



Donald Crowhurst setting out in the Teignmouth Electron.

This sailor was going to attempt a solo around-the-world sailing adventure but the world would soon find out that this was no normal adventurer

BY LAWRENCE WILSON

The Strange Mystery Of

DONALD CROWHURST

There is an old photograph in existence of a seven-year-old boy standing against a background of lush vegetation. He wears shorts, socks, and a white sweater and is laughing with wide-open mouth, positively chortling with glee while looking straight at the camera. The reason is clear. He has just been given a toy boat and he is clutching it, with hoisted sail half as long as himself, in his left hand while the right hangs firmly on to the rigging. “Look at my boat!” he seems to be saying. “My wonderful boat!” The name of the boy was Donald Crowhurst.

Thirty-years after that photo was taken, on the morning of 10 July 1969, the Royal Mail ship *Picardy*, bound from London to the Caribbean, was in mid-



The route of the 1968/69 Sunday Times Golden Globe Race.

Atlantic when a small sailing craft was spotted — an unusual sight in that area — moving very slowly. Seeing no one on deck, the captain sent a boat with three men to investigate and when they climbed on board they found that the craft — a 40-ft trimaran in a seaworthy condition — was deserted.

One sail was hoisted on the mizzen mast, the others were neatly folded on deck. The life raft was firmly lashed in its place. There was nothing whatever to suggest that the boat had encountered severe weather and this was confirmed by an inspection of the cabins. A soldering iron was found perched on top of a tin. The sink was full of pans, cups and dirty dishes. Working tables were littered with radio spares, presumably from

two receivers partly dismantled. There was enough food and fresh water on board to last for weeks.

Completely baffled, the men returned to the *Picardy*, taking with them three log books they had found in the cabin. The boat's name was *Teignmouth Electron*, which meant nothing until someone remembered a race organized by *The Sunday Times* and, fishing out an old copy of the newspaper, found some details: A single-handed, non-stopping round-the-world race with top prize for the fastest time of £5000. There was also another prize called *The Golden Globe* and it was for first home. The competitors were to start at intervals with latest starting date being 31 October 1968. Among nine or so entrants were Robin Knox-Johnston in *Suhaili*, Bernard Moitessier of France in *Joshua*, Cmdr. Nigel Tetley in *Victress*, and in *Teignmouth Electron*, Donald Crowhurst.

After the trimaran had been hoisted on board, the captain looked at the logs. Two books had been used for navigational records, which seemed to have been kept with obsessive detail. But what struck him most was a mass of writing at the back of Log Book 2, and in particular certain phrases: “I am nostalgic as a child sensing he is about to leave ‘home’ for ever... I am what I am and I see the nature of my offense... It is finished. IT IS THE MERCY...” What did leaving “home” imply, what was “finished,” and what was “the mercy”? These were strange words for a sailor to use on a round-the-world race.

The *Picardy* and, later, the US Air Force searched the area for Crowhurst though the last entry in the log was for 29 June and there could be little hope that he had survived. The captain then cabled his ship's owners about the strange find and that same evening two policemen called on Mrs. Crowhurst in Teignmouth where she lived with her four children to break the news. For them, as for the whole of the town, it was a shattering blow, for everyone had believed that Crowhurst was about to win the £5000 prize.

Winning had, in fact, meant a lot to him, not least because he had told everybody he was going to win, his backers, his family, his friends and anyone who would listen. One and all were invited to recognize in him a local boy who would astonish the world.

But there was more to Donald Crowhurst than a naive boastfulness. Even as a schoolboy in India, where

his father was a railway superintendent and his mother a teacher, he had been a perfectionist — scrawling “bad,” “very bad,” “disgraceful” in the margin of a first-term report that had marked him never lower than “fair.” In adult life he became a mathematician of considerable intelligence with a passion for electronics. At the same time he was witty, ebullient, a splendid companion for most people when on form, but subject to both high elation and depression that characterize the manic-depressive.

This brilliant but unstable personality was to get him into trouble on several occasions, in the Royal Air Force where he became a hell-raiser and later in the Army from which he was asked to resign in 1956 after a series of law breaking drives in his high-speed Lagonda.

In 1957, Crowhurst married an Irish girl and, a few years later after a series of jobs in electronics, founded his own firm to manufacture nautical equipment — in particular a radio direction-finding instrument, invented by himself, which he called the Navicator. The Navicator proved difficult to sell and to no one's surprise Crowhurst found he was a poor businessman, too interested in inventing gadgets to bother much about marketing them. Result: Money trouble.

Then in March 1968 came *The Sunday Times* announcement and it at once caught Crowhurst's vivid imagination. Admittedly Sir Francis Chichester had recently sailed round the world, but Joshua Slocum had done that in 1898. Here in the non-stop race was a chance for Crowhurst to outdo all previous sailors, revive the fortunes of his firm through the publicity, and become the hero he felt he was, at any rate potentially. He had done some sailing, had a small boat of his own and knew himself, as he wrote, “to be competent to undertake this voyage in a seamanlike manner.” Moreover, he would go one better. Though he had never sailed one, he had heard that multi-hulled boats were amazingly fast before the wind and he would therefore take a trimaran and clock up another first: First to sail a trimaran round the world.

But time was short, there were only seven-months to the deadline and backers had to be found, the boat had to be built, and a thousand preparations made for what was, after all, a unique test for a craft of that kind. Crowhurst flung himself into the work; he could be very persuasive when he wanted and before the end of May the money problem had been solved. Two firms — one in Essex and the other in Norfolk — were building the hulls and the rest of the equipment. Even so, it was a race against the clock.

At last, on 23 September, *Teignmouth Electron* was launched and then the maiden voyage began, right round from Norfolk to Devon. Crowhurst was expecting to do the trip in three-days, but it took two-weeks and was a near-disaster. The starboard float was damaged in a snarl-up with a chain ferry, screws kept starting out of the self-steering gear, Crowhurst was repeatedly violently sick, twice fell overboard during a brief stop-over at Cowes, and, worst of all, it was found that the boat would sail no closer to the wind than 60-degrees, which in the Channel meant endless tacks towards



Crowhurst, although appearing confident, was beset by many internal demons.