

R LANGDON/OCEAN IMAGES



AN ARTIST'S IMPRESSIONS

Artist Alexander Creswell chased the fleet of glorious classic yachts at the Pendennis Cup in Falmouth to capture the action at close quarters in chalk and charcoal. He offers his own particular perspective on the racing

M JONES



Alexander Creswell sketches in charcoal and paint while bouncing around in a chase boat, using his specially designed drawing machine to keep his sketches dry at the turn of a handle



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Creswell, 53, is an internationally acclaimed watercolourist, best known for his paintings of British country houses, in particular a large set of watercolours of Windsor Castle depicting the fire in 1993 and other commissions from the Queen and Prince of Wales.

His passion for sailing began as a child, but he describes his years as a liveaboard thus: "As a 30-year-old bachelor I bought a 36ft motor sailer, a converted double-ended Norwegian fishing boat called *Gafita*, a suitably foreign-sounding name which disappointingly turned out to be an acronym for 'Get Away From It All'. So I did.

"I went through the French canals to the Med, chasing the dream. Having cruised Spain and the Balearics, then Sardinia for several months, I headed south towards Sicily but ran out of money so headed back to Menorca, where the dream went sour.

"I returned home and two years later brought the boat back, tatty and peeling, eventually selling her . . . to a 30-year-old bachelor . . ."

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The Sparkman & Stephens-designed ketch *Tomahawk* was dismasted on the first day, but some fast repair work in Pendennis Shipyard (below) had her back racing before the end of the week

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The Herreshoff classic *Mariette* crosses astern of *Mariquita*. Previous page: the elegant counter of the 19-metre Fife cutter *Mariquita* with Jim Thom at the helm



It's what we've grown to love about Cornwall in August: two days of sea mist, drizzle and sou'westerlies, then reluctant spring sun giving way to resplendent summer for the last day. I was here at the Pendennis Cup for five days of non-stop drawing of beautiful yachts in Falmouth Bay.

The azure Mediterranean and Caribbean are wonderful, of course, but in Cornwall we were to have the broadest variety of conditions and the water was a symphony of greens, greys and blues. I was chasing in a RIB and, whatever the weather, drawing to record the action, the spirit and the sensation of classic yacht racing – power and grace right up close, hearing the grunting of the easing sheets, the shouts of the crew, the roar of displaced water as they powered through the seas.

Racing started on the first day with a flurry of protest flags as the Big Class jostled across the start line, spars almost

touching. The murky grey gloom was alleviated by *Adela's* crew shirts making dots of bright red in the murk. At the top mark her 'Big Red' kite was hoisted for the downwind run and she was soon lost in the mist as *Mariette* and *Mariquita* rounded behind.

Skippers and tacticians were on their mettle laying for Gull Rock as the turning mark, a jagged reminder of the hostility of this coast. What a way to begin a regatta! *Adela* rounded 1st in the mist, then the ghostly silhouette of *Mariquita* appeared, slicing the water in streaks of white and indigo. She broke the eerie silence with cries of 'heave!' and 'ho!' as sheets were hardened in without the benefit of winches to put her on the windward tack, followed by *Mariette* and *Velacarina*.

Danger was not far away and the Sparkman & Stephens ketch *Tomahawk* broke her mast at the first mark and was taken for repair into Pendennis Shipyard. She would reappear

before the end of the week, but for now her classmate *Pinuccia*, a local classic owned by the Tresanton Hotel, was on her own.

I had succeeded in making a series of wet, splashy sketches in smudgy charcoal for sky, water and sail alike with white chalk in streaks for the cresting seas and foaming bow-waves. My drawing machine provided me with a ten-metre roll of dry paper, tinted to allow the use of white chalk. So far I had needed only grey.

That evening the Royal Cornwall Yacht Club hosted a barbecue. Drizzle wrapped itself around the crews, owners and guests, a cool Cornish welcome from the sky, but inside the scene was more colourful, a feast that set the tone for a week of fun and fierce, exciting racing. The great flags from the Js of the 1930s on the club walls formed the backdrop to the gathering of experienced seadogs and young crew hoping to make history.

PHOTOS: N BAILEY/PENDENNIS



Above: crew make their weight felt aboard *Mariquita*. Top right: all hands to the runners aboard *Mariquita*, while *Adela's* crew (above right) have the benefit of winches. Below: extreme sketching – some of Alexander Creswell's on-the-water drawings

The second day started with worsening visibility and a long course out to sea. The wind had shifted to the west and a thin, persistent rain wet my paper and stung the eyeballs as we searched for the fleet in the bay, bashing our way to the Manacles buoy to wait for them. There was no horizon other than the rising profile of the next wave, a swell now steepening with the spring ebb across the rocks. The Manacles bell tolled ominously in memory of the 100 who had perished on the rocks. Visibility was below 200m. We were alone in a grey world.

A grey spectre

Then suddenly and far closer than we expected loomed *Adela* almost on the mark, a grey spectre like the *Flying Dutchman* parting the fog at full pace. Rounding the mark, she broke out her spinnaker in a deafening crackle of crisp fabric rapidly released from its snuffer, sounding like eager applause in a space confined by sails, hull and the sloppy water below. Then



she was gone, a meagre silvery light now leading her back to Pendennis Castle and the finish.

