

Robert Stephenson Trust



Contemporary Report on Yacht Titania race

This is a true account of that days proceedings in August 1851 as was witnessed by a reporter of the Hampshire Chronicle and written in his own words, but little did he realise the long term impact the Victory of the AMERICA would have in the annals of Yacht racing. That day in August, 1851, the yacht America, representing the young New York Yacht Club, would go on to beat the best the British could offer and win the Royal Yacht Squadron's 100 Guinea Cup. This was more than simply a boat race however, as it symbolised a great victory for the new world over the old, a triumph that unseated Great Britain as the world's undisputed maritime power. The trophy would go to the young democracy of the United States and it would be well over 100 years before the Cup was taken from New York, the American's domination was so complete. Shortly after America won the 100 Guinea Cup in 1851, New York Yacht Club Commodore John Cox Stevens and the rest of his ownership syndicate sold the celebrated schooner to an Irishman and returned home to New York as heroes. They went on to donate the Cup to the New York Yacht Club under a Deed of Gift, which stated that the trophy was to be "a perpetual challenge cup for friendly competition between nations."

Thus was born the America's Cup, named after the winning schooner America, as opposed to the country. The America's Cup is without a doubt the most difficult trophy in sport to win. In over 150 years since that first race off England, only three nations other than the United States have won what is often called the oldest trophy in international sport. For some perspective, consider that there had been nine contests for the America's Cup before the first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in 1896. The America's Cup is a challenge-based competition where the previous winning Yacht Club makes the rules and hosts the event, often making it difficult for the challenging Club(s) to take the Cup home. Early in the history of the Cup, these obstacles were completely insurmountable and the Defender was never threatened. In fact, despite a couple of close calls, it would take 132-years for a foreign Challenger to beat the American Defender and win the Cup.

None doubted that the "AMERICA" was a very fast sailer, but her powers had not been measured by the test of an actual contest. Therefore when it became known that she was entered amongst the yachts to run for the cup on Friday, the most intense interest was manifested by all classes, from the highest to the humblest, who have thronged in such masses this season to the Isle of Wight; and even her Majesty and the Court felt the influence of the universal curiosity which was excited to see how the stranger, of whom such great things were said, should acquit herself on the occasion.

The race was, in fact, regarded as a trial heat from which some anticipation might be formed of the result of the great international contest, to which the owners of "America" have challenged the yachtsmen of England, and which Mr R. Stephenson, the eminent engineer, has accepted by backing his own schooner, the "TITANIA", against the "AMERICA". Among the visitors on Friday were many strangers, Frenchmen enroute to Havre, Germans in quiet wonderment at the excitement around them, and Americans already triumphing in the anticipated success of their countrymen. The cards containing the names and colours of the yachts described the course merely as being "round the

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Isle of Wight" the printed programme stated that it was to be "round the Isle of Wight, inside Noman's Buoy and Sandhead Buoy, and outside the Nab" The distinction gave rise, at the close of the race, to questioning the "America's" right to the cup, as she did not sail outside the Nab Light; but this objection was not persisted in, and the Messrs Stevens were presented with the cup.

The following yachts were entered. They were moored in a double line. No time allowed for tonnage:-

YACHT..... TONS..... OWNER

Beatrice, Schooner 161 Sir W.P.Carew

Volante, Cutter 48 Mr J.L.Craigie

Arrow, Cutter 84 Mr t. Chamberlayne

Wyvern. Schooner 205

Duke of MarlboroughIone, Scooner 75 Mr A. Hill

Constance, Schooner 218 Marquis of Conyham

Titania, Schooner 100 Mr R. Stevenson

Gypsy Queen, Schooner 160 Sir H. R.Hoghton

Alarm, Cutter 193 Mr J. Weld

Mona, Cutter 82 Lord A. Paget

America, Schooner 170 Mr J. B. Stevens & CoBrilliant 3Mast Schooner 392 Mr G. H. Ackers

Bacchante, Cutter 80 Mr B. H. Jones

Freak, Cutter 60 Mr W. Curling

Stella, Cutter 65 Mr R. Frankland

Eclipse, Cutter 50 Mr H. S.Fearon

Fernande, Schooner 127 Major Martin

Aurora, Cutter 84 Mr T.Le Merchant

At 9.55 the preparatory gun was fired from the Club-House battery and the yachts were soon sheeted from deck to topmast with clouds of canvas, huge gaff topsails and balloon jibs being greatly in vogue, and the "AMERICA evincing her disposition to take advantage of her new jib by hoisting it with all alacrity, The whole flotilla not in the race were already in motion, many of them stretching down towards Osborne and Rhyde to get good start of the clippers. Of the list above given the TITANIA and the STELLA did not start, and the FERNANDE did not take her station(the latter was twice winner in 1850, and once this year; the Stella won once last year) Thus only fifteen started, of which seven were schooners, including the "BRILLIANT" (three masted schooner) and eight were cutters.

