

During 1898 it was apparent that the Marquis of Dufferin through the **Royal Ulster Yacht Club** would like to make a challenge for the America's Cup. Only a Royal Club would be an acceptable challenger to the New York Yacht Club and Thomas Lipton was deemed to be a suitable person with enthusiasm enough to wish to sponsor the challenge.

The Marquis was an experienced yachtsman who had taken his 80 ton schooner, Foam, to Iceland and Spitzbergen in 1856 which led to the publication of his book, Letters from High Latitudes. He had succeeded in reviving the then '**Ulster Yacht Club**' and his enthusiastic commodore-ship of the club had led to its receiving a Royal Charter in 1870. The **Royal Ulster** became the centre of yachting in Belfast Lough and by the end of the century the club's annual regatta attracted 'all the crack boats in British waters' including those of that 'boating grocer' as Kaiser Bill called Sir Thomas Lipton at this time.

Lipton came from a humble background, being born in a tenement house in Crown Street, Glasgow. His parents had emigrated from Ireland at the time of the famine. He worked for his father for a short time and then went to America to work. Months later, after a number of unsatisfactory jobs he stowed away on a ship going from Charleston, South Carolina to New York. There he did well as an employee in a large grocery store but became homesick so returned to Glasgow at the age of twenty with his savings of 500 dollars. He built up his own grocery business with a number of shops, importing supplies of bacon, butter and eggs directly from Ireland and by cutting out middle men, undersold his rivals. He was a millionaire before he was thirty, and he was knighted by Queen Victoria for philanthropic works in 1898. Now at the age of fifty, although he had never sailed a yacht in his life, his enthusiasm for the challenge was to become enough to keep his interest in sailing alive for 31 years. During this time he was to make no less than 5 attempts to win the cup for the **Royal Ulster Yacht Club**.

During the mid-nineteenth century the American clipper ships were probably the most seaworthy and fastest craft in the world. By 1851 the year of the Great Exhibition in London and encouraged by its promoters, some New York business men persuaded John C. Stevens, commodore of the recently formed New York Yacht Club, to commission a yacht to compete against the British for a 'hundred guinea cup'. This yacht was named America and had a famous win. Although it was the custom in England to cut baggy sails to hold the wind, the America's sails were flat as a board. The British did not know what to make of the yacht. It took 12 years before a counter challenge was issued. There were a total of 9 challenges which took place with ever tightening rules and regulations before the **RUYC** was to throw down the gauntlet.

By 1857 it was agreed that the 100 guinea cup which had been donated by the Royal Yacht Squadron, would be the property of the winning club and 'not the members thereof, or owners of the vessels winning it in a match', 'thus making it perpetually a Challenge Cup for friendly competition between foreign countries'. In 1876, prior to the RUYC challenge, Major Charles Gifford of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club had entered the 107ft 'Countess of Dufferin' named after the wife of the Marquis of Dufferin, who was Governor-General of Canada at this time. The Americans had a choice of 5 yachts on their shortlist for the defence and chose Madeleine. Although it was a much closer race than those sailed before, the Canadians still lost by 27 minutes. Many modifications had been done to the sails of the Canadian yacht and Americans had been very helpful in getting the work to rigging and sails completed in time for the race. Fortunately Gifford succeeded in getting the concession that in future the New York Yacht Club would nominate only one boat to defend the trophy and they, in generous mood, also offered him the opportunity of three deciding races instead of one. However it was not until the eleventh challenge in 1899 that the Marquis of Dufferin, through the **Royal Ulster Yacht Club**, first challenged the New York Yacht Club with the Thomas Lipton sponsored cutter, Shamrock.

For the 1899 challenge Shamrock was designed as a pure racing yacht by William Fyffe and constructed at Thornycroft's in England as there was no yard capable of building such a pure racing yacht in Ireland, where Lipton would have liked to have seen her built. She was 128ft in length with a sail area of 13,492 sq ft. Her opponent was to be Columbia. Lipton did not take the helm personally, but employed professional skippers as was the custom of the time, being represented on board by his friend Duncan Neill. Columbia was well ahead regarding design and it became obvious that Shamrock was too tender in anything over a 12 knot breeze and was unable to fly her great 'jack-yarder' (a topsail). She was beaten in all three races but some of the racing was very close and Lipton was elected an honorary, and very popular member of the New York Yacht Club. He immediately announced he would make a second attempt.

