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Three of Colin Archer's famous rescue vessels, *Colin Archer* (RS1), *Kragerø* (RS 32) and *Larvik* (RS 33) cruise in company along the Norwegian coast. Image courtesy Ida Uran Jørgensen

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Colin Archer in about 1893.

IN THE WORLD OF WOODEN BOATS there are but a few famous designers whose names are synonymous with traditional vessels of great beauty under sail. Colin Archer (1832–1921) is one of them. He designed and built more than 200 boats and, in Norway, many of his distinctive gaff-rigged double-enders are still very much alive and well after more than a century of sea-going, and have long since attained the iconic stature of national treasures. That affectionate distinction is due in no small measure to the perception that these boats are not merely inanimate objects but living entities, each endowed with its own distinctive persona. Their owners are members of Seilskøyteklubben Colin Archer (the Colin Archer Sail Boat Club, or SSCA), a unique organisation of dedicated Archer enthusiasts who preserve the original vessels not by admiring them tied to a wharf but by adventuring in them throughout the summer months. The traditional gaff-rigged boats are instantly recognisable as they set sail each spring, cruising in company along the deeply indented Norwegian coast, attending traditional boat festivals, competing in regattas or simply entertaining the families that continue to maintain them in immaculate order.

The SSCA's 203 members have 91 Colin Archer boats between them, including 14 historic pilot cutters and eight of the famous rescue vessels designed and built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fourteen of these boats were designed and built by Archer at his yard at Larvik on Norway's south coast. When I returned to Norway in 2017 after a 30-year absence, I made a special pilgrimage to Larvik to pay my respects at Tollerodden, the Archer family estate on the Larvik fjord. Approaching the handsome 17th-century house on foot through an ancient beech wood, I was gripped with a profound sense of delight at being at last on this hallowed ground. On that glorious golden autumn day, the rustling leaves of the beeches were already beginning to drift across the sloping lawns, tumbling down toward the quiet, tide-lapped cove where Colin Archer's boatbuilding sheds once stood cheek-by-jowl at the edge of the Larvik fjord.

A weathered bronze bust of the great man stood on a sandstone plinth amid a bed of colourful annuals. And behind that severe, bearded visage, captured so well by the sculptor, I caught the hint of a smile behind twinkling eyes as the laughter of children in sailing dinghies carried across the water. Colin Archer was one of a family of 13 children and he and his wife had nine of their own.

Colin Archer was born at Tollerodden in 1832 and there he died in 1921, aged 89. The elegant simplicity of the beautifully proportioned pale-grey timber house with its high-pitched roof and white shuttered windows spoke of a quiet, understated restraint. It is maintained by volunteers as a museum in his memory, and I had no difficulty in imagining him here, surrounded by his family. In the silence of his study, lit by polished brass oil lamps and redolent of burnished beeswax polish, there was the large oak desk at which the designer worked alone with pencil and paper, drafting the wonderful sea-kindly curves that came to characterise his many fine creations. It looked very much as though he had only just stepped outside and might reappear at any moment.

Colin Archer was an unlettered man of genius, a self-taught designer gifted with an innate understanding of, and empathy for, the ways of a ship. In a country justifiably proud of its ancient seafaring culture, Archer remains very much revered as a figure of national importance. Evidence of his enduring legacy can be seen in many of Norway's maritime museums and ancient seaports, where the immaculately maintained vessels he designed and built continue to have pride of place in the national consciousness. *Fram* is one of them. She was Fridtjof Nansen's great ship of North Polar exploration and was later used in Roald Amundsen's historic first expedition to the South Pole. Still regarded as the strongest wooden vessel in the world, *Fram* stands in her own purpose-built museum in Oslo. *Fram* (the name means 'Forward' in Norwegian) drifted unscathed over the Arctic ice for three years (1893–96) in an unparalleled voyage of exploration, and was later sailed to the Antarctic by that other great Norwegian explorer, Amundsen, the first man to reach the South Pole.

