



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

Art Treasures of the Squadron

HMV Britannia 1932

Offset Lithograph from a painting by Norman Wilkinson
Located in the hallway leading to the Carabella Room



His Majesty's Yacht *Britannia* is depicted in this print which was presented to the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron by the Flag Officers and Members of the Royal Thames Yacht Club in September 1933. It is an offset lithograph 35.5 x 53.5 cm signed in pencil by both the artist and the Commodore of the Royal Thames Yacht Club, H.R.H. Prince of Wales – who later became King Edward VIII before his abdication in 1936.

However, the story of *Britannia* is not only inextricably bound to the story of kings and princes, but also to the actual creation of the sport of yachting and sailing for pleasure that we recognise today, which grew out of yacht racing from Cowes on the Solent in the UK.

'The Yacht Club' (which became the Royal Yacht Club and eventually the Royal Yacht Squadron) was formed in 1815 in Cowes and is generally acknowledged as the first organiser of yacht racing in a similar form to what we know today. For example, of the 13 rules of the Royal Yacht Club committed to paper in 1928, there is just one right of way rule:

'...vessels on the larboard [port] tack must invariably give way for those on the starboard tack...'



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

Britannia was launched in 1893 and was refitted several times during her 42 year sailing life. In this painting she is depicted in her then new J boat configuration with a Bermuda rig, sailing downwind on starboard tack under three jibs, a spinnaker and mainsail. Her dimensions were huge: 121.5 ft (37m) in length with a mast height of 164 ft (50m) and a 10,328 sq ft (959.5 sq m) sail plan. It was said she was so powerful that you could feel her coming towards you through the water before you heard her. The other two yachts in the picture are likely to be the other newer J Class boats *Shamrock V* and *Endeavour* with which she often raced in trials, before each of those boats made challenges for the America's Cup in the early 1930s. There is a naval ship in the background, suggesting that the scene is set on the Solent, near Cowes and Portsmouth, the latter being a major base of the British Navy.

Britannia is shown in full profile showing off her magnificent lines and sail acreage. She sits on the low horizon in fairly choppy seas for which the Solent is known. The light is muted on an overcast day, except for highlights on *Britannia's* spinnaker and the sails of the second yacht, in contrast to the third yacht. Wilkinson has used the light masterfully to dance across the waves and there is a sliver of light dramatically peeking through the clouds near the top of the mainsail. The presence of the other two yachts creates a competitive atmosphere - *Britannia* is out in the lead, reflecting her outstanding record for wins. The colours are fairly muted in blues and creams, almost tonal. The use of the whitewash highlights the hulls of the boats against the land fading into the background at the horizon. Wilkinson's inclusion of the Navy ship reflects the local area but probably also refers to his strong ties to the military – he was the designer of 'dazzle camouflage' to protect merchant shipping in WW1.



Going to windward on *Britannia*
Photo Credit - BEKEN



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

Norman Wilkinson (1878-1971) was born in Cambridge, England. He primarily worked as a marine artist, but also as an illustrator, poster artist and wartime camoufler. He usually worked in oils, water-colours and dry point. His 'dazzle painting' camouflage was in his words '*Not for low visibility, but in such a way as to break up her form and thus confuse a submarine officer as to the course on which she was heading.*' He also worked as a war artist in WW2. He was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his wartime efforts. He is represented in the National Maritime Museum, the Royal Academy and the Imperial War Museum.

Spurred on by the acquisition of *Thistle* by Emperor Wilhelm II in 1892, the Prince of Wales, Albert Edward (who later became King Edward VII) commissioned *Britannia* as a new first class racing yacht for the 1893 season. This, in turn, also produced a new scale of development in yacht building across the Atlantic in America.

In 1893 the Prince of Wales's *Britannia* began a 42 year racing yacht career which remains unrivalled in the history of yachting. After her first year's racing, *Britannia* scored 33 wins from 43 starts. In her second season, she won all seven races for the first class yachts on the French Riviera and then beat the 1893 America's Cup defender *Vigilant* in home waters by just over seven minutes. People came from all over South West England to watch this race. Her beauty and size never ceased to capture the imagination of all who laid eyes on her.

After 1897 *Britannia* served as a trial horse for Thomas Lipton's *Shamrock* for the America's Cup. In 1901, Sir Thomas Lipton's second America's Cup challenger *Shamrock II* was accidentally dismasted during sail trials. There were no injuries, and a new rig was quickly built but the presence of King Edward VII on board caused some comments about the advisability of 'going boating with one's grocer.'



Shamrock II dismasted, 1901 Photo Credit - BEKEN



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

King George V and his father Edward VII had a very close relationship and a common interest in sailing. Upon his father's death in 1910, King George V wrote in his diary that he had lost his:

"best friend and the best of fathers... I never had a [cross] word with him in my life. I am heart-broken and overwhelmed with grief."

