

Where is Mr Hidden hiding?

In August 2006, on the eve of the first anniversary of my father's untimely death, my wife and I travelled on the sail training ship Astrid Finne to celebrate one man's special contribution to Swedish sailing.

What could possibly make a grown man cry aboard a 69-year-old Norwegian schooner motoring slowly north through the tranquil waters of the archipelago west of Sweden's second city, Gothenburg? Certainly not the barely perceptible breeze coming in off the Skagerrak. Maybe the knowledge that another brief trip to an island paradise would soon be over? Or maybe it was the words of people who having known – or merely heard about – my father, spoke of him with a reverence that I am sure he would have found embarrassing.

It was late August 2006, on the eve of the first anniversary of my father Alan's untimely death. My wife Jan and I, in the company of our family friend Eva Martinson, her ex-husband Lennart Martinson ('Martinson'), Lennart Magnusson ('Magnusson'), his wife Tullan and our captain for the evening, Magnus Olinderesson, took *Astrid Finne* out of Öckerö harbour and set course for the neighbouring island of Björkö where we would honour one of my late-father's most heartfelt requests.

I simply didn't appreciate the full extent of my father's passion

A few minutes out of Öckerö, with Magnusson's encouragement, I took *Astrid Finne's* helm and felt the strange sensation of knowing that my father must also have held that same weathered wooden wheel on many occasions. Keeping a watchful eye on the handful of motor launches and small yachts around us, I steered for a still distant lighthouse on Björkö's western shore as, with a celebratory glass of low-alcohol Swedish cider in my hand, we motored northwards. And as we did so, I found myself reflecting on teenage sailing in Northern Ireland and how, back then, I was a reluctant bit-part player in my father's consuming affair with the sea and ships and all who sail on them. In those days, while Alan was building and sailing dinghies in Ulster waters, my interests lay elsewhere. Occasionally I'd join him in one of the dinghies: first, a white Mirror; later, a bright orange GP14 named *Kymothoe*. Even then, though I knew he enjoyed his boats and the sea, I simply didn't appreciate the full extent of my father's passion. Nor did I share it.

Alan was a man of many interests and talents, too many of which I struggled to relate to. An engineer and an extraordinary craftsman, he was also a talented artist and – as I eventually came to realise – a linguist with good knowledge of French, Dutch, German and Swedish – as well as being a rather pedantic stickler for correct English. Back then, I was more interested in photography, writing and cars, content to sit at a quayside with a book and a notebook while my father did battle with his sailing buddies and the tides of Strangford Lough. And then it was time for university and escape from a beautiful, yet troubled province where, though my parents were surprisingly happy, I seemed to have accumulated the unhappy memories that made it easy to escape to England.

Participation in the Tall Ships' Races

Over the next 25 years, I pursued my business career, married badly and divorced well before eventually coming back to my life's passion for writing and finding the true love of my life. And, as I contemplated this past, Jan stood on *Astrid Finne's* bow and chatted with Tullan Kalstrom, the delightful blonde lady president of Öckerö's Mot Bättre Vetande Skolskepp (MBV) – the sail-training organisation for Swedish teenagers that, inextricably linked with Öckerö's community, owns *Astrid Finne* and the larger *Hawila*.

My father sailed many times on both vessels. I heard the stories at a distance, occasional tales of participation in the Tall Ships' Races, of visits to Öckerö and passages around

Scotland and across the North Sea. And that was, I realised as we drew nearer to Skarvik's quaint, sunlit *Gästhamn*, about all I knew. Preoccupied by my own life, the successes and failures that Alan celebrated and commiserated with, his own passion for sailing and the sea was reduced to something happening on the periphery of my life. For sure, I was proud of my Dad's achievements, learned with time that sailing and everything marine was his passion. But beyond that, there was little. He and my mother lived in Northern Ireland and then, more recently in Devon. And for the best part of 20 years, we spoke on the phone occasionally and met up once or twice a year – rarely talked in detail about his sailing adventures.

As I think back, I suppose I'd periodically heard my parents mention a Northern Ireland Swedish Association (NISA) and must have connected my father's participation to my sister's study year in Lund – southern Sweden's famous university city. And with that, in all honesty, I probably thought little more of it and got back to the preoccupations of my own life. Of his activities in the NISA, I knew only that Dad was adding another language to his portfolio, that he was busying himself with his hallmark enthusiasm in the administration of the (now defunct) group and that they occasionally had Crayfish suppers, enjoyed old Ingmar Bergman movies and waved their blue and gold flags in vicarious celebration of Swedish high days and holidays.

