

Man of steel



Denis and Philomena Ganley, only two weeks before their deaths

A tribute to Denis Ganley, 1943 - 1997

by Rebecca Hayter

When boat designer Denis Ganley and his wife Philomena died in a car accident just north of Murchison in the South Island on 24 May, 23 years of boat design that has spawned around 1,000 boats worldwide came to an end. Within the boating industry, many other New Zealand designers and owners of Ganley boats lost two close friends and a willing source of advice. But for their only child, Denise, aged 27, there are no words to describe the loss of her parents, with whom she shared an extraordinarily close relationship.



Philomena and Denise on Lone Gull, Ganley's first design

The house that Denis Ganley designed and built in 1973 perches at the end of a small peninsula in Greenhithe. Its three tiers give it optimum advantage of its site, overlooking the mostly-cruising type boats moored placidly in the upper reaches of Auckland's Waitemata Harbour by Herald Island. At the foot of the steps Cosworth, Ganley's wire-haired fox terrier takes his role of "office manager" seriously, importantly bustling visitors to the front door and escorting them off the premises when business is finished.

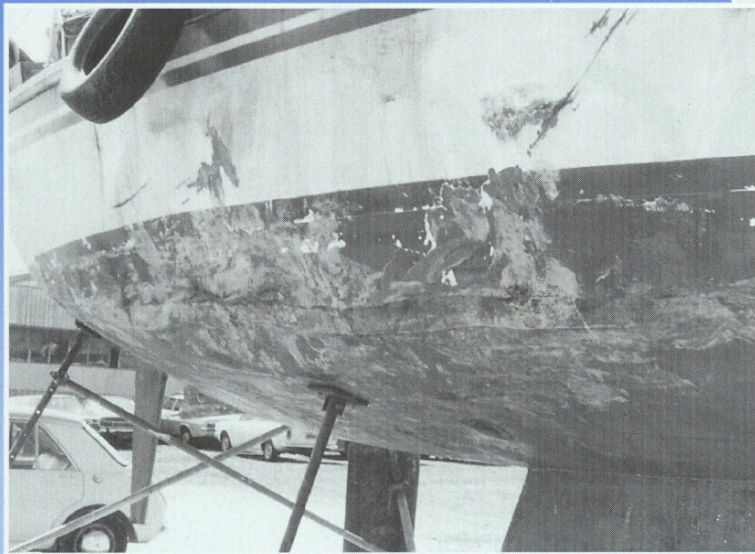
And inside the house, except for the bouquets of flowers that fill every room, it is all so normal. You can almost be sure of stepping down to Ganley's office to find him leaning over the drawing board, and of meeting Philomena, more usually known as Phil, working in the garden.

Denis Harcourt Ganley was born in Hamilton on 3 September 1943, the second in a family of five. Growing up on the shores of the lake his first boatbuilding project was to help his father build a Frostbite. Later he and his elder brother, Howden, sailed P-Classes and Q-Classes. He hated school saying "even the good times were bad" and he was asked to leave Hamilton Boys High after he and his friend Brent Parry played hookey for two weeks to go sailing. His final year was at St Paul's Collegiate, where his lacking in academia was compensated for by his prowess in athletics, including long distance swimming.

The young Denis was a notorious practical joker – his stunts included a fascination with making things explode. After one disappointment with friend Paul Nelson when a home made bomb had failed to blow in a timber yard, they were biking back home when three fire trucks tore past them – the "bomb" had been more successful than they'd intended.

The mischievous sense of humour came through in Ganley's completion of a *Sea Spray* survey. To a question about the greatest threat to the Kiwi defence in the America's Cup he replied, "Not building them in steel and a general lack of comfortable accommodation on board."

At 16, the lure of marine engineering took Denis to Listers engineers in England. Working in the office was a young woman from Dublin named Philomena Bridget Collier, recovering from serious injuries after being



The Tara 39, Bakaal. Her "recovery" after a pounding on a reef bore out Ganley's confidence in his steel boats



the sole survivor in a recent car accident which had also taken the life of her sister.

