

Antique Boat Regatta in the Netherlands

The village of Grou hosts
250 'old sailing ships'

By Peter Tait

There were Aaks, Schokkers, Tjotters, Boeiers but I was looking for a 'Zeeschouw with an orange banner' and the waterfront was chock-a-block! I had arrived in the small town of Grou in the Netherlands for an antique boat regatta, and I could see there was something special about to happen..

Dutch friends Koos and Bert had invited me to spend a few days with them at a 'classic boat regatta' but I hadn't expected anything on this scale. Two hundred and fifty antique boats, all in sparkling condition, some dating back as far as 1820 were tied up in town ready for a big celebration. Crowds of onlookers were wandering around and Grou (near Sneek) was all dressed up for the occasion.



Gleaming varnish, flags and excitement in the air.

The occasion was the celebration of 50 years of the Stichting Stamboek Ronde en Platbodemjachten (SSRP) the official guardian of the Dutch old boat register and the historic value therein. The program was for 3 days. Day one for socialising - there was plenty to see and talk about, day two for parading the boats in front of the Queen of Holland (a sailor, she actually owns one of these craft herself) and day three the much anticipated race day.



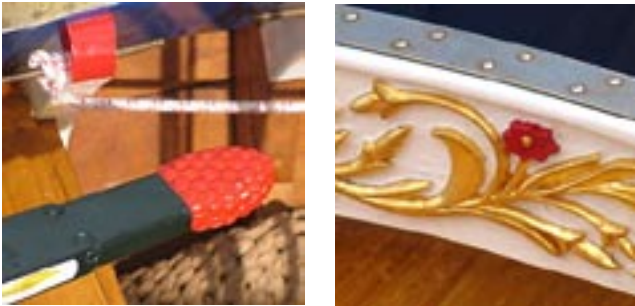
Grou all dressed up and a rudder carving for a Queen!

I walked the length of the waterfront looking for the 'one with the big orange banner' but soon resorted to a phone call and Koos appeared from the crowds. I had sailed in this area previously and seen plenty of the old ships around but hadn't ever been on board one. Our 'Ouwe Tukker' was a 32 footer in steel with the standard wooden spars, lee boards, bent gaff, loose footed main, lead light window - in fact there wasn't much that was familiar or 'normal'! Additional motive power was a large diesel - it's often not possible to sail on the crowded canals and lakes where these boats are based .

The Boats



An extraordinary workmanship and maritime artistry.



Kinky tiller knob and is this really gold leaf, on a yacht?

There were twelve classes attending the regatta including big Aaks, the Praams which had in the old days been produce carriers, Shokkers with the distinctive sharp bow and Bol similar to the Aak but smaller. Length varied from the large 20 meter Aaks to the Tjotter, small play-yachts with all the trimmings, see photo. Looking back in time the Tjotter gets credit as one of the early recreational sail boats. The actual word 'Tjotter' is the likely origin of the English word yacht.

The example above is certainly recreational - a fully functional racing yacht but also a floating work of art! This little ship actually tied up alongside us overnight so the next morning we had a close up look. Eyes popped at the detailing - at every opportunity superb craftsmanship had given over to artistry: relief carving, fancy metalwork, rope work, bright paint, the eye catching red strawberry tiller knob, and were those highlights really gold leaf?

Similar traditional techniques and total respect for boating culture could be observed throughout the fleet. The favoured timber is especially grown European oak.

The Queen's 'Groene Drachten' and several of the other larger examples were the stars of the show. 'Ooohs' and 'aaahs' were heard as they passed by - powerful boats with large 'hissing' bow waves pushed up by the blunt bows.



Lining up four abreast for the Queen.



Real Queen at the helm.



Koos and Bert

Big Parade for The Queen

The morning of day two was a dress rehearsal in the morning and the Parade in front of the Queen in the afternoon. A 'Palaver' at the yacht club for skippers sorted out the program - the intention was for the entire fleet to anchor out on the lake and at a set time for each class proceed single file up a side canal, U-turn into a formation four boats wide and get sail on. This procession then passed by the Queen with a salute which consisted of a headsail dip, crew waves, sail up again and continue on. What could easily have been a shambles appeared to be quite successful, Queen Beatrix obviously enjoyed the spectacle and as a guest and not the skipper, I was happy too!



One of the smaller boats showing leeboards and rig.

