

THE SOUTHERN CROSS CIRCUMNAVIGATION

David I. Hutchison tells the exhilarating but ultimately tragic story of David Guthrie Dunn and his ambitious quest to circumnavigate the globe during the early 1930s in the small Clyde-built yacht, *Southern Cross*

World voyagers are the elite of modern travellers, and the circumnavigators in small ships are the nobility of the elite.

— Donald R Holm, 1974

The yacht *Southern Cross* was designed for the young tobacco heir David Guthrie Dunn to sail round the world with two university friends in 1930. It was one of the few circumnavigations by small yachts during the early part of the 20th century, but sadly never got the recognition it deserved.

The voyage was not undertaken with any record or recognition in mind, but to allow the young graduates to gain experience exploring the oceans and cultures of the world before embarking on their chosen careers. Unlike many of the small boats used in such voyages, *Southern Cross* was specially designed by one of the leading naval architects of the day, and the trip was well-

funded by her millionaire owner. During long stopovers the crew had plenty of time to relax, explore and become acquainted with all the fascinating characters they invariably encountered. Their leisurely passage across the Pacific afforded a unique insight into the life and survival of isolated island communities at the height of the Great Depression in the early 1930s.

The story of this extraordinary yacht is all about connections. There were significant links between Dunn's home at Largs, the southern cross constellation and the town of Brisbane in Australia. Furthermore, during their three-year voyage the crew came across many people with connections to the Clyde, Largs and even the small village of Sandbank where the yacht was built.

Southern Cross

John Dunn was a tobacco merchant and partner in the prominent Glasgow tobacco

The route *Southern Cross* took around the world

manufacturing company F & J Smith, which became part of Imperial Tobacco in 1901. The imposing Knock Castle at Largs was acquired by Dunn as a family home in 1915. He had two sons, David Guthrie and John Jnr, the eldest who was destined to inherit the family fortune. Tragically he drowned in a boating accident in 1924 so David Guthrie at the age of 18 was placed under the guardianship of the trustees until he inherited the family fortune on his 25th birthday.

D. Guthrie Dunn, as he was known, was able to indulge in his great passion for yachting. He was an accomplished sailor, active member of the prestigious Royal Clyde Yacht Club, and became one of the most prominent young yachtsmen on the Clyde. He named two of his elegant racing yachts *Southern Cross* due to a fascination with the constellation and the southern ocean. 'Southern cross' is the most commonly

known and easily identifiable group of stars in the southern hemisphere and was of great importance to the early island-hopping Polynesians who used memorised star maps to navigate.

Yacht and crew

While Dunn was still a student at Cambridge University he finalised his plan to build an ocean-going cruising yacht to sail round the world. His third *Southern Cross* was specifically designed by the renowned firm of Scottish naval architects G.L. Watson & Co for the challenging voyage. This sturdy 51-foot yacht was built at the boatyard of Alexander Robertson & Sons Ltd., Sandbank, which was well known for the quality of its workmanship.

There were two cabins and a fine stateroom for the owner. The comfortable walnut-panelled saloon had ample space for dining, entertaining guests and additional accommodation. Located next to the wheelhouse, the galley had a big oil-fired stove and plenty of storage space. One rather unique piece of equipment was the large Kelvinator electric compression refrigerator and ice-maker. Domestic refrigerators were still a novelty in those days, even in the mansions of the well-to-do, so precious few would have been fitted on small yachts. There was an extensive library aboard



Southern Cross at anchor in Bora Bora

which had books on all the great circumnavigations, foreign travel, nautical almanacs, pilot information and three large leather-bound folders which contained all the charts needed for the trip. Entertainment was provided by a cine projector, wireless, gramophone, piano in the saloon and of course the three semi-accomplished musicians on board.

Dunn, at the age of 24, undertook his grand adventure with two friends. James Shackleton from Yorkshire studied at Cambridge with Dunn and was the navigator on the voyage. W.G. Penman from Dumfries was an experienced Clyde yachtsman who studied engineering at Glasgow University, so naturally he became the ship's engineer.

Southern Cross was launched into the Holy Loch on 18 August 1930 with her name and RCYC (Royal Clyde Yacht Club) proudly painted on her stern. A few days later the crew embarked on a challenging shakedown cruise to St Kilda to learn the ropes and evaluate the vessel's ocean-going performance.

