



Local History Collection

12 - Donald Charles Alfred Crowhurst

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Donald Crowhurst was an Amateur sailor and businessman. During the late 1950's and early 1960's he lived in Stewart Close, Fifield and played cricket for Braywood C.C.

Born in India in 1932, Donald moved to Reading, England after partition in 1947. His father died a year later and this left the family in a difficult financial position as his father had invested in an Indian Sports factory that was ruined during rioting.

Donald left school early and started a 5 year apprenticeship at the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough airfield and in 1953 he was commissioned into the RAF as a pilot. He was asked to leave the RAF in 1954 and then the army in 1956 for reasons unknown!

It was after this period that he lived in Fifield up until 1962. Donald was the opening batsman and wicket keeper for Braywood C.C. and in 1961 was top of the batting averages for the club. He is remembered by several players for the celebrations at the end of that season which took place in the Prince of Wales Pub that was opposite Braywood School. Donald was also a member of the Maidenhead Hockey club in this period.

By 1962 Donald had moved to Bridgwater and set up his own electronic business designing and building navigational equipment. He was a member of the Liberal Party in Bridgwater and was elected to the Borough Council.

His business started to fail and as an amateur weekend sailor he decided to enter the Sunday Times Golden Globe Race with a prize of £5,000 (about £80,000 in 2021). Donald mortgaged his home and business to financially support his race.

The Golden Globe race was inspired by Francis Chichester's single handed round-the-world voyage in 1966/1967(stopping in Sydney) but the plan was to circumnavigate non-stop in 1968 and the Sunday Times who sponsored Francis Chichester was keen to open the race to all levels of sailors. Previously entrants had to prove their sailing ability before taking part.

Donald built a modified 40 foot trimaran for the voyage which had the potential to sail much faster but was unproven for such an arduous journey. Compared to the other sailors; Chay Blyth and John Ridgway for example, Donald was hopelessly inexperienced. Competitors had to set out before 31 October and on the 1st sea trial his boat took 2 weeks to complete a 3 day trial. His journey from Cowes to Teignmouth with an experienced sailor; later reported that Donald had fallen into the water several times and that whilst the Trimaran was swift, when it reached 12 knots the vibration was severe enough to loosen the screws on the self-steering gear. He was met in Teignmouth by a film crew from the BBC.

It was on the 31 October that Donald set out from Teignmouth on his boat Teignmouth Electron. In those days there was no GPS, satellite communication or the internet, just an intermittent radio and morse code transmitter.

Early in his journey he realised that his boat was leaking and that he'd left an important part of his bilge pump in England. It was at this point that he realised that he wouldn't make the journey around the Cape of Good Hope and unwilling to pull out of the race he began faking results and then ended radio contact for 111 days while he sailed around the Atlantic.

In the Spring of 1968 he was due to re-enter the Atlantic Ocean and he announced that he had completed his circumnavigation and was sailing home. He was told that one competitor had completed the race and another was due to finish shortly after with a faster time. So he began sailing home not realising that the boat with the fastest time would sink and put him in fastest time position. Knowing that his logs and account of the race couldn't withstand the scrutiny back home he cut all contact on 29 June. Early July 1969 was his last log book entry. His boat was found drifting in the mid-Atlantic on the 10 July 1969 intact and empty and the log books confirmed that he had never left the Atlantic. It is believed that he went overboard.



The winner of the Race gave Donald's wife and children his winnings. In 2018 a film (*The Mercy*) was made of his story, starring Colin Firth as Donald and Rachel Weisz as his wife. The film Director; James Marsh, said: *'He made a pretty good go at sailing round the world. He stayed out in the Ocean for the best part of 7 months so all in all, he achieved much more than people ever thought he could, he just didn't achieve what his objective was. It was a case of over-reach, it was hubris and that is what caused the tragedy of his demise.'*