

Stokey Woodhall – A Synopsis – Extract from Yachting Monthly

Despite growing up in the landlocked town of Dudley with no desire to sail, Peter ‘Stokey’ Woodall has become one of the most experienced, renowned and admired celestial navigators in the world. He has clocked up more than 300,000 miles, with 31 transatlantic crossings, and his contributions to the field of astronavigation are respected globally.

Stokey Woodall has taught [celestial navigation](#) to the world’s most accomplished sailors and the odd royal too. For a man that’s never learnt to swim, is nicknamed after his unwavering support for Stoke Football Club and started out life against all odds having been abandoned on a doorstep, he is an unlikely seafarer.

But Stokey has spent his lifetime rebelling against what he sees as the mediocre formalities and expectations of society, and to this day, continues to defy the odds – a trait ingrained into all the best sailors. His long list of accomplishments is impressive but it’s his charm and unique character that make his stories both entertaining and significant.

Defying the odds

Stokey’s first encounter with the world was rough. His mother abandoned him on the doorstep of a children’s home wrapped in a simple red and white handkerchief – ironically the same colours as Stoke Football Club. Suffering malnutrition, rickets and jaundice he was given just one week to live, but the universe had other plans for Stokey. From birth he was strong, determined and frankly a little defiant, continuously living out his dream. Last year he celebrated his 70th birthday.

Stokey has lost everything more than once, faced death multiple times, but yet never lost sight of his sense of humour. He is apt at delivering typically British anecdotes at the perfect moment, something we tend only to see today in old movies. When faced with a sinking ship, his words were ‘I’ll be up in a minute, but meanwhile put the kettle on and let’s have a cuppa.’ As his Army colonel put it, ‘He’s the last of the old school.’



After a rough start in life, Stokey is happiest at the helm of a boat with only loose plans about his destination

Much of his assiduous manner could be attributed to his adopted mother, Mrs Woodall. She fostered more than 100 children in her lifetime, but as the only child to be adopted by the Woodalls, Stokey had a unique relationship

with his adoptive parents. Mrs Woodall cared deeply, though was stern in her manner, reminding Stokey that no shame would be brought to the Woodall name.

‘My parents were amazing, but my mother, gosh she was tough – what she said was the law!’

Despite the strict upbringing, Stokey was hardly a straight-A student and left school enrolling into an apprenticeship at the steelworks, working alongside his father. It was a harsh, hard environment, tolerable for only the toughest of men.

After witnessing three horrific deaths in the workplace, and seeing how arduous the hard labour was, he thought, ‘There has to be more to life than this!’ And with that, he signed up to the Army, sold on a life filled with adventure skiing and sailing, but soon realised this was more a marketing strategy than reality.

The search for his speciality in the forces proved difficult. His free spirit rubbed against the institute in every way but what he lacked in structure and discipline he made up for in charm, and he persisted with his four years of service. However, he had none of the natural skills required of the traditional soldier, inciting incidents such as exploding fire hydrants with rifles.

Stokey also had little concept of spatial awareness or of speed, and had several close encounters while driving a tank, including a near miss (in the tank) with an articulated lorry on the A1.



LEFT: Stokey’s incredible celestial navigation skills are often called upon – here he is pictured sharing his knowledge with sailors during preparations for the 2023 ARC. Photo: Sophie Dingwall

In his defence that was his first time in control of any vehicle. He had, after all, signed up to travel the world as promised and was clearly not there for the driving or soldiering. According to Stokey, ‘The sooner the Army realised this, the better it would be for both of us!’

He had taken up running and his achievements as an ultra-distance runner were acknowledged, and whether it was luck or desperation, he was sent skiing – his final shot at fitting into the system.

A few weeks later, Stokey wasn’t ready to be sent to fight and blagged an interview with the Colonel to go sailing. Little did he know, this would shape his life forever. Of course, he’d never been sailing before. He was from Dudley, though astutely failed to mention this.

Relieved to avoid the troubles in Northern Ireland, he was sent to the British Kiel Yacht Club, Germany to look after the regimental yacht. ‘I wasn’t really interested in the sailing part, I wanted to travel the world!’

A baptism of fire

His first time at sea was with Captain Roger Justice, a well-respected officer who may well have blagged his Colonel too, for his sailing experience didn't surmount to much either. Their combined lack of experience led to them enduring gale-force winds, torrential rain, zero visibility and a near miss by a passing ship.

The short hop along the coast was tormented hell, a far cry from what he expected, and the same can be said for the Brigadier's daughter, whom Captain Roger had brought along with hopes to woo. Stokey thought, perhaps if this is what sailing is like then Northern Ireland might be an attractive proposition after all.



