

**Monday March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2026**

## **Sailing with Altered Abilities**

**Simon Mahoney and Terry Shiels**

**Reviewer: Janette Sykes**

Every so often, life bowls us curve balls – and we either embrace them or fail to adapt. Few people can be more acutely aware of this than Simon Mahoney and Terry Shiels, who, despite having just ‘two eyes, three arms and three legs’ between them, now sail in what they describe as a ‘bath tub with attitude’ and have their focus fixed firmly on national and international sailing glory.

Neither Simon, who is approaching 80 and became completely blind in later life, or Terry, who is in his early 60s and had a stroke 15 years ago that completely paralysed the left side of his body, ever dreamed that they would team up to compete in Hansa Class UK races in places from Bolton and Rutland to Gloucester and Poole. Nor did they expect to even contemplate the prospect of representing Great Britain at the 2026 Hansa Class European Championships in Barcelona this September – but thanks to £2,000 sponsorship, they will soon be on their way.

The ‘bathtub’ the two men sail is a Hansa 303 Sailing Dinghy, and their close partnership has been forged over a period of just 18 months. Simon, of Ashbourne, had previously sailed since 1955, but had given up all hope of taking to the water again after losing his sight ten years ago. Terry, of Belper, whose passion was ballroom dancing before he had his life-changing stroke, discovered what he summed up as the ‘sheer joy’ of sailing ten years ago.

The two men met at Carsington Sailability, part of Carsington Sailing Club at Carsington Water, near Ashbourne, whose aim is to enable people with disabilities to try sailing and experience the freedom and exhilaration it can offer. Neither is keen on the label ‘disability’, perceiving it as negative and preferring the description ‘altered ability’. They have also reset their collective mindset to ask ‘how do we do things’ rather than ‘we can’t do things’ – a positive attitude that is clearly paying dividends.

Simon and Terry are among around 40 people with altered abilities ranging from autism and Down’s syndrome to cerebral palsy and MS living in Derbyshire, north Staffordshire and South Yorkshire who sail

regularly with able-bodied members of the group at Carsington. Ability levels range from what Simon termed 'pootling about on the water' to competitive racing standard.

Both men have experienced what they term an 'extraordinary turn round in their mental health' since they joined Sailability. Said Simon: "It started in Scotland around 30 years ago. Now there are more than 200 groups across the UK, plus others in Europe, Australia and the Persian Gulf. They are open to anyone of any age, no matter what their ability, to get on to the water, to relax and enjoy themselves. Once you are out on a boat, it's a magical feeling, and any stress you might be under just melts away. You feel the same as anyone else – it does wonders for your state of mind." Added Terry: "It's absolutely amazing and gives me such intense pleasure, especially when we're taking part in a race."

Despite working together over such a short time, the men have built up a genuine rapport when competing, and are now fifth on the national leader board in their sailing class. Last year they took part in six competitive events, with Terry as helmsman and Simon in charge of the sails, and this year are on course to enter 12. "Terry and I have really developed as a team," said Simon. "When we're in a race, we've reached the stage of hardly needing to speak to each other, because we seem to know exactly what the other is doing or thinking. And when we are out there competing against other people, it's feral! No-one takes any prisoners, and it's a great leveller. If you move from a position of thinking 'we can't do this' to working out 'how do we do this?', it's very satisfying and refreshing when you succeed."

Now they are keen to encourage more people with altered abilities to give sailing a go, and to urge more people to join the band of volunteers who help them to taste the freedom and satisfaction that taking to the water can bring. "In my own case, it has really boosted my confidence, and given me the appetite to try other activities," said Terry. "When I took up sailing, I had no idea whether I would be any good at it, but now I have got to the stage where I am about to take delivery of my own specially-adapted boat. My aim is to perfect my solo skills so that I can eventually take part in solo races. Life is for living, and I now feel there are no barriers to what I can do. It's spurred me on to learning to operate a flight simulator at Tatton Hill Airfield, near Burton-upon-Trent – something else I thought I would never achieve."

As well as being focused on their own ambitions, the two men also derive huge satisfaction from helping others with altered abilities enjoy the sport. They are both qualified to help others into boats using a hoist, and are currently learning to sail a bigger keel boat at Rutland Water, so that a similar craft can be used for group sailing sessions at Carsington. They are clearly inspired and motivated by each other's irrepressible enthusiasm, summed up neatly in a message that Terry read out to end their talk:

### ***The Blank Piece of Paper***

*When faced with a blank piece of paper and asked to fill it with their dreams many will say, "I am too busy, tired, poor to fill it. What do I have to say anyway? I haven't lived the kind of life that means I can fill a blank piece of paper with anything, never mind dreams. Give the paper to someone else for it is not mine to fill."*

*This is a tragedy. A waste. A great sadness. A shutting down of mind and spirit. Of wondrous possibility. Of dreams.*

*If, on the other hand, you face the piece of paper and you see the height of the mountains, feel the warm or cold water on your skin, hear the call of the birds, smell the pine woods, then you will fill that piece of paper with possibility, life, dreams.*

*And, with that, you will not be too busy, too tired or too poor to say: "Here are my possibilities, my dreams, and now I will set about their happening."*

*The message is: don't say "I can't fill this piece of paper", it is "How can I fill this piece of paper?" It is not "I can't buy this red ribbon for my hair", it is "How can I buy this red ribbon for my hair?"*

*With this the mind and spirit will soar, and the ribbon will be yours.*

- Anyone keen to try a sailing session or to become a volunteer can find out more at <https://www.carsingtonsailingclub.co.uk/page/carsington-sailability-overview>.