

## FV Seafire ZMBC 5875

She was the Buzzard FD109, Official no. 187847, IMO No. 5049350 and she was built for Brixham Trawlers Ltd in 1956 by Henry Scarr Ltd, Yard no. 736, at Hessle near those two famous Humber river ports of Grimsby and Hull. On the 1<sup>st</sup> August 1959 she was sold to the Boston Deep-Sea Fishing and Ice Co. Ltd of Fleetwood, a fishing port on the Irish Sea coast of England and in 1961 renamed the Boston Seafire FD 109.

The Boston Deep-Sea Fishing Company soon became one of the largest operators of trawlers out of Fleetwood with 82 boats or one third of the boats working out of that port as well as a large number of other vessels jointly owned with other companies out of Hull, Grimsby, Lowestoft and Aberdeen. At 314 gross tons (104net), drawing 12.3ft with a LOA of 127 ½ft (or 38.87m)\* the Boston Seafire was built as a ‘middle distance’ or ‘middle water’ trawler. Fleetwood was ideally placed to exploit the Irish Sea catching Cod, Plaice Hake, Monkfish, Soles and a few other bits and pieces found there, as well as the Hake fishery off northwest Scotland and the west of Ireland and the traditional Rockall, Faroe Islands and Icelandic Cod, Haddock and Plaice fisheries.

In 1969 the Boston Seafire came out to New Zealand under a charter agreement to fish for Wonderfoods of Nelson. The Seafire broke down on the delivery trip stopped at the Azores for repairs. Charles Hufflet was the manager at the time and told me “I got cold feet and cancelled the contract to bring her sister ship, the Hawfinch, out here”. At that time there was a penalty payable on the importation of fishing vessels; a way to protect the local ship building industry by discouraging imports. So when Wonderfoods eventually bought her for \$25,000 pound sterling they were lumped with an extra 25% duty.

“I recall when she arrived” said Skipper Mike Baker. “Richard Hoarder and I were standing on the wharfe and I commented that she’ll never make it. How wrong was I?” She still had a plaque that “looked a bit like a rooster on her funnel when she arrived here” according to Gary Courtenay, skipper.

The Boston Seafire began fishing for ‘couta and other species with Bob Ford from Hull, one of two ex-British skippers. For one reason and another, their turn at the wheel didn’t last long.

John Mansell, now with MSA recalled spending most of his time hanging over the side untangling the warps. “I joined the Seafire in early 1970 as a deckhand and did four trips on her. I forget the skippers name; he was ex Navy and had brought one of the Sea Harvester ships to NZ.” said John. Gary Courtenay was the Bosun and there was a total crew of nine and John had no experience at all of fishing vessels. “I’d never worked so hard in my life or been so dirty. The boiler was only flashed up once a week to conserve fuel.” Doing ten day trips and fishing 24 hours with three hour tows normally there was one six hour tow after midnight to give the crew a chance to sleep.

They were trying times as Gary put it. “It was a right f@&%-up”, said Gary “The officers were all ex-navy or merchant men and hadn’t a f@&%-ing clue how to catch fish or work a side winder. I was on deck but I had the knowledge and was always going up top telling the old man what the F&@k to do. Like shooting the gear away on the turn otherwise the inboard Danleno rips out the other side wing which they did a lot ‘till they f@&%-ing listened”.

Once the doors were shot away the warps are then bought together into the towing block on the starboard quarter. Doing this puts a turn in the warps and depending on which way the turn was the skipper had to put the wheel hard over against the gear or turn away from it before he started to haul back. "The warps would be chattering away then they'd dip and the twist would come out" Gary described in detail. "I remember going below to shovel ice and one of the crew asked me what's wrong? He's turned the wrong f@&%-ing way I said. You wait, I said in 30 minutes we'll have the biggest f@&%-up you've seen." he laughed. "And we did!"

The first landing return for the Seafire was the 20th December 1969:

TAR 18585	GUR 8616	BAR 8105	WAR 3138
SPO 2211	ELE 1905	SKI 1099	STA 888
SCH 850	SQU 312	LIN 268	RCO 253
SKA 210	KAH 36	ESO 18	

"We had good catches of Terakihi on Rogers Tongue off the Motunau and Treadwells Bank down the West Coast off the Haast." said Gary.

"I never made any money. We were on a share basis and had to catch 1000 cases to meet costs first. Something went wrong every trip and we never caught more than the 1000 cases." John told me. "The company eventually had to pay everyone a retainer of (I think) ten dollars a day to attract crew." After three trips John was the most experienced fisherman on deck and went as Mate (as he had a foreign going masters ticket). "I left her after the fourth trip and joined the seventy foot stern trawler Phoenix which was like daddy's yacht by comparison".

Ron Blackman skippered her for a while but as Charles Hufflet pointed out, she was never really successful until they changed the way they worked her. "We got rid of the Granton gear, switched to a trawl that was more suited to our fisheries and began towing off the stern. But we still had to bring the bags alongside to split them over the rail".

Rising from a deckhand to skipper Gary Courtenay took the wheel later in 1970 and along with fellow Cornishmen Colin Nunn and Sean Orchard they fished her successfully until 1972 when the winch engine died. "It was a rattling old Crosley 2-stroke and she was tied up for a while for repairs so I went and did my own thing on other boats" said Gary. Johnny Gay, Glen 'Shorty' Duggan and Brin Reid are names well known to all of us of maturing years. "With a crew of 12...good buggers and bad we were known as the Dirty Dozen".

