

through him

Malcolm Hardee, the 'father of alternative comedy' and one of London's most anarchic characters, died a year ago this week. He drowned in Greenland Dock, Rotherhithe, when he fell off the dinghy he used to travel from his Wibbley Wobbley floating pub to his houseboat, just a few feet away. He had been drinking. On the eve of his memorial show at the Hackney Empire, Hardee's sister Clare handed *Time Out* this remarkable unpublished essay by her brother (which she found among his belongings) on the trials and jubinations of living on the Thames. Portrait **Barry J Holmes**

I was brought up by the River Thames – sometimes in it, because my father was a tug captain and lighterman – and ever since then I've liked the feeling of being on water. It's the river I like, not the sea. The river has people; the sea has solitude.

Strangely enough, I've never sailed a boat – 'sailing' as in wind and sails – except for once in Aberystwyth some time ago, when we were doing shows with *The Greatest Show on Legs*. Because we were poor in those days, I was being put up by the students whom we were doing the shows to. We had a few after-show drinks at their house and one thing led to another and, by about two o'clock in the morning, I was telling them I was related to Hardy who was with Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar. And they mentioned to me that, that morning, they were going out sailing and I said 'I'll come' – as you do at two o'clock in the morning when you're drunk.

They held me to my word and, at about six o'clock in the morning, there was a bloke knocking on my door and I wasn't really suitably attired. I had a leopardskin vinyl jacket with a velvet collar, a pair of drainpipe trousers and winklepickers. And a silk shirt. And it was freezing. Nowadays, I'm better attired. I have a captain's jacket and a white naval cap.

I bought my first vessel from an old school-friend of mine called Wizo: it was a twin-bilged wooden sailing boat with a motor, which I moored at a place officially called the Greenwich Yacht Club but actually known as Concrete Ken's. He was a man who'd bought a jetty from the Gas Council for £1 and allowed anyone to moor a boat there for £5 per week – no matter what size – and rarely collected the money. Concrete Ken's was basically a collection of villains, ex-convicts and people who wanted to get away from their wives.

He was called Concrete Ken because he used to make boats out of concrete, which isn't a bad thing. Quite a lot of boats are made out of concrete. It's quite a good material to make boats out of, though not if you hit something.

Eventually, Wizo's wooden boat sank. And then, many years later, I had a small boat called the Oy Oy, which is sort of my catchphrase. 'Oy oy' is a phrase that was used by people on the river and was also used by Michael Barrymore, who

came from Bermondsey – he likes water. It's actually an abbreviation of 'Ahoy there' from the old sea people. Not to be confused with 'Oioi', which is associated with the National Front and a completely different thing.

Concrete Ken's was knocked down around the time the Millennium Dome was built, to make a proper quay. So I lived in a Greenwich council flat with Boothby Graffoe for a while, until one day I was sailing along on the Oy Oy and I saw a marina – South Dock in Rotherhithe. I saw two or three other boats for sale – in particular *The Sea Sovereign* – and I thought: That'd be a nice place to live.

I bought it from an 80-year-old racist who basically owned it so he could get away from all the darkies at the weekends. He used to come on

'I was flying the Jolly Roger and got stopped by the river police. They warned me I could hang for it. You can be hanged for piracy, treason and eating a swan'

board so he could rant and rave in peace. I bought it because I was no longer living with my wife. The idea of living in a peaceful marina is to keep yourself to yourself.

The *Sea Sovereign* is a 40-foot motor cruiser and it's got a bedroom and everything. I bought it to live on but also so I could go out on the river or over to France or go round the world. Anyone can get a boat – no licence, no nothing – and sail it on the Thames. But to go abroad, I needed to get my captain's badge, the International Certificate of Competence that you need to take if you want to go abroad. I got this and then found out, if I'm a captain, I can marry people and I can declare war for England. The *Sea Sovereign* was registered as a ship and, if it's a ship, it becomes part of Her Majesty's Land somehow. So, if I go to France and

a policeman comes on the ship and I don't want him on the ship, I can say I'm going to declare war with France as captain of one of Her Majesty's ships. I'm thinking of doing that later on.

I thought that I should get a proper captain's cap, which I bought at a shop in Greenwich called *Nautilus* that sells water-related objects to tourists; that's also where I bought a very nice stuffed nautical cat and a Jolly Roger flag – the skull-and-crossbones. It was when I was flying the Jolly Roger that I got stopped by the river police, who cautioned me that I could be hanged for flying it because it was a capital crime. You can still get hanged for piracy and treason, for arson in a naval dockyard and for eating a swan. Eating a swan comes under treason because they're all owned by the Queen. I haven't eaten a swan yet, but I still fly the Jolly Roger and hope to get arrested soon.

The river police are a nice bunch, really, but almost every time I go out on a different boat, I get stopped by them and, every time, they do the same thing; they take me on board and give me a bit of a test. They ask what my radio signal should be in that particular area. You're meant to know all that – sort of – but if you don't, it doesn't matter. It's not illegal, but they go through the motions anyway. The rules of the river are a joy.

You can be breathalysed by the harbour-master – not by the police – but you can refuse the harbourmaster's request and, even if you do get breathalysed and it's positive, there's nothing they can do because it's not illegal and you've got no licence they can take away from you. So the whole thing's pointless. Being inebriated in charge of a boat is not an offence. You can be roaring drunk and weaving round the river, but provided you don't hit anything, you're okay.

I lived on *The Sea Sovereign* in one old dock and my local pub in the neighbouring dock was also a ship: the *Wibbley Wobbley*, an old 1929 Rhine ferry that had been converted into a pub in Britain and owned by a succession of villains. When I first knew it, it was owned by an ex-boxer. I used to organise a quiz night for him every Tuesday and got quite friendly with him. Then one night, around August 2001, he said 'I'm selling this place.' ►