

Why sailing in a 12 Foot Dinghy? A family history.

I was born in 1965 as youngest in a family of four sons. My eldest brother, Pieter, started sailing when he was 8 in a youth boat we called a "flits". This wooden boat can be sailed up to 16 years of age. Nowadays they are rare but still sailing. The younger brothers (Walter, Jan and Wim) became crew as young as 5 or 6 years, so sailing became a family business. Later on they also became captain of their own boats. In this boat the basis (and the love for wood) was laid for many years of successful sailing. Especially Pieter won a large number of prizes. In the sixties Flits boats were put on top of our beetle because trailers were not available. In the spring and summer we usually sailed on the lake nearby Groningen (Leekstermeer) but many times we competed with other sailing club. Sometimes the boats were transported by a freighter boat to Friesland and sailors were sleeping at the mother ship.



After the age of 16 another boat had to be found and in the early seventies this was the Vaurien. The Vaurien was an excellent boat for youngsters (and older sailors!).

Pieter and I sailed for one year together and became second at the Sneekweek (one of the largest sailing events of Europe).



After a few years of sailing in the Vaurien we sought for a more spectacular boat. In the seventies the Laser became popular and although my father thought a Laser was an inferior boat because it was made of GPR (plastic tupperware in his eyes) we convinced him that he had to stop with his old-fashioned ideas and later on we had a series of 3 lasers. Our brother Jan stopped sailing but the other brothers all sailed Lasers. We all were successful, although some years later, and the laser was indeed a spectacular boat to sail. Especially my brother Walter was an excellent performer in starting a race with a great sense of timing and in hard wind unbeatable. But when I started to sail a laser Pieter became a little bit rusty (his younger brothers became better and better) so he started to look for another boat. Although GPR served its goal father was pleased to see him sailing a wooden boat again. In the 1930^s a Frisian hairdresser (!) developed a boat of 6 m and still this boat is popular in the Netherlands (16m²). In those days a boat had to be less than 6 meters otherwise tax had to be paid. The boat has 16 square meters of sail hence the name 16m². This boat had to be

sailed in a completely other way than a laser. Steering had to be smooth and slow and the gaff introduced another way of sailing. The boat is slower than a laser but the fun was equal. All racing boats had to comply with class rules and therefore uniformity was guaranteed. In the early nineties some builders started to build in wood epoxy and that decimated the class because in hard winds the epoxy boats were stiffer and therefore faster. All boats build before the nineties (approximately 4000!) were slower and therefore worthless for racing except perhaps in slow winds. Many sailors were disappointed and started to look for other boats. My boat (the 4244 Gips Moth) was a



beautiful 1979-build ship and I had many successes but with the new boats I didn't stand a chance. It learned both Pieter and I that uniformity (as in the laser) is essential for racing. On the one hand we love to sail in wood because it has a history of hundreds of years on the other hand you can fall in love with a wooden boat but never with a plastic one! As our father said, it is Tupperware and it stays Tupperware.

So Pieter looked for a new boat and in 2003 he ordered Jeroen de Groot to built a new 12 foot dinghy. The 824 was built in the winter of 2003 and baptised in early spring by my daughter Nicole (age 3) because she was the only daughter in a long period of boys in the Bleeker family.



It took me some years to say goodbye to my “Gipsy Moth” but eventually I sold here and bought a second hand dinghy (the 657 ‘Chuchubi’). This boat was built in 1969 at the “Vlijt” shipyard. The last one built over decades in a large series of 12 foot dinghies. Usually the last one is the best because it became Dutch champion in 2010 and 2011 sailed then by Jeroen de Groot. Although it is an easy to sail dinghy some planking had to be repaired otherwise the boat

leaked to much. In 2010 I ordered to build a new boat and this boat was also build by Jeroen de Groot (869 ‘Trupial’). In those days (2009) Pieter was Dutch champion and was invited by the Italian Dingy association. Many more Dutch sailors were attracted by the adventure to start sailing in such unknown but beautiful waters. It taught us many lessons as we are used to sail on big lakes, but not as big as in Italy. The friendship and hospitality of the Italians are legendary but there way of “improving” the wooden/GPR dinghy eventually had to lead to a break-up.

Sailors, as in our family, love to compete in equally designed boats and hence only the best sailor will win. Pieter and I are the only ones still sailing because our brother Walter was victim of a traffic accident and stopped racing since 1997. Our father was a fearless sailor (he crossed the IJselmeer in 1942 in a 16m² to Amsterdam which was an act of lunacy and almost killed him) and died in 1997.

The 12 foot Dinghy is a boat in which Pieter and I will sail to the end of days, maybe not as the ‘flying Dutchmen’ but as brothers competing in a sportive way.