Largs-Brisbane connection

Dunn planned to head for Brisbane, Australia due to all its family, historic and scientific links with his home town of Largs. Several

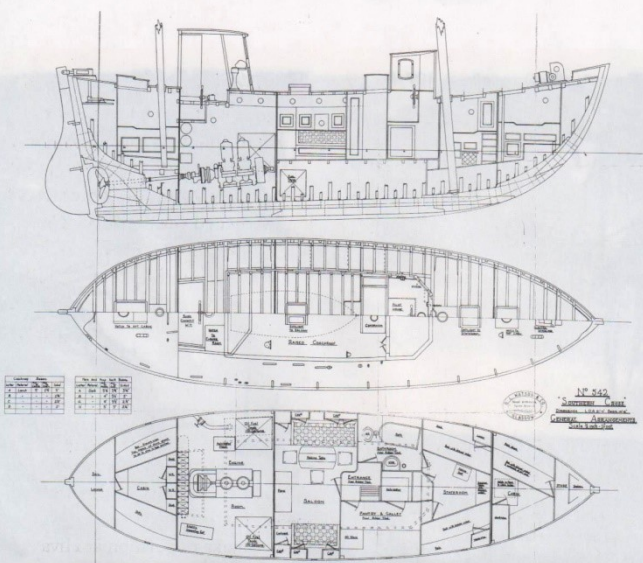
newspapers referred to Dunn's relatives in Brisbane and the name 'Brisbane' features quite prominently around Largs.

The town of Brisbane was named after Sir Thomas Brisbane from Largs, the famous soldier-statesman-astronomer-navigator, who was the 6th governor of New South Wales (1821-25). After one disastrous Atlantic crossing with his army regiment in 1795, his ship ended up off the coast of Africa rather than the West Indies. As a result, Brisbane resolved to learn more about astronomy so he could navigate at sea. While on medical half pay from the army (1805-11), his early interest in astronomy developed into a lifelong pursuit. Sir Thomas Brisbane built a private observatory at his home, Brisbane House, in 1808. There were only two Scottish observatories in operation at the time and his was by far the better equipped. Dunn's Knock Castle home was built on part of the old Brisbane estate, so this nearby observatory would have been a great inspiration while he was learning to navigate on the challenging west coast of Scotland.

Books and equipment from Brisbane's private observatory at Largs were taken out to Australia and used to establish his second observatory at Parramatta on the outskirts of Sydney in 1822.

Penman repairing sails in his Tahitian 'pareu'





Plans and layout of the *Southern Cross*



Southern Cross at anchor opposite the Brisbane Botanical Gardens

It famously became known as 'the Greenwich of the Southern Hemisphere', where sea captains had their ships' chronometers calibrated.

In conferring the medal of the Royal Astronomical Society on Sir Thomas Brisbane in 1828, it was noted that the first fruits of colonisation were in so many lands rape and violence towards its 'unoffending inhabitants' but that in Australia through the work of Brisbane, the first triumph of colonisation was the peaceful one of science and useful knowledge for the future

The studies/observations carried out in his private observatories at Largs and Parramatta made a significant contribution to major advances in celestial navigation which took place over the next 100 years. Undoubtedly, *Southern Cross* would have benefited from these developments while navigating in the southern seas.

Round the world – Sandbank to Brisbane
On 26 October 1930, *Southern*

Cross set sail from Sandbank on her 31,000-mile voyage round the world with the three young yachtsmen. However, it was a rather embarrassing start as they narrowly escaped colliding with a large yacht anchored nearby.

During the early part of the trip across the Bay of Biscay they fought the full fury of the sea for three days and had to seek sanctuary in the picturesque fishing town of Corcubi6n, on the north-west tip of Spain. During this first real test of man and boat, the ship behaved admirably, but the crew had great difficulty lowering sails in those stormy

conditions and could not use the sextant to get an accurate position.

Some vital equipment was damaged during the storm so the sailors had to wait three weeks in Tenerife for spare parts to arrive by steamer from England. A new friend from the Yacht Club organised an exciting camping trip by mule into the mountains to see the snow-capped Pico del Teide, which at 24,600 feet is the third-highest volcano in the world. To commemorate this daring winter expedition they left a message in a bottle inside an impressive 20-foot cairn they built at the campsite in the valley below. Countless flash photographs of their monument were taken and they pledged to return one day.

Southern Cross eventually set off on the 3,100 mile Atlantic leg from Tenerife to Trinidad on 16 December. The mariners spent an enjoyable Christmas at sea and feasted on sausage, eggs and spinach with plum pudding for dessert, but otherwise, had a pretty uneventful crossing. The crew jubilantly celebrated their safe passage with iced beer when they sighted Tobago, dead on course, on 8 January 1932.