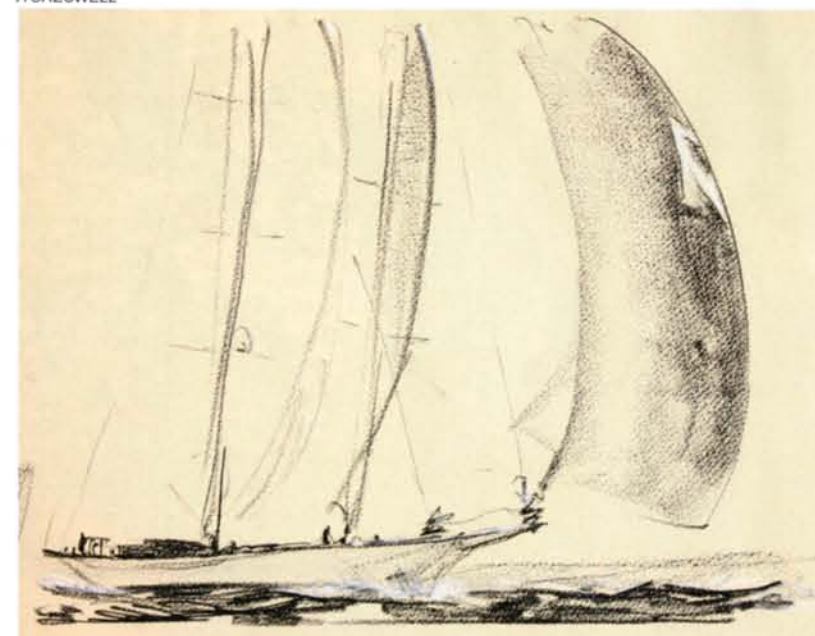
The layday allowed all to rest and dry out, but many were back on the water for the harbour activities laid on by Pendennis Shipyard. The crews who been so focused while sailing appeared to find gig racing more of a challenge. *Mariquita's* crew won the day as the menacing grey skies gave way to a rich cobalt washed by the rain.

Towering cumulonimbus set the stage for the greatest spectacle and every boat in the harbour held expectant faces turned skywards, awaiting the arrival of the Red Arrows. On shore every quay, ledge and lawn was crowded with onlookers as the phalanx of nine jets tore from the sky and swooped over the Royal Cornwall Yacht Club and fanned out across the harbour. They skimmed the top of the flagpole on Flushing Bowling Green, rolling and turning with just a hair's breadth between them. Gasps and whoops of joy came from many

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Top: *Adela* surges out of the grey gloom as Creswell races to sketch her profile. Above: Creswell's rapid sketch of the same yacht on the next leg

a mouth and children who had wished to sail like local hero Ben Ainslie now wanted to be a Red Arrows pilot instead.

Spring arrived on day three, the wind shifted to a steady north-westerly with clear visibility and a few patches of sunlight. The course was set for a long reach to Dodman Point and back with 20 knots off the land. These were fabulous schooner conditions and we dashed along the coast to find them.

Fast on the draw

Adela's towering profile was visible from afar, approaching rapidly with a fine bone in her teeth. Closing with her, we sat off her leeward bow for an exciting series of urgent sketches,

smudged with spray. We were doing 17 knots, the fastest I have ever tried to draw. We dropped astern, white-water rafting on the massive quarter wave.

Most of her topsides were invisible in the bright white maelstrom of water from bow to quarter. This was extreme sketching at its most exhilarating. I worked frantically, chalk and charcoal clamped in my lips like roll-ups, one hand hanging on to the RIB. Then it was over. St Anthony light was abeam far sooner than we expected – we had covered the ten miles from the Dodman in what seemed like minutes.

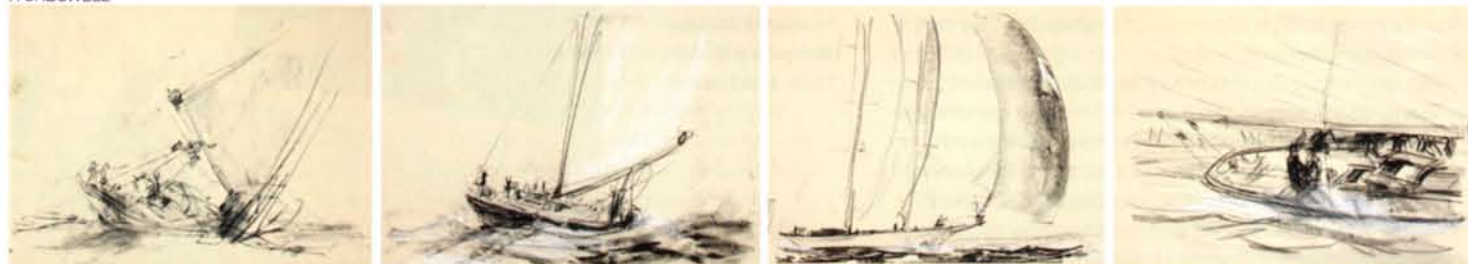
Power and resistance

We turned back and intercepted *Mariette*, more graceful than powerful *Adela*. Her lee rail was awash, invisible in the foam, her taffrail was below the quarter wave and her transom invisible. She and the water were as one in a delicious synthesis of power and resistance, wind against sailcloth, steel against water and above the roar of the battle could be heard the hum of tension in the rigging, straining to transfer the forces from air to water. Loud groans of a strange, bestial ecstasy emanated from the sheets as the trimmers eased and hauled, maximising performance. *Mariette*, despite her tremendous exertions, finished half an hour behind *Adela*.

