

PERCE COVERDALE

Yachtsman and Battery Point boat builder

In People magazine, 23 December 1959, Perce at 80 was described as: 'Tasmania's oldest boat builder, a lean, wiry, weather beaten man forever clenching a pipe between his teeth.' I remember Perce as a man of a very few words who in his inimical laconic style pronounced 'most of today's boats are built of plywood and glue and wouldn't have passed muster in my young days.' Despite this, I was able to keep my plywood Gwen 12 in his shed after Secheron, his last large boat, was finished and launched.

Percival George Coverdale was born on March 20, 1882 at Holbrook Place, Hobart, the son of Norrison John Coverdale, a clerk, and his wife Mary Elizabeth, and the eldest grandson of Dr John Coverdale MDCM of Richmond. He married Frances Minnie Rodgers on February 15, 1910 in the Anglican Church of John the Baptist. She was known as Ninie and he as Perce, Percy or Mate. Ninie died in 1959 and Perce on 30 March 1963. They had no children. Whilst known as a boat builder and yachtsman, Perce was a keen rower and competitive cyclist in his youth.

Perce and his younger brother Fred, grew up in Battery Point. Both went to the state school in Macquarie Street. After leaving school, they were apprenticed to local boat builders. Perce started his apprenticeship when he was 15 at Robert Inches yard in Cromwell Street, Battery Point. He was paid five shillings a week, with annual increases of two shillings and sixpence a week, until he finished his apprenticeship. Then, according to Perce, it was 'eight hours work, eight hours play and eight flaming bob a day'. In 1914, when Perce was 32, he took over Lucas's yard.

In 1931, Perce built a radical yacht, based on an American R type 8 metre, and named her after his wife, Ninie. I got to know Ninie during the school holidays and weekends when my father's yacht *Kathleen* (loa 32 ft) was on Coverdale's slip for the 1957 winter. Ninie had quite a lively personality and was probably a 'flapper' in the 1930s. Like Perce, she contributed to the war effort during WW2. The *Mercury* lists many thank-you letters from Diggers who were serving overseas for the socks etc. knitted by 'Mrs Francis Coverdale'. The *Woman's Weekly* (19 January 1946) featured an article describing Ninie as aged 67, a bright, charming woman with dark hair turning a steely grey. The same article attributes Ninie's talking Perce into naming the boat he was building *Winston Churchill* after her war time hero. Perce had intended to call it *Southern Light*. It was used during the war to maintain the Tasman Island light and others and, after the war, the couple lived aboard *Winston Churchill* for many years.



Percival George Coverdale (1882–1963). Photo: Neville Smith

Vessels built or altered

Models

Perce made sailing models in much the way he made rowing skiffs. Clinker-planked with King Billy pine and held together with tiny nails and roves so small 'they were lost in the creases of my hands'.

Fishing boats

Eveline May (1923) a new ketch to carry box timber for Mr A Sward of Simpson's Bay. Length 44ft, beam 14ft, draft 4ft 8in, with a hardwood and Huon pine hull. The ketch was fitted with a 8hp standard engine (*Mercury*, 12 November 1923). The name was changed to *Premier* in 1938. It was in Hobart for the 2013 and 2015 Wooden Boat Festivals.

Storm Bay (1925) a 52ft fishing smack built for Mr G Bridge, was launched on 21 July and described as a 'handsome addition to the Tasmanian fishing fleet, no expense having been spared in her construction' (*Mercury*, 22 July 1925). *Storm Bay* returned to Hobart for the 2013 and 2015 Wooden Boat Festivals.

Olive May. Coverdale modified the stern for scallop fishing, and others he worked on were *Rachael Irene*, *Amy Johnson*, *Rowena* (60ft), and *Volita* (Norman, L. *Pioneer Shipping of Tasmania*, 1938).

Motor boats

Tanda (60ft) was designed by A Blore and built by P Coverdale. The boat had twin engines and was a prototype for others to be built in Hobart. The prototype returned to Sydney successfully under her own power (*Mercury*, 12 August 1927).

A 255 cc skiff type motorboat was built by Coverdale for the Australian Motor Yacht Club championships (*Mercury*, 18 March 1949).

Yachts

Derwent Class. The "D" class were sponsored by EH Webster as an affordable one design keel boat. The first boat, *Imp*, was built by P. Coverdale for Webster (*Mercury*, 8 December 1927). The second was *Gnome* for Walter Taylor and later *Pixie* for P Coole.

