

Diary of a Racing Shrimper - George Sylvester

I didn't mean to buy a Shrimper. To be honest, I didn't plan to own any boat! I was quite happy sailing at my local sailing club in an old gravel pit, using the club boats, when I was asked by my godmother if I could help her look on the internet for "a boat for her". She didn't go into great detail, just that she had spent two years without a boat for the first time ever and that it was time to get back on the water. I helped her to research Squibs, Folk Boats, Drascombe Luggers, and a delightful clinker-built trailer-sailor in Shepperton, before one day she announced that she was going to go after a Shrimper. She sent me some cuttings and I found the SOA website, and we went through every Shrimper I could find for sale. Eventually I went to have a look at one that she liked on the Deben. She needed a bit of TLC, so my godmother offered about 75% of the asking price but the offer was turned down. By now I had of course fallen in love with the boat and couldn't let her go so offered to put up the rest of the money. So there you have it – I was now a part-owner of *Cotebele* (63) and had some explaining to do when I returned home to the family.

I have always holidayed on the East Coast as both my parents hail from Suffolk, and so I entered *Cotebele* into the 2007 Aldeburgh regatta. Our only race was Orford Day and I couldn't get across the start line! This was partly due to my own failings but also due to the wind direction, strong tide and that awful bend in the river just south of Orford Sailing Club. We had to start the outboard to avoid a moored boat, another Shrimper, and so my racing career got off to a poor start. However, we had the most beautiful sail and I knew then that she was a fantastic little boat and I vowed to do better next year.

The 2008 regatta was plagued by poor weather. The first race was cancelled due to strong winds but we returned the following day, this time completing the course and not even coming last! Looking back, this was entirely due to the young lad who had agreed to crew for the day. He had competed in the junior regatta the week before and brought so much experience to the boat that if he had not been there I am fairly sure I would not have even been able to get the correct course, let alone get across the line. Our final race in 2008 was in practically zero wind and, having battled the tide for a short while and realising the futility of it all, I collected the family from the shore and we motored up towards Iken, abandoning the race for a pleasurable afternoon afloat; the wind eventually picked up, resulting in a great sail.

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And so came the 2009 regatta. So far we had entered four races and only completed one. This was going to be the year that I made my mark! I entered three races, had prepared the boat and briefed the crew – what could possibly go wrong? As we approached the start line for the first race and obtained the course, I was feeling confident. The horn went and we shot across the line ahead of the rest of the fleet and on our way to glory. It must have been a minute later when I heard the horn go again and turned round to see the rest of the fleet cross the line and start their race. I had of course made the elemental mistake and gone on the minute! Rather than backtrack across the line and get in the way of the following classes we slowed up and tucked ourselves in behind the Shrimper fleet and sailed for fun, counting it as a lesson learnt. Race number 2 saw us cross the start line in a respectable third from last and I was confident of holding my own as the course was the same as before and the wind was favourable. However, whilst gybing round one of the marks midway through the course, I noticed that the starboard mainstay was loose and had in fact come away from the chain plate completely. We dropped the sails and motored back to the mooring, slightly dejected but, having replaced the lost clevis pin, felt confident we would do well in the final race.

As we approached the mooring on our final day the clouds to the west of us were a menacing grey block. We put a reef in and made our way through the moorings ready to move up to the start line when our time came. The line of clouds drew closer, the skies darkened and about ten minutes before the start I bolted for the safety of the mooring, not wanting to get caught in a storm with so many other boats about. No sooner had we got the mooring buoy on board than the heavens opened, the wind changed to a very strong westerly and threw the rain at us sideways. I peered out of the cabin and looked back to the start line where there was obvious chaos amongst the other boats of all classes. It transpired that two Shrimpers and a Loch Long had a bit of a to-do and the remaining races were abandoned for the day. However three of the Shrimper fleet had crossed the line and, shortly after, Andrew Hawes shot by, closely followed by the seemingly unbeatable Robin Whittle. *Bumble Chugger* eventually caught the lead boat and took first prize with five wins out of five. As for me, well the tally now stands at entered seven races and started six, with one disqualification, one OCS, two DNS, one DNF and one completed! I wouldn't want anyone to think that I am disappointed nor that I have not had a good laugh at every turn. The people I have met have been very supportive and informative and I shall be back at Aldeburgh to race in the 2010 regatta, if they will have me.

George Sylvester – *Cotebele* (63)