

# SEA+I

ISSUE 42



Camper  
Nichols  
Internat  
YACHTING SINCE 1762



HERITAGE

## Celebrating 120 years of Black Swan

WRITTEN BY WILLIAM COLLIER

Charles E. Nicholson was brought up in Gosport where Camper & Nicholsons and the yachting businesses that surrounded it dominated much of the town. The Nicholsons were a large family and young Charles was never intended to be a yacht designer. Instead his father had him earmarked to be a salesman for the yard which was to depend on external designers for its yacht building.

**I**nevitably the young Charles messed about in boats and tried his hand at designing. In 1887 his first yacht *Lucifer* was built, and she impressed his father enough for him to speculatively build more of his son's designs. In 1889, Nicholson had his first commission for a racing yacht and with its success Nicholson developed a small following. Then in 1892 *Dacia* burst on to the yachting scene; Charles E. Nicholson's new creation beat all comers and made front page news when her owner sold her for twice what she had cost him, halfway through her first season.

IMAGE *Black Swan*









## Nicholson had an enthusiastic patron and very soon after the build commenced, Calverly started looking at all the additional options to ensure that his yacht would be as fast as possible.

Orders for small racing yachts followed but the young Nicholson inevitably set his sights on building a large yacht and it took him time and effort to secure his first sizeable commission. In October 1898 he met John Selwin Calverly a former army officer and barrister with a large estate in Yorkshire. Preliminary designs were soon prepared and by early November Nicholson had secured the contract. The yacht was to be an all-rounder, not designed for racing but able to participate in the handicap classes. The significance of this was that Nicholson was unconstrained by any rating rule and able to design a yacht that truly reflected his ideas on yacht design. In Calverly, Nicholson had an enthusiastic patron and very soon after the build commenced, Calverly started looking at all the additional options to ensure that his yacht would be as fast as possible. The two men formed a powerful partnership.

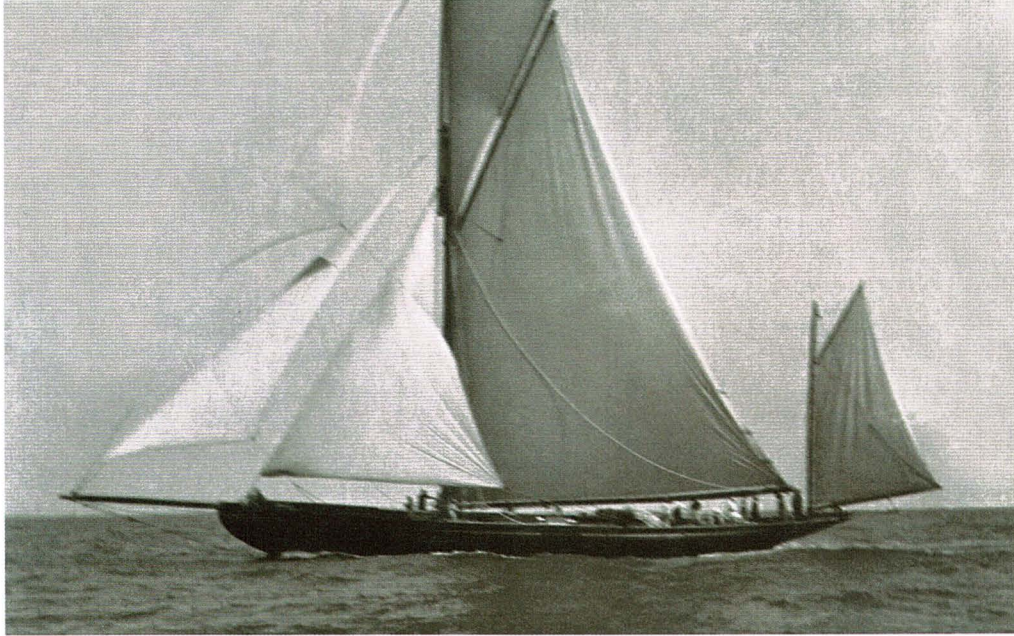
By late March Calverly had settled on the name *Brynhild* and his new yacht was launched in May 1899. Calverly immediately took to racing and demonstrated that his yacht which had none of the excesses of the heavily canvassed extreme racing machines but was still a formidable competitor as well as an able cruiser. The *Yachtsman*, the leading yachting magazine of the day, commented that: '*Brynhild* is a vessel that everyone is compelled to admire, for she represents all that is best in the science of yacht designing and

