

Steam Yacht Alacrity

She was designed by G. L. Watson and built by Scott and Company, Greenock. Launched on 30 April 1900 she was the property of A. J. Drexel II, the America banker from Philadelphia, who named her the *Margarita* (all his vessels, at least five of them, were given the same name, which happened to be that of his wife). The *Margarita* was said to be the third largest privately owned ship afloat at the time. Drexel had her for several years until she was sold to the Marques of Anglesey in 1911 who renamed her the *Semiramis*. He sold her on, in 1913, to the Princess Schahovsky-Gleboff-Stretchneff, a Russian aristocrat. It is at this stage the story becomes a little complex and the vessel falls foul of international wars, disputes and tensions.

The *Semiramis* was then appropriated by the Tsarist government for war duties being renamed the *Malada*. She then became embroiled in the Russian Revolution and after this the post-Revolutionary wars in Russia. Sometime around 1919 she was either seized or somehow appropriated by the Admiralty and was possibly commissioned briefly as HMS *Malada*. Later in 1919, equally briefly, she became the flagship of the British Commander-in Chief of the China Station based in Hong Kong. All such vessels were given the same name and so she was renamed HMS *Alacrity*. It seems that at this stage the British and Russian governments were trying to sort out disputes over vessels seized and appropriated in the war, during the Revolution and in the hostilities that continued after 1918. Part of the settlement appeared to be the repatriation of the now HMS *Alacrity*. However, with the Russian Revolution there was nowhere she could be repatriated to because of the change of government. In any case throughout all of this, at least in legal terms, the vessel still belonged to its original owner, which was Princess Schahovsky-Gleboff-Stretchneff. The Princess, as many Russian aristocrats did after the Russian Revolution, had settled in Paris but wanted to divest herself of the vessel. A yacht broking intermediary, Monsieur Clerc, knew of this and approached an old friend Montague Grahame-White who was running a yacht charter business in the UK. After some false starts a deal was agreed and the *Alacrity* was towed from Honfleur to Southampton docks and then to Grahame-White's own permanent mooring, at Warsash, close to where he had his country house.

Grahame-White totally re-fitted her and although she nearly ruined him financially he finally managed to get a yearlong charter with a wealthy American widow, Mrs. Moore, for £40,000, which just about covered his outgoings on her. She set out from Cowes in October 1926, under the command of Captain John Skinner (my great-great-grandfather) who was an expert Master of large luxury steam yachts. Unfortunately, he was taken ill on the voyage out but fighting bad weather, lack of coal (due to the General Strike when they left) managed to arrive in Rangoon, where the charter was to commence, with just thirty-six hours to spare before penalty clauses became operative. He was replaced by his second in command, Captain Calder, who then took the vessel on her voyage. She ended up in New York in August 1927. Captain Skinner made it back to the UK but did not recover from his illness and eventually died in Poole, where he had been born, in January 1928.

Unfortunately, the first cold winds of economic change were beginning to bite in the USA and new charters did not materialise. Soon the American Crash of 1929 came and it was not until 1931 that Grahame-White was able to go to the USA to pick her up and bring her back. Nothing really materialised for him and by 1932 he was pretty desperate to use the vessel in some way in order to raise money. In the end he hit upon the idea of using her as a floating club and so 'Club *Alacrity*' was born. She was moored at Brownsea Roads in Poole from June 1932 and as well as 'weekend parties' etc she was used as a set for the films *Men of Steel* and *Sleepless Nights*. Unfortunately an argument then ensued with the harbour master and the dispute went to the local courts. As well as a small fine, £35, Grahame-White was instructed to move the vessel and so he took her to the Medway where the photograph, by Mr. Clarke Senior, was taken. She remained there, as far as I know, until the British government requisitioned her for war duties, presumably in 1939. She was sunk on active service in the Second World War.