That evening the party was in Falmouth Art Gallery where guests could view an exhibition of marine paintings by Jamie Medlin, Philippe Gavin and myself. After a glass or two with culture, the party moved to the perhaps prophetically named Gurkha restaurant where Pendennis Shipyard treated the entire party to a fabulous curry. Those reluctant to embrace the night retired to the adjacent Seven Stars, a pub redolent of Falmouth in a less genteel age.

On day four my friend Mike Hutch, who had generously sped me around in his RIB, had a better offer of a day racing on *Adela*, manning the portside runners with my wife. I spent the day aboard *The Buzzard*, Pendennis Shipyard's Batmobile on

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Top: Spitfire fly-past. *Mariquita* won the beauty contest in Creswell's eyes. Above: aboard *Mariette*

water, skimming across the bay at incredible speed to monitor and umpire the race. Sketching at 45 knots was beyond me; staying aboard was challenge enough.

This was a superb day's racing, with *Adela* once again taking the prize, while *Mariquita* won the beauty contest, as always in my view. In whatever conditions and on every point of sail she is the epitome of classic beauty. Her graceful sheer, fine entry and pert counter are always a pleasure to draw, and her cloud of canvas above is perpetually perfect. To sketch her is to caress her and just looking is a joy.

It was clear that *Adela* had the Big Class trophy in the bag so the final day introduced a pursuit race for the newly created St Piran Cup. A diminished breeze from the north-east and broken cloud looked much like summer. The windward/leeward course across Falmouth Bay offered maximum spectacle from the shore. The competitors, including *Tomahawk* now repaired, were clearly visible preparing sail in the bay. Seals basked on Black Rock. I was due to present framed sketches to the class winners in the evening and I had work to do.

Ear to ear

Velacarina started first. *Tomahawk* and *Pinuccia* had four days' racing to make up and crossed the start line together, ear to ear, and battled to the top mark. I sketched them both with lee rails under, sunlight picking out *Tomahawk's* white coachroof and the immaculate clear decks of *Pinuccia*.

It was a surprise how small they looked compared with the mighty forms of *Adela* and *Mariette*. This called for a delicate line which at moments blended completely with the white water. *Pinuccia* barely had a hull at all, it seemed; just her elegant fractional rig and a gash of white water below, with glimpses of Pendennis Castle through the slot. Turning downwind, they broke out spinnakers and gathered speed for the Manacles.

By now *Mariquita* had started, followed by *Mariette* and finally an impatient *Adela*. I changed allegiance from the spinnakers to *Mariquita* and *Mariette's* battle for the top mark, both heeling keenly in front of St Anthony.

First to the mark, *Mariquita* set her trademark 'Beken of Cowes' poled goosewing and processed serenely towards the Manacles. *Mariette* slowly overhauled her in an opulent cloud of canvas so bright in the sunlight that I could draw her using only white chalk on my tinted paper.

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Above: a finished Creswell painting of *Mariette*. Right: Alexander Creswell presents his watercolour to *Adela's* skipper Greg Perkins. Far right: *Adela's* crew with proud owner George Lindeman in the centre of the group



Mariette gybed and increased her lead. Down at the Manacles buoy something was amiss. *Pinuccia* was clearly round the mark, but *Tomahawk* was nowhere to be seen. Soon news came that rigging failure had brought her mast down again – the hard season of racing had taken its toll.

The 85ft/25m bermudan ketch *Velacarina* had caught less attention than her rivals during the week, but this was to be her day. She sailed well and showed off her gleaming brass and perfect sails as she took the first gun on the finish line crowded with spectator boats.

Straight from the quay on the final day the crews found solace and celebration at the Redman Whiteley Dixon rum bar, the regatta over, regrets and joys anaesthetised with a shot or two of the Cornish smugglers' favourite. That evening I had 45

metres of drawings to display on the wall of the central hall of the National Maritime Museum, the dramatic and appropriate setting for the closing ceremony.

I had never seen the fruits of a week's work displayed in this way and took a certain pride in what had been achieved. Now I could show all those curious pairs of eyes on board the yachts what I had been doing all week and offer them a glimpse into another dimension of their noble and beautiful world.

It had been a brisk, thrilling and productive week, with the Cornish showing us all a great time on land and sea. To begin the evening in Rick Stein's fish 'n' chippy, armed only with a waitress's pen, I was persuaded to draw *Mariette* and *Mariquita* as tattoos on the muscular arms of the 'Pendennis Pirates' as they prepared for the Caribbean party...