

CAT MAN

Multihull pioneer James Wharram
is still preaching the gospel

BY

Next time you climb on board a Lagoon in the Caribbean or spy a Prout bobbing in the harbor, spare a thought for James Wharram. Though this somewhat froward Englishman won't thank me for saying so, he is partly responsible for both—and indeed, all the other modern catamarans now sprouting like Sargasso weed among the world's warm-water cruising grounds. As a designer of Polynesian double-hulled sailing craft (he hates the word “catamaran”) with more than 10,000 sets of design drawings sold, he has arguably done more to popularize the multihull than anyone else.

His distinctive home-build boats can be spotted on the water from Maine to Melbourne, but at the tail end of a career spanning more than 60 years, he is at last starting to slow down—as I learn when I catch up with him at his home on Devoran Creek, Cornwall, where we naturally start with a cup of tea.

“Never get involved with young women, because they grow up and dominate you,” he warns me with a twinkle in his eye. As he imparts this sage advice in a hearty Lancashire accent, his partner of 50 years, Hanneke Boon, is clattering about in the kitchen next door, looking for some cake. He wriggles his toes in thick woollen socks, resting his long legs on a low table in the sitting room. Through the windows behind him, the twin hulls of Mana, his latest design, bob gently on the chop.

It's not true, of course. Here is a man who has repeatedly become involved with much younger women and done very well out of it. Hanneke is the longest serving, but it started with two Germans: Ruth Merseburger and Jutta Schultze-Rohnhof, with whom Wharram embarked on the grand experiment that has turned him into a somewhat impecunious, but widely





Wharram's timeless designs evoke a sense of history and adventure; the Lapita design was created to show how settlers from Southeast Asia could have reached the Hawaiian Islands



the fourth of about five at the time."

In that first small, planked catamaran, with her windowless, low hulls, James, Ruth and Jutta made their way to Trinidad—a voyage fraught with bad weather and boat troubles. Chief among these was the repeated failure of the

celebrated and controversial designer.

This is a story that begins in Manchester, England, in the turbulent years after the Second World War. While studying to become a building engineer like his father, James had come across Eric de Bisschop's book about building a Polynesian double canoe (Kaimiloa) and sailing it from Honolulu to Cannes in 1937-38. Using the model of a fishing canoe in the British Science Museum and de Bisschop's scant descriptions, he built the 21ft catamaran Tangaroa in his parents' garden in Manchester, miles from the sea. His father was dismayed.

In a theme that reoccurs again and again throughout his life, James enthused some friends about the project, and they agreed to drive his two hulls to Brightlingsea—200 miles away on the east coast of England. From there he promptly set sail for Emshaven, Germany, to collect his two girlfriends. After that he aimed to cross the Atlantic, proving the seaworthiness of his primitive craft and validating the designs of the ancient Pacific islanders.

"I only ever became the 'great James Wharram,' through the auspices of these two German women," James says seriously. "I want you to stress that in your article. Ruth became the mother of us all." He ponders a moment, then holds up a crooked finger. "Effectively, I'd say that in attitudes I'm post-war part German. The Germans really pioneered oceanic multihull cruising in the '50s, notably with the Schwarzenfeld brothers, who built in steel. I was just

long metal pins that held the rudder. At first James was able to drop in a replacement, but by the end he was engineering new rods using nails, a paraffin stove and hammer.

In the Caribbean, James continued with the plain-speaking, contrarian approach that has characterized his whole professional life and kept him on the fringes of the sailing establishment. He made an enemy of a newspaper editor on the island and scandalized the local British population with his two girls. (Jutta was at this point pregnant with his baby.) They led a rather shabby, but happy existence in a houseboat made of bamboo poles, logs and palm fronds. And when their home eventually foundered in a storm, the little band set to building a new boat with the help of American friends on the island—and French sailing enigma Bernard Moitessier.

