

Kind of magic

Morgan Giles was unique. Not only did he design class-leading small craft he built and sailed them too, and all with exceptional skill. In the first of a two-part series, John Leather gets to grips with his genius

ON A FINE SUMMER morning in 1947 I watched a sleek, white-hulled yacht come ghosting down the Blackwater in the light breeze. She looked new, her Egyptian cotton mainsail and large genoa catching every zephyr of the faint north-easterly which had our chubby craft merely lolling indolently. Almost magically this vision of all that a sailing yacht should be slipped past, her crew intent on getting the best from her, and soon she showed us a shapely canoe stern. I remarked on her beauty and speed, to be told she was designed “by that Morgan Giles”. I remember her name gold lettered on one of her lifebelts: *Matawa*. I have never forgotten the sight of her that morning, and realised later that I had witnessed the work of a master.

Francis Charles Morgan Giles enjoyed a career spanning more than half a century and could boast many successes. He was not only an able designer of sailing yachts and boats but had a sound practical knowledge of good boat construction. Born in 1882, he had a lifelong interest in small craft and yachts, and was to become a very able sailor of small boats, but this was not in his background. In fact, his father and mother had no interest or knowledge of sailing matters.

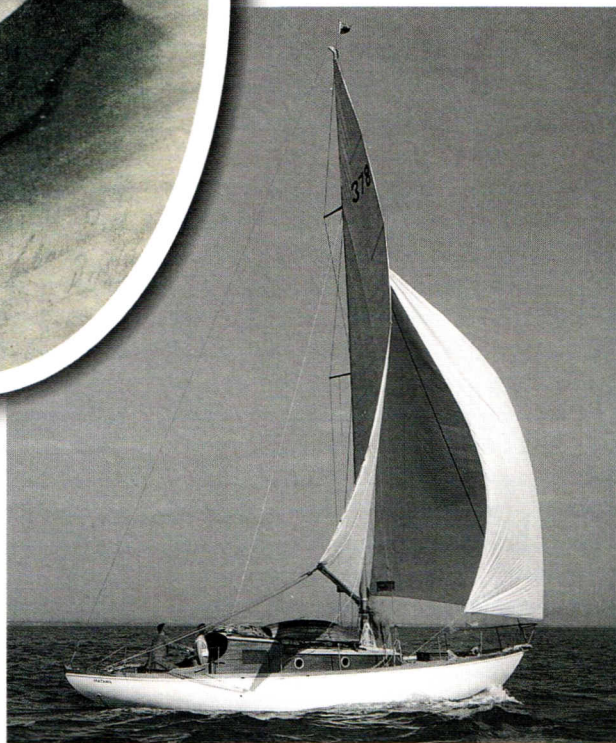
Morgan Giles’ earliest experiences afloat came during a holiday at Shaldon on the river Teign in South Devon when he managed to persuade a local waterman to take him in his 16ft rowboat that was equipped with a small lugsail. The boat had neither centreplate nor rudder but was steered using an oar over the lee quarter. This filled Morgan Giles with the desire to explore more complex craft and next he managed to talk the owner of a local crab boat into letting him accompany him on trips. In her he learned the rudiments of sailing from the fishermen who sailed these boats every day.

Soon after this Morgan’s father funded the purchase of a 15ft sailing boat from a local waterman. This heavy boat, which had little more than 5ft (1.5m) beam, a lug mainsail and a foresail but no centreplate, had been a rowing beach boat originally and had been “rizon” one strake to increase depth. This was a very

unhandy craft and Morgan did not hang onto her for long. But he had learned some valuable lessons and the experience set him firmly on the path towards a life filled with boats and yachts.

He admired the 20 or so racing dinghies owned and raced from Shaldon and Teignmouth and would often visit the yard of Abraham Pengelly (CB173), at the upriver part of Shaldon known as Ringmore, near the bridge across the river Teign. In a dimly lit shed Pengelly built many of the fastest racing dinghies of the time. Frequent visits to the yard saw Morgan accepted by the boatbuilders there, who regarded ‘that boy Giles’ as worth tolerating.

His interest in yachts and boats became so strong that in 1896, aged 14, his parents allowed him to attend at Pengelly and Gore’s yard as a fee-paying pupil, rather than as an apprentice. For two years he also



Matawa was the author’s first sighting of a Giles design