



Gretel II

Vessel number

HV000437

Date

1970

Primary Maker

Bill Barnett (1915-2018)

Description

GRETEL II was built for a syndicate headed by Sydney based media owner Sir Frank Packer who had challenged for the America's Cup with GRETEL in 1962. Packer retained designer Alan Payne who had shown with GRETEL that he could produce a different and competitive design. GRETEL II continued his innovative approach with a very different hull shape to other contemporary 12 metres, and it carried many unusual custom designed fittings, including an aircraft style construction, riveted mast section that was the most advanced spar of its time. The Oregon planked hull was fastened with wooden trunnels instead of metal screws, saving weight in the planking that could then be employed as ballast. The yacht was launched in March 1970, behind schedule, but immediately drew praise from commentators for its bold approach and striking appearance. Pictures of the sleek all white hull (including anti-fouling coat on the underbody) filled the magazine pages. With its relatively clean deck and low profile fittings the yacht stood out on

the harbour as a leading edge, pure racing machine that still retained a classic and elegant profile. After trials on Sydney Harbour where it showed glimpses of its potential it was shipped to the USA and rigged with the new racing spar for the first time. There was only a short period available for tuning and crew training before it raced against FRANCE, owned by Baron Bic in a best of seven race series to determine the right to race against the American defender. GRETEL II won four nil in an exciting series and the yacht began to show its true potential. The final race was a stunning whitewash sailed in foggy conditions, where GRETEL II's navigator Bill Fesq piloted the yacht around the course in total confidence of their position, while the French yacht got lost and retired. This display was noted by the Americans who realized that like GRETEL in 1962, the Australians had once again come to Rhode Island with a very competitive yacht.

Whilst the first race of the America's Cup series was an embarrassment for the Australians, losing by a wide margin when a crew member fell overboard and time was lost retrieving him, the second race has legendary status in Australian yachting and sporting history. A collision at the start stalled GRETEL II and INTREPID got away to hold a lead of around one minute for the first four legs. On the fifth leg GRETEL II sailed though INTREPID under spinnaker to lead by 50 seconds into the last beat to windward, and held on to win by just over a minute. The anticipated speed was at last evident, but the win was short lived, the race committee ruled that GRETEL II had infringed INTREPID at the start and awarded the race to INTREPID. Australians everywhere were shocked to lose the race on protest. Packer created headlines when he stated that having the protest heard by the holders of the trophy, the New York Yacht Club was akin to complaining 'to your mother-in-law about your wife'. This phrase has endured in the years since the event as has the controversy over the actual decision and facts presented by both sides. Despite this setback it was now apparent the GRETEL II was indeed a very fast yacht, and showed over the next three races that it had the speed to match the American yacht, however the experienced American skipper Bill Ficker managed to stay ahead with better tactics on the race course, except for the fourth race where GRETEL II used its superior light weather speed to break through the American cover on the last leg and win by a comfortable margin. The close series rattled the Americans who could see that they no longer held a technological advantage in terms of boat construction. The respected Australian journalist Murray Davis noted in Seacraft November 1970: "... that the Australian challenger is the fastest all round 12 metre in the world - and that her crew is the second fastest." Packer considered a third challenge after his narrow loss, but passed away before making any commitment, by which time Alan Bond had announced his intentions to take on the mantle of Australian challenger. Bond's syndicate acquired the two GRETEL yachts and they were used for crew training and acted as trial horses for the new Miller designed aluminium 12 metre SOUTHERN CROSS. GRETEL II went back to Rhode Island as part of the team but only acted as a sparring partner. After the unsuccessful challenge it came back to WA and was later sold in 1976 to Sydney engineer and yachtsman Gordon Ingate who had put together a syndicate to challenge for the Cup, working with a limited budget. Their intentions were to improve GRETEL II which many felt still had potential to win the event. For the 1977 challenge the yacht underwent a number of changes to make it more competitive with the aluminium hulls, and as a gamble on conditions, its performance was optimised toward lighter weather. According to reports almost 150mm was taken off the bow on either side, but the underwater hull shape was left unaltered except for truncating the canoe body at the stern to create a shorter waterline that would conform to the lighter displacement created when 400kgs of ballast were removed. An aluminum deck and transom were fitted, and the sail area increased significantly. GRETEL II was crewed by a team nicknamed 'Dads Army' due to the post 40 years old age bracket many fitted into, and wearing T shirts emblazoned with " Daughters of America, lock up your Mothers", the crew made up for youth with experience. At the end of the first round in the elimination series, it was the second boat on points behind Australia. In the semi-final sail off, GRETEL II pushed the fast improving Swedish yacht SVERIGE to seven races, the first time seven races had been sailed in an America's Cup series, and all the teams recognised how competitive the seven year-old yacht had been. GRETEL II returned to Australia and the syndicate plans to build a new design did not eventuate. GRETEL II continued to sail on Sydney Harbour and raced in the 12 metre World Championships in WA in 1986. In 1987 it was donated to the Sydney Heritage Fleet, in full sailing condition, and for a period they were able to use it as

an operational vessel. However the demands of maintaining its customized fittings and parts of the structure that was not expected to be in use after 20 years eventually caught up with the boat and it was withdrawn from sailing. The Sydney Heritage Fleet were committed to the massive JAMES CRAIG project and unable to raise further funds toward GRETEL II's restoration, so the craft was offered for sale and went to a private buyer in 2007. In 2008 it was sent to New Zealand for a major rebuilding project so that it could be raced again. The project was a combination of two aims. The principal one was to return it to the racing outline and profile of its 1970 configuration which had raised so much interest and was a classic look for the period, while the other aim was to make the yacht more useable with a modest fitout inside, an engine, and contemporary fittings on deck. GRETEL II now sails again with a new wooden deck, the 1970 transom profile and cove line, a new alloy mast to replace the aircraft inspired riveted section (which has been retained by Gordon Ingate), a retractable propeller so that the hull shape is not compromised, and an interior fitout that has been largely restricted to the middle of the hull and still allows access to and views of much of the original wooden framing and structure. The intriguing plate fabrication designed by Payne for the shroud plates that had corroded over time, and was a fine example of his detailed and unorthodox approach, has been replaced with a new identical fabrication. This combination of features allows much of the original and unique parts of the vessel to be interpreted while making it a much more usable yacht so that it can still be seen sailing on Sydney Harbour as a representative of its era and the Corinthian days of America's Cup racing. The wooden deck, absence of guardrails, twin steering wheels and other features all retain the character and feel of the yacht as a classic racing 12 metre from 1970, but the introduction of modern fittings, an engine and some saloon fitout allows GRETEL II to be easily maintained and operated. In 2010 GRETEL II takes part in races on the Harbour and is planning to sail to events outside of NSW in the coming year.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 18.97 m x 3.72 m, 31.5 tonnes (62.25 ft x 12.2 ft, 31 tons)