



The Royal Cruising Club Pilotage Foundation

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In December 1880, nine Victorian yachtsmen met to form the Cruising Club (later to become the Royal Cruising Club). In the words of the club's founder, Sir Arthur Underhill, they 'felt it an anomaly that upwards of twenty Royal yacht clubs should exist for the encouragement of racing, while the increasing class which was far more interested in cruising and navigation was left entirely unrepresented'.

Sir Arthur drafted the new club's rules. One of the primary objects was 'to give the opportunity to Members who may wish to visit a coast, river or lake which is new to them, to obtain information as to harbourage, boatmen and other local matters by means of correspondence with members acquainted therewith'. This wording remains unchanged today, and Royal Cruising Club (RCC) members have been happily exchanging pilotage information with each other for 143 years.

By the mid 1970s, club membership had grown to about 400. With the honourable exception of Adlard Coles' *Creeks and Harbours of the Solent* (1933) and *Biscay Harbours and Anchorages* (1959)

and Blondie Hasler's *Harbours and Anchorages of the North Coast of Brittany* (1952), very few pilot books other than for military and commercial shipping had been published since the end of the Second World War. Colin McMullen, then Commodore, felt that the club's collective knowledge and experience of foreign ports should be made available to the wider cruising world through the publication of pilot books. Quite how this project might be financed, however, remained an unanswered question.

Then in 1977 a remarkable thing happened: an American member of the RCC, Dr Fred Ellis, made a gift to the club of his house at the mouth of the river Dart, together with a donation of £10,000. He did this in memory of his father, Robert H Ellis MD, who had sailed his 104-foot Richardson schooner, in which the young Fred had cut his sailor's teeth, from Hong Kong to Portland, Oregon in 1923; and of Peter Pye and Roger Pinckney (both past RCC Commodores) and John Ives, whom he met subsequently when he was building his own boat at Moody's yard on the Hamble. He stated that his aim was 'to provide something tangible for the club for the next hundred years or so, as he had always held the RCC in high esteem'.

This fine bequest allowed Colin McMullen's idea to bear fruit. A sub-committee was formed, chaired by the Rear Commodore John Power with the novelist Ralph Hammond Innes as vice-chairman and Alison Miller as hon. secretary. A constitution was prepared, and on 27 April 1977 the Charity Commission granted charitable status to the new Foundation with its object: 'to advance the education of the public in the science and practice of navigation'.

Fred Ellis and his wife were invited to attend the club's AGM that May. In those days, meetings were held at the 'In and Out' Club in Piccadilly. Fred Ellis preferred not to wear a tie, and there was some concern that he might be turned away, until someone pointed out that his mighty beard would easily conceal any breach of the 'In and Out' dress code. Once established, the Foundation wasted no time in getting going. Adlard Coles was a publisher as well as an author, and with his publisher's hat on he asked the Foundation to revise

Blondie Hasler's *North Brittany Pilot* and said that he intended to donate the copyright of both this book and *North Biscay* to the Foundation.

In 1978, the first of a long line of authors was appointed when Donald Beswick began work on revising *North Brittany Pilot*. He surveyed the Breton coast in his yacht *Knotty*, and the new book was completed in 1980, just after many RCC members had already sailed for the club's Centenary Meet in Tréguier. The first copies were sailed over to the Meet in appalling weather, and members were supplied with their new but soggy tomes, later seen spread out to dry in many boats. Of course everyone immediately looked up Tréguier, only to find that an error which had eluded the proofreaders had all the buoys reversed on the plan and some of them positioned ashore. This did not, however, detract from the book's immediate success.

In 1983 the house donated by Fred Ellis was sold. This gave the Foundation the resources to pursue more ambitious projects, including a loan to the Clyde Cruising Club to support their pilot book on the Clyde, a loan to a film producer to complete a seaman-ship video, and compiling a series of articles entitled *Classic Passages*, written by RCC members and published in *Yachting Monthly*. The latter have been updated very recently and published as a single volume entitled *Rites of Passage*. The Foundation was later to make a substantial donation towards the cost of the new Beaulieu River Beacon in the garden of Lepe House at the entrance to the Beaulieu in the Solent.

These excursions apart, the Foundation's primary objective has always been to publish and update reliable pilot books for cruising yachtsmen at large. While the research provided by its members was uniformly excellent, the involvement of an experienced nautical publisher was essential. John Power, by then Vice Commodore, contacted George Wilson at the highly respected Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson, thus beginning a long and productive relationship with him, then his son Willie, and more recently by his granddaughter Lucy as the Foundation's main publisher; and Adlard

Coles Nautical, since 2000 part of Bloomsbury, to take on the publication of its ocean titles.

In 1992 the Foundation had just eight books on sale, but two years later Robin Brandon, an RCC member who had written seven pilot books, donated the rights to his books covering the Mediterranean coasts of France and Spain and the Isles of Scilly. At the same time, Malcolm Robson bequeathed the copyright of his Channel Islands and Brittany books to the Foundation. In the early days colour photography was expensive, and there was some concern over whether it was economically viable. The Foundation therefore agreed to subsidise its cost in three publications and thus played a pivotal role in establishing colour as the norm. It also became clear that aerial photography had an important role, and one or two RCC members who had a pilot's licence volunteered to take to the air to provide aerial photographs of harbours and approaches.

Feedback from users of the books has always been encouraged, and updates are published regularly; but major amendments need to be corroborated. The need for this was demonstrated some years ago when a yachtsman wrote a withering complaint about the description of a North African port, alleging that it was wildly inaccurate and misleading and proposing massive corrections. This broadside prompted the book's worried author to make a special visit to the port, where to his relief he could find nothing wrong. Closer examination of the amendments revealed that the complainant had actually been in a completely different harbour.

Today the book list has grown to twenty-five printed titles and more than sixteen further titles available in digital format, with sales of about 7,500 books each year. In addition there are a number of French, German and Italian editions. As part of its charitable duty the Foundation makes available free of charge PDFs of cruising areas for which a hardback book would not be viable. These cover the more remote cruising grounds, such as South Georgia, the Aleutian Islands, the Alaskan Peninsula, the Chagos Archipelago, French Guiana, Suriname and Guyana. Remoteness is fast disappearing, however, and there are now hardbacks for Cape

Horn and Antarctic Waters, South China Sea, Chile and Arctic and Northern Waters, all selling well, as well as Atlantic and Pacific Crossing Guides.

The production learning curve has been almost vertical, from the early days of sit-up-and-beg manual typewriters, black-and-white photographs, no internet and an almost complete absence of electronic navigation aids, to the technological revolution. The Foundation has kept pace. The first website was established in the mid 1990s, and from quite primitive origins it has evolved into a sophisticated facility that lies at the heart of the Foundation's activities (www.rccpf.org.uk). Further, the Foundation is working closely with Imray on its *Explore with Imray* digital service. This provides most of Imray's library of pilot books in digital form and enables users to download the relevant section of the pilot book for a particular location at the click of a mouse, alongside a social hub for the exchange of information.

The Foundation is proud to have Trinity House as its patron. It is run by its trustees and a management team of eleven volunteers, headed by its Director, with just one salaried Editor-in-Chief. Its twenty-six or so authors are drawn from across the cruising spectrum, including in particular the RCC, the Ocean Cruising Club and the Cruising Association. Several have presided over successive new editions of their book and have probably acquired a more intimate knowledge of their country's coast than most of its native population.

When you next open one of the Foundation's books, please raise your glass to Dr Fred Ellis for his generosity, to the visionaries who turned his generous gift into such a lasting legacy, and to the many volunteers who have seen it through so many changes and challenges since its formation.