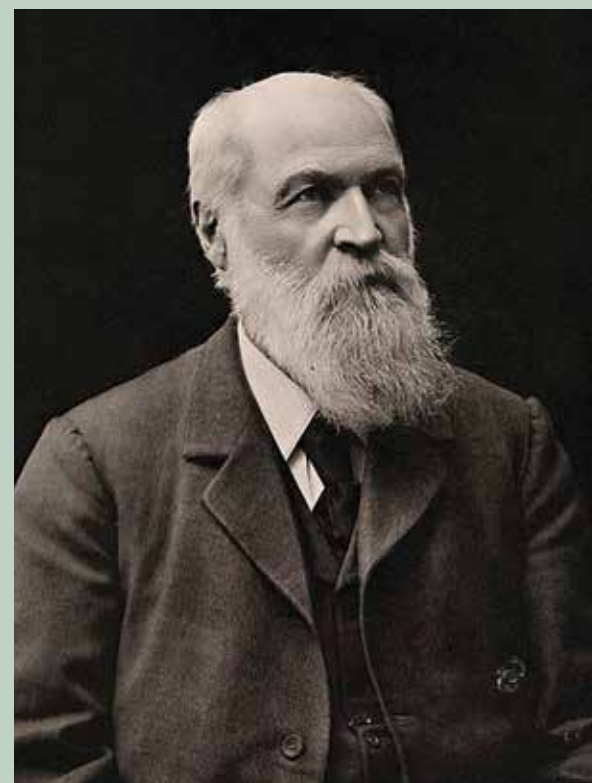
But of all the vessels Colin Archer designed and built, it is his pilot boats and rescue vessels for which he is most famous. At the Traditional Boat Festival at Risør, Captain Knut von Trepka, master of the most famous of them all, RS1 *Colin Archer*, invited me aboard. It was a great privilege to go below and sit in the spartan but spacious apple-green saloon while the skipper explained the boat's illustrious history. She was designed and built by Archer in 1893 and for 40 years between 1893 and 1933 she rescued from certain death 237 seafarers, mostly fishermen. She towed 1,522 fishing boats to safety and rescued a total of 4,500 fishermen. With a crew of only four men, no auxiliary engine and no communications equipment whatsoever, she stayed with the Norwegian fishing fleet for eight months at a time as they hand-lined for cod from their frail little *færings*.

Although she is now one of the most treasured vessels in Norway's National Maritime Museum, she continues to voyage around the coast manned by a volunteer crew under Captain von Trepka. Her arrival in any Norwegian port is always a source of rejoicing because she is the living embodiment of the deep sense of pride in the nation's seafaring heritage. It was worth my travelling 20,500 nautical miles to Risør just to see her.

# Colin Archer

An enduring legacy

Over the course of his long life, the great Norwegian naval architect Colin Archer created a fleet of beautiful sailing craft – everything from prams to powerful polar exploration ships, cruising yachts, pilot cutters and the distinctive double-ended rescue vessels that continue to inspire us with their timeless beauty under sail. The museum is fortunate to be the custodian of *Kathleen Gillett*, a precious example of Archer's work. **Bruce Stannard** salutes the design genius who remains at the core of Norway's proud maritime culture.



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Throughout the war years the Earls lived aboard *Kathleen* in Rushcutters Bay and later in Mosman Bay



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*Kathleen Gillett* on Sydney Harbour.  
ANMM Collection 00008344 Gift  
from Royal Norwegian Embassy.  
ANMM image

#### ***Kathleen Gillett***

I have been a devotee of Colin Archer since I was a child growing up half a world away on Sydney Harbour in the bleak austerity of the post-war years. Then, as now, there was only one Colin Archer ketch in Australian waters and that was the grey-hulled beauty *Kathleen Gillett*. The 13.4-metre double-ender was built between 1933 and 1939 by Swedish boatbuilder Charles Larson for Jack Earl and his wife, Kathleen, for whom the boat was named. Larson had Colin Archer's lines plans for a Norwegian Customs patrol vessel (Boat Number 93) dated July 1901. Written in ink on those lines in Archer's own hand were the words *Krydsbaad til Kjerringvik* (Crossing-boat for Kjerringvik). Kjerringvik is a small harbour near Larvik on Norway's south coast. The crossing-boat was designed to cruise across the entrance to the many fjords, harbours and inlets that characterise Norway's rugged and deeply indented coastline with her Customs crew constantly on the lookout for smugglers. Once Jack Earl saw those lines he immediately abandoned plans to build another double-ender and instead embraced wholeheartedly the Colin Archer concept for this remarkably safe seakeeping vessel whose lines are clearly developed from those of his famous Rescue Vessels. The lines Larson used to construct *Kathleen Gillett* are now part of the Jack Earl archive lodged with the State Library of New South Wales.

