



# The Curious Miss Carstairs:

## Marion Barbara "Betty" Carstairs—Part One

Marion Barbara Carstairs (1900–1993), although largely unknown today, was one of the more colourful and outrageous characters of the 1920s and early '30s. My original intent was only to research her boat racing career, particularly her three attempts at the Harmsworth Trophy, along with her connection to Muskoka, but it quickly became apparent that some additional history is required to provide a proper perspective of this amazing lady.

"Betty" was born in England in 1900. Her American grandfather amassed a fortune as a founder of the Standard Oil Corporation. Her mother, heiress to millions, had numerous lovers, married at least three times, became a heroin addict and travelled the world constantly—generally ignoring her daughter. Betty herself claimed not to be sure of who her father was. The best guess is Albert Carstairs, a Scottish Army Officer who apparently disappeared just prior to her birth.

Carstairs received some schooling in England and attended a boarding school in Connecticut for a short while, but by age sixteen was on the battlefields of France driving an ambulance for the American Red Cross. In 1918, after Armistice, she spent some time in Ireland driving lorries for the British Forces, then returned to northern France to assist with the re-burying of thousands of British soldiers from the temporary shallow graves of war to permanent resting places.

In 1920, she received her first inheritance, said to be a "stipend" of \$200,000 per year. She established the "X Garage", a high-end chauffeur service in London employing only female drivers. While it was no secret that Carstairs

was lesbian, after her inheritance she started to become quite well known in British society and particularly in the wealthy gay community throughout Europe. This period following the First War and leading into the "Roaring Twenties" was more tolerant and open than any before it. Betty began referring to herself as "Joe" Carstairs. She wore her hair short, dressed in impeccable tailored suits, and was more often than not seen smoking a cigar. Some of Europe's most famous gay movie stars and stage actresses were among her lovers.

An active sportsperson, she began to take an interest in powerboat racing. So in 1925 the X Garage was closed and Carstairs commissioned her first race boat. It was around this time that Ruth Baldwin, a long-time lover, gifted her a leather man-doll which Joe dubbed "Lord Tod Wadley." Standing about a foot tall, Lord Tod became her constant companion. Carstairs referred to the doll as her dearest friend and outfitted it in Savile Row suits and tiny handmade Italian shoes. Wadley remained Joe's mascot for the rest of her life. He was at her side most of the time; except when she was on the water. Wadley was considered too valuable to chance his loss overboard. Ultimately, Lord Tod Wadley was cremated with Betty and buried by her side after nearly 70 years together.

With very little experience behind her, Carstairs soon showed her daring, by winning her first major race—The Duke of York Trophy—in 1926. This hard-fought victory against world class drivers included Joe having to cut herself free when a rope became entangled in her prop. Motorboat racing and world speed records, on both land and on water, were extremely popular at the time, and Carstairs became an instant sensation. Over the next two years, she took Europe: winning the Royal Motor Yacht Club International Race, the Lucina Cup, The Daily Telegraph Cup, The Bestise Cup, and the World Record for One and One Half Litres. She became known as "The Fastest Woman on Water." Her celebrity was such that young women would follow her from race to race and send her enticing photos of themselves.



**Above:**  
*Betty Carstairs and Tod  
Joe Harris and Carstairs*

**Below:**  
*Estelle I and Estelle II*



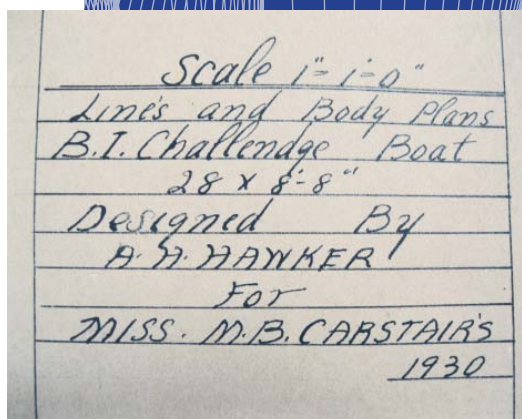
In 1928 Carstairs set her sights beyond Europe. She commissioned a boat called *Jack Stripes* to conquer the Atlantic. The plan was a solo crossing of the Atlantic averaging 50 to 60 miles per hour. The effort was cancelled when *Jack Stripes* proved to be not up to the task, being unable to handle the English Channel, much less the Atlantic. The designer and/or builder of *Jack Stripes* are unknown.

