



Photo: Ed Dubois

A world of his own

When it comes to taking on hazardously low odds and facing unknown risks, few people even approach Sir Robin Knox-Johnston's achievements. As **Peter Poland** relates, if ever there was a saga of British bulldog spirit, then this is it

Sailing Today's Editor, John Goode, is a fortunate fellow. He regularly sails on the truly iconic yacht *Subaili* with 'the man' himself – Sir Robin Knox-Johnston. Perhaps one should cast a tactful veil over the stories about hazardously hot curry served up in the overfalls off Portland Bill (Knox-Johnston is a curry expert having spent several years on Indian crewed ships) and their occasional rumbustious runs ashore when harbour had been reached. After all, both men are time-served deep-sea mariners and know how to have a good time as well as how to handle a ship. But it is probably safe to allude to the real life double-shotted cannon that they fired (frequently and to the consternation of some temporarily-appointed 'marshalls') from *Subaili's* foredeck during the Trafalgar celebrations held off Portsmouth Harbour last summer. Then, shortly after, there was the 'race' for 'The Three Old Ladies' (*Gipsy Moth III*, *Lively Lady* and

Subaili) that took place off Cowes. Maybe it was Goode's "rusty" race-crewing work or maybe it was the raids on the ship's stores – but, whatever the reason, *Subaili* (the smallest of the three) came an honourable third. As Goode said, "It was great to be part of a unique event. Despite not being allowed a 'barnacle allowance' and trailing in last, we had tremendous fun."

So, whilst wandering down the soul-less central concourse at the January Boat Show in ExCeL – looking fruitlessly for something to fire my fancy – I felt I had to pause at a booth bearing the bold banners of Knox-Johnston's *Clipper Ventures*. Besides which, the girls looked pretty and smiled. So – in the interests of civility – I gratefully accepted the proffered paperwork.

The 'forward' in the brochure – promisingly titled 'Could you take on the World?' – kicked off with the rousing words of Chairman Knox-Johnston. They could just as well have been written about the man as by him. "It is human to dare. It is never easy. No doubt

when someone first thought of swimming across a river there were many who sat and watched and said it couldn't be done. But someone strived and succeeded despite the Jonahs. Daring is an inherent part of human nature." Then, talking specifically about the Round the World event, he goes on to say, "One of the core parts of this challenge is that it is not easy. But who is interested if you have done something that is easy? There is much greater satisfaction, and far greater respect, for the person who has achieved something that is really hard to do."

It got me thinking – and casting my mind back to the various daring adventures that Knox-Johnston had undertaken over the last four decades or so. When it comes to contemporary heroes who have done difficult things that gain our respect, Knox-Johnston stands near the top of the pile. In these days of Health and Safety 'jobsworths' and recurring risk assessments, true heroes are few and far between – unless you include brainless

footballers in the equation. When it comes to taking on hazardously low odds and facing unknown risks in the process, few people even approach Knox-Johnston's achievements.

In order to understand the man, you first have to realise that he is an Ulsterman through and through. And proud of it. Which explains why one of the photos on his office wall features Knox-Johnston standing beside (and totally dwarfed by) one Willie John McBride – that giant of an Ulsterman who took the British Lions to South Africa and dominated one of the bloodiest Test Series ever. As we sat and chatted in his office, RKJ said "Did you know that the Ulstermen were also in the only Brigade to make progress on the first day of the Somme? If there's something that needs doing, Ulstermen get in there, get on with it and do it. But if there's nothing important going on, Ulstermen are also the best at letting their hair down and having fun." This ability to stick cussedly to his guns when it's necessary (and have a laugh

when it's not) explains much of Knox-Johnston's ability to brush problems and hazards aside and get the job (any job) done.

Out on his own

Born in 1939 and educated in Hertfordshire, Knox-Johnston enjoyed long distance running, swimming and boxing at school. Team sports were not really his game. Even at an early age, he displayed an aptitude for challenging pastimes in which you stood or fell on your own. He took to sports that demanded self-reliance. And whilst still at school, his life-long affinity for the sea soon came to the surface when he joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve as a Boy Seaman. At this time he spent a fifteen-day training spell aboard *HMS Vanguard* – the last of Britain's Battleships.

With the sea now obviously permanently in his blood, the following year he signed up with the British India Company (BI) and joined their Cadet ship, the *Chindwara*. Those were the days

when ships were ships. As Knox-Johnston said, "deck officers had to know about metacentric heights and ship's stowage. It was a way of life that taught skills, tenacity and leadership. Their modern counterparts are, sadly, little more than lorry drivers carting piles of boxes around the world. Traditional deep sea skills have now largely succumbed to the (shoreside controlled) shipping office computer."

