

John Spencer 1931 - 1996

An Obituary by Peter Tait

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The Oxford Dictionary says 'obituary - A 'brief' biography of a deceased person.' There is no chance of that here, this is definitely a special case. It's never been possible to be 'brief' with someone like John!



Photo: Mark Steele

John Spencer

Knowledgeable in many areas, complex and multi-talented, well read, of quick mind and keen humour, popular and generous, only John's modesty and dislike of publicity kept him from being a national hero. Best known as a boat designer and builder but really more like a 'sailing boat scientist' John dissected any problem to small parts before ingeniously re-assembling it his way. As someone said of him, "You ask him the time and he explains how a clock works."

Always to the fore in John's work was the requirement that it must be possible to do it yourself and at moderate cost. He became the champion of the amateur boatbuilder.

Early in his career John Spencer was too radical for the establishment. The sight of his brightly coloured, hardchine, low cost creations rocketing around the harbour winning races was too much in many quarters. The Spencer flagship "Infidel" became "the Black Box" and its creator begrudgingly 'The Plywood King'

(not really a complement when you think about it) and no doubt many other unpublishable descriptions but all were impressed albeit secretly. John developed modern concepts and materials firstly with dinghies then applied them to keelboats. Others followed. It took considerable genius get dinghies planing and to change the way keel yachts were designed and built. John showed the way and at the same time made keel boat sailing affordable. His specialty was low cost, easy to build, nice to sail boats. On behalf of those who have owned or sailed on his boats, 'Thanks John!'



A revolution in dinghies - John on 'Cherub', launch day. All other 12 footers were obsolete overnight!

How do you summarise such a career? John was a prolific letter writer, often sending and receiving as many as 17 letters in a day, to and from all corners of the world. I was lucky enough to have been the recipient of many of these and some excerpts might be of interest to readers his Fresh Perspective column (Boating New Zealand's most popular columnist), as they show more of Spencer the character and I'm sure he would approve a DIY obituary. His magazine column was largely devoted to his cause which clearly was,

'Promoting the building, sailing and racing of all types of yachts for good clean fun' but there was much more to him than that:

Health problems always dogged him. He suffered from asthma and had polio as a child, which damaged his spine, but over the years he developed his own ways of dealing with his problems. He always felt that the various medical professions had let him down and they often copped his wrath;

"In spite of all predictions to the contrary I've definitely made it to 60."

And then, *"I was promised a wheelchair at 18 if I persisted (at boat building) and was supposed to be dead at 50. I think I have done it well and I did it my way. I'm 64 on July 6 and still alive and not in a bloody wheel chair."*

And more recently *"I have suffered all my life from heating systems that burn up oxygen and leave me short of breath. It is easy to keep warm with suitable clothes and I would have been dead 15 years back if I had followed up on Green Lane Asthma Clinic treatment for it. The fellow who they reckoned was their "Prize Patient" and did all they told him has been dead for 15 years now and was 10 years younger than me."*



'Infidel' The 62' revolution in keelboat design, all other keelboats were obsolete overnight!

Lots of faithful friends, *"Got home to find my German one legged friend had been out and got me a Xmas tree - now all decorated and standing in one of my new gumboots - he reckoned as I did not like to make a fuss about Xmas, he only got me a small tree."*

Not too concerned about 'the image' and by now living in a unique house in the Bay of Islands *"All dressed up for a funeral at 3pm. First time since John McCurdie's and I'm not feeling very comfortable. Had a hell of a job to get my good leather shoes looking right as had no shoe polish but silicone spray fixed them after numerous applications. A really nice pair of brogues that I inherited from a dead man I never met or knew..."*



NZ's first big boat export 'New world' 73 foot light, fast and lovely, character schooner, tiller steering, no engine..

Enthusiastic. I had asked him how many divisions he thought there should be in FIREBUG racing. *"What I envisage is six trophies in all, for various categories of entrants;*

- 1. Two handed, both under 14*
- 2. Two handed, one under 12*
- 3. Two handed, one over 40.*
- 4. Single handed under 40.*
- 5. Single handed over 40.*

I guess 5 is enough? 6. Was to be two handed with one over 50 years of age...



FireBugs in a school regatta. A new look on the water. What kid would want anything else?

Hard to clean up. I had sent up the results of some 'pull out tests' I had carried out on self tapping screws after doubting his advice, "Your tests on screws are nothing new to me..."



