

IRENE REMISCENCES OF COLIN COOPER A GRANDSON OF THE FIRST  
OWNER.

MY first glimpse of Irene was from the sands of Burnham-on-Sea, where we used to go for pre-war family holidays. My father pointed to a two-masted sailing ship (a gaff-rigged ketch, as I later discovered) emerging from the mouth of the Parrett estuary, and said "There's Irene." As far as I can remember, her sails were white. I recall with certainty that a sister ketch, the *A*, had black sails. She was smaller and not so pretty, and ended her days as a grain tender in Bristol docks. The third member of the Colthurst Symons fleet at that time was *Sunshine*, lean and graceful and reported to be the fastest sailing vessel trading in the Bristol Channel. Unlike the other two, *Sunshine* had a figurehead, a busty lady painted in bright colours.

Colthurst Symons had owned other ships. My father told me that the *New Endeavour* had encountered a German U-boat in World War One. Its skipper had put the crew into a small boat with a supply of apples, and then sunk her with a shell at close range. At dawn the crew found themselves only a mile or two from the Welsh coast. After the war, Colthurst Symons acquired a replacement, named *New Endeavour II*. She too came to a sticky end; after leaving the service of Colthurst Symons, she was scuttled by her new owner for the sake of the insurance money.

Another ship at one time owned by Colthurst Symons was the *Rosevean*, mentioned by James Joyce in *Ulysses* "*..the three-masted schooner Rosevean*

*from Bridgwater with bricks...*" OUP paperback edition page 240. She was sold some years before Joyce published his celebrated novel in 1922 and, I understand, finished her life on the muddy banks of the Parrett. *Sunshine*, sold after World War Two when the post-war boom had declined, was arrested for gun-running in the Mediterranean and taken into Genoa harbour.

There has been some discussion on the internet about the ownership of Irene in the 1930s. I had believed that Colthurst Symons, who had bought the ketch before the launch in 1907, were still the owners when I first saw her c.1936, but so many are the assertions and the different names put forward on the internet that I must now admit to some doubt.

As a schoolboy in the late 1930s, I would sometimes cycle from Somerset Bridge, where I lived, down to Bridgwater docks, where I watched my grandfather's sailing vessels being loaded with bricks and tiles for Bristol or Dublin, and perhaps other destinations. A unique aroma of tarry rope and old tobacco wafted up from the below. I half-hoped that someone would ask me if I would care to sign on as a cabin boy, but of course it never happened. It was not until 1980 that I had the unimaginable pleasure of clambering on board Irene and actually being taken for a short trip up the River Parrett. In an article, *Clay Recollections*, written for the Brick and Tile Museum, I wrote the following

(slightly edited):

*The ketch that achieved international fame was the Irene, which those who loaded her, like those who sailed her, called the 'Eye-reeny', giving her the three syllables that were her due as a Byzantine saint. The later 'Eye-reen' was derived from the American folk-song first recorded by Huddy Ledbetter in 1932 and which reached the British charts in the 1950s, subsequently being adopted as their anthem by Bristol Rovers.*

***'Goodnight, Irene, Irene goodnight,  
I'll see you in my dreams.'***

*Well, I dreamt of her sometimes, but it wasn't until Dr Leslie Morrish rescued her from dereliction and gave her a new lease of life - and a new profession - that she returned to my consciousness. Irene had been built in Carver's Yard on East Quay, and was bought by Colthurst Symons before completion. She was launched in 1907, and christened by my Aunt Gladys, eldest daughter of C.J. Symons. On board were various other members of the family, including my mother, then a teenager of 17.*

*Leslie Morrish found Irene, derelict, in Hamble. After restoring her, he sailed her round the south coast to Combech, the tiny port in the Parrett estuary from which she had sailed and to which she had returned so many times in the early part of the 20th century. Morrish's voyage in 1980 was well publicised, and when I went with my wife and two small children to spend a week in my brother's caravan at Blue Anchor, I knew that her arrival was imminent. I had not expected, however, to see her one afternoon while we were exploring Bossington Beach. When I spotted a sail coming round the headland*

*west of Porlock, I had no doubt that it was Irene. It was exciting moment for me. I persuaded my family to leave their quest for unusual striped pebbles (flint streaked with limestone) and to get into the car.*

*There was no sign of Irene at Minehead. Watchet was the next possibility - almost a certainty, in fact, because it was getting late. But there was no sign in Watchet either, although we waited until well past the time when she should have appeared. I heard afterwards that it been the skipper's intention to put in at Watchet, but a combination of engine trouble and an offshore wind had made it impossible.*