Windward – a 43ft staysail schooner for Mr. EH Webster. It was designed by Delamere of Burnham-on-Crouch (UK), planked with 1¾ inch Huon pine, painted green. It had a 10 foot beam, 6ft 2 inch draft, with 4 tons 16cwt of lead on the bottom. The schooner was launched by Mrs Coverdale on 18 December 1929. It was later changed to cutter rig and was in Hobart for the 2013 Wooden Boat Festival.

Wanderer – a 46ft schooner. It was moored in the Tamar after being built in the 1930s and competed in two or more Sydney to Hobart races.

Ninie – along the lines of an American R type 8 Metre yacht. Very different to the 'one designers' such as *Vanity* and *Pandora*, it was built in 1931 in nine weeks. *Ninie* made its maiden appearance at the Royal Hobart Regatta on 3 February 1931 with a radical loose footed mainsail. It was sold to the McKean brothers after *Chloe* was built in 1938. (*Sailing on*, 1980).

Landfall – a 44ft yawl for G.W. Rex and C. E. Davies built in 1934. *Landfall*, the 54th Sparkman and Stevens yacht, was the first built outside the USA. Perce described her stern as 'duck-tailed' i.e. up in the air.

Chloe – a ketch built in 1938. It won the 1939 Bruny Island race and was sold to WH Walton of Sydney (*Mercury*, 25 March 1939).

Lewan – a 30sq m yacht was built for N Campbell in 1938.

Winston Churchill – built in 1942, it competed in the Sydney to Hobart in 1945 and 1946. In the late 1950s, it was sold to Sir Arthur Warner and sailed by his son Graham.

Matthew Flinders – a large ketch built for Audie Palfreyman. It was built during the war and only completed at the end, when the last two planks were fitted, so she could not be expropriated by the Navy.

White Cloud – a 49ft ocean racing cutter built during WW2 for Mr Justice Hutchins and sold to AE Herbert. It took 2½ years to build, and Coverdale was assisted in the later stages by N Taylor. It was similar to the CE Philp designed *Southern Maid* and was later sold to a Sydney yachtsman (*Mercury*, 24 December 1948).

Chloe II – After *Winston Churchill* was sold, *Chloe* was Coverdale's own boat. It was a clinker-planked boat, about 25ft long and painted black or dark blue.

Yacht – A Colin Archer style of yacht, possibly a William Atkin design, was built for John Westlau in 1954.

Secheron – built in 1958, this was Perce's last big boat. I spent my school holidays and weekends helping him to fit the blue gum ribs (timbers) into the framed-up shell of *Secheron*, and to plank it in King Billy pine. He steamed the timbers in a steam box then pre-bent each one, first the reverse bilge bend/curve from the keel then the gradual bend curve to the deck. This was done with a system of pulleys and steel straps. The hot steamed pre-bent timber was pushed up through the stringers. Perce would then climb up a ladder into the boat like a teenager and knock the timber into place. This would be followed by the next one for the other side of the boat. I also watched him cut the rebate in the transom with an adze to fit each plank of the hull. This was done standing under the transom swinging the adze over head. The planks fitted perfectly!



Ninie

Photo: MMT Collection



Storm Bay on the slip

Photo: MMT Collection

Many dinghies were made in King Billy and Huon pine at about £6 a foot, both before and after *Secheron* was launched. Coverdale dinghies were lighter than fibreglass ones!

The storyteller

Perce could tell good yarns. I can still picture him – sucking on an old pipe out the side of his mouth – telling how, in a fog, he dropped the anchor, went to sleep, and when he got up in the morning found he was in Constitution Dock. And coming up the river, finding a rock he had never seen before and landing on it to boil the billy, only to find it was a whale. As an apprentice, he saw a practical joke misfire. A plank over the water toilet on the slip yard was partly cut through underneath with a saw. The boss (Lucas I think) come down to use the toilet, the plank broke, and the boss ended up in the water – the wrong person! The cut was made for some one else.

When I helped Perce to build *Secheron*, the roving dolly was heated on cold mornings with King Billy shavings and was too hot to hold. Now and again, when he was feeling well, he would clean up the timber shavings in the shed because, he said, they wouldn't be needed to soften the fall if he dropped dead.

References

- Mercury* 31 July 1915 onwards.
- Pioneer Shipping of Tasmania*, Norman, L, 1938.
- Woman's Weekly*, 19 January 1946.
- People*, 23 December 1959.
- Sailing On: A History of The Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania*. Centenary Book Committee, 1980.