

THE SAGA OF THE GIRL PAT

On April 1st 1936 the Grimsby trawler *Girl Pat*, owned by the Marstrand Fishing Company and skippered by George 'Dod' Osborne, set sail for the Dogger Banks for a nominal 12-14 days' fishing. She was a 'yacht' type of trawler, only a year old, and fast – able to do 200 miles a day. Also on the *Girl Pat* were members of Osborne's family, and when they presently sailed south instead of east at the start of an adventure that had nothing to do with fishing, they tricked a non-compliant member of the crew, an outsider, into leaving them at Dover. Thereafter they sailed by way of the Channel Isles to Spain, putting into Corcubion on April 12. Here they were seen to be 'in rather a bad way', according to Lloyds' agent in Corruna in a report that was carried in the London *Times*. It was the first of what would be 36 such references to the *Girl Pat* in that paper over the coming weeks. It is not difficult to guess what the tabloids would presently be making of the story.

At Corcubion they took on stores and carried out some repairs, debiting them to the Marstrand account. They left Corcubion ten days later on 24 April and resumed their southerly course. At 1700 on 17 May they were sighted by the Yeoward liner *Avoceta* at anchor off the Salvage Islands, a group of rocky islets 17 miles south of Madeira, Lloyds' agent in Las Palmas being despatched to the Salvages to investigate. The whereabouts of the *Girl Pat* was becoming a topic of interest that was now national, and would presently become international.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the adventure was that Osborne had left Grimsby with charts only for the appropriate area of the North Sea. All navigation thereafter (and the press was to make much of this) was done with the help of his son's 'sixpenny school atlas'.

On 26 May the *Girl Pat* put into Dakar, French West Africa, because the mate, Stone, had become ill. He was admitted to hospital, took no further part in the venture and on recovering returned independently to England. This enforced visit should have presented the authorities with an opportunity to ask Osborne a few questions of the kind of 'What's the fishing been like?' but, as was to be the case so often, he gave them the slip, on this occasion with the excuse that he needed to try his engines.

He now began to disguise the *Girl Pat's* appearance, though at this stage her arrest on the high seas does not seem to have been sought by the owners, as a statement in the House of Commons on 29 May by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty made clear.

On 3 June the French liner *Jamaïque* reported her off the Bissagos Islands, Portuguese Guinea, some 250 miles south of Dakar, flying the British flag and once again sailing south.

The limitations of the school atlas now began to show. (Perhaps not for the first time. The earlier report of her being 'at anchor' off the Salvage Islands may in fact have seen her temporarily aground.) It had been Osborne's intention to put in at the Azores, no doubt to reprovision himself further at Marstrand's expense. Unfortunately his dead reckoning was awry, and he found himself headed irrecoverably westwards for an entirely different continent. Surprisingly soon afterwards, on 11 June, he provided the occasion for what were, by the *Times's* standards, shock headlines: '*Girl Pat* off South America? . . . Mysterious vessel's distress signal'. The master of the *Lorraine Cross* had telegraphed Lloyds' agent in Georgetown, British Guiana: 'At 0800 hours GMT today sighted small vessel flying distressed signal in 5 degrees 30 minutes North latitude, 51 degrees 40 minutes West longitude, or 47 miles NW [actually the position given is NE] of Cayenne, French Guiana. Vessel about 100ft. overall length, steel hull and Diesel engine, having four men on board. All names on vessel painted out, but claimed name was *Margaret Harold*, registered in London and bound from England to Trinidad via Gibraltar. Reported out of fuel and food. Looks and acts suspicious. When asked if they had any ship's documents they immediately hauled down distressed signal, hoisted sail, and left before assistance could be given. When last seen was under sail and heading about south-west. This vessel doubtless a British fisherman and probably *Girl Pat* that is missing from Grimsby'. Lloyds Register showed no record of a *Margaret Harold*.