The design that had been taking shape in James's head was to be much longer—38ft. He would make the hulls V-shaped and bigger for a more comfortable life aboard. He would also beef up the rudders to avoid the debilitating failures aboard Tangaroa. Jutta sketched his vision, and the result was christened Rongo, the Polynesian god of cultivation. She carried them northwest to the U.S. Virgin Islands, then up the U.S. East Coast to Sheepshead Bay, where James felt himself amongst friends again. They landed at the dock of the Miramar Yacht Club in Brooklyn, New York.

His contact there was Jim Plieger of the Slocum Society, but the circle soon broadened as he met Boris Lauer-Leonardi, the



From left: Wharram at ease in his office; with Jutta and Ruth before their groundbreaking voyage; sail-trialing the Tangaroa before setting off across the Atlantic

then editor of Rudder Magazine, which had published some of his articles on catamaran design. "Americans are immediately friendly," James remembers. "New York sucked us into its exciting life." The U.S. sailing fraternity was much more open to the idea of oceangoing multihulls and far less distracted by the snobbishness of England. Appearances on a TV show led to further articles and lectures. "Money to finance the North American voyage came flooding in."

But as James admits, he also yearned for the recognition of the British sailing establishment. Believing that an oddly reticent home press would surely take notice of a first North Atlantic crossing in a catamaran, he swallowed his very real fears and set sail for Ireland. Though the larger hull made light of the tougher conditions, Rongo still ran into serious steering problems. Just as before, the rudder pins snapped, causing them to nearly lost one rudder altogether. Discovering the 11ft wooden blades were too heavy

to rehang, James took a saw to one of them. Astonishingly, the boat steered as well as ever after the surgery. He added this finding to his mental list.

Revolutionary design

The voyage was gruelling, but even before they had set shaky feet on dry land, James was molding the experience into shape a new boat, which would in turn ultimately lead to his first commercial design in 1965: in effect turning professional where his earlier activities had been funded by sporadic publication in the sailing press. That first boat was based on the Tangaroa, scaled up to 34ft LOA, but with a V-shaped hull, a design characterized by limited accommodation and headroom in the two hulls, a full bow and boxy coachroofs. The hulls were connected with baulks of timber, lashed on; the platform between them was slatted to prevent slamming and let water drain out. Tangaroa proved successful, selling 486 plans over 10 years.

Looking back, James is scornful of his first effort. "With Tangaroa, I knew nothing, so I built her with a flat bottom and slab sides and too full a bow. She relied on two deep rudders and a centerboard to go to windward." Contrast that with today's designs: Wharram's Mana 24 has more graceful, curvaceous lines and raised, inward-slanting topsides to give more headroom below. The hulls are all V-shaped and have a hint of chine plus stub keels for sailing to windward. The designs avoid centerboards for simplicity's sake. "I like simple boats," James says firmly.

Beyond that, the crossbeams are no longer spruce trunks, but plywood boxes or wooden I-girders, still lashed to

the hulls; the rudders are now laced to the sternpost with 2mm Dyneema, which flexes and rolls, but won't chafe. In the years since all the trouble they had with the rudder fittings in that first Atlantic crossing, James and Hanneke have designed out steel parts wherever possible.

True to the Polynesian style, the hulls have a narrow beam/length ratio, making them slim and fast—Wharram's 63ft flagship Spirit of Gaia throws a fine spray around

THE BOATS

Tangaroa (1955-1960)
Rongo (1960-61)
Pahi 31 (1979)
Pahi 42 (1980)
Hitia 14 (1980)
Tiki 21 (1981)
Tiki 26 (1983)
Tiki 31 (1985)
Pahi 63 (1985)
Tiki 28
Tiki 36
Tiki 30
Tiki 38
Tiki 46
Melanesia (1997)
Tahiti Wayfarer (2000)
Islander 65 (2000)
Pahi 52 (2001)
Islander 55 (2002)
Child of the Sea (2003)
Islander 39 (2007)
Amatasi (2011)
Mana 24 (2015)



Wharram's biggest design, Spirit of Gaia, carried him and Hanneke Boon around the world



Wharram's partner for half a century, Hanneke Boon drafts the lines for the next project

the bows as she reaches 20-plus knots in a blow. Finally, the accommodation is all in the two hulls—only a couple of the larger designs feature “deck pods” on the platform between the hulls.