Swedish teenagers have learned confidence and discipline on *Astrid Finne* and *Hawila*

Our own flag fluttered half-heartedly among *Astrid Finne's* rigging as tiny Skarvik's quayside and pastel-shaded timber-sided houses filled our view and a racing gig powered by a bevy of athletic young women passed us on its way into open waters. I relinquished the helm to Magnus for the entry to the harbour and berthing near the quaintly Anglophile 'Seaside' restaurant where supper awaited us. Magnus, quiet, calmly confident, a young man whose rosy cheeks and schoolboy looks belie the capability of someone who found his feet with MBV before making his career as an officer on the huge ferries that ply between Sweden and Denmark. Quiet and unassuming – except when talking happily about his newly adopted Columbian-borne child – Magnus epitomises the long line of Swedish teenagers who have learned confidence, discipline and a thousand other useful things on MBV's *Astrid Finne* and *Hawila*. And that, I was realising, had everything to do with my father's consuming love affair with the Öckerö-based tall ships in the years before his death.

It started back in the late 1980s, before Belfast was re-born and became the relatively peaceful place that it is today, *Astrid Finne*, on that occasion under Lennart Martinson's command, was the sole Swedish participant in the world-renowned Tall Ships Race when it visited Northern Ireland. Other Swedish tall ships, Martinson explained, had avoided Northern Ireland for 'security' reasons. For some reason, MBV decided to participate in their stead. My father, Martinson explained, got wind of the plan and took it upon himself that the Swedish Association would extend the hand of friendship on *Astrid Finne's* arrival from Cork. Plans were made, a still-remembered coach trip was arranged to The Giant's Causeway, and when *Astrid Finne* and her crew arrived in Belfast Lough, it was my father who stepped aboard as Northern Ireland's welcoming ambassador.

Unique gestures of international and inter-generational kindness

I'm not sure exactly what I was preoccupied with around then: probably my work and marriage plans, my head full to brimming but not with visits to Northern Ireland or any great understanding of my father's adventures with his new Swedish friends. Now, I know, because Lennart Martinson has told me, about the things I never found time to properly understand at the time – how Alan embarked on his unique, maybe unrepeatable, voyage of generous contribution and unique gestures of international and inter-generational kindness.

As well as my father's seminal decision that the Northern Ireland Swedish Society would befriend *Astrid Finne* and MBV, I believe it was a serendipitous coming-together of two complementary minds that led to the subsequent working relationship between Alan and

Lennart Martinson. It was a relationship that served well for more than a decade – and would surely still be growing if not for Alan's death.

In many ways, my father, a multi-talented, generous university teacher who loved ships and the sea and languages and had always related well to teenagers, had a lot in common with Lennart Martinson. Bearded sea-dog Lennart Martinson, the latest in a long line of Swedish mariners, was – and is – a respected teacher of teachers at Gothenburg's pedagogical university, another man who manages to combine academic excellence with great practicality – a man who has spent decades taking Swedish teenagers to sea. A man who, just like my father, is a master with wood.

'The Swedish boys and girls liked Alan very much'

I spoke with Lennart Martinson, another of several long conversations, about his experiences with my father onboard MBV's boats, that punctuated our ten-day visit to Sweden's west coast. And in the quiet, considered tones of a master storyteller with a subtle and mischievous sense of humour, Lennart described the alignment between his pedagogical philosophies and my father's ability to clearly explain concepts in English that had worked so effectively with the Swedish teenagers.

'What I liked about Alan,' began Martinson thoughtfully, 'was the way he would explain even the simplest of activities and gently correct the Swedish boys and girls while expanding their vocabulary.'

I listened and saw another side of my father as Lennart used the simple example of painting varnish onto shipboard timber.

'He would say: "Now we are going to dip the brush in the pot, and then we are going to brush the varnish onto the wood, along the grain". And then, as he demonstrated for the children, he would explain about needing to thin the varnish with linseed oil, to make it flow better and find its way into timber. These things we take for granted but for the boys and girls it was wonderful to be able to improve their English while doing practical things. It was very close to my own pedagogical theories. Alan was very good with the children. He understood sailing and he communicated well. The Swedish boys and girls liked Alan very much.'

As I listened, I thought back to the times my own interests never quite aligned with my father's attempts to initiate me into the practical craftsman's ways with wood and paint and glue. We never quite found that alignment, though got closer in years before Alan's death when, after my parents moved back to England, we spent more time together as I helped initiate Alan to the ways of computers and the internet. Though I'm not a totally impractical DIY duffer I suppose our differences in approach were summed-up by a comment Alan made when I asked him (he who co-wrote a book on computing before Microsoft existed and when windows were still just wooden and glass objects that you stripped and repainted very few years) whether he'd ever thought of writing fiction.

