

Yacht SUZETTE (later SOUZETTE)

Built by T.O. (Orlando) Lay at his house in Parkfield, Rowhedge, Essex. 1924.

22ft 7in length overall

21ft 7in waterline length

7ft 3in beam

2ft 6in draught ex-centreplate

Sail area 340 sq.ft. Bermudian Sloop rig.

Original sails very probably made by either Madder and Co, Wivenhoe or Gowen and Co, West Mersea.

New sails by Gowen and Co. 1938.

A 2 cylinder Ailsa Craig petrol engine was installed in 1929.

The SUZETTE was almost certainly designed by Orlando Lay and as far as is known was built by him as a speculation during a spell of unemployment. It is believed he sailed her for a time before she was sold. The owner was Captain D.R. Vachell M.C. an army officer who lived at Old White House, Great Horksley, Essex. He was a member of the Royal Engineers Yacht Club and the West Mersea Yacht Club. He owned her into the late 1940s and possibly slightly later. He was always an army officer and was awarded the Military Cross for distinguished service.

The SUZETTE was renamed SOUZETTE before 1939. I do not know why the name was changed.

T.O. (Orlando) Lay was of an old Rowhedge family of smack owners, yacht captains and hands and shipwrights.

His father (also Orlando) and grandfather owned fishing smacks. His father's smack was the DEER HOUND, a cutter of 22 Registered Tons built at Rowhedge in 1865, a typical Rowhedge smack, about 65ft long, one of the 50 or so then owned in the village.

He served a five (possibly seven) year apprenticeship at the old established yard of Harris Brothers, the Lower Yard, Rowhedge, during the 1890s. Harris Brothers built yachts and fishing smacks and repaired, refitted and altered very many wooden yachts, sail and steam, racing and cruising up to about 110ft sailing yachts and 160ft steam yachts.

After finishing his apprenticeship 'Lando' Lay, as he was known in the yard, worked as a shipwright. He and his contemporaries were very skilled men as were almost all the employees in the shipyards at Rowhedge, Wivenhoe and Brightlingsea; management, ship draughtsmen, engineer draughtsmen, platers, engineers, shipwrights, joiners, patternmakers, riggers, painters and the departmental foremen and charge hands. These shipyards had a long tradition of technical excellence and accuracy. 'Lando' Lay was typical of his contemporaries in the shipwrights trade and also had a good working knowledge of laying off vessels in the mould loft. But all the shipbuilding trades were subject to fluctuations of employment until the late 1930s, when employment stabilized for more than 20 years.

It was during a probably short period of unemployment around 1924 that the SUZETTE was built by Orlando Lay at his home, which was a substantial semi-detached, late Victorian house with a long and relatively narrow garden which contained a sizeable shed or store. These men were careful savers and most owned their own houses, which were well kept and usually run on strict lines by their wives.

Orlando Lay became a chargehand shipwright probably during the late 1920s and remained in that role until he retired, about 1956-7 when probably 75 years of age. He died about 1959-61.

A chargehand was a deputy foreman and often led numbers of other similar tradesmen, in his case shipwrights, on various major jobs. Orlando Lay was also in charge of much of the frequent slipping and unslipping of vessels on the five slipway cradles of the Lower Yard which could haul up vessels up to 180 ft length and about 11ft draught. He did at times also work in the Upper Yard, the main premises of the firm, which was almost exclusively devoted to the building and engineering of steel ships up to 220ft length, though there was shipwright work on them such as laying of wood decking, fitting of windlass beds, hold ceilings and linings and so on. Wooden construction was usually at the Lower Yard.

T.O. Lay was a tall man, about 6ft, but slightly stooped when I knew him. Like many shipyard workmen he wore a boiler suit, black laced boots and a cloth cap as basic working clothes. He was frequently to be seen about the Lower Yard with a stick of chalk held like a cigarette in his mouth and with a supple batten in one hand. 'Lando's' batten had many uses, from check measuring the length of a piece of timber required to be cut from a pile of fitches by the sawmill to measuring the distance between the cod blocks on a slipway cradle to suit a vessel to be hauled up. He was a respected shipwright of relatively few words but with a very keen eye and great knowledge of his trade.

I knew both Orlando Lay and the SOUZETTE by sight from about 1936 onwards and better when I started my apprenticeship at the Rowhedge Ironworks Co. Shipyard as a Ship Draughtsman, late in 1944. Part of a ship draughtsman's apprenticeship included spending six months working in each of the shipyard departments under a skilled tradesman; platers, mould loft, shipwrights, engineers and joiners/patternmakers (3 months each) before going into the ship drawing office to complete the five year apprenticeship. During that time I knew Mr. Lay and the SOUZETTE, which throughout the war lay in a corner of the Lower Yard with four or five other yachts, well covered up. After 1945 the SOUZETTE was got out of her covers and was refitted. Mr Lay was involved in his spare time, with the owner, who had by then I think become a Major if not a Colonel. He sailed the SOUZETTE with his wife and a daughter, who probably still lives for she would now perhaps be 70-75 years old.

The SOUZETTE laid up at the Lower Yard for perhaps one or two subsequent winters but I think spent much of her summers and perhaps much time subsequently at West Mersea.

The SOUZETTE had new sails by Gowen and Co in 1967 and a 4½ bhp Lister engine in 1966. At that time (1966+) she was owned by Colonel M.B. Hales and was kept at Orford, at least until 1969.

The SOUZETTE rig as seen on 12 May 2001 appears as the original except that she is now a bermudian cutter instead of a bermudian sloop. The mast, spreaders, boom and bowsprit appear to be the originals. The bumkin is of original arrangement and length. It is pleasing to see she is so well maintained and sensibly used. Orlando Lay would, I know, be very pleased.

John Leather
The Saltings
Ferry Road
Fingringhoe
Nr Colchester
Essex
C05 7BX
01206-729853

Souzette (formally Suzette)

Designed and built by : T.O. Lay, Boatbuilders , Rowhedge , Essex Built: 1924.

LOA 22' 7", LWL 20'0", Beam 7'3", Draft: 2'6", 5'0 (cb)

Construction: Mahogany carvel on oak backbone and beams, C.R Elm timbers. Keel: Oak with cast iron ballast. Mast: Spruce.

Official Lylods registered No. 163822. First registered 1937.

RORC Rating 19.59' (1948) Sail number 615Y

History (as known)

1924: Built Rowhedge.- builder information unknown, but was thought to be involved in lifeboat building and restoration. Owner unknown, presumed to be Cpt. Vachell due to length of subsequent ownership ?

1937: First official registration, owner Cpt. Vachell, Old White House, Gt. Horksley, Colchester. Port of registration Colchester.

1938: Sails made in June by Gowen: Bermudan Mainsail, Luff 27'9", foot 14'10" roller reefing. Trysail: luff 22'0" foot 11'3" (1998 sizes: luff 27'6", foot 12'9").

1938 to 1948: Cpt Vachell became LT. Commander, and moved down the road to 'Cockereills', Gt. Horksley, and remained there until Souzaette was sold in 1960. During this period a RORC Rating was issued for racing at 19.59'

1959: Vachell still owned her.

1960: Sold to H. Walrond. Thorne Court, Cockfield, Suffolk. Port of registry West Mersea. (why W. Mersea, maybe for racing ?)

1961: Engine removed.

1966: Sold to LT. COL. M. Hales. (Royal Artillery) 15 Well St. Bury St. Edmunds. Suffolk. Port of registry Colchester.

1967: Port of registry changed to Orford.

1973: Port of registry changed to Woodbridge. Last registration date, Hales still owner.