For the next 30 years she would be Ganley's near-constant companion. "You never saw one without the other," recalls Denise.

Ganley brought his fiancée to New Zealand in 1965 and they married in Auckland on 16 April 1966. He designed and built his first boat, the 24' timber *Lone Gull*, in 1968 but it was Denise's birth in 1970 that prompted Ganley to spend "one glorious year" living aboard *Lone Gull* and to pursue his design dream, with the establishment of Denis Ganley Yacht Design Limited in 1974. Company advertisements read: "Steel away with a Denis Ganley yacht design".

"He had this idea of being a grumpy old yacht designer," Denise says. "I think he tried to cultivate that but in fact he was the nicest man you'd ever meet, amazingly good tempered." As a designer, he was ambitious and a perfectionist.

Philomena helped on the administration side of the business for several years and Denise, a qualified librarian, wrote the company newsletter, *Steel Away*. Her closeness with her father's business is reflected in her knowledge of, for example, the naming of his designs – Snowbird: a favourite song by Anne Murray; S130 Lotus: reflecting his love of sports cars; Pine Island Clipper: a reference to Herald Island; Tara: a place near Dublin and Denise's second name; Pacemaker: "Dad reckoned that if Mum ever sailed on it she'd need a pacemaker" Lizzie: "Dad and I had watched Sunday Montana Theatre, there was a film called Lizzie's Pictures which we really liked". The Ganley's closeness as a family was

Denise's prime support in her battle with muscular dystrophy.

Ganley's aim, he wrote, was "to design well balanced, easy to build cruising yachts mainly for construction in steel" and "to sell stock plans to the amateur and professional builders worldwide".

Designs included yachts, workboats and launches.

And then came the infamous Muldoon sales tax on locally built boats in 1979. Ganley wrote to the September 1979 issue of *Sea Spray* in response to an editorial bemoaning the tax:

"...I do not believe we have to settle for smaller boats. I feel the emphasis should be on simpler boats of more basic design, construction and rig, which would enable the person to have the size boat he or she would like, but at a cheaper price."

He vowed he could build a 26' boat in 10 weeks for less than \$1500. The result, *Caique*, came in under budget, at \$1352 and was Ganley's most successful design.

Ganley deeply believed that no one should go offshore in anything but a steel, safe boat. *Bakaal*, a Tara 39 proved his point when she struck a reef on Hiu Island in the Torres Group. The boat was pounded by heavy surf and had to be cut from its keel, wedged tightly between coral heads, and sailed 600 miles without a keel. She made a full recovery in Honiara and a later owner celebrated, in 1989, by organising a Ganley day of about 40 boats at Motuhui Island in Auckland. Denise remembers her father swimming from boat to boat, greeting each one.

Ganley's greatest career disappointment came when an owner deviated from the design plans and produced a launch well overweight. Ganley said it set his powerboat programme back many years and it was this market he was particularly concentrating on at the time of his death.

His high point, however, was winning the Consumer category in the 1986 steel awards. The awards recognise "excellence in design, engineering and capability for the innovative use of steel used in a commercial manner". Ganley's Pacemaker 40 took the honours, never before granted to a boat.

As an anecdote to design, Ganley followed his brother Howden's passion of motor racing, in classic cars, owning around 20 at various times, including the Scimitar in which he and Philomena died. "That's what I don't understand about this whole thing," Denise says. "He's not the sort of person who doesn't make it round the corner." Only two weeks after her parents' death, the present tense still comes naturally.

But while Ganley gained international fame, his wants in life were simple, and the final word must come from the man whose idea of the good life was going sailing for the weekend in a small sailing dinghy with just a sleeping bag. Of one such morning he wrote:

"Waking briskly in the morning has never been one of my strong points but this morning was an exception. I pulled the blankets high around myself, fighting off the inevitable waking... and then it dawned on me. This was not an awful working weekday, it was Saturday – which of course makes getting up so much easier."