"PRUNELLA" .. the LADY who was taken out of hiding ...

The story of how Mark Wightman and Stefaan Persoons became joint owners of "Prunella", a 1938 veteran motor yacht, and their many ensuing adventures. Part One.

"Prunella" at the 2021 Thames Traditional Boat Festival

Early Beginnings ... with Endings in Two TTBF Trophies ...

It was early spring 2016 and Mark and I, now co-owners of *Prunella*, had only met once in person. That one time was when I joined Mark on his classic motor yacht "Vanessa" (www.my-vanessa.com) for a day trip from Gallions Point Marina through London up to Shepperton lock. It was a glorious sunny day, perfect for casual cruising on a beautiful classic yacht through a historic city. Coming up to and going under Tower Bridge has a particular feeling that is difficult to describe if one hasn't experienced it.

Mark and I had connected over the internet as I was browsing around looking to buy a sailing yacht for myself (after I had completed my RYA Fast Track Yacht Master Offshore during the summer of 2014) and I came across the "*Rachel III*" a twin screw 68" Formosa ketch which Mark had totally stripped and restored from the bottom up. We stayed in touch and Mark invited me along for the day trip on Vanessa and that was the start of a great friendship and "partnership" in *Prunella*.

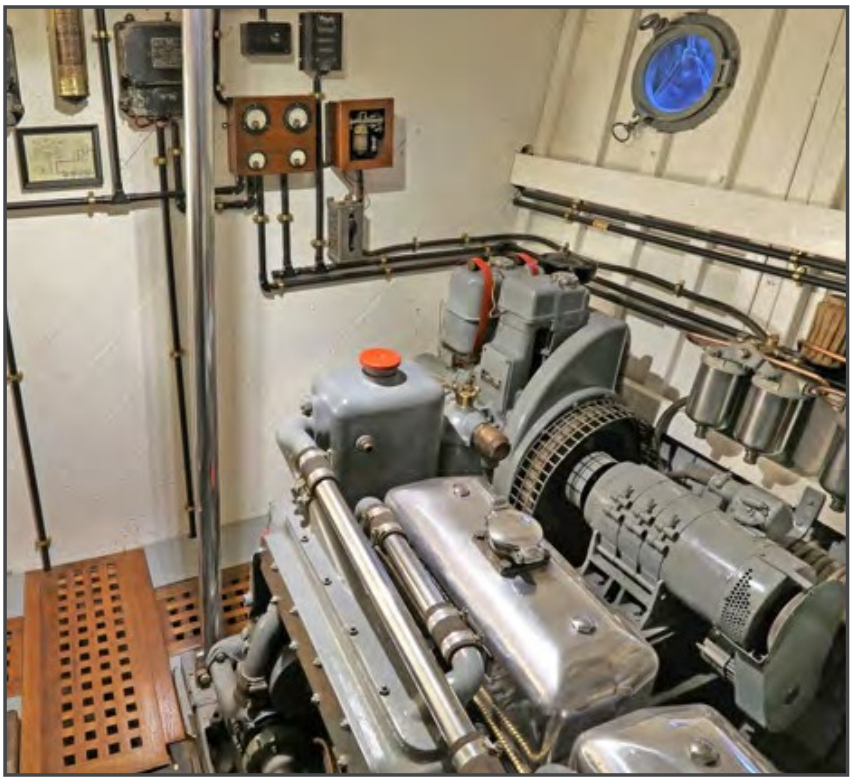
Apart from enjoying the scenery going through London on Vanessa, we also spent a lot of time talking about the renovation of both *Rachel III* and *Vanessa*. Being on the very boat with such a history both in historical terms as well as renovation terms was special. Mark clearly knew what he was talking about and what he was doing.

We made it safely to Shepperton, moored up and, before parting ways, we headed out to the local pub "The Thames Court" for a pint and a meal.

