

# Dogged Dooley proved them wrong

**IN** retirement Dooley Wilson looks out across the same view he did as a lad, a view dominated by seawater.

It is not surprising that childhood contact with the sea was to become a major factor in his life.

It was to dominate his sporting interests and career.

He was to lose a loved brother to it, and have a son follow it.

Today Dooley and his wife Kit live alongside the Tauranga Harbour on part of the original family property.

On the skyline above their house is the old family home with, alongside it, a kaouri tree planted in 1920, the year of Dooley's birth.

Dooley was the second of four boys born to Frank and Erica Wilson.

Frank, a partner in the law firm Sharp, Lydhope Wilson, bought the eight-year-old Dooley a P-class yacht.

It was a terrible home-made thing and quickly earned the name 'The Tub'. But it proved the gateway to a new interest.

Erica's father, Dr Walter Fell, was one of Wellington's top yachtsmen. He gave the Wilsons a 7.6 metre ketch rigged sailing launch.

With that, a 4.2 metre rowboat with a lug sail and an increasing fleet of P-class the Wilsons roamed the harbour, fishing, picnicking, camping and just sailing.

Because of the tidal nature of the beach they would moor the little yachts out in the harbour. Home from Tauranga Primary School, they would wade out, hoist the sails and be off.

Dooley and the next youngest boy, Sandy, became the core of what became known as the Fifth Avenue Yacht Club. On Saturdays they would tow the yachts under the railway

bridge to race with the Tauranga Yacht and Power Boat Club off Coronation Pier.

He believes his father first enrolled him with the club in 1928. Over the years he has served on its committee, been commodore and is now a life member.

Moving up to Z class he twice represented Tauranga in the Cornwall Cup, the first time with Sandy as crew. Both times he was runner-up.

Years later his son, Nick, was also runner-up in the Cornwall Cup, as well as the inter-provincial P-class series for the Tanner Cup.

In 1963 the youngest brother, Pat, wrote a children's book, Tauranga Adventure, based on those early sailing days.

Sent to Nelson College, Dooley was soon involved in a variety of activities — tramping, gymnastics, hooking for the second XV, experimenting with photography and sailing an Idle Along with Sandy.

University studies aimed at a career in marine biology were interrupted by war. Dooley became a radio technician and posted to Wigram, did a lot of sailing round Akaroa.

While at Tauranga Aerodrome he caused a major shakeup in the air force. He says most aerodromes were overstuffed and to disguise this from a committee studying the air force men would be posted away when the committee came visiting.

Refused permission to speak to the committee he hid where they were expected, popping out at the right time with a sheaf of submissions.

He says within days he was posted to Fiji, a number of airfields were closed for reorganisation and there were a number of demonstrations.

During the war, Dooley in the islands and Sandy in Egypt,

saved all they could for a dream yacht, ending the war with £1200 each.

They approached the famous Lidgard yard, to be told their money would only pay for materials for the sort of yacht they wanted.

Dooley worked for Lidgards for a year, doing some interior work but mainly helping on the slipway. He also worked for a year with the Lane Motor Boat Co., while Sandy went into journalism with the Auckland Star.

The brothers kept looking for the boat they wanted to fulfil their dream of competing in the Fastnet race.

They virtually memorised Uffa Fox' four books of yacht designs, but it was in another book that Sandy found their ideal.

This was a 16.4 metre design by Swede Knud Reimers.

It was nothing like the fashionable offshore boats around Auckland, having long overhangs fore and aft, a bulb keel and a high aspect ratio mainsail.

Dooley says it is only in recent years he has admitted the parentage as the lines were lifted from the book without any reference to the designer.

Jack Taylor, who they had met at Lidgards, scaled up the plans, filled in the construction detail and promised to build the boat once the brothers had found the timber.

Dooley says this was not easy for at that time, post-war, there was a ban on the sale of kauri.

They toured the north looking for suitable trees, with Dooley and Kit's new daughter Jan in a St Mungo's soap box carry cot.

Eventually, next to an aunt's farm at Okahanau they found three trees which the farmer was willing to sell as long as they took a rimu and matai as well. The material was to provide floorboards for the yacht.

The timber was milled and railed to Auckland

and trucked to the Wilson's Northcote flat in secret.

Taylor told Dooley to loft the lines — at that stage he did not even know what loft meant — but eventually he got the lines drawn fullsize.

Taylor kept getting sidetracked by other work so eventually Dooley started on the boat.

For the next two and a half years, with only Christmas days off, he worked on the boat while Sandy provided the income for all.