While at anchor in Kingston Harbour, Jamaica they had an interesting encounter and poignant reminder of the strong links to their home waters on the Clyde. They were moored near the famous yacht *S.Y. Nahlin*, which was owned by the jute heiress Lady Yule and built by John Brown & Co at Clydebank in 1930. This elegant 296-foot steam yacht, which required a crew of around 50, had the same designer as *Southern Cross* and was built the same year. Needless to say, Dunn and his crew were only too happy to accept Lady Yule's kind

The crew (centre) James Shackleton, Guthrie Dunn and W.G. Penman





invitation to lunch aboard what was regarded as the premier British yacht of the day. Incidentally, the magnificent S.Y. *Nahlin* is currently owned by vacuum cleaner magnate Sir James Dyson.

Their passage through the Panama Canal in late February was a memorable experience thanks to an exceptionally knowledgeable American who had been working at the canal since 1908, but even he had never piloted such a small boat as *Southern Cross*. They spent a particularly enjoyable evening with one of the original gold prospectors in the canal zone who had become a legendary fishing and wildlife expert. The sailors listened intently to his fascinating stories, and armed with all this new knowledge they very excitedly set off on the next leg of their great adventure towards the Galapagos on 7 March.

Major renovation underway in Brisbane, courtesy James Penman

They finally had some success fishing using a simple hand line, and regularly feasted on tuna and red grouper. They briefly stopped at the Cocos Islands to search for the legendary treasure which was buried there for safekeeping by the Peruvian cathedrals in 1820. However, despite having a rudimentary map their venture was unsuccessful. After *Southern Cross* arrived at the Galapagos on 16 March there was plenty of time to explore at length several of the islands on horseback. The crew photographed a wide variety of breathtaking wildlife and clearly enjoyed meeting the population at large.

On their way to the Marquesas, Dunn celebrated his long-awaited 25th birthday on 30 March, when he acquired full control of the family inheritance. A magnificent birthday dinner prepared by Shackleton consisted of hors d'oeuvres (shrimps, sardines, eggs

and potato mayonnaise), chicken, potatoes and peas, followed by suet pudding and coffee. A good strong wind the next day helped them cover 94 miles, which was a new record for *Southern Cross* in the 'doldrums'. However, the wind soon died down and they began to run short of food during this gruelling 3,300-mile passage, so they were forced to dine on curried porridge for several days. Early in the voyage they had miraculously discovered that if you put enough curry powder in anything it became quite edible.

On 26 April a large group of the local Kanaka population at Hiva Oa, in the Marquesas, came aboard to welcome the yacht. The cheerful islanders enjoyed the entertainment laid on for them, with Dunn playing the piano and music from the gramophone. They particularly appreciated the cold beer and even took some ice away in a big thermos. In stark contrast, the crew had a rather chilling trip to see the centuries-old cannibal sacrifice amphitheatre at Atuona, which had terracing for 1,000 people, an impressive stone throne for the king and a large pit for the poor victims. Fortunately for the crew, the last case of cannibalism on the island was in 1876. Several days later they met the crew of the recently-arrived schooner *Northern Lights* and were surprised to discover her captain was from Greenock, the port of registry for *Southern Cross*. Not only that, but the schooner's diminutive, bow-legged cook came from Sandbank, and had amazingly attended her launch.

Due to poor or limited soil and an over-reliance on coconut palms on most of the remote Pacific islands, overpopulation was always a great threat. The main coconut plantation on Hiva Oa was struggling to survive after the price of copra (the coconut's dried white meat) halved at the start of the Great Depression (1929-39), so the island was more dependent on agriculture and trading.

Some days later, on the remote Takaroa atoll, they had an even bigger party with 50 to 60 on-board. A few of the elders were invited below to drink cold beer and smoke, while on deck the children enjoyed ice cream, made simply from tins of condensed milk. This time

While Dunn was still a student at Cambridge University he finalised his plan to build an ocean-going cruising yacht to sail round the world

During the early part of the trip across the Bay of Biscay they fought the full fury of the sea for three days

Penman provided the star musical performance of the evening, playing the banjo until 3am. The next night there was a welcome invitation to see the local native dance troupe, but as it turned out most of them were visiting a neighbouring island so it ended up more of a barn dance with everybody joining in, some less enthusiastically than others. The islanders used to survive simply on coconuts and fishing, but due to the low price of copra they needed to rely more on pearl diving.