We stayed in contact and then one day I received an email from Mark with a link to an advert for the sale of 53" classic motor yacht from 1938, called "*Prunella*" and a short and simple question from Mark: want to go 50/50 on this? In the hour that followed we had a telephone conversation to talk about *Prunella* during which Mark told me he had already visited her and looked her over (and under as much as possible) and "she was good and she will be stunning when we'll be finished" ... as if renovating a 1938 wooden classic motor yacht is ever finished... but I didn't know that yet at the time .... But, truth be told, having seen what Mark had done with *Vanessa* and *Rachel III,* I had already made up my mind before the telephone call anyway. If I ever wanted to be part of the adventure of restoring a historical classic motor yacht (or a sailing yacht for that matter) and learn lots in the process, Mark was the man to do it with and *Prunella* was the boat to do it with. So, all the ingredients were in place for saying "yes" ... even before the telephone conversation.

One of the main features on *Prunella* (after all "only" a 53' classic motor yacht from 1938) which immediately caught both Mark's and my eye and interest is her huge "walk down and in from the wheelhouse via a small ladder in between the two engines" engine room. On boats of that size very often the engines are tightly squeezed underneath the wheel-house or saloon floor boards where they are difficult to get to comfortably for maintenance and repair. However, on *Prunella,* both of her massive Thornycroft RNR6 and 89.52 horse power engines were relatively easily accessible from both sides and even I, at 6'6", can nearly stand up in the engine room. I did say "nearly" ... because a few head bruises and some rather loud expletives later I have been reminded that the headroom in the engine room is "not quite" 6'6" ... In addition to the two main engines there is also, in the front starboard side of the engine room, the original generator from 1938 and which still works and still produces 12V. To start it, one needs to turn a lever on top of the generator fully to the right to take the compression off the cylinders and then bring it back slowly only as and when the generator turns on maximum RPM through the use of a little starter engine powered by a small 12V battery independent from the main engine

Her twin Thornycroft RNR6 diesel engines



The 80-year-old generator

and house bank batteries. The (rather loud) sound of this now more than 80 years old generator is just marvelous. Just like the beautiful purring sound of the Thornycroft engines.

Those Thornycroft engines are, like many others, prime examples of great British engineering. As are the crafts themselves which they propel. For one, think of the Rolls-Royce V-1650 Merlin Engines in the Supermarine Spitfire MK XVI. Not to mention, apart from the engineering side, the role these particular aircraft played in Dunkirk and World War II of which *Prunella* also had been a part. Not just the looks, but the sound of a Merlin engine in a spitfire flying by is entirely unmistakable and will give anyone with more than a shred of emotion goose pimples. To have such an iconic aircraft do a few flybys during the 2021 TTBF was a beautiful addition to help create the wonderful "classic old fashioned" atmosphere. The presence of a Spitfire during the filming of the film "Dunkirk" (see later) also made the entire event very special. Just imagine being out at sea, in Dunkirk, surrounded by a flotilla of Dunkirk Little Ships with a Spitfire roaring overhead. Literally breathtaking.

Another unusual feature we had noticed, apart from her engines and generator and still in her engine room, was her rather large and very practical original work bench on the forward port side of the engine room.

It was clear from the start that the unique engine room would become a focus of our renovation plan, particularly with Mark's great interest, passion and knowledge about engines. That renovation and particular attention to the engine room would culminate in *Prunella* winning the "Piston Trophy" award at the Thames Traditional Boat Festival in 2021, very much to Mark's more than well deserved pride and joy. In addition, that same year at TTBF, *Prunella* also came second for "Amateur Restoration".

More on all of that later, but here early on in the story we should mention a key fact about the renovation journey of *Prunella:* credit where credit is due and the vast majority of the credit for *Prunella's* successful renovation goes to Mark. Well done, Mark, and thank you for all the hard work and teaching me a few things in the process.