'No. I generally find real things more interesting,' he answered and the subject was closed. Yet despite this, and never showing obvious curiosity about my novel writing, I believe he was proud of my fiction writing and songwriting: not because of what it was but because it was important to me.

The legacy that Alan had left to his Swedish sailing friends

Thoughts of the novel that had occupied me for five years – or a second which will have a connection with Öckerö, couldn't have been further from my mind as the sun started its descent over the island Hälsö that lay, a low and rounded grindstone-like mass rising out of the sound, a kilometre to the west. The light was pale and clear, the sky, splashed with a mess of incoming cloud, the same pastel-blue as my wife's eyes as we tied *Astrid Finne* alongside Skarvik's quay. Thumping rock music – that I might have enjoyed on another

occasion – seemed obviously out of place as it reverberated from the stereo system of a small modern speedboat nearby. Dad would have hated that, I thought as the über-cool sunglasses-wearing couple returned and loaded the sleek white projectile with provisions. It was everything about maritime life that was the opposite of my father.

'A CD-player on a speedboat?' I exclaimed to Martinson as I recalled Honda Goldwings spewing Meatloaf and AC/DC up from the cantonal roads far below me as I climbed through the clear air of another Swiss alp.

'It's the first thing you fit on a speedboat these days,' said Lennart and shrugged as, under the admiring gaze of early evening quayside strollers, we left *Astrid Finne* and walked to the bright airy timber and glass dining room of Björkö's newly opened 'Seaside' restaurant. First had been the voyage; now supper and the presentation during which Jan and I would give MBV the legacy that Alan had left to his Swedish sailing friends.

When my mother and I read Dad's will, a year before in the dark, confused, days after his passing, we firstly thanked Alan for the typically well-organised documents and files that he'd left behind. And as we went through his papers in his study, the room overlooking Dartmoor in which he spent so many hours planning his adventures with MBV, one of the first things we noticed were the legacies he left to the sailing world. They came as no surprise: money for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution; for Northern Ireland's East Down Yacht Club where Alan spent so many happy hours and made so many enduring friendships and for the Old Gaffers' Association of which he was an active officer and sailing member. And then there was his legacy to MBV – to his Swedish friends on Öckerö...

Time for the presentation and more anecdotes about my father

Over a delicious supper of freshly caught catfish, we celebrated Alan's life and the times he enjoyed with his Swedish friends, dragged more anecdotes from the rope-lockers of time and discovered even more about a unique, special man, the Englishman who was banned from speaking Swedish on board *Astrid Finne* and *Hawila* so he could concentrate on teaching the children English rather than improving his own language skills. And as we talked, I knew for sure that Alan won't be forgotten in a hurry on Öckerö. Not if the response from our dinner companions that evening – and at several other meetings during our visit to Sweden – was to be believed.

Later, as the sun dipped further and the water beyond the restaurant windows turned to burnished pewter it was time for the presentation and more anecdotes about my father: how the Swedish enjoyed the word play on his surname and how *Astrid Finne* and *Hawila*, resounded with calls of 'where is Mr Hidden hiding' and, late into another evening at sea, the whispered 'Mr Hidden is sleeping' as the teenagers reminded each other to respect Alan's septuagenarian inability to keep up with their late-night partying. As to who was better able to turn out for next morning's pre-dawn watch, I have little doubt that it was my father!

As the dinner plates were cleared away we learned how, during a passage through Scotland's Western Isles and the Caledonian Canal, Alan impressed the Swedes with his knowledge of tides, a strange phenomenon hardly experienced in *Astrid Finne's* home waters. And then, over coffee, came Martinson's fondly told reminiscence about of their visit to one particular Scottish Isle – it may have been Islay – where Alan briefed the teenage crew to interview local residents. I'd never heard the story before – or maybe, in all honesty, I hadn't been listening properly. Now, fascinated by my father's typical ingenuity and hungry to know more, we heard how Alan got the youngsters to improve their English, understand Scottish culture and find a host of dinner guests for *Astrid Finne*. I now know that he sent the teens off around the island with instructions to find an example of one of several specified people and invite them, in English, back to the boat for supper. The plan obviously worked because, come suppertime, a stream of local personalities – a plumber, a policeman, a bagpiper, a vicar and so on, all dressed in their working attire – came on board to enjoy a fine supper in exchange for explaining what their job entailed and answering the teenagers' questions. And on another occasion, the children were briefed to obtain Haggis... It was all so typical of my father: the

wit, the intelligent injection of fun into education – yet another demonstration of why his presence is not only remembered but seems to be revered among the close-knit sailing community of MBV Skolskepp and, indeed, Öckerö Kommun itself.