*Kathleen* was the Earls' dream boat, in which they had hoped to circumnavigate the world together. The German invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the subsequent war put those plans on hold until after the Allied victory. Throughout the war years the Earls lived aboard *Kathleen* in Rushcutters Bay and later in Mosman Bay. At the war's end their shipboard family included two children, Michael and Maris. Given the dangers of a global circumnavigation in seas still littered with unexploded wartime mines, Kath stayed in Sydney with the children while Jack set sail with four others on 7 June 1947. They completed the 28,700-nautical-mile voyage on 7 December the following year.

*Kathleen* remained a floating home for the Earl family until the mid-1950s. She was then sold and disappeared for many years, wandering under various owners through the South Pacific and in New Guinea waters, where she was hard used by crocodile shooters.

She ended up in Guam in Micronesia where she was driven ashore and very nearly lost in Hurricane Pamela. I found her there and in Australia's Bicentennial year, 1988, I proposed that the Norwegian Government acquire *Kathleen*, restore her and make a gift of her to the Australian people through the Australian National Maritime Museum.

Norway's King Harald V and his Council of Ministers seized the opportunity. For them it was a wonderful way of both honouring Colin Archer's memory and underlining the strong maritime commercial links between Norway and Australia. Norway's Ambassador to Australia, Per Haugestad, and the Consul General, Trygve Amundsen, shared my passion for the project and with their blessing I acted in a purely voluntary capacity as Norway's agent, negotiating successfully for the purchase of the boat and organising free transportation home to Sydney through the generosity of the Zim Israel Navigation Company's Managing Director, Nir Serlin.

Another key element at this stage was the understanding I reached with the Halvorsen Brothers, the old Norwegian–Australian boatbuilding family who agreed to undertake *Kathleen's* restoration at their yard at Bobbin Head, a northern suburb of Sydney. They did so for a fixed price and without having laid eyes on the vessel, let alone surveyed her. It was a gesture of extraordinary generosity and one which effectively guaranteed the success of the project. The Norwegian Government's funds were immediately placed in a trust account in Sydney and because *Kathleen's* restoration came to be drawn out over two years, the accumulated interest went at least some way toward easing the financial burden on the Halvorsens.

Carl Halvorsen played a crucial role in the entire project, not only overseeing every aspect of the restoration but also showing incredible skill in fashioning the yacht's Norway spruce spars with the traditional broad axe and adze once used by his late father, master boatbuilder Lars Halvorsen. I lost count of the number of times Jack Earl and I drove up to Bobbin Head with Jack's beautifully drawn details guiding every phase of the work. The Halvorsen shipwrights Terry Lean and Dean Marks did an exceptional job in restoring *Kathleen* to her former glory as a true Colin Archer ketch.

When at last all the work was completed, the distinguished Norwegian Foreign Minister, the late Thorvald Stoltenberg, flew to Sydney to preside at the formal hand-over ceremony attended by hundreds of dignitaries and invited guests at the museum. Mr Stoltenberg made an eloquent speech explaining the profound significance of Norway's Bicentennial gift. He then surprised Carl Halvorsen and myself by presenting us both with very special honours bestowed upon us by King Harald. We were made Knights First Class in the Royal Norwegian Order of Merit.

While I will always be deeply proud of that signal honour, I am doubly proud of the old grey ship herself. Each year, on 17 May, Norway's National Day, I go aboard *Kathleen*, hoist the Norwegian flag to the mizzen truck, and spend a quiet hour alone in the cockpit contemplating the enduring legacy of Colin Archer.