At weekends a gang of reporters from the Star would turn up to help, while during the week Sandy would sneak down to the wharf to discuss their joint projects with a crane driver called Lou Tercei.

Tercei was building a radical 18.2 metre yacht of his own design. Like the Wilsons' yacht it had long overhangs, the mast and boom were the same length but it was four tonnes lighter.

Dooley says both yachts were criticised as being too extreme as they were such a break from the short ended, gaff rigged racers of the day.

Tercei's yacht Ranger proved all the critics wrong and for around 25 years was the undisputed queen of the Waitemata.

The Wilsons' yacht was finally launched, christened Leda and was promptly sailed to Tauranga where it was hauled out on the First Avenue Slip.

Dooley worked there for a year, fitting out Leda's interior after work and at weekends.

Once afloat Leda's only local competition was Frank Gresham's famous Mata-ata. Two years in a row Leda won the race out of Auckland round White Island, both times taking line and handicap honours.

She also sailed in the annual Auckland to Tauranga races.

Though she did not win the Wilsons had the satisfaction of beating Leo Bouzaid's crack

harbour racer, Rainbow, in a Tauranga harbour race for the Wilkinson Trophy.

In 1961 Leda was entered for the third transman race. In the crew were Kit and Sandy's wife Erica who were to be the first women to race the Tasman.

The Press had a field day. Leda was too extreme to race in open water, they said, and she was roundly criticised.

Favourite was another yacht of the same size, the Australian cutter, Southern Maid. In Sydney after the race her miffed crew would not talk to the Leda people.

Col Wild had his famous Tara entered, while the experienced Halverson brothers from Sydney had their 11.8 metre light displacement flyer Solveig as handicap favourite.

There was a beer shortage in Sydney and the Halversons bought a supply to take home, but because their boat was so light they dumped it on Leda.

By the time the fleet was out in the Tasman Leda was a day ahead. Then she ran into a flat calm and sat for five days. Solveig caught up, doing enough to guarantee her handicap win, and for days the two yachts rocked on the windless Tasman in sight of each other.

Soon after they ran out of wind Leda's navigator and wireless operator, Terry Hammond, contacted a passing TEAL Solent flying boat. The crew asked if Leda wanted anything and Hammond mentioned they had lost their can opener overboard.

The next day the Solent flew over low down and dropped a can opener and a copy of the Star wrapped in an old lifejacket. Each day from then till the calm ended the Solent dropped the latest papers.

Once the wind picked up Leda sailed away for line honours. Kit and Erica became the first women allowed to enter the august Royal Prince Alfred Yacht Club, but permission was only just given.

Hammond was staying in Australia, leaving Leda without a navigator. He offered to go back as far as Lord Howe Island, teaching Dooley on the way.

However, Hammond was so seasick, Dooley was only able to pick up the rudiments of using a sextant.

Hammond left a book of tables and instructions, "Take a sight and turn to page . . ."

"It took me 24 hours to work it out, so I was able to tell where we had been 24 hours before," Dooley said. "By the time we got to New Zealand I had got it down to a few hours."

"I told one of the crew to climb to the first cross-stress and he would see North Cape. When he yelled 'land ho' no one was more surprised than me!"

The brothers decided the time had come to sell Leda and get a smaller yacht each.

America looked the place for a profitable sale so they decided to make the 7000-mile trip via the Pacific Islands.

There was one crew vacancy so they advertised. Among the flood of replies was one perfect crew, expert navigator, done the Fastnet, vast yachting experience and son.

The day before Leda sailed the police came and took him away. New Zealand's leading con man they said.

Kit and the children, Jan, 8, Ruth, 6 and four-month-old Nick, went as far as Fiji. From there Leda cruised the islands, the crew skin-diving and enjoying the idyllic life, till at last they reached Hawaii where Leda was shipped and prepared for sale.

From then things deteriorated. Sailing to America most of Leda's sails were blown out and she drifted hove to for much of the way.

Food and cigarettes ran out and the crew were starving.

Finally, late at night, they tied up at the Golden Gate Yacht Club to find members in the midst of the annual prizegiving dinner.

The New Zealanders were treated as guests of honour and feted, but before long the unaccustomed rich food and cigars became too much for weakened stomachs.

The welcome was great but the news bad, there was a recession and not a boat had sold on the coast for six months.

Sandy and Erica, both journalists, were able to get television jobs but Dooley was not allowed to work and after four months returned to New Zealand.

Sandy eventually found a buyer, but the deal was dependent on the sale of the buyer's boat.

