

The round-the-world sailor, a noisy cockerel and a chain of events.

By Victor Gordon.

Perhaps the most bizarre happening of my 45 years at the typewriter (now the laptop) with the Portadown Times was the day that my cameraman and I leapt on board a fishing boat at Ardglass and ordered – “Follow that sailing boat!”

We'd been after the story for months. But the modest man on board the 35-foot ketch that was our target had wrong-footed us at every turn. I had every respect for tradesman-mariner Tommy Baird. He and his brother Joe had built the craft with their own skilled hands in the back garden of their Woodside Green home.

I often had a yarn with them as I used to dander down Woodside Lane to the old rugby pitch on the banks of the Bann (I played the game for Joe Roney's Thirds). But little did I realise then that Tommy would one day sail the beautiful craft solo from Northern Ireland to New Zealand. And later on, he sailed it back to Northern Ireland with the new wife he met down under, and then back to Christchurch. Round the world one-and-a-half times.

Tommy was as modest as they come, and I had tremendous respect for him. He genuinely wanted no publicity, but who could let a story like that pass!? In our job, we are inundated with fanatical self-publicity seekers – especially politicians! There's an old saying that they love being photographed, even at the opening of an envelope. And if the photographer fails to show, nowadays they take a selfie.

Anyway, the vibes were hot that Tommy was leaving soon. But I didn't know when and I didn't know from whence he was sailing. Then, that sunny Saturday morning (I think it was the late 1970s) I got an anonymous call – “Tommy's leaving from Ardglass in an hour or so.”

I rang fellow newshound, photographer Eric Cordner, and within five minutes, the horn of the Times van was blasting like mad at our front door. Off we sped, with Cordner driving like a demented Lewis Hamilton – except that the rusting van had less power than the sprightly sailing boat we would encounter on the rolling Irish Sea.

Gilford, Banbridge, Castlewellan and the scenic villages of Mourne-land flashed by. We squealed to a halt on the quay at Ardglass, only to see family and friends waving a tearful goodbye to Tommy who was well out to sea as his ketch caught the wind that would carry him and craft across the Mighty Atlantic, through the Panama Canal, from whence he would tackle the Pacific, the world's most expansive ocean.

“We've missed him!” Eric mourned.

But we hadn't. I cajoled a bemused fishing-boat owner, handed him a tenner and pleaded with him to pursue Braveheart Tommy. The fisherman loved the idea, and as his engines roared we

overtook Tommy far out to sea. Cordner's camera, with a selection of telephoto lenses, was clicking like a turnstile.

Tommy obviously suspected nothing as we pulled alongside. He was shouting and waving and then when he saw the Times Two, he had to smile as we shouted "Ahoy there! All the best Tommy – we'll be praying for you!"

"Thanks boys!" he replied, realising he'd been rumbled. And we watched in admiration (I admit with tears in my eyes) as he made for the horizon and Australasia. It was such raw courage and expertise for a man whose story was the best human interest one I ever landed.

The Baird family helped me at every turn as Tommy made his epic journey. Our readership followed his progress at every stage, calling at islands along the way, sailing through Panama and island hopping through the South Seas until he finally stuck land at Gisborne, North Island, New Zealand.

It was life-changing for erstwhile confirmed bachelor Tommy, as he fell in love in NZ with a bride whose fanaticism for sailing matched his own.

A couple years later, the erudite Cordner – on his own initiative – photographed Tommy and his wife when they returned on the ketch to Ardglass for a holiday here. Again, no interviews. That meant Tommy had sailed around the world. And his wife circumnavigated the Globe with him when they sailed back to their home at Christchurch.

Many of the Baird family have settled in Christchurch over the years, and the last we heard of the NZ connection was when they were affected by the earthquake a couple of years ago.

His sister Pamela Cully – who lived in NZ with husband Sidney for a while (they have long since returned to Portadown) - assured us they were fit and well, slightly affected but not too bad.

But I'll never forget that fishing boat pursuit of one of the bravest and most modest men I have ever met.

Perhaps the quirkiest story I have ever covered was the tale of the noisy cockerel in the middle of a housing estate. A rather eccentric couple kept the bird in their garden shed in the middle of Enniskeen, not the best way to look after a bird that made a noise at dawn that would have awakened the dead.

It certainly wakened half the estate at 6am, and complaints flowed into the local Housing Executive office. But the couple couldn't see the problem and called in the Portadown Times to launch a campaign and save the future of their pet.

Cameraman Tony Hendron and I didn't have all that much interest in this particular campaign. We could empathise with the residents and their rude awakening. But photographers are a breed

apart, and we arrived to snap a picture that had him crowing – like a cockerel!

A harassed official of the NI Housing Executive had arrived to try and persuade the couple that perhaps a farm would be the best place for the bird and his ear-splitting habits. And when we arrived, the couple were standing defiantly at their front door. The husband had the rooster under his arm and his wife was shaking a defiant fist as the official took his leave down the garden path.

We didn't hear the outcome (and didn't much care) but Hendron had got his picture and he crowed about it for weeks.

Brownlow was a real mine of bizarre stories in its infancy. And again Tony and I indulged in shall-we-say toilet humour when I received a call from 'Mr Angry Aldervale' that his toilet hadn't been working for months and the NIHE wasn't really put out.

"How do you flush out the stories?" Hendron quipped as we arranged to meet the man outside the local NIHE office. "Anyway, what's to photograph here?"

He changed his tune when the tenant arrived with offending loo under his arm. He had unscrewed it from the floor and disconnected it. His aim was to place it on the counter of the local office to explain the, um, chain of events.

"Now THAT will make a picture," enthused my snapper.

I thought he was going to photograph the tenant outside the office. But our man slipped in surreptitiously, took an action pic of our friend ceremoniously placing the disconnected loo on the counter much to the chagrin of the staff. And off he strutted.

It did the trick. The plumbing was fixed the very next day, and Mr Hendron was cock-a-hoop. "I'm flushed with success," he boasted.

Yip. Photographers are not to be trifled with.