In 1901, for Lipton's second challenge, Shamrock II was designed by George Watson to be even faster than the first. By tank testing the hull he was able to launch the most extreme type of racing hull which had yet been seen and regardless of lessons learned in testing, it was planned that she would carry more canvas than her designer envisaged. She had to be towed across the Atlantic by Lipton's steam yacht Erin. She failed to win a single match but was a very fast yacht. After 90 minutes no more than three seconds separated Columbia and Shamrock II. It was concluded that the superiority of the American helmsman, Charles Barr, over Lipton's man, Sycamore, was due to his greater experience. He had already helmed the first Columbia challenge. Nevertheless, the racing had been the closest yet seen.

After waiting a reasonable time in case other challengers came forward, the **Royal Ulster Yacht Club** put in a third challenge (1903). Thomas Lipton wrote a personal letter to accompany the challenge and the New York Yacht Club agreed similar terms to those of 1901. The winner was to be chosen from 5 races. Shamrock III, the first British yacht with a wheel, (though the Americans had steered this way for years) was to compete against Reliance, the largest and most impressive yacht ever to take part. No expense was spared and although Reliance had a waterline within the rule (90ft), huge overhangs at bow and stern gave her a heeled over waterline length of more than 130ft. Reliance was well sailed by Barr and easily won the first two races. In the third race a bank of fog descended and Shamrock III lost her way. This challenge was a great disappointment to Lipton who was not to put in another attempt until 1912 and did not make the challenge finally until after the Great War in 1920.

The fourth **RUYC** challenge (the thirteenth overall) was to be the closest yet. The brilliant Charles Nicholson had considerable knowledge of building yachts but this was his first America's Cup boat. A major error in his design

meant that she (Shamrock IV) had to carry more sail than Resolute (the American defender) and thus had to give away a time allowance of 7 minutes. She was the first British challenger to be fitted with a centreboard in her keel. She was also to be towed across the Atlantic by Erin (Lipton's personal steam yacht). However war had been declared so Erin was returned to Britain and put at the disposal of the British government by her owner. She was used by the government as a hospital ship and sadly was torpedoed in the Mediterranean and lost with six crew. In the fourth challenge which could not take place till after the war (in 1920) Shamrock IV won two of the five races. Tactics in the third race, which was a windward leeward course, involved nineteen tacks which left Resolute in the lead. By the end of the windward leg although Shamrock began to pull back and close the gap, taking the lead, she was unfortunately outside her time allowance. Burton (Shamrock IV) and Adams (Resolute), the first amateur skippers in the Cup's history had the closest racing in the challenge so far. Nevertheless Resolute won the last two races and was considered the faster boat.

Sir Thomas Lipton was almost 80 years old when he launched Shamrock V, his fifth and final challenge from **RUYC** (1930). By this time it had been agreed to race yachts without handicap. The New York Yacht Club decided to race J-Class, and both sides welcomed this decision. Four J-Class yachts were built, Whirlwind, Weetamoe, Yankee and Enterprise, in answer to this challenge. The latter was chosen by the Americans and had the backing of Harold S. Vanderbilt (great grandson of once the richest man on earth). Enterprise was to be one of the most innovative yachts ever built with a light 'tin mast' (duralim), a mainsail that allowed alterations in shape while underway for maximum efficiency and a very professional, drilled crew, who won her the first three races. Sailing small boats, including fishing craft in often inhospitable waters gave the challengers the skills to manage their J Class yachts but not necessarily the skills to win races against highly competent professional racing crew and skippers. Following his final defeat the American public gave Thomas Lipton a gold cup for what they considered his excellent sportsmanship.

During his yacht racing period, which embraced the last thirty years of his life, Tommy Lipton became known as a lavish and genial host, whose lifelong abstention from alcohol and tobacco in no way impaired his hospitality. Unfortunately he was not a racing yachtsman and therefore could not direct his projects as well as he would have liked. His skippers lacked the experience of competing against similar boats before arriving in America and as amateurs may have let him down. The Americans made the rules, it was sailed on their waters, and they provided the jury. The decisions made, were at times controversial and the challengers had no appeal open to them.

In his lifetime Sir Thomas Lipton was a kind and generous man giving much to the city of Glasgow. He had a genius for publicity but he was genuinely a good employer. **The Royal Ulster Yacht Club** keeps the Lipton Room in the club to his memory. A signed portrait of 'Marie Studholme' a well known actress of the time and reputed to be Lipton's mistress hangs in the Lipton room which is filled with memorabilia from the Lipton era including models and photographs of his yachts. A replica of the famous America's Cup is also on show in the trophy room of the club, and a model of the famous yacht is on the landing outside.

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