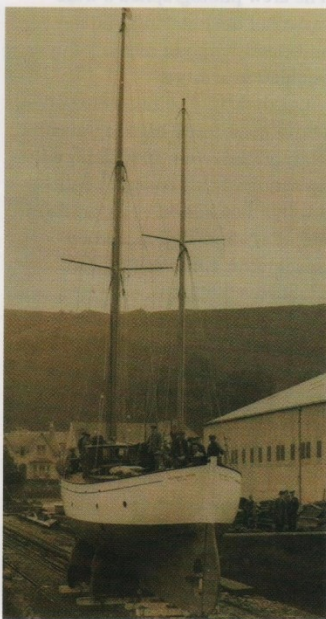
When the crew arrived at the port of Papeete, Tahiti on 17 May they were surprised to find many British-registered yachts in the harbour, and were delighted to pick up mail from home. They enjoyed island life so much that they decided to have a bowsprit fitted here rather than in Australia. As this work was being carried out the sailors had time to explore the island and the crew were very generously entertained on many occasions by the British vice-consul and his family. Fortunately,



Tahiti was an important trading centre and had a burgeoning tourist industry so it was able to survive the worst of the Great Depression, when exports from Polynesia fell by 60% between 1929 and 1933.

Southern Cross enjoyed leisurely stays at many exotic islands on her long passage across the Pacific via Rarotonga, Samoa, Fiji and New Caledonia. However, as they approached Brisbane they were keen to reach their destination and while cruising along at a very respectable 7¼ knots on 14 October they broke their record, covering 161 miles. To celebrate arriving at Brisbane on 18 October 1931 they had a good meal, smoked their stash of reserved cigarettes and drank some well-earned champagne out of their old beer-mugs.

Miss Betty Philp, daughter of the late Sir Robert Philp, premier of Queensland and a friend of Dunn, took great delight in entertaining the crew and introducing them



Southern Cross at anchor in Soller, Mallorca 2013

Southern Cross launch at Robertson's Yard

to the yacht clubs and everybody ashore. The films from Kodak arrived, so Dunn was able to show some of his cine film of the voyage at the yacht club.

Dunn had to return to the UK by steamer to attend to all the legal formalities relating to his late father's estate, which he inherited on his 25th birthday. In the meantime, *Southern Cross* was laid up to be extensively overhauled.

Round the world – Brisbane to Sandbank

Five and a half months later, on 13 April 1932, the crew met up again to resume the adventurous voyage, but their Brisbane departure was delayed due to extra repair work. It was not until 30 June that a large crowd of friends and well-wishers finally waved them off.

Southern Cross reached Cairns on 12 July, where they restocked and got the radio fixed again. A friend kindly organised a wonderful train trip into the interior to see the vast sugar plantations and majestic scenery at Barron Falls. After leaving Cairns, *Southern Cross* was navigated carefully along the Great Barrier Reef so they were able to visit many small islands on their way. They set sail from Thursday Island for the East Indies on 25 July, and for the first time felt they really were homeward bound.

The crew particularly enjoyed the rich multi-cultural heritage of Bali and Java, but it was very hot and sticky so even sleeping on deck was difficult. Several weeks were spent in Surabaya looking for a new radio set, and then getting it installed properly. There was plenty of time for sightseeing, which included an exciting plane trip to see the active Mount Bromo crater. They relaxed and enjoyed 'the sheer luxury of their existence', but with the work complete they very reluctantly left Surabaya on 1 September.

At Home Island on the Cocos (Keeling Islands), the crew explored and visited several big plantations to see how copra was processed. Dunn organised an

Southern Cross trophy

The renowned Glasgow jeweller Robert Stewart, silversmith to queen Victoria, was commissioned by D. Guthrie Dunn in 1930 to produce a finely-crafted sterling silver model of *Southern Cross*, which was hallmarked in 1932. The mast is 60cm high and the detail so fine that you can see all the fittings and beautifully coiled ropes on the deck. In 1965 Dunn's cousin Miss Elizabeth B. Mathieson donated the magnificent Southern Cross trophy to the Ayr Yacht Club to be presented to the winner of the 'Ailsa Craig' offshore race. At this time the trophy was valued at £1,000.



outdoor cinema show behind the governor's house one evening. These were the first moving pictures ever to be seen on this remote island and even though the event was not widely publicised everybody turned up in their colourful gala dress. The show, featuring Charlie Chaplin and Felix the Cat, was such an immense success that a baby born that night was named Guthrie Dunn in his honour.

