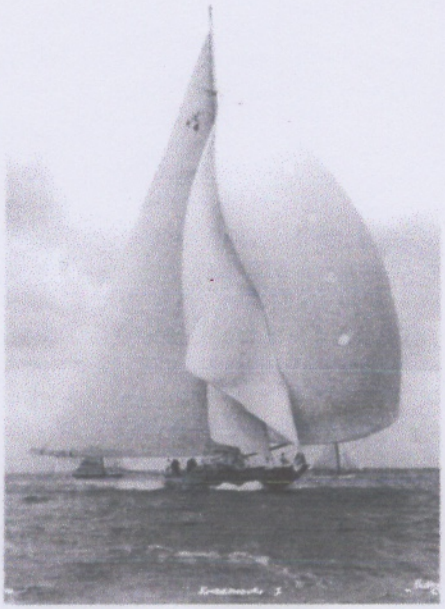
[War interrupted one of the district's great preoccupations - sport, represented here by sailing, shinty, and golf.]

Sailing Memories by Chester Currie (interviewed by Alan Millar)

Chester grew up as a seafarer. He remembers Smith's Yard in the village in its heyday when a clinker built dinghy would be constructed each week, built upside down, in the long shed on the site of the modern Life Boat Station. Boat handling and early sailing experience were gained in such a dinghy. An old sack for a sail meant rowing to windward and coming back downwind. Later, as a fisherman, he learned to sail and successfully race a fishing smack.

Between the two World Wars Chester was much involved with boats and with the sea. He remembers how at that time up to a hundred men would leave the village every season to work as paid hands on various yachts. In those days many yachts were much bigger than anything there is today, and the owner relied entirely on professional crew.



Endeavour I with Chester at the bow

Chester, for his part, sailed in the 1930s on boats in the biggest racing class: J Class yachts. In 'Valsheda' there were 26 of a crew and he was the only Scot aboard. There were no winches, so the huge sails had to be sweated to the top of the mast and, of course, trimmed, by muscle strength alone; hence the need for so many men. Another huge difference was in the materials. Whereas modern sails are made of terylene or other synthetic fibre it was cotton for all pre-war sails. This meant that they had to be carefully dried before being put away. Always there was the risk of mildew, both on the sails and on the sail covers. Nowadays, sails hold their shape but natural fabric had to be treated with much greater care. A new sail had to be 'run in' and very slowly stretched.

There was a class of about eight J Class yachts, of which the King's 'Britannia' was one. The season ran from April to September with early races out of Harwich. From there they progressed along the English south coast, with the highlight naturally Cowes Week in the Solent. From Falmouth, these huge yachts would go round to south Wales, over the Irish Sea to Cork, to Dun Laoghaire outside Dublin, up to Belfast Lough and then to the Clyde. After that it was back south, but to France.

But even then the J Class was proving beyond the means even of the wealthiest, and the smaller 12 metres began to supplant them. Chester skippered 'Trivia' for the last three seasons before the war, and his highlight was six firsts in Cowes Week. These were wonderful boats but smaller, of course, than the big Js. Crew consisted of four professionals supplemented by one or two amateurs. Amongst the amateurs Chester had crewing for him was Peter Scott, the ornithologist.

Whereas today all yachts have a dual role, as racers and cruisers, in those days 12 metres had no engines so that there was a premium on seamanship for all manoeuvres. And there were few concessions to comfort. All spare equipment was taken ashore before racing to keep down weight. Chester well remembers meeting the legendary, outspoken, Uffa Fox, renowned designer of so many fast yachts, and later sailing companion for Prince Philip. He had the privilege of racing Uffa's own Flying Fifteen.

Throughout the war Chester served in the Merchant Navy as skipper on the Clyde of a Thames Barge: a big, broad beamed shallow draught boat of which a few remain today. These boats, stripped of their sails, worked as tenders to the myriad ships using the Clyde at that time. Chester was based in Greenock and would take out all manner of goods to the Tail of the Bank and beyond. He recalls how once ammunition and cordite off a warship was to come ashore at the Albert Dock but the harbourmaster on learning the nature of the cargo ordered him off to sea and far away. His manifest had to be transferred to a special vessel and taken to Ardeer in Ayrshire.

On another occasion it was a cargo of gold bullion which he took aboard at Greenock and out to the battleship 'Rodney'. It was at the very worst time, when British assets were being shipped across the Atlantic for safe keeping in Canada or to meet the costs of the war effort. Security was naturally tight and Chester remembers coming back to his ship alongside the dock in Greenock when, just as he was about to go down the vertical ladder, he had a pistol poked into the back of his neck. Only when his identity had been clarified was he allowed to carry on.

In the post war years yachting returned to the Clyde but the boats were much smaller. Dinghies had never been popular pre-war, but Chester was among the pioneers of dinghy racing here, and he led the way with his own Albacore and Wayfarer, a precursor of the fleets of small boats so much a part of the summer scene in the Kyles today.

Regatta Day by Deirdre MacIntyre

Glasgow Fair Monday, regatta day! Rain or shine there was always a good turn out of spectators - many locals and a large number of friends who would have arrived on the Friday steamers for their annual 'fair fortnight'. It was a beautiful sight on a clear morning with a light wind blowing to watch each class of yacht line up for the gun.

The rowing races started later: girls' singles, boys' singles, girls' pairs, boys' pairs, and mixed doubles. My father had a 12 foot clinker dinghy which was quite a heavy row, but I was used to it. However, an elderly gent who hired boats from a hut on the foreshore at Ardencraig, by name of Currie Mhor, was my supporter and always gave me the use of a nearly new 10 foot dinghy which was a dream to row. Light as a feather!

Although Dad had put me through my paces at rounding a buoy at top speed it wasn't really needed then, as what we all rowed around was a luxury motor vessel, the 'Iolaire'. She, to me, was beautiful! Had her uses too: on one occasion when in the mixed doubles with Sandy Malcolm, we changed places when we got on her off side. Sandy had hurt a wrist, but we were both strong rowers and aye oot on the water. We got away with it until we had to go out to the commodore yacht to be given our prizes, and were met by the late Dr G.L. Thomson who enquired why we had changed places.

The greasy boom usually came last, and no wonder. If you weren't wet before entering, you were pretty well sure to be soaked afterwards. Many entered, especially our macho boys. Very, very few were successful but we all enjoyed it and the crowd loved it. Many memories of very happy days and lovely people.