At 10 o'clock the signal gun for sailing was fired, and before the smoke had well cleared away the whole of the beautiful fleet were under weigh, moving steadily east with the tide and a gentle breeze. The start was effected splendidly, the yachts breaking away like a field of race horses; the only laggard was the America, which did not move for a second or so after the others, Steamers, shore Boats, and Yachts of all sizes buzzed along each side of the course, and spread away for miles over the rippling sea, a sight such as the Adriatic never beheld in all the pride of Venice; such, beaten though we are ,as no other country in the world could exhibit; while it is confessed that anything like it

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was never seen, even here, in the annals of yachting. Soon after they started a steamer went off from the roads, with the members of the sailing committee, Sir B. Graham Bart ,Commodore, Royal Yacht Squadron, and the following gentlemen:-Lord Exmouth, Captain Lyon, Mr A. Fontaine ,Captain Ponsonby, Captain Corry, Messrs Harvey, Leslie, Greg, and Reynolds. The American Minister, Mr Abbot Lawrence, and his son Col Lawrence (attaché) to the American legation, arrived too late for the sailing of America, but were accommodated on board the steamer, and went round the island in her; the several steamers, chartered by private gentlemen or for excursion trips, also accompanied the match. The GIPSY QUEEN, with all her canvass set, and in the strength of the tide, took the lead after starting, with the Beatrice next, and then with little difference in order, the VOLANTE, CONSTANCE, Arrow, and a flock of others. The AMERICA went easily for some time under mainsail (with a small gaff-topsail of a triangular shape, braced up to the truck of the short and slender stick which serves as her maintopmast), foresail, fore-staysail, and jib; while her opponents had every cloth set that the Club Regulations allow. She soon began to creep upon them, passing some of the cutters to windward. In a quarter of an hour she had left them all behind, except the CONSTANCE, BEATRICE, and GIPSY QUEEN which were well together, and went along smartly with the light breeze.

The yachts were timed off Noman's Land Buoy, and the character of the race at this moment may be guessed from the result. Volante 11hrs 7mins 0secs Freak 11hrs 8mins 20secs Aurora 11hrs 8mins 30secs Gypsy Queen 11hrs 8mins 45secs America 11hrs 9mins 0secs Beatrice 11hrs 9mins 15secs Alarm 11hrs 9mins 20secs Arrow 11hrs 10mins 0secs Bacchante 11hrs 10mins 15secs The Other six were staggering about in the rear, and the WYVERN soon afterwards hauled her wind, and went back towards Cowes. The AMERICA speedily advanced to the front and got clear away from the rest, off Sandown Bay, the wind freshening, she carried away her jib- boom; but as she was well handled, the mishap produced no ill effect, and during a lull which came on in the breeze for some time subsequently, her competitors gained a trifling advantage, but did not approach her. Off Ventnor the AMERICA was more than a mile ahead of the AURORA, then the nearest of the racing squadron; and hearabouts the number of her competitors was lessened by three cutters, the VOLANTE having sprung her bowsprit, the ARROW having gone ashore and the ALARM having staid by the ARROW to assist in getting her off. But from the moment the America had rounded St. Catherine's Point, with a moderate breeze at S.S.W., the chances of coming up with her again were over. The WILDFIRE which, though not in the match, kept up with the "Stranger" for some time, was soon shaken off, and of the vessels in the match, the AURORA was the last that kept her in sight, until, the weather thickening, even that small comfort was lost to her.

As AMERICA approached the Needles, the wind fell and a haze came on, not thick enough, however, to be very dangerous; and here she met and passed (saluting with her flag) the Victoria and Albert Royal Yacht, with her Majesty on board. Her Majesty waited for the AURORA and then returned to Osborne, passing the America again in the Solent. About six o'clock, the AURORA being some five or six miles astern, and the result of the race inevitable, the steamers that had accompanied the yachts bore away for Cowes, where they landed their passengers. The evening fell darkly, heavy clouds being piled along the northern shore of the strait; and the thousands who had lined the

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southern shore, from West Cowes long past the Castle, awaiting anxiously the appearance of the winner, and eagerly drinking in every rumour as to the progress of the match, were beginning to disperse, when the peculiar rig of the clipper was discerned through the gloom, and at 8h.34m o'clock (railway time, 8h. 37m., according to the secretary of the Royal Yacht Squadron) a gun from the flag-ship announced her arrival as the winner of the cup. The AURORA was announced as at 8h.58m.; the BACCHANTE at 9h. 30m.; and ECLIPSE at 9h.45m, the BRILLIANT at 1h.20m.; (Saturday morning). No account of the rest.

On the evening after the race there was a very brilliant and effective display of fireworks by land and water along the Club-house esplanade, at which 6000 or 7000 persons were present. A reunion took place at the Club-house; and the occasion was taken of Mr. Abbot Lawrence's presence to compliment him on the success of his countrymen. His Excellency acknowledged the kindness in suitable terms, and said that, though he said he could not be proud of the triumph of his fellow-citizens, he still felt it was but the children giving a lesson to the father. On Saturday evening the AMERICA was sailed from Cowes to Osborne, in consequence of the intimation that the Queen wished to inspect her. The Victoria and Albert also dropped down to Osborne. At a quarter to six, the Queen embarked in the state barge, accompanied by his Royal Highness Prince Albert and suite, and on nearing the America, the national colours of that vessel were dipped, out of respect to her Majesty, and raised again when her Majesty proceeded on board. Her Majesty made a close inspection of the AMERICA, attended by Commodore Stevens, Colonel Hamilton, and the officers of the yacht. The queen remained on board half an hour, and expressed great admiration of the general arrangements and character of this famous schooner. On her Majesty leaving, the American colours were again dipped, and her Majesty proceeded in the barge to Osborne, where she arrived at half past six o'clock. And so ended a fateful day for competitive sailing, the cup was taken back to America and to this day it has never taken a place at the Royal Yacht Squadrons headquarters, Cowes, we have tried many times to recover this prestigious trophy but alas it has always eluded us.