



**Alf Delany,  
1910 – 2006**

**Alf Delany realised at an early age what a difference one man could make, and set out to make those differences. Three months after his death, Aisling Moore looks at the man behind the sailor**

**I**f you had a few important aims for 2007, what would they be? Do you think you would achieve them? What if you were turning 96 that year, would you have made targets at all?

Alf Delany started 2006 with five goals, and continuing a habit of perseverance, he realised each one. On the inland waterways, we know Alf as a leading figure, a founding member, and a sailing veteran. However, there were other elements to Alf's life that weren't as apparent to us.

Alf's father Vincent Delany raised his children in Longford town, where he has his medical practice. He preferred to spend the summers in Tarmonbarry so the family could enjoy the outdoors, away from the town, though Vincent spent a lot of energy improving the social life of the town by setting up a

rugby club, organising a scheme for building a swimming pool, and acting as one of the leading lights in the North Shannon Yacht Club. As a result of all this activity, Alf realised what a difference one man could make and started involving himself in these activities at a young age – a tradition he would follow for his entire life.

Alf wasn't a 'come all ye' young man, unlike his mother who loved entertaining people, and looking after them. His son Vincent says there was a bit of a loner in him in his youth, participating in the sports for the game, and less so for the social diary.

Alf went to school in Congo's College in Dublin, and here he met with boys from all walks of life, getting a good education and training in many sports. When he was 15, he was at a regatta with his father in the North

Shannon Yacht Club, and suddenly one of the crew for Jack Stevens was called back to Dublin on urgent business. A replacement was needed to crew with Jack in the water wag so Vincent volunteered his son for the job. Jack was impressed with their impromptu performance as a team, and in any subsequent races in the area, the two paired up again.

His competitive nature was honed here, which he carried through into Trinity College, where he studied medicine. He had a very active college life. He maintained his interest in sailing, and Trinity was a great place for this, as he sailed with sons of the 'big houses'. He also played for the Trinity first hockey team, which was as popular then as rugby is today, and he continued to play after college for the Three Rock Rovers. On the Trinity team, he made

# WHAT A DIFF A M



two of his many life long friends – Dickie Pilkington and Ian 'Tolomey' Roberts, both of whom died in late 2006 also. To hold a 60-year friendship shows just how popular Alf was.

As he started college, he also set up the Motor Yacht Club on the grounds of the Lough Ree Yacht Club, which was still standing until last year it was knocked to make room for the new clubhouse. His first target for the year was met last July when he saw the new Lough Ree Yacht Club opened, showing the strength of sailing on the Shannon.

He bought a motor boat called *Hold Everything*, in his early 20s which was so light it could barely hold the weight of the engine. It was a canvas hull, varnished to be waterproof, but very delicate. The boats were always being re-designed, and the most cutting edge technology and thinking were employed to improve the boats by trying to introduce air under the hull so it would float on air rather than on water.



**Alf joins Father Paddy Dowling and CIE engineer Brendan Daly on the protest rally to Pollardstown Fen in 1979**



**The Delany family at Tarmonbarry in the early 1930s: Alf on the right with his father, mother (seated), sister Pat and younger brother Vincent**

# REFERENCE AN MAKES

He regarded his first great sporting success as winning the Bann 100 – a six-hour gruelling race with a 100hp engine. In this race, his analytical mind solved the problem of lengthy pit stops for re-fuelling by devising a system where the fuel tank could be removed from the vessel and replaced with a full one, buying him priceless minutes.

When, in 1938, Jack decided to move to England, he offered Alf a share in *Pansy*, the water wag, which Alf readily accepted. He later bought the whole thing.

After deliberating between Pat, a student he met in Trinity, and his childhood friend, Mary, he married Pat in 1942 – it seems there was a bit of Casanova in Alf. Their first few years of marriage were divided between England and Ireland, before settling in Clontarf. Here, the Delany practice was set up and Alf worked for local patients, and also as the doctor to Guinness workers and the Great Northern Railway (which later became CIE). His second target was

realised when the tradition of practicing medicine in the family was continued into the next generation – his niece graduated in medicine last year.

Pat and Alf's marriage was a very positive one, as the couple made a decision to live in the present, look to the future, and never speak of the past. This optimistic lifestyle was followed throughout their 46-year marriage.