The BI Company had started in Calcutta back in 1856 and its main initial trading routes were to and from the Indian sub-continent. But as British interests in East Africa grew, BI ran an increasing number of cargo and passenger ships to this area. Its fleet of over eighty ships included such famous names as *Dunera*, *Dilwara*, *Uganda* and *Nevasa*. On the *Chindwara*, the crew (usually a mix of Indian, Pakistani and Goanise sailors serving under British officers) was partially replaced by Knox-Johnston and his fellow apprentices. So they received the finest possible grounding in

seamanship as well as learning to sail on the ship's whaler. The *Chindwara* – a shelter decked dry cargo ship – ran from the UK to East and South Africa and by the time Knox-Johnston left her as a Petty Officer Cadet in 1959 he had many thousands of sea miles under his belt. Not to mention a wealth of seamanship and experience.

Bombs on board

Knox-Johnston then spent four years on the Bombay to Basra run which was operated by the 'Four Ds' – the *Dwarka*, *Dumra*, *Dana* and *Daressa*. And his 'boys own adventures' began with a vengeance. "*Dana* was blown up in 1961 with the loss of four hundred lives," he said, "and three months later we had a bomb explode on *Dwarka*, but fortunately with little damage," then going on to add, "Bombs went off on the ships from time to time thereafter, placed, it was thought, by terrorists involved in the insurrection in Muscat. Our route was Bombay, Karachi, Gwadar, Muscat, Dubai, Qatar, Bahrain, »



The first solo sailor to voyage around the world non-stop enjoying a well earned puff and a pint after crossing the finishing line at Falmouth

Bushire, Kuwait, Khorremshahr – then back. It was very much a left over from empire. I led a charmed life. I was only on two ships that had bombs explode. One was an own goal, with the bombers blowing themselves up. But when you're young, it's all a bit of an adventure! I would probably take everything a bit more seriously these days!" Well, maybe...

Having married, set up home in Bombay, survived the bombs and joined the *Dumra* as Third Officer, Knox-Johnston now thought up a new adventure that was to shape his future life. Together with another young officer, Peter Jordan, his mind wandered to an alternative way of getting back to the UK. Why not just buy an old dhow and sail it back? Then sell it. Well, maybe not. Perhaps the UK market for superannuated dhows was not likely to be that healthy. So, without a thought for the probable pitfalls and perils, they decided to buy some plans and build a little cruiser in India instead. Then sail her home. "A yacht", in Knox-Johnston's words "which we could use for skin diving and underwater photography to pay our way home, and which we could sell at a profit when we reached England." Obviously really.

But the plans they bought turned out to be of the wrong boat, and the plans for a rig – they subsequently learnt – would be 'extra'. Never mind. She looked sturdy and seaworthy and was perhaps better

suited for a long ocean voyage than a slimmer, faster boat. And they designed their own rig with the help of a couple of books. So the first of many large Indian teak logs (this one was twenty five foot long) fetched up at the Colaba Workshops' slip in November 1963 and the team of Indian shipwrights set to with their traditional adzes and bow drills. And *Subaili* (the name given by Arab seamen to the south-east wind) was born.

When she was finally launched in 1964, she floated a full two inches below her designed water line – such was the weight of her substantial all-teak construction. Meanwhile, a third partner joined the 'syndicate' – Mike Ledingham, another BI Third Officer. But further delays meant that they missed the North-East Monsoon in early 1965 and – as so often seems to be the case in one's twenties – they ran out of money. And then – because of the delays – Knox-Johnston's two partners had to move on (one to Australia and the other to New Zealand). So he took out a loan, bought them out and laid up *Subaili*. In his own words, Knox-Johnston now had "an unfinished, half-paid-for boat 10,000 miles from where I wanted her and no crew to bring her home." Which would be a real 'downer' for most people. But – undeterred – Knox-Johnston just press-ganged his insurance broker brother Chris and a Marconi radio operator called Heinz and set sail a year later. Taking jobs en route

to pay for replenishing stores (RKJ as captain of a tramp coaster), they overcame the small problem of a broken mast and reeled off the final leg from Cape Town to Gravesend at a respectable (if unspectacular) 112 miles a day.

Non-stop circumnavigation

Whilst Knox-Johnston's early career at sea and determination to build and then sail *Subaili* all the way from India to England is the stuff of heroes, his next exploit borders on the superhuman – or the insane – depending on where you stand. The Golden Globe Race was unique. No one had ever sailed single-handed and non-stop around the world. If anyone made it, they would be 'the first'. As Knox-Johnston says, "these days, when people are thundering around the world in purpose built greyhounds in less than 100 days, it is hard to fully appreciate that it is only 35 years ago that we were not even sure that a non-stop circumnavigation was possible." Let alone a solo one.