That first decade was all about Tangaroa, and it was only later in the 1970s that Wharram really stepped up his design output. In time, the 17 designs that emerged from that heady decade came to be known as the “Classic” range, from the 16ft Maui to the 51ft Tehini. Some of the designs are still available. Most, however, have been superseded by the “Coastal Trek” designs of the 1980s, with greater headroom below and more detailed interiors, including the Hitia and the Tiki boats (14ft to 46ft LOA). In between were the Pahis (26ft to 63ft)—with exaggerated raised bows and sterns intended to provide a curvier “female” counterpart to the “male” Classics.

James believes his design ideas come from the unconscious part of the brain that contains the instincts and the lessons from generations of humanity. It takes as little as two weeks to build a boat in his head, he says, after which Hanneke adds, “Then the hard work begins.” And she should know. For nearly 50 years, she has been doing his actual draughting, painstakingly turning his mental pictures into beautiful pen-and-ink drawings to guide builders through every step of construction. “I draw James’ mind,” she says with a gentle smile. “We’re a team, but don’t stand too close to us as we work!”

The result of their teamwork often features naked sailors, I observe—another key part of the Wharram philosophy and the cause of repeated “friction” with the sailing establishment. As if to prove it, the design office is adorned with a huge glossy photo of Hanneke and Ruth trimming

sails without wearing a stitch.

The ‘70s and ‘80s were also an exhilarating time of symposia, lectures and papers published in the United States and Europe. The way James tells the story, he was treated like a rockstar at the first World Multihull Symposium in 1976, Toronto. Hustled in to present his paper, he was mobbed by groupies and wellwishers afterward. At the same time he continued to expound his beliefs on everything from hull length-to-beam ratios, stability and Polynesian migration routes. On occasion he was disappointed by the standard of the debate, and I can well imagine the moderator struggling to keep this belligerent, opinionated Englishman in check.

American sailors have remained staunch supporters of Wharram, responsible for around a third of all orders. There is also now an annual Wharram Hui, or gathering, in Fort Myers, Florida, and in contrast to the British sailing establishment, people here recognise James’s achievements. In 2008, for example, he was invited to the Mystic Wooden Boatshow where he was honored as a multihull pioneer. “This type of honoring is special to the Americans, who are not shy of telling the world how great people are,” says Hanneke appreciatively.

Modern build

All his life, James has sought to replicate and hone the Polynesian boatbuilding tradition. But if there is pleasure and purpose in it, he is not slavish. “We are not trying to recreate Polynesian techniques, just their forms,” he says firmly.



Wharram has voyaged far and wide on his own designs

From the outset, Wharram sought to make his boats as simple as possible to build. So he eschewed the traditional method of building a solid base first, with heavy cross-pieces at each station. His so-called “backbone and bulkheads” method uses the boat’s own structure as the guide, for a “dras-

tic reduction of pieces of wood, measurement and saw cuts to reach the final ply planking stage". There were no metal fixings, just glue—urea-formaldehyde at first, then resorcinol.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Wharram's adoption of West System epoxy in 1980. Now it was only necessary to "stitch" the members together using loops of copper wire and then "weld" them into place using a healthy fillet of epoxy putty, after which the outer hull is sheathed in a layer of glass and epoxy for strength and waterproofing. Over the years this technique has been further refined through the use of cable ties and the advent of laser cutting, with Falmouth firm Fibre Fusion now providing entire kits ready-cut into millimeter-perfect shapes.

"James worked out lots of methods to make building easier for unskilled people," Hanneke explains. "Low skills make it much more likely to succeed, even if it does look a bit rough around the edges. Better builders produce a real work of art."

James adds that over the years they found that some of the early builders were improvising on the cabins as they grew in confidence later in the build. The result was some rather unsightly boats. To solve this problem, James says, "We built the cabin shape into the bulkhead design, so people were committing to it right at the start of the build.... There's psychology in it."