Dunkirk ... and "Operation Dynamo" ... 76 Years Later ... The 2016 Edition

"Prunella" as she was in 1938

June 2016 and here we were with our recent purchase. We were now the proud owners of "our" *Prunella* who would become our pride and joy for us to bring her back to life and to restore her to her former glory in a manner respectful of and in keeping with the period in which she was built. 1938. How we went about picking her up and our first few days of preparing her for our first adventure of taking her straight across the channel from Lowestoft to Dunkirk to partake in the filming of the film "Dunkirk" by Christopher Nolan can be read on our website www.prunella.info

We "had" to make it to Dunkirk because Mark had already committed us to be there even three days before we actually were the official owners of *Prunella*. So, with Mark already making important decisions, we were clearly off to a good start for some fun adventures with our newly acquired *Prunella*. When we had offered *Prunella* for the filming and had sent some pictures, the response that came back very quickly from the producers was: "yes, please do come but don't clean her up too much before you come. We'd want her exactly how she is".

Poor "*Lady Prunella*" did look a bit worse for wear as she had not been used as a cruising yacht at all but as a stationary live aboard and had only been taken out a few times in the last 18 years. And that was exactly what they wanted for the filming of "Operation Dynamo" in Dunkirk because that is what all the boáts would have looked like then in June 1940 as none of the owners who had their boats requisitioned for "Operation Dynamo" would have had much time to clean them up before going over to Dunkirk.

On the way to Dunkirk

Owners Stefaan and Mark dressed for the "Dunkirk" movie

We are still researching her history but from what we know so far is that she was on the East Coast at the beginning of the war and so it is surprising to find that she was not in Dunkirk in June 1940 ... although she definitely was there in June 2016 and we have the pictures and film to prove it.

Despite not being in Operation Dynamo, *Prunella* however did serve for the full five years of the Second World War from the East Coast all the way to the Scapa Flow. All the available history about *Prunella* can be read on our website www.prunella.info.

A rather funny little anecdote from the filming is that *Prunella* was repeatedly asked to come forward and nearer the camera. *Prunella*, however, was not an "official" Dunkirk Little Ship and there was (as of yet) no proof that she had been in Dunkirk in 1940 and, therefore, she could not be considered as a member of the "Elite Club" of the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships and we could sense that there was some kind of "friendly surprise animosity" building up because, after all, we were "not one of them". After this request for *Prunella* to move up and closer to the camera, one of the "objecting" skippers boldly asked over the radio: "Why is *Prunella* always being asked to get further upfront and closer to the camera? She's not even a "proper" Dunkirk Little Ship". The answer from the camera crew came straight back: "Because she looks the tattiest of you all."

At the end of the filming for the day we were all thanked for our efforts and asked to make our way to port. Mark and I had been taking turns during the day between helming and being out on deck to entertain and talk with our 40 or so extras we had on board. They were all French students who had been recruited locally and dressed up as soldiers. They all had a whale of a time and voiced their enthusiasm in a very complimentary way about *Prunella's* authentic look.

French students masquerading as British soldiers!

The header tank that ran dry at Dunkirk

I turned to port, handed the helm to Mark and went out on deck to speak some French with the "lads". As I stepped out of the wheelhouse it was immediately rather silent. I had also felt *Prunella* slowing down a bit but nothing to worry about. Maybe Mark had decided to take his time going into port and wanted to enjoy more time out at sea. And, also, as I was now half outside, I was obviously going to hear the engines a lot less and so I was not immediately surprised. But when it went totally silent and *Prunella* had pretty much come to a halt altogether, I stuck my head back in the wheelhouse and Mark and I looked each other with a perplexed look. It was obvious that we had lost both engines. About ten seconds apart. The first engine when I had felt the first slowing down and the second when *Prunella* came to a halt altogether. I re-entered the wheelhouse and we immediately tried to restart the engines but to no avail. A quick look at the gauge on the header tank provided our answer: the header tank was empty. As we knew that we had plenty of fuel, we also knew that we had not run out of fuel altogether but the problem was that the pump to take fuel from the main tanks to the header and from where the fuel gravity fed into the engines had not kicked in.