The hunt was now really on. On 15 June she was being sought by an aeroplane from the French warship *D'Encasteley*. The following day she was reported as having watered at the Salut Islands in French Guiana. The pursuit even included a classic false trail: a small British boat, wrecked, and the bodies of three white men, found on Samana Cay. A magistrate sailed there and established there was no connection. But the net was closing. Presently came the headlines for which the world was waiting: '*The Girl Pat* . . . Arrest by Police off Georgetown'. The Master, now named for the first time as George Black Osborne, and his crew, had been arrested for unlawful possession.

They arrived in Georgetown as celebrities. The warrants for arrest were temporarily withdrawn and they were freed, and for a time no further action by the government seemed contemplated. The case,

though, was seen as raising interesting points of insurance law. The *Girl Pat*, insured for £3,600, had been damaged in the course of her arrest by the government launch *Pomeroon*. The insuring syndicate might well claim they had provided insurance against risks attendant on activities in the North Sea, not those in the waters of Central America. Obviously Marstrand took a different view and back in England writs were issued against syndicate members who declined to meet claims in respect of their vessel.

On 24 June a Parliamentary Question to Mr Ormsby-Gore produced a reply that elaborated on the circumstances of the arrest. On the evening of 18 June the *Girl Pat* had been seen anchored within the three-mile limit of British Guiana. A police launch, sent out to confirm her identity, was threatened with sinking should she approach and attempt to board. She withdrew. The following day, on the Governor's instruction, police and customs officials returned in the *Pomeroon* to be greeted with similar threats. This time the *Girl Pat* was chased to some twelve miles from shore when, having run out of fuel, she surrendered 'and came quietly to port. (Laughter.)' Any question of assisting the crew was a matter for the local shipping master.

By 29 June the legal situation was becoming clearer. 'Skipper Orsborne and his brother have been arrested on the owner's warrant on a charge of larceny of ship.' They were remanded in custody for a week awaiting extradition and pending the arrival of a writ. On 13 July the two other members of the crew, Hector Harris and Howard Stevens, both of Grimsby, arrived at Southampton from New York.

On 20 July the mate, Stone, arrived in the Mersey from Dakar on the steamer *Baron Cawdor* and was interviewed by Superintendent Moore and Sergeant Allison, of Liverpool CID. The press quickly followed with interviews of their own and on 22 July the *Times* gave Stone's story fifty-eight lines, describing his account as 'Vivid'. They were twice stranded on sandbanks off West Africa. Their main privations were lack of food and water. The strandings took place 45 miles west of Blanco. In the first of them they were on the bank a night and a day, when they took to a small boat until the vessel refloated. Five hours later they hit another shoal. They shifted pig-iron ballast either fore or aft, then rowed off with the anchor, returned, and managed to 'bump the vessel off'. Had they not succeeded the prospect would have been gloomy indeed. They had only four bottles of water, a few pancakes, a tin of milk and a tin of bully. If unsuccessful they would have had to row forty-five miles against an easterly wind and then cross a desert. 'We were properly down and out and glad to get the *Girl Pat* off the bank. We then put back to Port Etienne'. It was quite true, and not a joke, that they used a sixpenny atlas for navigation purposes. 'It was very rough navigation'. As a seaman with seventeen years' trawling behind him he would not like to go through it again. It was certainly a fine experience, the sort of thing not to have been missed - when it was all over. 'We had good days and we had days which were just hell. We had to put into Dakar because of our having no oil, food, or anything else. At that time I was between the sheets and did not know much about anything'. Mr Stone also remarked that they left Grimsby on 1 April: he thought it an appropriate enough date.

In Georgetown the hearing of committal evidence against the two Orsborne brothers was concluded. Defending counsel said the men had several times expressed a wish to surrender to Lloyds' agent in Georgetown but disbelieved the assurance of Captain Murland, Deputy Inspector-General of Police, that he was on board the *Pomeroon*. Hence their initial disinclination to surrender. They were remanded in custody for a statutory fifteen days before being deported. By 3 September they were in court in London, facing a private prosecution by Messrs Marstrand, and were remanded on bail of £500 each, one of the amounts being provided by the editor of the *People*.

