

— ISLE OF WIGHT —  
**HIDDEN  
HEROES**

## Primary School Education Resource

**Marion 'Joe' Carstairs (1900-1993) - female powerboat racer, known as  
'the fastest woman on water'.**



## Who was Joe Carstairs?

Once dubbed 'the fastest woman on the water', Marion 'Joe' Carstairs was an openly gay, eccentric and tattooed, female powerboat racer who lived on the Isle of Wight in the 1920s.

## What did Joe Carstairs do?

Her love of the water (and of speed) led Joe Carstairs (born Marion Barbara Carstairs) to the Isle of Wight when she commissioned powerboats from the celebrated boatbuilder, Sammy Saunders (find out more about Saunders at the Classic Boat Museum).

Joe chose powerboats over any other racing machine because, in her words, 'you get a better idea of speed than in a car or anything else.'

The millionaire heiress led an unconventional and eccentric life, but she had an enormous passion and drive to succeed at any challenge she set herself, inspiring and touching the lives of others as she went.

Powerboat racing in the 1920s was not for the faint-hearted. It was a hugely dangerous sport and one that many did not expect to see a woman taking part in. But Joe enjoyed the danger and often she was knocked unconscious falling out of the boat. She said, 'The water when one hits is as hard as a marble floor.'

However, speed was a massive motivation for Joe - she wanted to be fastest and the best, so invested considerable amounts of money (thanks to her inheritance) into building several powerboats which she raced here in the UK, as well as in North America.

Her right-hand-man was a Isle of Wight marine mechanic named Joe Harris. It was said they were devoted to each other - working together for five years - with the mechanic sitting alongside Joe in every race, ready to be flung from the boat when it hit a crashing wave, while avoiding debris in the water or rounding buoys.

So fond of Joe Harris was she, that Joe provided him with an income for his entire life and, when in old age he lost both legs, she travelled to be at his bedside, continuing to support his family when he passed away.

The first powerboat - or hydroplane as they were then known - built for Joe on the Island was designed by a brilliant young designer called Fred Cooper (he later went on to design for H Attrill & Sons). Built at the Saunders Yard in East Cowes (the same building the Boat Museum is now situated within), Gwen - named after Joe's Variety star lover, Gwen Farrar - was painted gloss black with a sleek white stripe running along her length.

This was a revolutionary time for boatbuilding and the wood used for Gwen was so thin and pliant

that it bulged in the water when it hit every wave. When the boat capsized during early sea trials, Joe renamed her Newg. She went on to win several races around the world.

Although Joe inherited a fortune from her family (her grandfather owned Standard Oil - now Esso), she worked hard for a living prior to powerboat racing. She'd served in the First World War with the American Red Cross driving ambulances in France and did the same later in Dublin with the Women's Legion.

In 1920 she set up a car-hire and chauffeuring service with other female service drivers and named the company 'X Garage'. It was strictly a women-only affair with female drivers and mechanics, who would drive clients all around Europe.

Although born Marion Barbara, and using the nickname "Joe" (thought to possibly be a reference to her father, Albert Joseph Carstairs), during her time as a powerboat racer, Joe was often referred to as 'Betty'. This was something she apparently hated and accused the press of doing 'just to spite her'. Although she received a great deal of attention when she first started powerboat racing, the press did seem to turn against her after a while.

Perhaps her eccentric lifestyle was hard for some to understand. She lived a wild and crazy life, with lovers such as Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo.

After packing up powerboat racing and leaving the Isle of Wight, Joe went on to buy an Island called Whale Cay (pronounced Quay) in the Bahamas (then known as the British West Indies).

She set about creating an empire, bringing the island back from the brink of ruin, building houses, roads and regenerating the economy through food production and more. It was there that she was known as 'The Boss'.

Joe bought many other West Indian islands over the years, but sold Whale Cay in 1975 and moved to Florida where she lived until aged 93.

### **Why is Joe Carstairs a Hidden Hero?**

- Joe Carstairs, along with help from Isle of Wight boat builders and engineers, became the fastest woman on water, competing in powerboat races against all-male competitors at a time when it was rare for women to race.

### **Joe Carstairs Facts**

- Many powerboat acers had mascots and Joe had hers. Joe Carstairs' one true love was a 12 inch Steiff doll which she called 'Lord Tod Wadley' and he went absolutely everywhere with her - except out on her boat, as he as far too precious to her!

- Before arriving on the Isle of Wight, Joe Carstairs ran an all-female chauffeuring service with other former service drivers and named the company 'X Garage'.
- Joe retired from powerboat racing in 1931, after being beaten by French powerboat racer Madame V Heriot in a race from Ryde to the Havre lightship.
- Joe Carstairs invested £10,000 in Bluebird, Malcolm Campbell's racing car that went on to set land speed records.
- Joe's hydroplane, Newg, won her first race on Southampton Water.

## Joe Carstairs Timeline

**1900** - Born in London.

**1911** - Moved to school in New York.

**1916** - Moved to Paris - driving for the American Red Cross.

**1918** - Married childhood friend Count Jacques de Pret (in order to gain inheritance).

**1919** - Moved to Ireland and joined Women's Legion Mechanical Transport Section.

**1925** - Arrived on the Isle of Wight - had five boats designed and built here.

**1931** - Left the Isle of Wight for London, then a world tour.

**1934** - Bought Whale Cay (pronounced Quay) in the Bahamas.

**1975** - Sold Whale Cay and moved to Florida.

**1993** - Died in Florida.

## Educational Resources

### School Trips

**Visit The Classic Boat Museum Gallery.**

The Classic Boat Museum Gallery holds a wealth of information about Joe's time on the Isle of Wight, including trophies, albums, press cutting books and many photographs.

Columbine Building  
Columbine Road  
East Cowes  
Isle of Wight  
PO32 5EZ

01983 244101

<http://www.classicboatmuseum.com>

### **Visit the Cowes Maritime Museum**

The Museum displays a selection of objects and images which help to tell the story of Cowes and its important maritime heritage, including objects relating to Joe Carstairs.

Cowes Library  
Beckford Road  
Cowes  
Isle of Wight  
PO31 7SG

01983 823433

<https://www.iwight.com/Residents/Libraries-Cultural-and-Heritage/Heritage-Service/Cowes-Maritime-Museum/About0>

### **Ideas for Incorporating Joe Carstairs into the Classroom**

Carstairs and other Hidden Heroes can link into many areas of the [National Curriculum](#), including design and technology, and art and design.

Below is a breakdown of subject areas and content quoted from the National Curriculum where it might be appropriate for Carstairs, plus some ideas for study:

#### **Design and Technology**

Link to [National Curriculum for Design and Technology](#)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-design-and-technology-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-design-and-technology-programmes-of-study>

#### Ideas:

- Plan a design for your own hydroplane powerboat. Do some research of how Joe's Gwen Nweg boat looked like and worked. Maybe some local research would find plans of her original boat.

#### Art & Design

Link to [National Curriculum for Art and Design](#)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-art-and-design-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-art-and-design-programmes-of-study>

#### Ideas:

- Make your own racing mascot in homage to Joe's Lord Tod Wadley doll out of junk and fabric and other materials.

#### Website Links

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe\\_Carstairs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Carstairs)
- <https://therake.com/stories/icons/joe-carstairs/>

#### Books/Research

- The Queen of Whale Cay - The Extraordinary Story of 'Joe' Carstairs, the fastest woman on water by Kate Summerscale. ISBN: 9781408830512.