"Johnny Gay had chronic emphysema and e'd smoke like a bleedin' chimney too, coughin' and wheezing his way up to the bridge. It was so f@&%-ing bad that one trip before they sailed the crew went to the company and said they weren't sailing 'cause they were scared of old Johnny f@&%-ing dying on them. Well it turned out he out lived the lot of 'em, didn't he!" laughed Gary. "And he was still coughing!"

Unlike modern stern trawlers, sidewinders had their accommodation/wheelhouse amidships extending aft. This allowed a large open working foredeck. While hauling, the boat would have fall off the wind and lay beam on to the sea. The doors would appear first to be shackled onto the gallows by their chain preventers. The crew then had to bring the ground rope aboard. Low bulwarks made the job of hauling the "Granton" gear with its heavy bobbins over the rail relatively easy but it also meant the crew was fully

exposed to everything that Ol' Huey could throw at them. Often working waist deep in water as the rails dipped and exposed to every puff of wind, it wasn't a job for the faint hearted, limp wrested or politically correct. Hazardous at best it was just part of the job. A gilson winch would lift bobbin rig clear of the water over the rail which swinging wildly with the roll the deckies would do what they could to guide it inboard and hard up against the bulwarks. The net would be fleted aboard over the rail; in the early days hauled in by hand but now-a-days with the use of lifting gear. The cod end, now floating alongside would be 'split' and 'lifts' of 1 - 2 tons brought inboard to hang, dripping, over the deck. The cod end knot was then let go which allowed the catch to cascade out between the pound boards to be sorted, cleaned then cased or bulked below in ice. Retying the cod end knot, the bag end would be heaved over the side again, the vessel would make way slowly washing the fish back and filling the bag end before another 'spilt' could be taken.

Hoki, Orange Roughy and Barracouta made up much of her catch plan. Fishing the 'Wall of Death' and 'Tora' up the East Coast of the North Island for Southern Kingfish (Gemfish) another fishery she did well in. At some stage she even went squid jigging; though who ran her then I haven't a clue but the accompanying photo shows her with squid jigging machines and a steadying mizzen sail. Brian Hardcastle ran her at some stage as did John Gardner before joining the Amaltal Voyager.

"I think it was about 1990-91 that Sealord sold the Seafire to Seafresh Fisheries of Wellington." said Steve Bailey former Seafresh skipper. Jim Cunliff skippered her for the first trip with a Sealord crew off Banks chasing Barracouta and Red Cod. "Then Greg Clifford took over doing trip on, trip off". Steve Paku, Lindsay Elkington and Andy Karatea; other well known names to also have skippered her.

The Seafire was powered by a 5-cylinder 2-stroke diesel built by British Polar Engines Ltd of Glasgow developing 740bhp. "She was a beautiful sea boat. Her top speed was about 11knots but she'd cruise comfortably at 9 to 10." Punching when empty wasn't much fun Steve told me but get a load in her and she was really good. "Laying to splitting bags aboard was no trouble" added Steve. "She rode over the swells just fine and even when we were fishing Roughy off Puysegur taking waves over the deck, she felt as safe as houses. The crew just got wet though."

Seafresh crewed her with 9 comfortably. "We had a Skipper and Mate, Chief Engineer and Motorman and 4 to 5 deckies". However, maneuvering her alongside was a bit of an act. "Like Fred Flintstone and his Brontosaurus" Steve smiled. "She has a great big wheel mid-ships with the engine telegraph across the wheelhouse. You found yourself running back and forwards ringing for slow ahead, half astern, what ever and hoping the engineer acknowledged the bells of the telegraph".

When TACC cuts bit the Seafire found herself hamstrung for quota and had to resort to chasing Leatherjackets in the South Taranaki Bight or Roughy outside the EEZ on the Louieville Ridge and Lord Howe Rise.

"An Aussi company owns her now" said Steve. "It must have been about 2002 when they bought her and she's been lying alongside dying a slow and sad death ever since. It's a crying shame".

The Boston Kestrel was the last sidewinder ordered for Fleetwood. She was broken up in 1993 ending a line of boats, like the (Boston) Seafire, that built the British trawl fishery and provided a livelihood for generations of Fleetwood families. The Seafire has contributed much to the New Zealand trawl fishery as well; the port of Nelson in particular. She has played an integral part in the lives of many, many New Zealand fishermen.

I'll leave the last words to Quentin Bates, a good friend and features editor for Fishing News International. "There are lots of these old ships lying about here and there, waiting to be scrapped or just mouldering away. Some of them get looked after occasionally, but it's not often. There are a couple in England that have been preserved as museums, plus one in Belgium and a couple in France. Last year I saw the old Icelandic gunboat Thor at the quayside in Reykjavik, a very sad old lady now and painted gold as she was supposed to become a floating disco. I suppose she'll be scrapped sooner or later, which is terrible considering what a huge part she played in the cod wars and is such a central part of their history in the 20th century. They'll miss her when she's gone, but it'll be too late by then."

*Seafire was sunk by scuttling on the 19th October 2008 near Whale Island, Whakatane, New Zealand and will be used as a dive wreck.*