In 1947, discussions were held to find a way for Ireland to compete in the Olympics in England for the first time, and to create a voice for Irish sailing internationally. Trials were held in Dun Laoghaire harbour, and Alf was chosen to compete in the Swallow class. The only difficulty was that there were only 16 Swallows in the world. Alf's persistence and determination set in once again, and he tracked one to George O'Brien-Kennedy, the owner of one of the first fleets of hire boats on the Shannon. On loan, Alf took *Cloud* to England, along with some required foodstuffs – whiskey, a side of ham,

10lbs of butter, and some bottles of milk. With so little time to train, and competing in a boat he wasn't adept in, he didn't race very well at first.

However, the event gave Alf the Olympic buzz.

In 1952, Alf was nominated to sail the Finn Dinghy, which was designed in 1949. He travelled to Helsinki and was awed by the beauty of Finland and the organisation of the event. He thoroughly enjoyed the trip, making many friends including Canadians and Scandinavians. Again, with little experience in the dinghy, and competing alongside the inventor, Alf didn't place but travelled home satisfied and always remembered the competition fondly.

His thirst for knowledge extended beyond the latest medical developments, and from these competitions, he came in contact with the best of international journalists and writers about sailing technology. He kept up-to-date with new advances in sailing through the books and articles for the duration of his life.

Alf Delany  
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He also enjoyed Rolt's *Green and Silver*, about travelling down the Grand Canal, up the Shannon and down the Royal Canal, completing the ultimate tour of the waterways. Harry Rice's book *Thanks for the Memory* from 1952 was an inspiration for Alf's writings in the '80s and '90s. He spent three years in the late '80s writing a history of the wags, with help and encouragement from his sister-in-law, Ruth and her experience writing about the Shannon.

He continued the Shannon regattas every year, without missing a single one except the years his was otherwise engaged in the Olympics. He sailed in *Pansy*, as well as 505s and Fireflies. Throughout the '60s and '70s he crewed with his wife Pat, and taught the children Vincent, Peter, Owen and Margaret to sail, always encouraging them and chasing them up and down the river to regattas. Last summer, Alf

initiated his 18 month old great-grandson Matthew into sailing, and saw the third goal of 2006 realised, as he took the little boy on his first sailing experience. Matthew's first sentence was 'boat in the water', which brought great delight to his great-granddad.

After Pat's death, he met up with Mary Pieu, the woman he'd almost married 40 years before, who had also recently been widowed. They maintained a close relationship for the rest of their days. This helped Alf keep an active life, something he cherished.

His fourth aim for 2006 was met in May, when a 100th birthday party was held for *Pansy*, the water wag Alf had been sailing since the mid-1920s.

Finally, in his death, he achieved his last target – the president of the Water Wag club has always died in office, and although he had tried to resign a few years before, the members had refused

his letters. This may seem morbid, but it really was an honour. Alf would have been proud.

From Alf, it is easy to see that, like dropping a pebble into a pond, you never know just how far the ripples will go. Through his medical practice, his sailing and his trustworthy friendships with so many people, young and old, his influence is immeasurable. A man who would camp out at regattas instead of staying in a hotel, and who always displayed resilience, persistence, consistency and competitiveness, he made the world around him what he wanted it to be. There is no doubt that Alf's legacy will be felt for years to come. He will be celebrated while he is missed, as he would have wished. ■

*Aisling Moore is a member of the Lough Derg branch of the IWAI, and a journalism masters student.*

# FAIR SAILING

**Alf Delany's sister-in-law Ruth Delany explains his involvement with the IWAI, outlines his sailing triumphs and talks of his enduring love of the waterways**



**(Above): Alf attended the Athlone Branch Silver Jubilee cruise to Barley Harbour in 1979. He is pictured here talking to (left to right) Cynthia Rice, Rosemary Furlong and Alf's wife, Pat**

