



BARNEY SANDEMAN

MARRYING OFF THE KIDS

The classic yacht broker who thinks he's running an orphanage

STORY ROB PEAKE PHOTOGRAPHY GEOFF MOORE

Re wind to 1982 and Barney Sandeman is 16. He's on holiday with his family in Corfu, on a classic motoryacht called *Caramba*. The young Sandeman loves *Caramba*, but it's something else that's caught his eye. At every port they tie up in, there she is, and Sandeman cannot take his eyes off her. She has the looks, the curves, the grace, she has everything an adolescent boy might fall for. Sandeman is bold enough to ask around and finds out her name. "She's called *Erna*," a kindly local tells him. "She is 70 years old, built in Scotland."

Better known today as the 1912 Fife *Sumurun*, the object of Sandeman's desires had a lasting effect. "It still makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up," he recalls. "This beautiful wooden boat, like a big bird."

When it came to selling boats, some years later, Sandeman knew it had to be boats he loved, or none at all.

He'd grown up in a sailing family, exploring Poole Harbour as a child and then spending time working in the Med and Caribbean as crew – "I'm not sure how professional it was back then but it was a lot of fun". He returned to work in his father's marketing company, where he learned about running a business, and meanwhile raced competitively on the water. Sandeman made the British Olympic development team training for the Sydney games and raced at the pre-Olympic regatta in the Tornado class, with partner Will Howden.

"We were fast, but fast in the wrong direction is never great," he says with a smile. Then a back injury forced him to give up the dream altogether and he found a job as a yacht broker. Twelve years ago, he set out on his own as the Sandeman Yacht Company and is now one of the go-to brokers on the global classic scene.

"We would do better financially selling modern yachts, but my passion has always been old boats," he says.

Sandeman tells a story about a yacht he was shown last year that was sitting quietly on the hard in Villefranche-sur-Mer. "It was a time warp. One of those boats that have been in the same family for decades and are unchanged. It was lovely to come across."

Part of Sandeman's job is being a vintage yacht match-maker and having seen the boat in Villefranche, he immediately called a customer he knew in Rome. Now he turns to his telephone answering machine and replays a message from said customer, a rolling Italian accent spoken above wind and waves: "Barney, we have just arrived in Rome, we sailed here in seven hours, she is lovely, lovely, thank you Barney, we talk soon, bye bye.."

"I do sometimes feel like I've got an orphanage and I've got to get the children out to the right family," says Sandeman. "There are a lot of people who would like to own a classic but it's a very special person that will commit. The boats we sell are not bought by lottery winners. They are very passionate people, who are careful what they do with their money, but owning a classic is not something they have suddenly decided to do. It is in their DNA. It's a love affair, something they can't do anything about."

It's no surprise to hear there are two common requests from potential owners nowadays, the first being for a big name designer. Sandeman says: "The early days of digging those boats out of the mud put the Fife name out there, but Fife is not the whole story. There are some wonderful designers that are not as well known, the Fred Shepherds, the Dallimores, that don't get

the air time they should. There may be a better boat out there for someone than simply one by Fife or Herreshoff."

The second request, again unsurprising given the thriving classic regatta scene, is for performance on the racecourse. He'll happily find you a slippery wooden boat to race if you want one, but despite his own racing background – he was also part of the highly competitive XOD fleet in the Solent and has won national and European titles in keelboats – when it comes to classics Sandeman is a cruising man. He says: "I would rather see people sailing and enjoying their boats with a big smile.

"Rather than a set of guys with matching oilskins pushing a boat harder than it was meant to be pushed. Time spent when you're actually part of the boat is priceless and racing can complicate that relationship."

Sandeman owns a 44ft Sparkman & Stephens yawl, *Laughing Gull*, that he sails with his wife Grace and eight-year-old daughter Bonnie. "I'm a big fan of Olin Stephens and I wanted a boat designed by him between 1930 and 1950. I never thought I would own one. We are really lucky and hopefully we can afford to keep it."

Kept as she was at launch, bar one espresso machine down below, she's largely a family cruising boat, but the last two years Sandeman has entered Panerai British Classic Week at Cowes, run under the IRC handicap system. Sandeman is a

member of the British Classic Yacht Club and praises it for developing the UK classic scene, but he favours the CIM rating system used in the Med. "CIM rewards authenticity. You look out on a sunny day off Antibes and it could be the 1930s, whereas you look off Cowes and it's slightly different. I've done a lot of racing and I love racing, but these boats are almost birds or dolphins and there's something natural about them that shouldn't be compromised by modern concerns.

"I can't see the point of buying modern sails for an old boat. It's not good for the boat unless you've beefed it up and it's not in concert with what you're trying to achieve. To come in, polish your brass but hide your plastic sails under a sail cover..."

Sandeman is not shy of voicing an opinion but often he'll finish with a smile and an equitable "who's to say?".

And he rails against any 'sniffiness' around boats, saying: "You have got to keep an eye on what our children are going to call classic. They may be looking at early Wally Yachts in the way we consider a vintage design.

"If the classic scene goes anywhere, it will go to restorations that are even better, more authentic, like the classic car market, like *Altair*, where Albert Obrist was talking about buying a field to grow the right kind of Egyptian cotton. It's wandered off track a bit. Everyone calls a refit a restoration. No one wants to go sailing in a museum piece, but there is room for getting the detail as it was, as well as sneaking in some comforts where you can."

He baulks at the more exclusive side of today's classic scene and says: "Classic boats are for everyone. They are not elite. We've got to interest everyone, to preserve the past for the sake of the future. We've got to try to get families enjoying these boats, sailing with a smile, the kids helping dad varnish the toerail. You don't have to be made of money to own a wooden boat and there are plenty of people out there who are not part of the regatta clan, they're just quietly enjoying their boats." 🌊

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