

Antique Boat Regatta in the Netherlands

The village of Grou hosts 250 'old sailing ships'

By Peter Tait

There were Aaks, Schokkers, Tjotters, Boeiers but I was looking for a 'Zeeschouw with an orange banner' and the waterfront was chock-a-block! I had arrived in the small town of Grou in the Netherlands for a classic boat regatta, and I could see there was something special about to happen..

Dutch friends Koos and Bert had invited me to spend a few days with them at a 'antique boat regatta' but I hadn't expected anything on this scale. Two hundred and fifty classic boats, all in sparkling condition, some dating back as far as 1820 were tied up in town ready for a big celebration. Crowds of onlookers were wandering around and Grou (near Sneek) was all dressed up.



Gleaming varnish, flags and excitement in the air.

The occasion was the celebration of 50 years of the Stichting Stamboek Ronde en Platbodemjachten (SSRP) the official guardian of the Dutch old boat register and the historic value therein. The program was for 3 days. Day one for socialising - there was plenty to see and talk about, day two for parading the boats in front of the Queen of Holland (a sailor, she actually owns one of these craft herself) and day three the much anticipated race day.



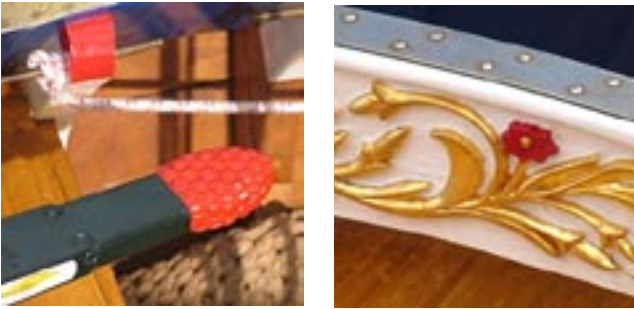
Grou all dressed up and a rudder carving for a Queen!

I walked the length of the waterfront looking for the 'one with the big orange banner' but soon resorted to a phone call and Koos appeared from the crowds. I had sailed in this area previously and seen plenty of the old ships around but hadn't ever been on board one. Our 'Ouwe Tukker' was a 32 footer in steel with the standard wooden spars, brown sails, lee boards, bent gaff, loose footed main and even a lead light window! There wasn't much that was familiar or 'normal'!

The Boats



An extraordinary workmanship and maritime artistry.



Kinky tiller knob and is this really gold leaf, on a yacht?

There were twelve classes attending the regatta including the big Aaks, the Praams which had in the old days been produce carriers, Schokkers with the distinctive sharp bow and Bol similar to the Aak but smaller. Length varied from 20 metres to the small play-yachts with all the trimmings. Looking back in time the small Tjotter gets credit as one of the early recreational sailboats. The actual word 'Tjotter' is apparently the likely origin of the English word yacht.

The example in the photo is certainly recreational - a fully functional racing yacht but also a floating work of art! This little ship actually tied up alongside us overnight so the next morning we had a close up look. Eyes popped at the detailing - at every opportunity superb craftsmanship had given over to artistry: relief carving, fancy metalwork, rope work, bright paintwork, the startling red strawberry tiller knob, and were those highlights really gold leaf?

Similar traditional techniques and total respect for boating culture could be observed throughout the fleet. The favoured timber is especially grown European oak but many of the larger boats are in steel.

The Queen's 'de Groene Draeck' (Green Dragon) and several of the other larger examples were the stars of the show. 'Ooohs' and 'aaahs' were heard as they passed by - powerful boats with large 'hissing' bow waves pushed up by the blunt bows.



Lining up four abreast for the Queen.



Real Queen at the helm.



Koos and Bert

Big Parade for The Queen

The morning of day two was a dress rehearsal in the morning and the Parade in front of the Queen in the afternoon. A 'Palaver' at the yacht club for skippers sorted out the program - the intention was for the entire fleet to anchor out on the lake and at a set time for each class proceed single file up a side canal, U-turn into a formation four boats wide and get sail on. This procession then passed by the Queen with a salute which consisted of a headsail dip, crew waving, sail up again and continue on. What could easily have been a shambles appeared to be quite successful, Queen Beatrix obviously enjoyed the spectacle and as a guest and not the skipper, I was happy too!



One of the smaller boats showing leeboards and rig.