With that knowledge, there was no point in further trying to start the engines because we would have to bleed them first. Mark got on the radio to inform all the boats about our predicament. That was obviously going to be heard not only by the camera boat and its supporting vessels, of course, but also by the very boats who had just questioned why *Prunella* had been asked repeatedly to move further up and closer to the camera, despite not being one of "them". We reckon that that may have caused some chuckles and some feelings of "payback time" ... but all in good jest, of course. There were several "Dunkirk" boats in our vicinity but none of them would have had the manoeuvrability the camera boat supporting RIB had. And the quick thinking driver of the support RIB seemed to realise just as much. As he came on the radio and informed everyone of his intention we saw him make a U-turn and head straight for *Prunella*. It wasn't difficult for him to recognise, of course, because we had, after all, played "centre stage" upfront of the flotilla and close up to the camera all day long. Whilst out at sea all day for the filming, the support vessels came around distributing lunch packages for all the crew on all the participating little ships. It was all amazingly well organised.

Moored alongside Riis 1 at Dunkirk

As the RIB was heading for *Prunella,* Mark got on the radio and said: "That's very kind of you and we thank you very much but I don't think that your little RIB will do to tow our 30+ ton *Prunella".* The reply came straight back: "That's because you don't know what I can do with my little RIB". (think famous James Bond line!) I took the strongest and longest line we had on board and went up on the front deck of *Prunella* to prepare the tow line with a bowline around *Prunella's* anchor winch. We did get a successful tow with the "little RIB" into port and no sooner had we docked or we had two engineers from the filming support crew down in the engine room and within minutes we had the engines bled whilst Mark and I got on with cleaning the valve which controlled and triggered the little fuel pump to take fuel from the main tanks to the header tank and the engines were successfully restarted and were running just fine. The organisation around the filming and the technical support was immaculate and *Prunella* was ready again to take "centre stage" again the next day.

After the few days of filming in Dunkirk it was time to head back across the channel to England or, in a term more commonly used during the war for injured soldiers being taken back home to "Blighty."

The weather was just absolutely perfect for the crossing back to Blighty. The channel was like a mill pond, the sky was blue and the sun was hot. As we were headed for Ramsgate, as were another few Dunkirk Little Ships, we decided to go in convoy. We were still not and could not become an official member of the ADLS (Association of Dunkirk Little Ships but we felt we had been "accepted" as the odd, but now no longer unknown, "ugly little duckling" outside of the official ADLS club and were now definitely "one of them" ... at least it felt that way and all the crews of all the official Dunkirk Little Ships certainly made us feel like it and since Dunkirk we have met again with quite a few of them during the Henley-on-Thames TTBF with *Vanessa* in 2017-2019 (2020 unfortunately having been cancelled) or with *Prunella* in 2021 and also at St. Katharine's with *Prunella* in 2021. It most certainly is a wonderful community ...

Early Renovations ... London to Burnham and to Lowestoft and St. Olaves ... and a Broken Rudder Shaft ...

Because one of the first jobs would be to apply one new coat of anti-fouling in order to make sure that her hull was properly protected (as we knew that it had not been for a long time) we had to find a place with a crane big enough to lift the lady out of the water and so it was that we decided to head for Burnham-on-Crouch where she was taken out of the water to get cracking with the work ... under Mark's supervision and guidance .. of course.

During the time she was out on the hard, she did dry out a little too much for our liking as it was a very hot summer that year, but there was nothing we could do about the high summer temperatures and so we got on with the job and put her back in the water as soon as possible.

One of the least nice jobs we did there was to clean "a lot a lot and a lot" of rubbish ... very greasy and oily rubbish out from the bilges. As it was easier whilst being on the hard to dispose of the greasy oily rubbish coming out of the bilges in an environmentally friendly way in barrels put at our disposal in the marina, as opposed to whilst being on a pontoon, we took the opportunity of diving down into the bilges and getting dirty. Very dirty.