When *Southern Cross* arrived in Port Louis Mauritius on 23 October the crew immediately noticed the exceptionally strong 'French' influence in the town. The sailors had an extremely interesting trip to see a sugar cane research facility and saw thousands of seedlings, all in carefully-labelled pots, the result of experimental cross-breeding. Nearly all the ships in the harbour were foreign registered so it was 'disheartening to see that no British ships are used to transport our sugar, especially as the British taxpayer is giving Mauritius a preference'.

After a relaxing stop in Durban, *Southern Cross* arrived in Cape Town

on 19 December. An enjoyable Christmas was spent with one of Penman's friends from Dumfries. On Boxing Day Dunn went off to visit Mr Ramsey, an 85-year-old ex-diamond miner, whose father had built his Knock Castle family home. Later, Dr Wilson, a surgeon from the City of Canterbury, came aboard and excitedly informed them that he had actually seen *Southern Cross* being built, and was a keen admirer of Robertson's Yard at Sandbank. Dunn decided that they needed to attempt an ambitious 70 day non-stop passage home due to all the extra time spent on repairs. They finally set off for the challenging southern Atlantic leg of their voyage on 16 February.

While cruising along at 5.5 knots on 7 March they had a series of sail and rigging mishaps. Even with all hands on deck an entire day was spent sorting out the problems and checking the rest of the rigging.

Worse followed. During heavy seas on 8 March 1933, around midnight, Dunn stood on the stern to set a sail and was accidentally lost overboard. From James Shackleton's log:

We did all that we could possibly do to save him but everything was against us. Nor did we give up the search until it had become hopeless – and more than hopeless.

After clearing the decks the yacht set sail for St Helena, arriving with a forlorn crew on 16 March to make an official deposition about the accident at the coroner's office.

Epilogue

A memorial service took place at St John's Church, Largs on 27 March 1933 and was attended by many prominent Clyde yachting dignitaries. D. Guthrie Dunn left

his entire estate of £1.2 million to Mrs Agnes Stevens, who was the housekeeper at Knock Castle for 20 years. In his memory the Dunn Memorial Hall was gifted to the church.

Mr Thomas Stark Brown, legal representative for the trustees of the Dunn estate, decided that a replacement crew would be sent out to St Helena to sail the yacht back. A beautiful wreath in the shape of an anchor, which was suspended from the pulpit during the memorial service, was laid on the sea near where the young yachtsman drowned. After nearly three years a rather weather-beaten *Southern Cross* returned home to Robertson's boat yard at Sandbank on 8 July 1933.

The surviving crew could not come to terms with the tragic loss of their dear friend and skipper, so they never talked much about their experience, even to their own families. Furthermore, the crew were surprisingly reluctant to give newspaper interviews throughout their long voyage and as a result, no comprehensive account of the voyage was published. Sadly, Dunn's paintings, photographs, cine film and typed log/diary of the voyage were all lost.

During World War II, *Southern Cross* was requisitioned to test radar systems in the Irish Sea. In the late 1960s she was owned by the Hull Fishing Vessel Owner's Association and used as a sail/navigation training vessel. The yacht has undergone several major renovations over the years and as a result of the careful custodianship of several owners she is still sailing today.

David I. Huchison examined the history of Southern Cross as part of his ongoing research into the iconic yachts built at Alexander Robertson's renowned boatyard at Sandbank.

On their way to the Marquesas, Dunn celebrated his long-awaited 25th birthday on 30 March, when he acquired full control of the family inheritance



The Circumnavigators: Small Boat Voyagers of Modern Times, D.R Holm (London, 1974)

history

SCOTLAND

Vol. 18 No. 3 May/June 2018

EXPERT
INSIGHT IN
EVERY ISSUE

✓ ARCHAEOLOGY
✓ HERITAGE
✓ HISTORY

Refugees welcome here

*How Scotland
supported families
fleeing WWI*

ARCHAEOLOGY

DUNDEE'S CITY OF THE DEAD

NEW RESEARCH ON RARE
MIEVEAL GRAVESTONES

Tragedy at sea

A tobacco heir's ill-fated quest
to circumnavigate the globe

A Prince in exile

The faded splendour of 18th-century Rome,
home to the Stuart court

PLUS: CAUSES & CONSEQUENCES OF THE 1623 FAMINE
THE ONGOING QUEST TO FIND THE SITE OF SELKIRK ABBEY
PRIZE-WINNING ESSAY: ROBERT THE BRUCE AND MUCH MORE