Sailing tricks out of the square.

These were real little sailing ships: a modest rig in the traditional style with adjustment ropes going in all directions, a rudder over the stern with tiller steering, unusual sail handling systems and all the the flags and banners. Unstayed wooden masts and those crazy-looking leeboards, great wooden 'pancakes' hanging off each gunwale on one large bolt - how did they operate? Maybe a bit like a mullet boat you ask? No, I'd say more like something from the Spanish Armada!

The first observation was the soft and pleasant motion through the water - a result of the flat bottom, shallow draught, internal ballast and maximum buoyancy forward. It's important to remember here that these are boats for sheltered water, no possibility of Atlantic crossings or Cape Horn roundings!

The leeboards were very clever. Shaped from timber with some ballast built in to negate buoyancy they operate by block and tackle. The topsides cant in above the gunwale so when the boat heels, the board in use becomes vertical, the cross-section is aerofoil one side and dead flat on the business face. Once in the fully down position the adjustment is effectively fore and aft allowing the balance of the whole show to be fine tuned. Think of all the boats that don't sail well, most are not balanced right

but have fixed keels or centrecases so you are stuck with it - these boats simply adjust the leeboards. Down-wind both boards can be up and clear of the water.

The rig - well, interesting again. The wooden masts are unstayed and mounted on a tabernacle to enable quick lowering for negotiating bridges or when going into the boat shed - yes most live indoors. A strut (sometimes doubling as the bowsprit) provides the angle to allow a block and tackle to do the raising and lowering. The loose footed mainsail attached to the mast with hoops and this allowed a very unusual secondary reefing technique - the tack could be hoisted high up the mast to quickly reduce mainsail area. The sail plan was very low aspect to reduce rig stresses and overturning moments.

Performance wise there were no surprises and it all reverted to the basics - it seems that with all sailing boats, old or new, all sizes, the rules just stay the same - good balance, nice flow over the sails, clean underwater lines and smart crew. Generally boat handing was first class.



Race day scenes could have been 200 years ago or a multi-million dollar oil painting by an old master!



Plenty of time for socialising and relaxing.

Race day

The day was overcast with squally showers forecast. Most boats put a reef in, skippers looking apprehensive. The races were to be held in an area of man-made lakes linked by narrow channels. There was plenty of action - at the first mark, while challenging for the lead, our bow knocked off the leading boat's flagpole – oops sorry!! And at the first narrow channel which was just 20 metres wide, there was a problem – it was directly upwind! The leading bunch were doing all right until the bowsprit of second placed skewered the rig of the leader! Both boats stopped and the next five had nowhere to go – steel boats - clonk! crash! bang! Dutch swearwords filled the air and engines revved but fortunately there was no blood or serious damage.

For us continued mixed fortunes meant we finished mid fleet but a few NZ sailing techniques had made a difference and the guys were pleased - "We have been sailing for 5 weeks and had a great time but this was by far the best day!"

Overall the organisation was tops, the sailors had a great time, the boats were simply stunning, real boats and real people, no loads of bull from sponsors and the like, and the final evening prize giving capped it off nicely - a casual yet grand affair under crystal chandeliers.



Stylish racing fleet on the square lake.



Big budget, casual prize giving and ancient mariners.

Great time!

Early the next morning it was off home for the guys, holiday over. They had explored the North Sea coast as far up as Wilhelmshaven in Germany and returned by canal. The coast of the Netherlands is protected by a string of low lying islands with a tidal area in between. These flat bottomed boats are able to dry out at low tide so can take full advantage of this large recreational area. Future plans include a trip out to the island of Helgoland in the North Sea and five months in the Baltic Sea amongst the Danish Islands in 2008.

So it was back to work for them but I was heading for the north of Germany and a 700 mile sail in the Baltic Sea but that's another story for some other time..

For anyone interested in visiting the area, the locals are friendly and most speak good English, boating is great fun on the inland waterways. Charter boat companies are plentiful and you can tie up in quiet waterways or in the centre of amazing old towns, right in amongst the cobbled streets with cafes and the razzmatazz. Big budgets aren't essential – even the sailing/camping holidays with big cruising dinghies (see photo) would be great fun!

Any comments are welcome to: pete@firebug.co.nz



Heading off home.



Small charter boats.



All types on the waterways but only electric windmills!