Sailing tricks out of the square.

As I stepped on board I had noted this was going to be a fun few days. Here we were on board a real little ship, 9 tonnes, modest rig in the traditional style with ropes going in all directions, a hunking great rudder over the back with tiller steering, flags, banners and unusual sail handling systems. The mast appeared to be unstayed and these crazy-looking leeboards, great wooden 'pancakes' hanging off each gunnel on one large bolt! How did they operate? Maybe a bit like a mullet boat you ask? No, I'd say more like something from the Spanish Armada!

But there were no surprises - it seems that with all sailing boats, from one metre models to heavy cruisers the rules and basics just stay the same - good balance, nice flow over the sails, clean underwater lines and intelligent crew. And it was all there.

The first observation was the soft and pleasant motion through the water - a result of flat bottom, shallow draught, internal ballast and maximum buoyancy forward. (It's important to remember here that these are boats for sheltered water, no possibility of Atlantic crossings or Cape Horn roundings!)

The leeboards were very clever. Shaped from timber with some ballast built in to negate buoyancy they operated by block and tackle.

The topsides cant in above the gunnel so when the boat heels the board in use becomes vertical, the cross-section is aerofoil one side and dead flat on the business face. Down-wind both boards can be up. Once in the 'down' position the adjustment becomes effectively fore and aft allowing the balance of the whole show to be fine tuned. Clever again - think of all the boats that don't sail well, most are not balanced right but have fixed keels or centre cases so you are stuck with it. These boats simply adjust the leeboards.

The rig - well, interesting again. Most masts seemed to be unstayed, mounted on a tabernacle to enable quick lowering to negotiate bridges or when going into the boat shed. A strut (sometimes doubling as bowsprit) provides the angle to allow a block and tackle to raise and lower the mast. The mainsail attaches to the mast with hoops and this allowed a very unusual secondary reefing technique - the tack could be hoisted high up the mast to reduce mainsail area. Generally the sail plan was very low aspect to reduce rig stresses and overturning moments.



Race day scenes could have been 200 years ago or a multi-million dollar oil painting by an old master!



Plenty of time for socialising and relaxing.

Race day

The day was overcast with squally showers forecast - mmm, could be interesting! Most boats put a reef in, skippers looking apprehensive. The races were to be held in an area of man-made lakes linked by narrow channels. There was plenty of action - at the first mark, while challenging for the lead, oops sorry, our bow knocked off the leading boat's flagpole! And the first narrow channel was a problem - the leading 7 boats were all close in the 20 metre wide channel when the bowsprit on the second placed skewered the rig of the leader! Both boats stopped and the next five had nowhere to go - clonk! crash! bang! Dutch swearwords flew, engines revved but fortunately no blood or serious damage (just chips and dents on the steel boats) and it was soon forgotten. For us mixed fortunes meant we finished mid fleet but a few NZ sailing techniques had made a difference and the guys were pleased - "We have been sailing for 5 weeks and had a great time but this was by far the best day!"

Overall the organisation was tops, the sailors had a great time, the boats were simply stunning, real boats and real people, no loads of bull from sponsors and the like, and the final evening prize giving capped it off nicely - a casual yet grand affair under crystal chandeliers.



Stylish racing fleet on the square lake.



Big budget, casual prize giving and ancient mariners.

Back to work!

The next morning it was off home by canal for Koos and Bert, holiday over. They had explored the North Sea coast as far up as Wilhelmshaven in Germany. The coast of the Netherlands is protected by a string of low lying islands with a tidal area in between. These flat bottomed boats are able to dry out at low tide so can take full advantage of this large recreational area. Future plans include a trip out to the island of Heligoland next year and five months in the Baltic Sea amongst the Danish Islands in 2008.

So it was back to work for them. I was heading for the north of Germany and a 700 mile sail in the Baltic Sea but that's another story for some other time..

For anyone interested in visiting the area, the locals are friendly and most speak good English, boating is great fun on the inland waterways. Charter boat companies are plentiful and you can tie up in quiet waterways or in the centre of amazing old towns, right in amongst the cobbled streets with cafes and the razzmatazz. Big budgets aren't required - sailing/camping holidays with big cruising dinghies (see below) would be great fun!



Heading off home.



Small charter boats.



All types on the waterways but only electric windmills!



Any comments are welcome to: pete@firebug.co.nz