Chilling out on a Swan 47

Wise words and persuasion from the Captain swayed Stokey's decision to stay on board: 'If the plan doesn't work, change the plan, not the goal.' The sun presented itself the following day, warming the atmosphere, and a gentle breeze propelled the yacht smoothly to their destination. An entirely contrasting experience led Stokey to believe that sailing might not be that bad after all.

A summer romance with 'the most beautiful Danish girl' might have helped sweeten the deal. He had a taste of a seafarer's life and liked it. His career as a master mariner had begun. For Stokey is about the camaraderie, the people, the journey. His time in the Army came to an abrupt halt when his love affair with the Colonel's daughter from Kiel was discovered. There's certain things one should avoid, and this was one of them. The animosity surrounding his relationship with the Colonel's daughter resulted in his dismissal, but civvy life freed him up to pursue a life of adventure. He fulfilled his dream to travel the world, choosing the ocean as his road to freedom.

The life of a free spirit

He exuded a sense of adventure and lived life from year to year, but one thing is certain; Woodall's bumpy start in life was to continue for many years.

He sailed many boats across the world's oceans, often taking jobs no one else was mad enough to agree to and lived many stories whilst doing so. A biography of this man's life cannot be compressed into one article. He put pen to paper and published the book [Who the Hell is Stokey Woodall?](#) in 1999. 'I love my life. I don't know what I'm going to do next, but I'm going to do something and I believe you create your luck.'

During my conversation with Stokey, he'd often chip in with things like, 'Oh, don't print that,' or 'Best not to include that bit.' In this day and age, a large proportion of his stories may be best saved for the privacy of the bar.



Stokey with his mother (left) and business partner Susanne Jacobs

Without giving away too many spoilers, some of his most compelling stories include: tales of a shipwreck in the Red Sea, where he was left with nothing more than his underwear; falling overboard in the [Bay of Biscay](#); locked up both in Bangkok and in a Caracas bordello; sinking ships and tussles with sharks. He opens up about relationships and of course, there are one or two mentions of that team closest to his heart, Stoke City Football Club.

Stokey has lost everything more than once, and during his most frugal time after being left shipwrecked in the Red Sea, he returned to Cowes on the Isle of Wight. He arrived wearing all he owned, which included the British Ambassador's underpants, blue velvet trousers and an orange shirt and lived in a potato shed at the back of a chip shop with a bank balance of £8.

Feeling somewhat glum, he gave himself a talking to, reminding himself that 'When you came onto this planet you had nothing, and you've still got most of it left so what's the problem?' But one thing can be said for certain: he has loved, laughed and truly lived in the moment. 'Relationships can be short-lived but contain the intensity of a lifetime,' he says.



Stokey on a delivery

Proving them wrong

Woodall earned himself a reputation as a master mariner and world-renowned celestial navigator. 'Back in those days, we didn't have GPS and had no choice. Neither did we have the means to check our workings out so we had to just hope we were right. For me, GPS is simply man-made stars.'

His English teacher once told him, 'You won't go far'. The rebel hardwired into Stokey proved his teacher wrong. Scribbling on the back of a beer mat, Stokey founded Britain's first-ever ocean sailing school in 1982 called International Ocean Services. He wasn't a rich man, nor was this his priority, and in order to make it all possible, he borrowed a friend's boat to teach from. However, he was fascinated by the universe and believed in the importance of sharing his knowledge with others.

He taught the most renowned and accomplished sailors using his unique methods, which simplified a rather complex subject. In fact, a large number of master seafarers are most likely former students of his: [Sir Chay Blyth](#), Barbara Harmer (the only female Concord pilot), [Dame Ellen MacArthur](#), Alex Thompson and Emma Richards are just a few from his portfolio.

His expertise in the field of celestial navigation has made him highly sought after. His recent work has been advising the latest generation of ocean adventurers prior to crossing the Atlantic with the [ARC \(Atlantic Rally for Cruisers\)](#).



Still teaching. Photo: Sophie Dingwall

Today he continues to run navigation courses and seminars. Even those with no prior experience or interest in sailing join his courses to discover the universe. In today's world of technology, the question of whether we need paper charts and celestial navigation has become a topic of debate.

When asked, is there was anything he feared, Stokey replied, 'I would like to leave this planet leaving a mark and if I didn't I'd be disappointed.' Stokey has never settled down; his commitment is to himself and the ocean. He is a master of his subject and dedicated to keeping it alive.

With that in mind, the closing pages of his novel read, '**Rule No.1 – Never tell all you know.**'