*The next port was the final destination of Combech, and there we found Irene the next morning, stuck fast in the mud within a short distance of the mouth of the small harbour. The skipper, Leslie Morrish, had brought her in with the radio assistance of a pilot who was unaware that an unusually high tide had caused the River Parrett to flood, so that at its outer limits the depth was a mere 2 feet. The inevitable happened, and Irene went aground. It was a compelling scene the following morning, with people everywhere. I lost no time in clambering up the ladder with my two boys and introducing myself to Dr Leslie Morrish. 'Never mind about that,' he interrupted impatiently, 'Get aft and jump and down with the others'. I should have realised that he was a man under pressure and left the formalities until later.*

*We joined the crowd jumping up and down in an attempt to free Irene from her embrace of Parrett mud. It produced no effect, despite a near-high tide, and eventually the freighter Bowness, on her*

*way out of Cardiff, made a detour to tow us off the mud. We were rewarded for our efforts with a short voyage up the wide estuary before Dr Morrish turned her round and returned to Combwich. The entrance to the harbour is a narrow one, and it was a mistake to attempt it under Irene's own power. There was a splintering of wood as the bows hit the wharf. 'It's only wood,' announced the skipper cheerfully. One of the old brickyard workers standing near me on the deck said: 'Thic zilly bugger, ur zhould've chucked a hrope across, like we used to do'. I'm sure he was right, but he had local knowledge and long experience. Nevertheless, it was the efforts of Leslie Morrish that saved the Irene from total extinction, an achievement to be admired by everyone who is alive to the simple beauty of sail, and in particular of old sailing ships.'*

I have been informed that one written source claims that Irene was named after a Miss Irene Symons. I cannot believe there is any truth in that. My mother Clara Violet (always known as Vi) had several sisters: Gladys, Beatrice, Christine, Gwendoline, Dorothy; but I never heard of anyone in the family called Irene. If my grandfather had decided to name a ship after one of his daughters, there was only one possibility: Gladys, the first-born. To name the ship after one of the others would have been poor family diplomacy, to say the least.

I have already mentioned how the classical three syllables of Irene became only two. Bridgwater in the 1930s and 1940s had a curiously old-

fashioned sound to its speech patterns. For instance, the Fleur de Lys pub in (I think) St Mary's Street was called the "Flower de Luce", a form used by Shakespeare and possibly before. This does not mean that the working people of Bridgwater were Shakespearian scholars; it was just the way they had always said it - until radio and television came along to erode their speech patterns with unimagined rapidity.

There are some unfortunate inaccuracies in Bridgwater's online history. One website tells you that the home of the Agapemonites (an unorthodox sect based on religion, money and sex, like many similar American organisations) had their home in Charlynch. Unless Charlynch has become a suburb of Spaxton, it is untrue: it was in Spaxton. Another website informs us that in the introduction to his book *Good Night Irene*, Dr Leslie Morrish asserts that Irene was owned by the Bridgwater Brick and Tile Company. I have searched the book, and cannot find such a statement. My grandfather, C.J. Symons (the managing director of Colthurst Symons and Company) purchased Irene from her builders, Carvers. I believe she was the last trading sailing ship to be built in Bridgwater, and I know that she remained in the possession of the company for many years. I do not know precisely when she changed owners. When I saw her, quite by chance, at Appledore c.1952, she was leased to, or possibly even owned by, Captain Schiller. I found Irene high

and dry by the sea wall, and I was able to photograph her from various angles as she stood securely on the sandy bed of the harbour at low tide. My photographs, unfortunately, have gone missing, but the photograph on page 13 of *Good Night Irene* shows the scene well.

Irene had a diesel engine, a somewhat unreliable Ellwe. It was fitted in 1939, according to Morrish, though I have the feeling that it was earlier, about 1933 or 1934. That may have been another engine. It did not have a battery; after the initial start, its first task was to pump compressed air back into the cylinder, ready for the next start. Leslie Morrish replaced the elderly Ellwe with a younger Gardner.

Later, Irene worked in the Caribbean; fitted out with diving gear and five-star catering facilities, she could be chartered for, I read somewhere, £10,000 pounds a week. It was a rags-to-riches story that, unfortunately, put her out of reach to all but the rich.

This glamorous life of a beautiful but once humble ship came to an end when a disastrous fire in 2003 all but destroyed her. Against advice to write her off, Morrish decided to have her towed back to England, an act as hazardous and as uncertain in its outcome as his original decision to buy Irene and restore her.

Irene is at present being rebuilt in a creek by the River Lynher, off the Tamar, near Plymouth. [When this was written, in 2010.]