

## Jack Holt 1912-1995 Designer of the Miracle

Paul Nudds

Halo Winter 2011



Miracle  
Mirror  
Cadet

youngsters, in Holt's cheap and simple Cadet, did not know this and when Cadets from yacht club and sailing club were out on the same bit of water the class privilege was ignored. It was the first breakthrough in solving the class problem on the water. The Cadet was followed by a simple boat with blue sails called the Enterprise, commissioned for promotional purposes by the *News Chronicle* newspaper in 1955. This too became very popular and has world-wide fleets. Both the Cadet and the Enterprise were accepted by the International Yacht Racing Union and were recognised as International Classes. Then came an even simpler boat that people could make from kits themselves. It was called the Mirror, promoted by the *Mirror* newspaper titles, and it too was accepted as a World International Class. Manufactured as a kit by Bell Woodworking, it has been built in greater numbers than any other of Holt's designs.

Jack Holt was one of the greatest small-boat designers that Britain has ever had. In a career spanning over 60 years, a quarter of a million examples of Holt's 40-odd designs, including the Cadet, Merlin, Mirror and Miracle dinghies, were built. Holt is the only British designer to have had three boats recognised with a classification from the International Yacht Racing Union. Latterly, the company he built up, Jack Holt Ltd, has switched the emphasis in its business from making boats to manufacturing and selling one of the biggest selection of boat fittings in the world.

Jack had sailed with the Sea Scouts as a boy, helping them with their boats, and bought his first boat, a 14ft dinghy in 1929, when he was 17. He set up business in a hut under Hammersmith Bridge where his late great-uncle John Holt had repaired boats. When building his first boat, "Candlelight", he did not have enough money to buy a brass tack, let alone the metal shanks which every other builder used on their masts to hoist the sail. Jack Holt solved the problem by making a groove in the wooden mast through which the thick side of the sail was pulled up. This "boltrope" groove was laughed at at the time but is now used by many small boats.

On his first visit to Cowes in the 1930s Holt competed in the championship for 14ft boats, one of which he had built. His entry was looked upon with sneers by the sailing establishment. Though Holt did not win he made a good placing. He was busy in the Thirties building other boats designed for eager sailors. His boat in the 18ft class was an outstanding success as was his 12ft National.

During the Second World War Holt built lifeboats and wooden copies of enemy planes for the Government, moving with his staff down the river to a former oar-making works near Putney Bridge. It is still a Jack Holt shop, selling everything you could need for a boat.

After the war, a small group from Ranelagh Sailing Club, based on the same stretch of the Thames, commissioned Holt to design a small boat. It was called a Merlin and was accepted as a fine racing boat more simply made and more economic than other 14ft boats. The first Merlin is now on show at the Maritime Museum, in Greenwich.

In 1947 *Yachting World* magazine asked Holt to design a children's boat. His design could be sailed by boys and girls aged 8 to 16. They were soon sailing them very proficiently and word of this small boat went all over the world. It was called the Cadet. In those early post-war years there was still a divide in the sailing world, with the yacht club for the gentry and the sailing club for the workers. But





*Streaker*

*Enterprise*

*Solo*

*GP14*

Other innovatory craft from Holt's design board included a single-handed boat, the Solo, and a longer one called the Hornet (1952), which was the first boat to have an aid to the crew in having a seat that extended over the water, the forerunner of what is now known as a trapeze. One of his very successful designs was the General Purpose 14 (GP14, 1950), a very wholesome boat, well adapted to sailing, going fishing, with room for a picnic, and a good boat to row.

Holt also made time to race, both in Britain and in countries abroad. He was a first-class racing helmsman and won many championships, including three Merlin championships in that boat's early days. His boats were the first RYA Class boats to sail abroad: in Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Poland.

The list of Jack Holt's designs is extensive, Cadet, Diamond Keelboat, Enterprise, GP14, Heron, Hornet, International 10sqm canoe, International 14, Jacksnipe, Lazy E, Merlin Rocket, Miracle, Mirror, Mirror 16, National 12, National E, North Norfolk 16, Pacer, Rambler, Solo, Streaker, Vagabond. A look around a boat park today will reveal a number of examples.

The Miracle, designed in 1973, was one of the last designs to come from Jack's drawing board and was the culmination of the lessons learned from his other designs. Along with Barry Read he developed the slot and glue method of construction for the Miracle, which enabled good results to be obtained from kits by inexperienced amateur builders.

The first Miracles were launched in 1975, since then the Miracle has gone from strength to strength and sail numbers today exceed 4000.

*Paul Nudds, Fleet Captain  
Wilsonian SC*

**Jack Holt was born in 1912  
and awarded an OBE in 1979 for his services to sailing  
He died in Chichester in Nov 1995.**

## Centennial events

As part of the celebration of 100 years since Jack Holt's birth a number of events are planned throughout the year by various organisations. So far we have been advised of:

- RYA Volvo Dinghy Show  
3rd & 4th March 2012  
Alexandra Palace, London  
Exhibition of dinghies designed by Jack Holt, including a Miracle, in the West Corridor
- Chichester SC  
22nd April 2012  
[www.cyc.co.uk/](http://www.cyc.co.uk/)
- Classic and Vintage Racing Dinghy Association  
7th & 8th July 12  
Wraysbury Lake SC  
near Staines, Middlesex  
Pre registration required as limited to 50 boats  
Pre registration online  
[www.cvrda.org](http://www.cvrda.org)

Watch the sailing press and websites for more information and other events.