Sandy went down the coast to fetch it. On the way back, in the night off Santa Barbara, the yacht was run down by the freighter Parmatta, and Sandy and the yacht crew drowned.

Leda was eventually sold for around the cost of the materials used to build her.

Later Leda was sold to a Seattle couple who corresponded with the Wilsons and once set out to bring Leda back to New Zealand for a visit. However part way they decided at their age the trip was too tough and turned back.

Friends who visited Seattle have brought back photographs showing Leda, in immaculate condition, tucked up in her marina berth.

In New Zealand there is still one memory of her, a small book written by Sandy about the building of the yacht and originally featured as a series of articles in the School Journal of 1953.

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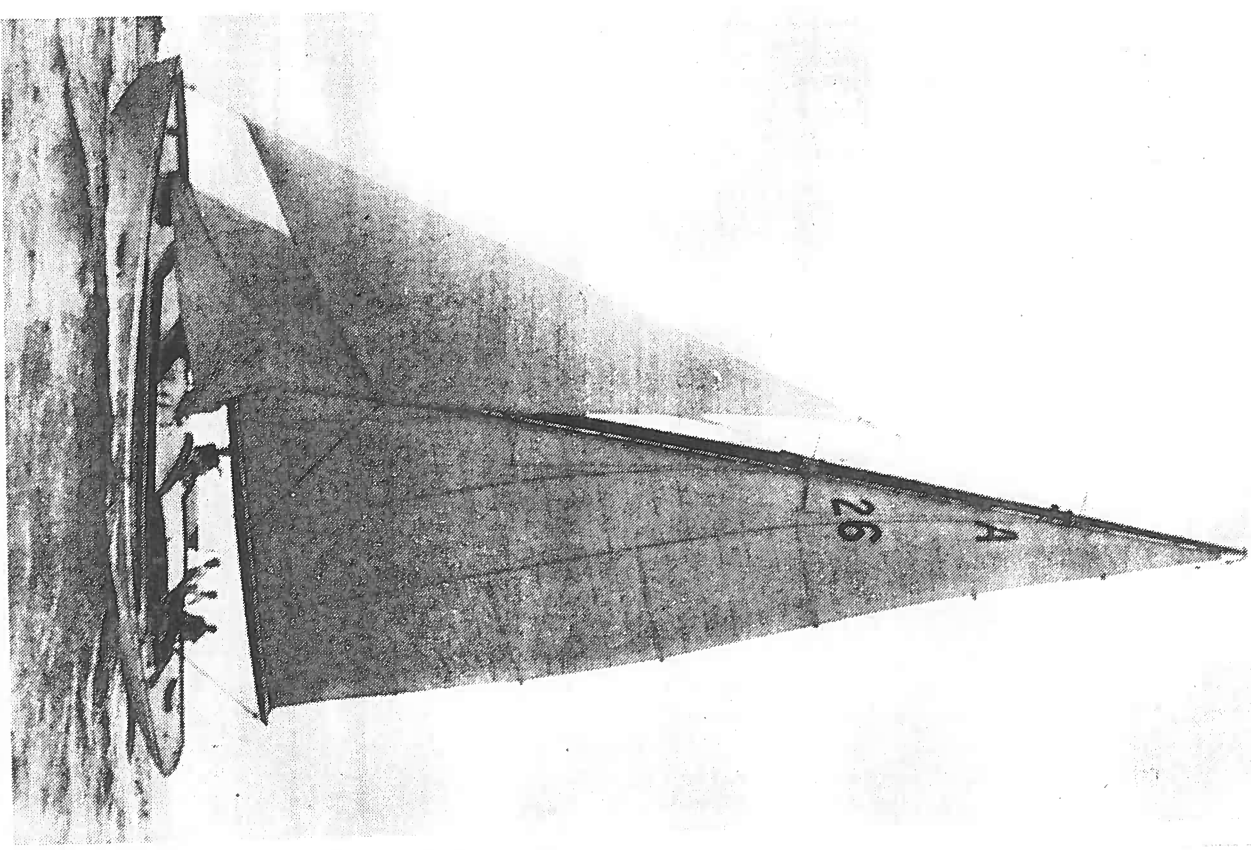
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● SIXTY-one years ago a young Tauranga lad got his first taste of sailing. Bay of Plenty Times feature writer Lincoln Vincent looks at the life of a yachtsman who took the traditional New Zealand way of building a "super" boat in a backyard and winning.



LEDA, the yacht the critics said would not perform offshore and which proved them wrong.

'Today's worst can