Modern cruising sailors (or high speed round the world loonies for that matter) have push-button GPS to summon rescuers with pinpoint accuracy if they run into trouble, satellite communications to keep in touch with those ashore (and with sanity), electronic steering machines to hold a course (even at thirty knots), roller furling headsails to reduce sail safely and easily, water-makers to produce drinking

water; and 'everlasting' grub. Knox-Johnston and his fellow *Golden Globe* participants, on the other hand, were out of reach, out of contact, and – if they got into trouble – out of luck. Big time. Solo meant solo. They were on their own in every sense of the word.

The statistics of Knox-Johnston's *Golden Globe* voyage are mind-boggling. Whilst *Subaili* was solid and sea-kindly (designed by William Atkins along the lines of the legendary Colin Archer pilot boats), she was hardly fast. In fact Knox-Johnston knew she was slow. He knew he was going to have to be at sea – if he survived that long – for an age. He would need all his seamanship and repair skills to keep *Subaili* shipshape and sailing. But he had one advantage over today's world-girdlers. He says they "suffer from the disadvantage that the spice of exploration is no longer there. Much of the sense of adventure has gone when a path has been explored, and more departs when the individual is just the leading edge and dependent on the rest of a (shore) team." He sums up the adventure by saying "there is something satisfying about being absolute master of your own fate, knowing that if things went wrong there was no satellite phone to fall back on; once you sailed you were left entirely to your own devices."

The 'own devices' to which Knox-Johnston was left were sorely tested. Ten months at sea, all alone in a very small boat, is enough to test



Behaving themselves: RKJ and JG shooting the breeze

Photo: Rick Buettnier

anyone to the limits. Knox-Johnston knew that his heavy, somewhat tubby and above all small boat had little chance of beating some of the speedier boats entered in the race. But, one by one, they fell by the wayside whilst he doggedly plugged on. Crowhurst vanished into a world of personal fantasy and wandered erratically around the Southern Atlantic before finally falling (or more likely jumping) overboard – never to be seen again. The enigmatic Moitessier was set to finish neck and neck after rounding the Horn, but decided to go into a semi-mystical oceanic orbit and instead of turning left, carried straight on for a second lap, finally fetching up in Tahiti. Rugged Atlantic rowers Blyth and RYdgyway both had to pack it in

when their respective craft failed. And Tetley's trimaran came to a sticky end when almost in sight of the finishing line.

When things go wrong

Subaili was not without her mishaps, suffering a variety of mechanical, steering and structural problems. Perhaps one example – when she developed serious leaks along planking adjacent to her keel floors – best illustrates Knox-Johnston's phlegmatic and 'never say die' attitude to life and its little problems. The solution to the leaks, he decided, was to dive over the side and hammer caulking cotton into the gaping seams – five foot underwater. This proved easier said than done, so he re-surfaced and re-thought the problem. A possible



RKJ served from cadet to chief officer with the British India Company



Suhaili heads towards the Fleet Review with 'bow chaser' primed

Photo: Jo Ward

answer, he concluded, might be to sew the caulking cotton onto thin seven foot strips of canvas then hammer these over the seams with tacks. Having achieved this, he decided to tack copper strips over the top to keep the whole thing in place. Then he saw a large and doubtless hungry shark swimming alongside. When it declined to go away, there was only one thing to do. Get rid of it. So Knox-Johnston lured it to the surface (by chucking loo paper onto the sea), then shot it between the eyes with his trusty rifle. Once it had sunk from view and he reckoned its friends were not coming to eat it, he went back into the water, hammered the copper strips in place, and got on with the race again.

Overcoming solitude, boredom and danger, Knox-Johnston's dogged determination won the day – and the Golden Globe. A psychiatrist who interviewed him – both before and after the race – described his mental health as 'distressingly normal.' His book, *A World of My Own*, is essential reading for any sailor. And even if you don't sail, you can't fail to be gripped by the rattling pace of a great yarn and by the self-effacing and entertaining style of its writing. If ever there was a saga of British bulldog spirit overcoming seemingly insuperable odds, then this is it.