One Metre Radio Yacht World Technical Officer

A great innovator and not often one to skite. "Professionals have copied many of my inventions, even stolen my patterns. You will be well aware of the luff spar..." and then "Pete, I look at all these close up pics of America's Cup on both courses and they are all using exactly the same style head, clew and tack attachments that I used back around 1960 for keel yacht sails. The first 'cross cut' genoa ever made in NZ was designed by me for 'Sirius'."

Couldn't get on with other people's gadgets, for example his new crockpot, "I read the instructions fully and did what they said. Set it going in expectation of having my first meal from it around 7 hours later at which stage the vegetables were still raw. Left it overnight and the vegetables were still raw though the outside of the pot was hot. Turned it onto high and got in with a potato masher (not needed in the instructions) and finally after 28 hours I got it all cooked." He must have been getting peckish by then!



The ply clad pole house with a difference in the Bay of Islands featured a unique ventilation system and a Tanekaha tree growing up through a hole in the veranda!

Always helping and encouraging kids, "Have had a brilliant day with my new apprentice - a 9 year old English boy who wants to build a model yacht. I tell him how and he does it right. He listens to what he is told and I only wish he was my Grandson."

The Pension. "One and a half weeks to go for the pension. Will believe it when I see it on the bank statement. I wonder if they pay it before or after. I suppose they would not want to pay in advance in case you died before the fortnight was up."

And then later, "Social Welfare Dept informed me today that my first "Guaranteed" Retirement Income will be deposited in my bank account tomorrow and henceforth every 2nd Tuesday. I bought after much hesitation this afternoon, a plastic bottle of \$19.50 gin to celebrate. It is as good as any other London Dry but had one and decided I had lost my taste for it. I guess it's all just habit but why can't I get a habit for fruit juice?"



My own Spencer 30 'Julius Pleazar' from 1972. With tumblehome and 10'-2" beam no-one these days knows what it is, "What sort of boat is that?"

Smoking. "Good day/bad night. Was so busy yesterday that I didn't have much time for smoking and my consumption of Pall Mall Plain over 24hrs approx. half normal intake as a result. As a Victorian novelist would have said - "I leave it to my gentile reader to presume whether the bad night that followed might not just be coincidence." John always maintained, and some medical opinion backs him up, that smoking can help asthma in some way. He may have been right but the almighty cough seemed to indicate otherwise!

Plan printing was sometimes a problem. "A one metre (yacht plan) will fit on A4 at 1:4 scale but on A3 the best you can do is 1:3. If enlarged from A4 comes out approx 1:3.5. Reduction seems to work out at approx. 0.7 each time down through A1 to A4. One metre full size will not of course fit on A1 and obviously can be reduced to 1:2 and 1:4 by starting from A0 down to A2 and then A2 to A4. If plans can be produced on A3 and /or A4 it saves a hell of a lot of printing costs..." Phew!



John Spencer receiving 'Some Trophy' from Joe Cotton, Russell Boating Club's barefoot Commodore when his schooner 'Black Panther' took the gun in 1995 with me at the helm.

His favourite boats. He liked them all even the BOI rubbish barge but at the time said "Probably 'Black Panther' the 17m schooner but the next time some twit asks me what my favourite boat is I shall say the Firebug"



The Spencer 33 'Scheherazade'

Politics. "I just found out that Mike Moore is PM. Labour must hold some sort of record for this now - maybe they are all having a turn or maybe they want out at the next elections."

Known worldwide but modest. "A local man asked, "Do you know John"? The American said - "Well I have known him for many years and I think I know him now. He is known throughout the world of yachting." I must admit to having great pleasure from such meetings and the locals finding I need no introduction to such people."

John's only remaining ambition was "to see as many people as possible, especially children, afloat in their own boats"



Sunrise discovery of the Bay of Islands in my Spencer 25' Stiletto 'Baccara' 1967

Feeling a bit long in the tooth. "I am not too happy about my condition these days but am a very happy fellow really. It is all a matter of attitude and friends and the ability to laugh at the experts who said I would be in a wheel chair and dead by 50. I think I am good for a few years yet, at 64 now."

But unfortunately not so. John's passing on has left a large gap in my life and that of many, many others. Cheerio old mate, thanks for the inspiration, the fun times and happy memories!



The legacy..