building. Fit to go anywhere and do anything she has a remarkable turn of speed.' It was a high accolade for her young designer.

Sadly, Calverly's ownership was not to last and he passed away after just two seasons sailing. But such was her reputation that *Brynhild* was quickly acquired by Sir James Pender who continued championing her and ensured that her reputation as a race winner only grew. Within a few years Pender had so taken to racing that he sought an out and out racing yacht. This was a desire that would ultimately lead to him commissioning Charles E. Nicholson to design and build the 23 Metre Class *Brynhild II*. *Brynhild* had not only fulfilled Nicholson's desire to design his first large yacht but led directly to his joining the elite pre-World War I Big Class fleet.

With the advent of the First International or Metre Class rule *Brynhild's* racing days were over. She was sold to Italy and for four years was based in Genoa, the property of A. Cappellini. By 1912 she was back in Britain in the ownership of J. Frederick Schwann who cruised her for 10 years. In 1923 her next owner, Sidney Greer gave *Brynhild* her first engine and four years later sold her to Major A. W. Foster. It was H. S. Bomford who converted her from yawl to ketch after acquiring her in 1937 but he resold her the following year to Frederick J. McEvoy who gave her the name *Black Swan*.





IMAGES *Black Swan* and one of her first crew.





Over 120 years since her launch, the commission that gave Charles E. Nicholson one of the most important opportunities in his career survives, providing a visible starting point to the series of yachts both power and sail which make up the Nicholson legend.



Immediately after World War II, *Black Swan* was acquired by Frenchman George Guérin who had her refitted at Camper & Nicholsons with Charles E. Nicholson's son John managing the work. Basing the yacht in Cannes, Guérin initially changed her name to *Changrilla* but perhaps becoming aware that this was no ordinary yacht to be renamed at a whim, soon reverted to *Black Swan*.

In 1958 Guérin sold the *Black Swan* to Mexico-based Turkish businessman Felix Mechoulam and this heralded a period of over 40 years in the Mechoulam family ownership. Frequently seen around Capri where Felix Mechoulam owned the Grand Hotel Quisisana *Black Swan's* rig was modernised and she lost her bowsprit. Nevertheless, she was extensively sailed until Felix's son Alain, carried out a major refit in Turkey in 1984-85. Although this ensured her immediate future, the quality of the work was poor and when he sought to sell her she did not survey well.

LEFT *Black Swan* during a regatta.  
BELOW *Black Swan* in the port of St Tropez.

Eventually *Black Swan* found a new owner, Mr Satori in the early 1990s and underwent a significant refit at the famed Beconcini yard in La Spezia. It was at this time that she was restored to gaff rig albeit ketch and the current deckhouse was installed. Sadly, this period of investment did not last. Passing into the hands of fellow Italian Mr Matassena she was soon mired in financial troubles which resulted in her being seized by the bank and laid up ashore at Valdetaro yard in La Spezia from 2008 to 2015.

Enter Edouard Poullain, her current owner, who recognised *Black Swan* as the important classic she is. In his ownership, the years of neglect have been addressed. *Black Swan* is sailing again, available for charter and gracing the classic yacht gatherings of the Mediterranean. Over 120 years since her launch, the commission that gave Charles E. Nicholson one of the most important opportunities in his career survives, providing a visible starting point to the series of yachts both power and sail which make up the Nicholson legend.