Once all that was done and given that we could use *Vanessa* (who was in Gallions Point Marina) to live on whilst we worked on *Prunella* we decided to take *Prunella* to Gallions Point Marina too and where we could moor her up very close to *Vanessa* and alongside a wide concrete working quay which again made some of the work a lot easier as opposed to being on a pontoon.

Once in Gallions Point Marina, a "working" marina, we took that opportunity to get on with the hard work such as taking out the old steel tanks (something we had not reckoned with but we found that they were in worse condition than we initially thought) to replace them with aluminium ones; putting an awning over her wheelhouse so we could strip, renovate and waterproof the roof of the wheelhouserip out the double bed bunk that was sitting across the rear cabin to restore it back to its original design of two separate single bunks either side of the cabin. Leo, from Reeds Lane Marina came down from St. Olaves to help with and see to (when Mark or I were not there) all that "heavy" sort of work which

Two of the new fuel tanks

The stern cabin under construction

we wanted to get done whilst in Gallions. And with the possibility, as also a good friend, to stay on *Vanessa,* we were well set. Leo organised some sort of make shift workshop on the quay across from *Prunella* to store lots of tools and make a work bench etc. and got on with a lot of hard work. Thank you, Leo.

We also renovated the little side decks outside the wheelhouse doors where there was some rot but nothing structural and also some repairs to the panel between the rear of the wheelhouse and the saloon. This delicate wood work was made practical due to the fact that Johnny, a master at French polishing and also a good friend, lived on his own barge in the marina and so he didn't have a very long commute to Prunella.

Once the "rough" work done by the summer of 2017 and for a number of organisational and personal reasons we decided to take *Prunella* back north to The Broads where she would again be alongside *Vanessa* and where she would remain for the next four years which was longer than we had planned. But which "renovation plan" ever goes to "plan"? Also, by early 2020, the time she was nearly ready for going around boat festivals Covid-19 threw a spanner in our works so Henley TTBF didn't happen and we had to wait for our first "official" showing of the "non-official" Dunkirk Little Ship, *Lady Prunella,* until the summer of 2021. But back to that summer of 2017 when she was taken from Gallions Point Marina to The Broads. Halfway through the journey the shaft from the wheel to the rudder going all the way along side the port side of Prunella, behind the backrests of the seats in the saloon, broke. Had Prunella been a single screw vessel that would of course have been a major problem and very likely would have ended up in a PAN PAN situation

The stern cabin completed

The beautifully refurbished saloon with the galley beyond

with us having to be towed into port. However, as she is a twin screw the second half of the journey was successfully, albeit tiringly so, completed by steering *Prunella,* by continuously adjusting the left and right throttles, which was rather demanding and exhausting for the crew but the crew and *Prunella* made it safely to Lowestoft and further on to Reeds Lane Marina in St. Olaves on The Broads which was to be her home for the next four years.

Reeds Lane Marina is a small, practical and very friendly marina where Lizzy and Leo will go out of their way not only to to make your stay comfortable but will also help with getting anything done and point you in the right direction for any shops, food or hardware, you may need. In addition, it was also very practical to have the Broadland Boat Builders literally next door across from the pontoon and a great pub "The Bell Inn" (who do the best Fish&Chips, in my opinion) with a lovely large garden right alongside the water and within less than 5' walk, *Prunella* and Mark and I were in a good location. If ever you need some nice and high quality wood work done on a classic wooden boat (and with Reeds Lane Marina, literally next door, to moor whilst you are having the work done), Henry at Broadland Boat Builders is your man. Henry and his staff (Tom et.al.) did lots of work on *Prunella* and all to the very highest quality.

As if we needed any more reasons or motivators for us to take *Prunella* to St. Olaves, there would also be Doug Ashley right on our doorstep. Doug is the former owner of Reeds Lane Marina and if there is still an expert engineer on Thornycroft or similar engines to be found, it's Doug Ashley. Whilst *Prunella* was in St. Olaves we got Doug to give both engines and the old generator a full check over and service after which they all ran like new again. Doug also helped with advising

"Prunella's" wheelhouse