A book for *Hawila's* library

As well as the money that Dad had left to them, we'd decided that it would also be nice to donate one of Alan's treasured nautical books to MBV, with the suggestion that it go into the ship's library on board *Astrid Finne* or *Hawila*. Wanting something practical with lots of pictures, it hadn't taken long to settle on a treasured copy of the Ashley Book of Knots. For those unfamiliar with the volume, Ashley is to rope and fastening what the Shorter Oxford Dictionary is to words – several kilogrammes of hardcover book documenting every known knot, lashing and fastening from the ubiquitous Reef knot to the bizarre Monkey's Fist. Days earlier, at Lennart Martinson's daughter's thirtieth birthday party in the woods beyond Gothenburg's Landvetter airport, we'd played a party game involving the timed unravelling of a length of thick rope. Alan would have loved it, especially the bit at the end where you had to create a challenging knot for the next team. With that in mind, I dragged the book, suitably inscribed with the family's thanks for the years of sailing pleasure and comradeship, from my rucksack, stood up and said my piece.

In a short speech, I summarised our reason for being there at that time and pointed out the irony that, in a few hours time, it would be the first anniversary of my father's death. (How ironic too that he breathed his last at Plymouth, such a key place in England's maritime history.) Tullan had kindly brought along a pair of prints depicting *Astrid Finne* and *Hawila*. We swapped these for our book and the money that Alan had so specifically left to MBV. Then we drank a toast to Alan and I called my mother back home in Devon before, led by Lennart Magnusson, singing 'For he was a jolly good fellow' as the last seagulls mewed their way to roost on Björkö's rocky shore.

We took pictures, handed the gifts over again and again so everyone could get the photograph they wanted, then left the restaurant and headed back to *Astrid Finne* for the passage back to Öckerö. Martinson raised the Red Ensign for our passage, a tribute to the English on board – and the special Englishman we had gathered to remember. Then we were casting off and motoring out of the little harbour under a majestic skyscape painted on that pale blue twilight ground as new weather moved in from the North Sea. Watching distant Egrets flying north along the sound, I thought about my father's love of painting, of the skies he must have seen on all his different voyages, and knew that he'd have been able to identify every one of the cloud types rearing over Öckerö.

'I have never met your father but I would have liked to'

'I think there are at least four,' said Magnusson thoughtfully as Jan hugged me on *Astrid Finne's* bow and we watched the twilit clouds perform, then agreed with me as, feeling that my father would have been proud of me for so doing, I correctly listed Cumulo-Nimbus, Cirrus, Alto-Cirrus and Cumulus.

As the others chatted in *Astrid Finne's* cockpit, Jan and I talked quietly with bearded twinkly-eyed Magnusson – another educator of teenagers and, like the other Lennart, another master mariner with huge experience on MBV's tall ships.

'It's a very unusual and special thing that you have done,' he said after a moment, and I'm sure I saw a tear in the corner of his twinkling eyes, 'I have never met your father but I would have liked to,' he continued, before outlining how too many modern people – he cited Sweden but the idea is universally applicable in western society – are too often preoccupied with self to make the generous gestures that characterised my father.

'And you,' he added, 'indicating Jan and I, 'to want to come here and do this, tonight. It means a lot to us, to MBV – and to the people of Öckerö...' And he was right, for what came so instinctively to us reflects the generosity of spirit that, in a world where so much is driven by the superficial, the selfish and the greedy, differentiates people like Alan. It's the rare, inimitable quality that led him to his Swedish Society, onto the decks of *Astrid Finne* and *Hawila* and into the hearts of his friends in Sweden and so many other places.

Where is Mr Hidden hiding now?

And that, I realised as we tied up at *Astrid Finne's* Öckerö berth, is where he'll stay, a man who contributed generously, who sought perfection in all he did and who loved the sea and ships and the people who sail them. It was nearly dark as, having at last performed the coda to his involvement with *Mot Bättre Vetande*, we stepped carefully from the little schooner's deck. And as I did so, I turned, looked up through the rigging into the now-dark sky and wondered where Mr Hidden was hiding now.

With sincere thanks to Eva, Tullan, the two Lennarts and Magnus for making this possible.