By the time Knox-Johnston was back in Blighty, he found that things were changing in the Merchant Navy in general and the British India Company in particular – which had merged into an enlarged P & O group. Container ships and bulk carriers had all but eradicated the seafaring life previously enjoyed by 'traditional' seamen. And, as I chatted to Knox-Johnston this year, he reckoned things had only got worse. "The British ran half the world in the days when we

produced go-getting mavericks. Now we seem to be run by career-focused 'jobsworths' who interfere a lot and create little. How can we let companies like P&O get bought-up by foreigners? Have all our entrepreneurs been replaced by bureaucrats?" And another like-minded old seafaring hand – none other than your Editor John Goode wholeheartedly agreed. Having signed on as a 'boy' aboard a sail training barque at the tender age of 12, he then served his officer apprenticeship on foreign-going cargo ships before making his way up to 1st Mate in his early twenties. But he too came ashore and hung up his sextant (temporarily!) when 'box-boats' began to replace the traditional tramp ships on which he had roamed the world. Whilst the 'tramping lifestyle' was lived by 'characters' and brought adventures galore, containerisation and push-button navigation brought boredom.

Having collected a CBE, Yachtsman of the Year Award and RCC Seamanship medal, Knox-Johnston now embarked on new careers. Predictably, they followed unpredictable courses. They can be split into commercial (building Marinas), sailing (races, cruises and adventures galore) and 'good works' (Sail Training Association, Sports Council and RNLI) – and frequently they ran concurrently. In the early seventies, Knox-Johnston was involved in building Mercury Marina on the Hamble and then ran Port Hamble Marina – finally moving on in 1974. "Why?" I asked. "Because the Rank organisation kept introducing new bosses and most hadn't a clue," was his cryptic reply. I suspect he is not the sort to suffer fools gladly. He then got involved with Taylor Woodrow in building and running St. Katherine's Yacht Harbour beside Tower Bridge, and subsequently



Photo: UKSA

Captions Clockwise from right:
Suhaila in the solent 2005...
Enza setting a new round the world record of 74 days in 1994...
 RKJ announces launch of Clipper 2005 Race... STA schooner skippered by RKJ heads to the Arctic... Pre hi-tech navigation – taking a sight in the Bass Strait...

More images on his website:
www.robinknox-johnston.co.uk

rescued (and later skippered) the steam tug *Challenge* – which had lain there as a rusting hulk – from the scrap yard. In the nineties, he persuaded Taylor Woodrow to sell her to the Dunkerque Little Ships Preservation Trust for a token £1, then suggested they get hold of some Heritage Lottery money to restore her.

Meanwhile, sailing remained to the fore of his life and it wasn't long before Knox-Johnston plunged back into the fray – albeit in a very different type of yacht. Teaming up with another professional seaman – Les Williams RN – he bought the first of the Van de Stadt designed Ocean 71 hulls. This was the largest GRP production boat of its day. With a very basic fit out, *Ocean Spirit* entered the two handed Round Britain race in 1970. Bear in mind that this was in the days before sophisticated headsail roller furling and high performance autopilots. This was a monster of a boat for two people to race. Many said it could not be done. But Knox-Johnston and Williams (whom he includes amongst his list of all time favourite shipmates along with Bernard Gallay, Billy King-Harman, Perry Crickmere and Peter Blake) tamed *Ocean Spirit's* power and won the race by two days. This was the first (and last) time a monohull took line-honours

in this demanding event ahead of the multi-hull brigade. Then – just to try something different – they took *Ocean Spirit* to the southern hemisphere and entered her in the first Cape Town to Rio race. Again, they won.

By way of contrast, Knox-Johnston also turned his hand to the Premier League of Ocean Racing – the Admiral's Cup. He joined the winning crews on *Frigate* in 1973 and *Yeoman XX* in 1975. But at the same time, he could not fail to notice that a new breed of high performance catamaran was making its mark in distance racing. So – never one to be left behind or ignore a new challenge – Knox-Johnston commissioned Rod Macalpine-Downie to design him a monster. Measuring in at 70ft, *British Oxygen* pushed the offshore catamaran concept to the limits – hitting 28 knots at full throttle. Partnered by Gerry Boxall, Knox-Johnston duly took line honours in the two-handed Round Britain race. He then proceeded to enter the 1978, 82, 86 and 90 Round Britains in catamarans (*Sea Falcon* and *British Airways*) and monohulls (the 80ft *Great Britain II* and Bob Fisher's *Barracuda*).

In between this lot, Knox-Johnston also managed to fit in another trip down to the Roaring Forties, teaming up with Les

Williams and Peter Blake to compete in the Whitbread Round the World race in the 77ft *Condor*. Sadly their revolutionary carbon fibre mast gave up the ghost on leg one, but a replacement was fitted. This meant that a 'win' was out of the question, but *Condor* completed the course and put in some fast times, with Knox-Johnston skippering her on a couple of the legs. Various two-handed transatlantic races followed – mainly in massive multi-hulls – and Knox-Johnston now has a total of twenty transatlantic crossings to his name. So far.