Unfortunately, in this same emphasis on amateur builders lies a problem with the Wharram legacy. Since the vast majority of the boats are home built, the quality varies widely. Even James would admit that his trial-and-error approach led to some problems, such as the time in 1973 when he was following the Whitbread Round the World Race in his 49ft 3in Tehini and the crossbeams started to come loose. He had forgotten to bolt the rubber pads down. "James's reputation was dragged down by the rougher boats," Hanneke admits.

After the huge Spirit of Gaia was built in 1987, James reflected that it was all very well drawing boats that might cost \$150,000 to build, but what about the ordinary sailor? The fruit of these thoughts was the launch of the Ethnic range of catamarans, starting with the 16ft Melanesia in 1997 pitched at a younger, poorer sailor. "The 22ft Tahiti Wayfarer costs half as much as a Tiki 21 because it doesn't need hardware or a proper mast," Hanneke says. "The hull is a beautiful sculptural shape based on a Polynesian hull form. You can go hunting for wood for spars yourself—it's

very creative." The design plans advise ash or sycamore for the spars and bamboo for the cross beams.

In a sense, Wharram's whole career has been an experiment in marine archaeology. Like in 1987, when he and Hanneke sailed Spirit of Gaia to the Pacific to research traditional sailing craft. On the island of Tikapia, they discovered a 200-year-old canoe with the same V-hull form as Spirit of Gaia, supporting their assumptions about Polynesian hull design. "We jumped up and down for joy when we saw that," recalls Hanneke.

The Lapita Voyages in 2008-9 were another such exploit. In an effort to show how settlers could have reached the Pacific islands from southeast Asia, an 80-year-old James and Hanneke recreated the voyage on an ethnic catamaran. "We learned that a simple double canoe with crab-claw sails can make such a voyage and sail to windward," Hanneke says.

These days, some of the early Wharrams are bordering on marine archaeology themselves. "There is now a new group of Wharram builders that take on old boats and restore them, often very beautifully," says Hanneke. "There are many such in the U.S."

A way of life

It is fading now under the twin assaults of age and Alzheimer's disease, but I can still make out an extraordinary intellectual vibrancy to James Wharram that comes to the fore whenever he and Hanneke talk about boats. During my 24-hour stay with them in Devoran, we talked of little else. It is intense, to say the least. That and his physical vitality have made him immensely attractive to women. "If you could have seen him a few years ago..." begins Hanneke at one point.

Through the network of sailors, friends and admirers accrued over 60 years of bucking conventions, Hanneke and James lie at the centre of a huge global web. I feel an almost overwhelming sense of having stepped into an alternative reality. Dominated by "the Wharram philosophy," it encompasses experimental marine archaeology, anthropology, mysticism, Jungian philosophy and a sexual openness whose clearest exponent is James's strongly libertine tendencies. "I loved two women," he says simply. It is a sentiment that encapsulates much of what makes him unique, as well as what has provoked such disapproval. *

SAILING A WHARRAM

In the course of my research I sailed several Wharram boats, but the one that sticks best in my mind was the Ethnic Wayfarer. Launched off the quay at Devoran on a cold, blustery spring day, she has a crab-claw rig with just a mainsheet for trimming and a paddle for steering.

The helmsperson sits at the back of a hull, where they can reach the water on either side. The paddle rests against the hull on the leeward side—pressed there by the lateral force of the wind on the boat. Lower the paddle a fraction and the boat bears away—raise it and she hardens up, then tacks. Downwind, the trick is to trail the paddle behind you, just touching the water where slight deflections are all that's needed to steer. The system is at once beguilingly simple and complicated to master.

Reaching back and forth with her tarpaulin sail, the Wayfarer accelerates quickly with its lightweight and manoeuvres easily. Plus, her draught of 8in makes her incredibly flexible. At 300 hours, she is the smallest and easiest boat to build, costing just a few thousand in materials, and built entirely of wood, epoxy and rope; there is not a single metal fitting anywhere.