us and posted it on Facebook. A Frenchman commented.

'Ce bateau a l'âme,' he wrote. 'This boat has soul'.

He never said a truer word and, as we dropped the main and grunted under the weigh of the stow, I didn't hear a single grumble from the fo'c's'le.