**(Below): Alf attending his final regatta in Lough Ree last summer with family members who won prizes**



**A**lf Delany was born in Mohill in 1910 and moved with his family to Longford town a few years later when his father set up there as a GP. His father was a keen sailor and Alf spent a great deal of time at nearby Tarmonbarry as a child learning to sail and travelling up and down the river attending regattas. *La Vague II* became the family boat in 1922, and in the following year the *Chang-Sha* was purchased and the Delany boats often cruised-in-company with the *Rambler* which belonged to his uncle, TW Delany. Alf became a very keen sailor from an early age; he sailed in the Water Wag *Pansy*, from 1925, first as crew and subsequently as owner in 1937 until he was in his 90s. He also sailed with his father in *Kiwi*, a Shannon One Design in the 1920s and his father gave him the boat in 1934. In both classes he won numerous awards, winning the champion boat in the Water Wags 22 times and the Shannon One Design award for champion boat over the LDYC and LRYC regattas, which was awarded from 1952, nine times. In addition he represented Ireland in the sailing Olympics in 1948 and again in Helsinki in 1952.

Although a busy doctor, a father of four children and very involved in

sailing, he was quick to lend his support to his brother, Vincent, and Harry Rice when they mounted their campaign to draw attention to the plight of the inland waterways in the early 1950s. It was in his house in Clontarf in December 1953 that a number of people came together and laid the plans to call the inaugural meeting of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland which was held on the 7 January 1954 in the Shelbourne Hotel. He became a member of the first council and was to remain a member for many years. His interest in all the waterways is reflected in the fact that in the late 1950s he and Peter Denham followed the voyage of the *Hark* down the Royal Canal by making a trip from the 12th lock to Ballymahon in an open boat, fitting it with hoops and a cover to shelter them at night.

Following the deaths of both Harry Rice and Alf's brother Vincent in 1964, he took a more active role in the IWAI. It was during those years that a campaign was mounted to prevent Dublin Corporation from filling in the Circular Line of the Grand Canal. He took over as President from Dermot O'Cleary in 1968. The great surge of popular opinion, particularly among Dubliners, swayed the Corporation who decided to tunnel along the line of the canal for the surface water sewer,

allowing the canal to remain open. He was to remain President until 1978, playing a very active role in all that was going on and attending IWAI events all over the country. He lent his support to Ian Bath who had begun his campaign to 'Save the Royal Canal' in 1972 and organised a walk for IWAI members along the Dublin stretches to draw attention to its condition and its imminent threat of abandonment.

There was much activity during the '70s throughout the waterways with special attention being devoted to the Grand Canal in Dublin, including organising rallies and bringing the Robertstown canal boat up to run passenger trips. Terence Mallagh built the waterbus Clonskeagh in his back garden and she operated passenger trips on both the Grand and Royal canals from 1976. Council meetings were held at various venues and I remember marathon sessions with Alf in the chair. In those days some of the branches were just getting started and much of the business of the association was initiated and managed by the council, leading to lengthy discussions and meeting which went on up to midnight. Bill Child took over as President from Alf in 1978, a year before the Silver Jubilee of the association.

While he played a less active role after this, he remained a member of the council and continued to take a lively interest in all the activities. He was always ready to lend support on occasions like the protest rally to Pollardstown Fen in 1979, when plans to carry out drainage threatened part of the fen.

In later years he will best be remembered in his boat *Camblyn* following the Shannon One Design racing on Lough Ree and Lough Derg. When he no longer felt fit enough to race regularly he would follow the racing keenly and when they came ashore, his family would be told just where they might have done things differently during the course of the race.

He retained a great interest in everything to do with the River Shannon which had played such a dominant role throughout his lifetime. During this time he had amassed a wonderful collection of photographs, regatta programmes and other material which now form a valuable archive.

The large attendance at his removal and funeral in Clontarf are an indication of the very high regard and affection which his many friends felt for him. They were all there: his own large family of children, grandchildren, great



**Alf celebrating his 90th birthday with his family**

grandchildren and other family members, several generations of local families he had looked after as their GP, sailing companions and boating friends. As we cruise on our waterways today we must not forget the people of vision like Alf who worked so hard at a critical juncture to raise the profile and point out the potential of this important element of our heritage.

We extend our sympathy to Peter, Owen, Vincent and Margaret and to the grandchildren who had grown to appreciate what a special grandfather he was. We will all miss him. ■

*Ruth Delany is a founder member of the IWAI and a published author.*