

That smile suggests Shelley's enjoying her drive of Lady Aitken's 1962 Round Britain Huntsman



I meet Shelley by the dockside down in Lymington, where we have a 1962 Fairey Huntsman standing by. It's identical to the Ford Express that Lady Aitken drove in the 1969 Round Britain Race, 29 years ago and Shelley seems very pleased with it. "They don't make them like this any more - she's a beautiful boat."

Moving out into the main channel for our trip down Southampton Water and opening the throttles, she's clearly surprised at how the old Huntsman handles the wash of the passing ships. "Gee, the craft I used in the Cowes Torquay race, is bigger. There's more boat around you and yet its not as much fun," she says comparing the Huntsman to the other classic of the '60s."

Quickly acclimatising herself to the helm and the Huntsman's response, she adds: "The race boats I'm used to are much lighter. They twitch and bounce at the slightest wave. You're securely strapped in, sitting on fully bolstered seats but you need to be. At speeds in excess of 100mph, you barely get time to think."

The Huntsman 28 was always acknowledged as being a wet boat in a swell but Shelley loves it: "She goes through the

water, shrugging off the conditions, and feels so stable. In an open cockpit like this you're really exposed to the elements."

So after her quick dash in the Fairey what does Shelley think of Lady Aitken taking a Huntsman all the way round Britain? "To drive a boat like this she must have been extremely fit and strong. I take my hat off to her . . ."

'The long range fuel tank came adrift and started rolling around the cockpit like a rogue elephant'

Lady Aitken

Lady Aitken came to offshore powerboat racing by chance. It was husband, Sir Max who was responsible for the introduction of the London Boat Show and the Cowes - Torquay Race. In 1962 Lady Aitken got to drive her husband's 31-foot Bertram across Torquay Bay. She was immediately smitten, so she entered the 1963 Cowes-Torquay event, finishing sixth, well ahead of her husband: "That didn't go down too well . . ."

By 1969 Lady Aitken had competed in six C-T races, winning the lady's prize in 63 and 64, and driving a variety of boats including a Volvo-engined 25ft and 31ft Bertram, a 25-foot Ocean with twin Rolls Royce engines, and a 'Sonny' Levi designed catamaran powered by triple 125hp Mercury engines - an impressive powerboat CV in such a short time.

"When I started, Max gave me two pieces of advice, 'respect the sea and don't get in the way of the men'. I was invited by Ford to drive one of the team of Fairey Huntsman they were entering in the first ever Round

Britain powerboat Race in early August 1969 because they wanted someone experienced to help win the team prize and the ladies prizes," she recalls, enjoying the memory of the sleek Huntsman 28 Ford Express.

Looking at the Fairey today she says: "Compared to the Bertram the Huntsman was a wonderful sea boat and of all the races I took part in, the Round Britain was the one I enjoyed the most." She and team mate, Thelma Freeman, took turns at the wheel hour after bruising hour, for almost two weeks. "It was always me who was packed off to the evening parties held around the course," she laughs, "the others were always too exhausted."

Not surprisingly, with a 1,700 mile race lasting ten stages there was the odd adventure. "I was given the title of chief prop basher of the team," she laughs. "On the first stage the long-range fuel tank came adrift and was rolling around the cockpit like a rogue elephant while on another occasion the entire dashboard came adrift. Then, we

LADY VIOLET AITKEN

Lady Violet Aitken took part in the first ever Round Britain Powerboat Race in 1969, finishing a remarkable fifth overall and rounding off her career by completing the 1988 season in fourth place, driving her Class 11 Phantom. She is now President of the British Powerboat Racing Club.



Lady Aitken is the original woman racer