

# TRUE BLUE

Mat Barker packed in banking in 1999 to start a long-term relationship with his Mylne-designed yacht *The Blue Peter*. He never looked back...



**D**uring Antigua's 2024 Classic Regatta, *The Blue Peter* charged toward the finish line powered by 15-knot tradewinds and a motley crew of newly formed friends. The 65ft Alfred Mylne cutter, built in 1930, was in her winning element, and so was her owner and captain, Mathew Barker. For hours, he'd been choreographing his team *du jour* to haul, trim and tack, and as the race ended, he stood up from his place at the helm, threw his arms in the air and loudly announced, "I love my job!"

Barker's livelihood is hard to describe and even more difficult to believe. His workplace, aboard a boat he's thrown his heart and soul into, changes location with the seasons. Co-workers come and go, and schedules shift like the weather. His chosen occupation, as charter captain of his own classic yacht, requires boundless determination, quirky humour, and an ability to fix anything and everything that breaks. It's a dream job, but not for the faint-hearted.

In winter you can find *The Blue Peter* at one of several islands in the Caribbean. She's easy to spot with her tall rig and masthead burgee emblazoned with the maritime signal letter P. Races in the region draw the boat up and down the island chain until late spring when it's time to head north. Typically, there's a stop in Bermuda before the long commute to Nantucket, where summer sailing begins.

Long before Barker created his enviable career, he had another highly successful one in London's banking

**Previous page:**  
Wickedly fast on  
the race course.  
Photo by Ed  
Whiting,  
courtesy of Mat  
Barker

**Above left:** Barker  
builds a crew with  
camaraderie;  
Father and son at  
the helm

sector, replete with a desirable lifestyle. However, all that changed in 1999 when he found *The Blue Peter* in Elba, Italy. Solely neglected and in deep disrepair, Barker saw beyond the flaws to the elegant vessel it once was and possibly could be. In a bold move, he bought it, quit his job, and for three years worked to unearth the boat's history and restore the septuagenarian to her original plans and glory.

Alfred Mylne was known for many impressive designs of race-winning yachts, so when W. King and Sons of Burnham-on-Crouch launched *The Blue Peter*, she had a legacy to uphold. Her first owner, Desmond Molins, lengthened her 10 feet in 1938 to fill his desire for a bigger boat. It proved to be an effective alteration because over the next two decades, the sleek Bermudian Cutter won over 50 races in and around the south coast of England.

Barker explained that before the restoration, he'd tucked away enough funding to last a long time, but after three winters in boat yards, with summer breaks for sailing, "The pot of gold ran out. I either had to get a real job or start making money with the boat. I still had quite a lot of connections in the city, so rather than take people sailing there, why not take them to the Med?" Why not, indeed.

The lure of the south of France drew the first guests in and chartering began in earnest. He competed in a few races with former clients, then asked brokers, "How about bringing people down for the races?"

At the time, it was a novel concept, but it quickly took off. He spent 15 consecutive summers racing in the Mediterranean. "I've done them all," he said. "Saint Tropez, Cannes, Palma, Antibes." Not only did he race in those distinguished contests, he brought home plenty of awards and prizes. "The only one I never won was Saint Tropez. I came in second so many times but never won it."

During that time, the scene in the area changed dramatically. "When I started doing it, classic sailing was kind of new on the scene," Barker explained. "People were still talking about *Altair* [1931 134-footer by Fife]!" Wealthy people bent on winning began bringing in rock-star crews. "Even if I wanted to, I can't compete with that kind of situation."

#### CARIBBEAN BOUND

Luckily, opportunity blew in and Barker grabbed it and got underway. Some clients asked to charter *The Blue Peter* for a transatlantic race from Portugal to Barbados. It would provide good income and a chance to do an Atlantic crossing on his own boat with a finish in the Caribbean. He accepted and readied the boat for the 2012 Panerai Transat Classique. It turned out to be, in Barker's words, "A pleasant sail," with a bonus, second place finish. In Bajan style, there were parties, ample rum, and an obvious reason to stick around for the Round the Island Race. "I got there and met so many people, I got bitten."