On 11 September (the same year and month! - the law seems to have moved with surprising speed in those days) the *Times* gave one and a quarter columns to the first day of the trial. George Black Orsborne, 32, Master Mariner, and James Black Orsborne, 32, grocer, both giving their address as Peaksville Avenue, Grimsby, appeared before Mr Justice Singleton at Bow Street, Mr Christmas Humphreys being one of two counsel for the defence. The prosecution's case was that at the end of March George Orsborne was to have taken the *Gipsy Love* to the Dogger Bank fishing grounds. He signed on Stone as mate (though Stone did not in fact have a mate's ticket) and Harris and Stevens as other hands. They sailed from Grimsby on 31 March but were towed back the next day with a defective engine. Crew and stores were then transferred to the *Girl Pat*. A stowaway on both boats, with George Orsborne's knowledge, was James Black Orsborne. Jefferson, an engineer, was also on board, apparently at the instance of the owners. The understanding was that they would fish 'near Grimsby'. Instead they headed south and put into Dover where Jefferson was 'plied with drinks'. When he returned to the quay found the boat gone. It was said Orsborne's intentions were to sail to Madeira, the Canaries and the African coast, and finally to Florida, where the boat would be sold and the profits divided. He spoke of 'picking up a

cargo of niggers and copra'. (So, bizarrely, he was considering reviving the slave trade!) By the time they reached Dakar George had become Captain Black, James was now A Black, and Stone was H Clarke; the ship was similarly not as it had been. Stone, in his evidence, said that he did not have a mate's ticket; and that in a wheelhouse discussion *en route* to Dover it was agreed they should rid themselves of Jefferson as he was 'not in the know'. When on 5 April they anchored off Jersey George Orsborne showed Stone his son's world atlas from which they would in future be navigating. The Cape was mentioned; and fishing for oysters for pearls . . .

The trial then seems then to have been adjourned for a month, which gave the *Times* the opportunity to cover the disposal of the *Girl Pat*. On 17 September, under the headline '*Girl Pat* to be Sold' the Salvage Association was reported as having so instructed a Liverpool firm of valuers and ship brokers. The value of the ship, lying derelict at Demerara, was of the order of £3000 - £5000 with an estimate of £500 suggested as the cost of bringing her home.

On 19 October the trial resumed with defence questioning taking the line that the Marstrand directors had colluded with the Orsbornes in an intended insurance fraud, a charge that was strenuously denied. It is hardly to George Orsborne's credit that he should have said Tom Moore, Managing Director of Marstrand, had sent the *Girl Pat* out to sea on the tacit understanding that she should not return, this particularly so as Moore, in court, had spoken up for Orsborne as a skipper of long experience of whom he knew nothing to his discredit. I prefer to think of this as a defence tactic to which Orsborne lent, at best, his unwilling support.

His appearance on the stand was eagerly awaited. He said he had joined the navy at fourteen, claiming to be 17 ½, and had served on the Dover Patrol. He had been wounded at Zbrugge. Leaving the navy in 1919 he worked for a while on a farm at Aberdeen where he met a Captain Wilkins, sometime captain of the China clipper, *Cutty Sark*. Wilkins, then 86, persuaded him farming was no business for him and that he should go back to sea. As to the recent episode, he had had it in mind to circle the Atlantic before returning to Grimsby to thank the owners 'for the loan of the ship'. On leaving Dakar they had had twenty-four hours' stores, and water for eight days. It had taken them sixteen days to reach Devil's Island (in French Guiana), at which point they had no food on board; and at Devil's Island they picked up supplies for a month. Near Georgetown an aeroplane had dropped a message asking if they were the *Girl Pat*. They had indicated that they were. In Georgetown he had sold their story to the publisher Anglo-Continental for £5000. (A quite enormous sum.) Of this he was given 200 dollars on account. He had intended to make for the Cape Verde Islands(?) but with minimal, or no, navigational aids he had missed them.