Back to basics

But what was *Subaili* up to while her owner was careering around the oceans of the world? When not 'resting', she was used as a typical family cruiser until – in 1989 – Knox-Johnston took her to sea for another single-handed jaunt. Always fascinated at how navigators of old managed to get from A to B without the luxuries

of modern instruments, he decided to sail *Subaili* from the Canaries to the Bahamas with no more than an Astrolabe (invented by ancient Greeks to take the height of the sun at noon) and a Dutchman's Log (noting the time a piece of wood takes to travel the distance of the boat's length) to guide him. After 3000 miles at sea, Knox-Johnston was only eight minutes (nautical miles) out in latitude and 22 minutes out in longitude. Called the Columbus Experiment, this adventure won Knox-Johnston an Honorary Doctorate at the Maine Maritime Academy, the Royal Cruising Club Challenge Cup, the Cruising World Magazine (USA) Medal of honour and the Royal Institute of Navigation's Gold Medal for experiments with renaissance navigation. During her return trip, *Subaili* was knocked down four times in a mid-Atlantic storm and dismasted. With her radio also disabled, she made it to the Azores under jury rig and



sailed home the next year once new masts had been fitted. Whereupon, undaunted, Knox-Johnston teamed up with mountaineer Chris Bonnington to sail *Subaili* north of the Arctic Circle and scale the highest virgin peak in Greenland. Sadly they failed, because having got to the top they noticed that the neighbouring peak was higher. Oh well – even Knox-Johnston can't win them all.

Knox-Johnston's appetite for breaking records was not, however, diminished by this small 'glitch'. In 1992 he teamed up with Peter Blake again to have a crack at being the first to sail round the world in less than eighty days. They bought the catamaran *Tag*, renamed her *Enza* and set off at much the same time as Frenchman Bruno Peyron in *Commodore Explorer*. They were neck and neck, until – somewhere in the Southern Ocean – *Enza* piled (at huge speed) into something in the sea. This ripped a large hole in her starboard hull. So it was back to South Africa for repairs,

while Peyron completed the course – just breaking the 80 day target. Undaunted, Knox-Johnston and Blake got *Enza* back to the UK, refitted and lengthened her 92 ft, then set off for a second crack at the record. They made it this time, creating a new record of 74 days at an average speed of nearly 15 knots. If at first you don't succeed....

Raising the wind

And, whilst he was not hammering round the Horn at horrendous speeds in the big cat, what was Knox-Johnston up to back at base in the UK?

One of his finest achievements was helping to raise £11.5 million for two new 190ft brigantines for the Sail Training Association (STA) whilst he was the Association's President from 1993 to 2002. The way these two huge brigs were acquired was typical Knox-Johnston – a mixture of dogged determination and just a hint of old fashioned buccaneering. We found the hulls in Germany, he told me.

They were built as small cruise ships, but the company went bust and the hulls were towed to East Germany and the receivers called in. We put in a cheeky bid for the pair of them, got the nod and towed them back to Hartlepool before anyone could change their minds. I was lucky to have a great ally in Giles Pritchett-Gordon a fellow Council member. He had been in shipping and knew his stuff. He organised the fitting out and introduced me to Niarchos, who became a major benefactor of the STA.

At around the same time, Knox-Johnston was lured onto the Sports Council, having previously been involved in the Sports Lottery. I was on the Council until 2002. Trevor Brooking was our Chairman and he did a great job. We put £120 million into the new Wembley Stadium project. The overall budget was on a par with the Sydney Stadium. But the Government kept on changing its mind so the cost has soared and completion date been delayed. I think it could have been

finished on time and to budget if the politicians hadn't interfered. Since he left that organisation other Council involvements (such as his much-loved RNLI) have kept him amply busy.

And what of the *Clipper Ventures* enterprise? At the time that I was chatting to Knox-Johnston in March, he was very much in the firing line. The ten-boat fleet was undergoing repairs in the Phillipines and his phone, not surprisingly, was red hot. "Shall I go away and come back when the race has restarted? You look rather busy at the moment." I asked. "Not at all", came his reply "I've got a great team doing a great job. They know how to handle it. This outfit is all about teamwork. We've just announced the race will restart at the end of March. And it will." And, against enormous odds, it did. But then that's somehow all one would expect from a man like Knox-Johnston. Unflappable, determined, and inherently optimistic, he always gets the job done. The question is, what's he going to get up to next?



Sailing Today Reader Offer A world of my own

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