**Above left:** A  
deck of newly  
minted friends in  
Antigua

**Top right:** The  
ever-vigilant  
captain, Mat  
Barker; An interior  
that defies age

After a winter of island hopping and sampling more races, he ended the season at the 2013 Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta with a fleet of 60 traditional beauties. Competition that year took place in the windiest conditions ever recorded for the event. Ominous seas and winds topping 30 knots produced a long list of casualties. Fortunately, on board *The Blue Peter* were members of the Italian America's Cup Team, the perfect crew when a chainplate pulled out of the deck and the mast came down. "If you're going to break your rig, they're the people to have on board," Barker said with confidence. "One was in the water in a minute to cut the rig free. They knew just what to do."

Once the mayhem was sorted, it was clear that the dismasting had caused serious internal damage. With a storm sail and the mast stump, Barker limped to St. Thomas where his boat was loaded onto a Med-bound ship. Once there, in Villefranche-sur-Mer, repairs were made and a new mast built by Gilbert Pasqui. They also decided to reinstate 10ft (3.1m) that had been trimmed from the height of the rig in the 1970s for short-handed sailing. With that alteration, the unstoppable cutter became unbeatable.

The next voyage to the Caribbean launched Barker on a life-altering course, one even he couldn't fathom. There were more races there, along with a growing list of satisfied clients. Breaks in the action were spent in remote locales, which is where he met boatbuilder Ross Gannon. Anchored together in Dominica, the two

## THE BLUE PETER



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DESIGN	Alfred Mylne
BUILD	William King & Sons
YEAR	1930
LOA	65ft (19.8m)
LWL	48ft (15m)
BEAM	13ft (4m)
DRAFT	9ft (2.7m)

classic yacht sailors quickly formed a bond and months later, met again at the Gannon and Benjamin Marine Railway in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

In the boat yard, a major rebuild of the 1957 52-foot *Mah Jong* was underway, with owner Pat Ilderton often in attendance. Eager to log some sea miles before his boat was launched, Ilderton joined *The Blue Peter* for a late autumn voyage to Antigua. So taken was he by that offshore experience, that he encouraged his daughter Sarah Mae Ilderton to also give it a try.

Ocean sailing suited Sarah Mae, and so did Mathew Barker. After a journey together from Antigua to Bermuda for the 2017 America's Cup, plans were set for a wedding at the Ilderton house on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina. In attendance were family, friends, and special guests, *Mah Jong* and *The Blue Peter*.

Now their young son and daughter are part of the crew when off charter, growing each year as boat kids. In order to keep the boat fresh for guests, the family lives ashore while *The Blue Peter* races through the Caribbean each winter. Grenada Sailing Week, Round the Island Race in Barbados (with the

Above: An annual star of Antigua's Classic Yacht Regatta. Friends join the boat for deliveries north to Nantucket Sound where *The Blue Peter* spends summers doing day sails.

Below: There's a reason people want to charter with this captain

same charter guests for the last 10 years), finishing the season with Antigua's Classic Yacht Regatta. Friends join the boat for deliveries north to Nantucket Sound where *The Blue Peter* spends summers doing day sails.

"The boat is a remarkable filter for people," Barker said. "Those who want to sail on a classic sailing yacht seem to be a certain kind of people. The ones I don't want to have on board go out on a boat with a big engine on the back and splash all over the place. It never ceases to amaze me how rare it is that we get someone difficult."

"There are no theatrics on board. "I don't dress up in a uniform, I don't bow and scrape. I'm me." The food and drink are perfect because guests bring their own. "People know what they're going to get – a more relaxed atmosphere. It's easy on the boat, easy on me."

Now registered in Newport, RI, the boat can easily accommodate an array of charter events.

Unlike many charter captains, Barker was hard-pressed to share any disasters, though easily recounted positive memories made on board. One woman, who came sailing to commemorate the loss of a son, was so taken by the experience that she joins the boat several times each summer and claims it saved her life. One day-sail turned into a meticulously planned marriage proposal on the bow, complete with a bottle of champagne to pop and a party waiting ashore. "What if she'd said no!" he joked.

Mathew Barker and *The Blue Peter* are living the dream. He tends to her maintenance; she keeps his spirit alive. Together, they're a winning team. With 94 years in the rear-view mirror, the cutter continues to sweep the competition wherever she sails – always with the man who saved her pointing the way.

To learn more or book a charter see [thebluepeteryacht.com](http://thebluepeteryacht.com)