King George V's diary, 6 May 1910. Royal Archives



King George V at the helm of *Britannia* Photo credit - Royal Archives

In 1920 King George V triggered the revival of the 'Big Class', announcing that he would refit *Britannia* for racing. With a mast towering 164 feet (50m) above the water and setting acres of sails, many of the individual tasks involved in sailing *Britannia* required the combined strength of the whole crew. Raising the enormous mainsail was the first of a series of heavy tasks which were mostly performed by fishermen who returned to their trawlers at the end of the yachting season.

Lulworth, Shamrock IV, Westward, HMY Britannia and *White Heather II* were the five yachts in the phenomenal Big Class racing fleet during the mid to late 20s, the precursor to the J Class. Together they were known affectionately as 'The Big Five'. With their speed and breathtaking sail area, they would attract the elite of 1920s society. During this period Frank Beken his son Keith worked on the summer racing at Cowes, becoming world renowned for their unique marine photography with its classic style and acclaimed depth of field. The company has held three Royal Warrants for excellence.



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON

Despite being the oldest yacht in the fleet, *Britannia* held her own in racing in the 1920s with rig changes. She was converted to a J boat in 1932 with a Bermuda rig designed by Charles E. Nicholson and raced for the last time in 1935. During her racing career she won a total of 231 races.



Lulworth, Shamrock IV, Westward, HMY Britannia and White Heather II racing at Cowes in the 1920s
Photo Credit - BEKEN

King George V's dying wish was for his beloved yacht to follow him to the grave. In July 1936, after *Britannia* had been stripped of her spars and fittings, her hull was towed to Catherine's Deep near the Isle of Wight where she was sunk by *HMS Winchester*. Most of the items from the boat were sold off and the proceeds went to the King George V fund for sailors. The Sir Max Aitken Museum in Cowes still displays the gaff - 51 feet long and hollow, with the two halves scarfed together made of Douglas fir; mast hoops; the King's chair, which was at the top of the companion way; the tiller; a brass cleat and small boxed spirit level and a wooden sail roller.

The spirit of *Britannia* lives on in a current project known as 'K1 *Britannia*' to create a modern replica of the original vessel. K1 designates the original sail number when she was converted to the J Class in 1931, as seen in the Wilkinson painting. Originally undertaken in 1993 by a Norwegian called Sigurd Coates, the project stalled due to recession as outlined in a documentary video called the 'Dream of *Britannia*'. The *Britannia* replica was finally acquired by the Britannia Trust in the UK with the goal of using her as a flagship for charitable causes.



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON



Britannia in 1897 Photo Credit - BEKEN

In August 2018, I had the pleasure of being part of the annual Cowes Week yacht racing regatta on the beautiful Isle of Wight to enjoy the sailing heritage instigated by *Britannia* and her peers. Cowes has been described as the 'cradle of sailing' and sits on the Solent - a particularly changeable and challenging stretch of water for sailing and navigation, featuring complex double tides and fickle winds that can blow up to 40 knots in Force 9 gales.

Participating in the regatta is quite a spectacle with big fleets and picture postcard spinnaker starts. The sailing village of Cowes is picturesque and features the famous BEKEN of Cowes photo shop and the Royal Yacht Squadron, originally built by Henry VIII as a fortress to keep out the French. We were fortunate enough to be invited on a tour of the Royal Yacht Squadron and were shown letters written by Nelson including the plans he implemented for the arrangement of the British ships during the Battle of Trafalgar.



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON



Royal Yacht Squadron, Cowes, image by Robyn Coleman

Nearby is the magnificent Osborne House where Queen Victoria and Prince Albert raised their large family of nine children, including Albert Edward, Prince of Wales who commissioned the building of *Britannia*. My husband Tony showed me the spot on the lawns at Osborne House where he attended a ball in 2001 to celebrate the 150th Jubilee of the America's Cup. He in fact participated in the race that re-created the original Round the Isle of Wight Race for the America's cup in 1851.

That regatta had also been remarkable for having all three of the then magnificently restored J Class boats *Shamrock V*, *Velsheda* and *Endeavour* racing together for the first time in more than 60 years – recreating the spirit of *Britannia*.



ROYAL SYDNEY YACHT SQUADRON



Osborne House, Isle of Wight, image by Robyn Coleman

By Robyn Coleman, Exhibiting Member of the Royal Art Society

Acknowledgements to Ken Beken from BEKEN of Cowes for permission to use prints of *Britannia*, *Shamrock II* and *'The Big Five'* and for his cheerful help to the author.