1928 also saw the arrival of her first Harmsworth contenders. *Estelle I* and *Estelle II* were built by S.E. Saunders of the Isle of Wight. Both were single-step hydroplanes designed by F.P. Hyde-Beadle. *Estelle I* was 26' long powered by a single 900 hp Napier aircraft engine. *Estelle II* was only 21' using the same power. The boats were tested against each other on Lake Windermere, the idea being to build *Estelle III* incorporating the best features of each. Unfortunately, neither boat performed up to expectations, causing Carstairs to call the project off. But under pressure from friends and colleagues, Carstairs reconsidered, travelling to Detroit to enter *Estelle II* in the 1928 Harmsworth race. The little 21' boat was severely outgunned by Gar Woods' much larger racer and ended up being swamped by *Miss America's* huge wake. To her credit, Carstairs did lead the race for half a lap but it was clear that she needed design help.

Carstairs had come to know A.H. (Bert) Hawker, a British native, now Chief Designer at Ditchburn Boats in Gravenhurst. Hawker was known not only for his design talents but also his racing success in one of the *Rainbow* series of Gold Cup boats on behalf of Harry Greening. Late in 1928 Carstairs asked Hawker to design a new boat to challenge the 1929 Harmsworth. It was around this same time that she purchased the Saunders Boatyard at Isle of Wight for her exclusive use and scrapped *Estelle III* (which had never run). It is said that prior to this point Carstairs had already spent over \$180,000 on the *Estelles*—only one of which ever raced. The cost of Hawkers new *Estelle IV* was expected to be some \$95,000. "Go Big or Go Home!"

—Bruce Cleland, MBHC Archives Volunteer

Carstairs 1930



**Above:**

**Carstairs' name on boat plan**

**Her name written by Bert Hawker on his plans for her boat**

**[These boat plans can be seen at Muskoka Boat and Heritage Centre.]**

**To be continued in the fall issue of *The Real Muskoka Story*.**

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# The Curious Miss Carstairs:

## Marion Barbara "Betty" Carstairs—Part Two

In the last issue of *The Real Muskoka Story* we read about Marion Carstairs, a British boat racer, and Canadian Bert Hawker who designed her race boats named *Estelle*.

### *Continued from the summer 2012 issue of The Real Muskoka Story:*

In accordance with Harmsworth racing rules, the boat *Estelle IV* was built and powered in England, her home country. The boat was to be shipped to Ditchburn Boats in Gravenhurst for testing prior to the Labour Day race. She was a single step hydroplane, 35 feet long with a beam of 9 foot 6 inches. Power was supplied to three propellers by three Napier engines, operating through a single transmission. Most sources say the engines made 1,000 hp each but the British *Westmoreland Gazette* of July 29, 1929 claimed 1,200 hp per. According to the press, 100 to 120 mph was expected. Railway holdups delayed *Estelle IV*'s arrival in Gravenhurst until mid August—barely three weeks before the Labour Day race. Once testing got underway, it was determined that the boat handled poorly, particularly in turns—so a decision was made to remove one engine to achieve better weight distribution. The *Gravenhurst Banner* reported that the change "has not altered the great speed it is possible to make." Unfortunately, this did not prove to be true. The Harmsworth consisted of three 30-mile heats, one of each run on the Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. Saturday's heat saw Carstairs averaging 66 mph before her transmission failed. It was replaced in time to allow her to complete a full heat on the Monday with her best lap at 69 mph, but Gar Woods' *Miss America VIII* was 3-1/2 miles ahead at race end. Her 1929 disappointments were not over with the end of the race. While being loaded for shipment back to Gravenhurst, a cable failed, causing the boat to fall back into the water. The fall broke the boat at midships. So rather than further testing and improvements at Ditchburn, *Estelle IV* was returned to England to be rebuilt.

It was full steam ahead for 1930. *Estelle IV* was repaired with an improved hull design and a new Hawker-designed boat: *Estelle V* was born! Carstairs, both boats, and her entire entourage arrived in Gravenhurst in early July for a two month stay. *Estelle V* was smaller than her sister at 28' long with an 8'8" beam. She was powered by twin Napier Lion V12s rated at 900 hp apiece. Early claims were made in the press of 70 mph runs in *IV* and 95 mph runs in *V*.

Meanwhile, the Gravenhurst townsfolk were getting their entertainment value as this excerpt from the August 21, 1930 *Gravenhurst Banner* indicates:

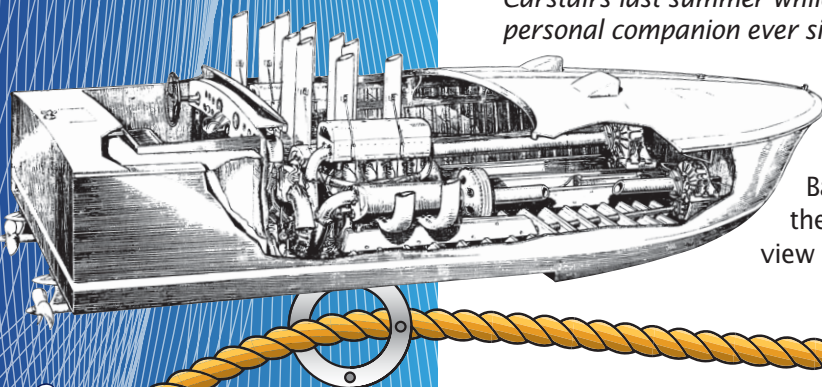
*This is Miss Carstairs' second season spent in Gravenhurst. Much of her spare time is occupied by motoring in a Chevrolet roadster, with robin's egg blue body and yellow wire wheels accompanied by her companion, Miss Mabel Jenkins of London, England, an actress, who made the acquaintance of Miss Carstairs last summer while crossing the Atlantic, and has been her close personal companion ever since.*

While the locals were busy reading between the lines, Bert Hawker and Herb Ditchburn concentrated on making the two boats ready. Log booms in Gravenhurst Bay and the boats not having a neutral gear required that they be towed to the open lake for testing. In an interview with *Ratherby Magazine* in 1991, Oscar Purdy recalled



**Wapaska Cabins,  
Muskoka Bay, where Betty  
Carstairs stayed**

**Cutaway of Estelle V**



how he and Gord Hawker, Bert's son, were best pals as kids and spent a lot of time hanging out at Ditchburn's. Purdy goes on to describe how they drew straws to determine which would be the lucky one to stow away in *Estelle's* bow section under a canvas snap cover to go for an unauthorized ride. Oscar won the draw and hid lying on the floorboards ahead of her motors while the boat was towed to open water. When she was fired up and took off, the noise and heat were so intense he couldn't take it. He came up through the canvas and the stunned driver shut the boat down. The boys received an "awful blast" from Herb Ditchburn and their parents. It remained a lifelong joke that Gord never did get his ride in Miss Carstairs' racer.



*Estelle IV being towed  
by a Ditchburn Viking in  
Muskoka Bay*

It was decided that Bert Hawker, having more experience, would drive *Estelle V* at Detroit. Joe Carstairs took the helm of *Estelle IV*. In the first heat, at the running start, Carstairs' timing was perfect and *Estelle IV* was first across the start line. Her lead was short lived, however. *Miss America VIII* and the new *Miss America IX* had both passed *Estelle IV* by the end of the first lap. Although both of the *Americas* had built up a significant lead, all of a sudden there was *Estelle V* gaining on them—and quickly! Hawker was pushing her for all she was worth. Reports say that the moment *Estelle V* took the lead is preserved on film shot from an overhead aircraft. A good thing because no sooner had Hawker taken the lead than an oil line broke, blinding Hawker and his riding mechanic, Joe Dodkin, with hot oil. *Estelle V* left the course travelling at more than 90 mph—across the bows of her competitors, and through a group of spectator boats—before Dodkin could get her shut down. It is miraculous that nothing was hit. To further complicate the situation, the rough ride caused the rivets to pull out of the fuel tank, spilling gasoline throughout the cockpit. Despite, Hawker cleaned his goggles, got her fired up, and set off in hot pursuit. He caught up to within 200 yards of the *Americas* before running out of fuel. Needing a tow, *Estelle V* was officially out of the race leaving the much slower *Estelle IV* as Carstairs' only challenger for the next heat.

Carstairs chose to relinquish the helm of *Estelle IV* to Hawker for the final heat. He was able to achieve a little more speed but could not match that of the *Americas*. As a final letdown, *Estelle IV's* gas tank split in the same way as her sister's and the race was over. None of the *Estelles* ever raced again and there is no record of what happened to the boats. It is known that Carstairs gave the Napier Lions from *Estelle V* to John Cobb to use in his land speed challenge car, *The Railton Mobil Special*. Cobb took the land speed record at Bonneville in 1939. Perhaps one day, in the back corner of a barn on the Isle of Wight, someone will discover an *Estelle* awaiting restoration.

There are photos of Betty Carstairs enjoying a recreational spin in a Dodge Watercar in the early 1930s, but no record of her ever competing again. As the 1930s progressed, the political mood in Europe and the United States started to become less tolerant. Reports began to appear about Carstairs and other gays, describing them as "inverts" and "deviants." Carstairs chose to escape this repressive atmosphere; she purchased her own small island near Nassau called Whale Cay and moved there permanently. Her creation of her own "kingdom" on Whale Cay is another story of eccentricity. If you like biographies, pick up *The Queen of Whale Cay* by Kate Summerscale—a fascinating read about a fascinating lady!

—Bruce Cleland, MBHC Archives Volunteer

*Betty Carstairs*