The jury was out for no more than thirty-five minutes and on its return George Orsborne was given 18 months' hard labour and James, 12 months. The judge commented unfavourably on the rewarding of criminals by newspaper proprietors – and, if not criminals, then those of less than wholly admirable character. (Such as Harris: 'I am scarcely ever sober when ashore'.) As to the apportioning of costs, the judge would 'think it over'.

The *Times* celebrated the conclusion of the trial, and the end of the main part of the story, with one of its fourth leaders. This struck the appropriate note of pained amusement, saying of the Orsbornes: 'They maintained to the end an air at once tough and enigmatic'.

The *Girl Pat* herself, abandoned at Demerara and with Marstrand now reimbursed for her loss, remained as a loose end, and some who had been diverted by the saga formed a syndicate to bring her home. The leader and Captain was to be Commander R W Lawrence, DSC, RN(ret.), ex-navigator of submarine E14 and hero of an episode in the Sea of Marmora, where he had won his decoration. The crew were selected from 500 applicants. It was intended the return route should include one or two places of interest. The vessel was reconditioned and fitted with wireless. On the 9th of May 1937, thirteen months after leaving Grimsby, the *Girl Pat* arrived in Portsmouth for paying off, having crossed the Atlantic in 11 days, 19 hours. Commander Lawrence's comment was that he had never been in a better sea-boat.

I have not been able to discover *Girl Pat's* subsequent history all the way to what I assume will have been her eventual breaking up. She was exhibited in various ports for charity, and the *Times's* final reference to her is in respect of a grounding in Liverpool Bay while making for Liverpool for repainting. From this she was successfully refloated. Later, there is evidence of her return to fishing, but with the new home port of Brixham. Oddly, in recent years I have seen a rust-bucket of a working boat, some sort of dredger perhaps, in Penzance named *Girl Pat III*, but I suspect no more than a sentimental acknowledgement by its owner of a famous predecessor.

I have spoken on the telephone to 'Dod' (George) Orsborne's police inspector grandson who, in a profession that has to be sensitive to 'black sheep' in the family, declined to give me his address; and I have

had a brief correspondence with another branch of the family who find the association so embarrassing they have changed their name to the more usual Osborne. Embarrassment aside, and popularly-perceived rogue that he may have been, Orsborne seems everywhere to have commanded respect. In court his employer had nothing to say against him other than that he had run off with one of his boats. One comment made to me was that essentially he was a pirate out of his time. He wrote a book in a style so awful that I assumed it had been ghosted. (*'I want you to get me right from the start, and no misunderstandings. I'm no Captain Bligh. But I'm no harbour loafer, either. I'm a man who's sailed a North Sea in fifty storms. Who's been in tight corners – some of 'em so tight that I thought I'd never round 'em! I'm a man who's looked death in the face many a time without batting an eye . . . ' – and so on for another 230 pages.*) In fact it *must* have been ghosted, if only because its style runs so contrary to the known character of the man himself. It is indicative of the authority he still commands years after his death that his police inspector grandson insists he wrote the book himself, and others besides, including one published in Japanese. 'In translation, naturally', I said. 'Oh no, he *wrote* it in Japanese', the grandson assured me. (I have tried to make enquiries of a contact in Japan, though I hardly need to do so. I continue to believe it is not possible.) The police inspector has a model of the *Girl Pat* that his grandfather made while doing his 18 months 'hard' in Dartmoor.

'Dod' Orsborne died, appropriately, at sea of a heart attack while ferrying someone's yacht across the Channel.

I continue to be astonished that no one has thought to make something of this story. Given its swashbuckling style and exotic locations it would seem to be heaven-made as a scenario for a film. I have been told that some years ago the BBC were considering recounting it in some form on radio, but the idea was dropped. I tried to interest television's *Timewatch* and they turned it down.

It seems to me that we have here a saga that possesses everything that goes to make a cracking good story – except, I have to admit, sex. But then, it is only in recent times that a sexual component has become mandatory. In those days, other elements could stand alone in making a good story.

The Voyage of the Girl Pat by Skipper George 'Dod' Orsborne; Hutchinson, 1937, reissued George Mann, 1974

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