

# Record

## Sir Francis Chichester, K.B.E.

SIR Francis Chichester, a Fellow and Gold Medallist of the Institute and a former member of Council, died in Plymouth on 26 August 1972. The Institute was represented at his funeral on 1 September by the Executive Secretary, who also provides the following personal note.

Francis Chichester was the most illustrious navigator of his day. For him it was not just a deductive process but a means of expression, a discipline involving the whole man, and it was the spur to much that he achieved. His navigational attainments are well chronicled in the numerous books he wrote about his adventures and in the countless articles about him. The most characteristic are perhaps, in the air the crossing of the Tasman Sea in 1931, and at sea his attempt last year to average 200 miles a day over a distance of 4000 miles, the romantic challenge as he called it. The former entailed homing down an astro position line to refuel at Norfolk Island and Lord Howe Island in conditions where an error would have meant plunging into a shark-infested sea, for the Gipsy Moth aircraft had insufficient range for the flight. It also involved taking an astronomical observation at the same time as flying a light unstable aircraft. The latter attempt, had it succeeded, would have meant sailing Gipsy Moth V at very nearly her maximum theoretical speed for most of the time over this vast distance. That he so nearly succeeded in this 'soaring aim' (as *Argus of Yachting Monthly* has termed it) was astonishing. His finish at night, on an unlit and rapidly shoaling coast five miles off the Corn River, must have been a hair-raising affair.

All his navigational achievements, and perhaps particularly the winning of the first single-handed transatlantic race in 1960 and his magnificent circumnavigation of 1967, for which the Institute made him a Special Award, have been characterized by very thorough planning and remarkable determination. He must have had a will of iron and one was constantly astonished that this man who so often could not get up his own stairs without panting should conceive and then so unerringly execute these great feats. But it was not truculence or stubbornness that led him on, but rather that achievements were for him a means of living more intensely; he was an artist. And this I believe is why he found a deeper satisfaction in doing things alone. It was certainly not that he spurned company. He was I suppose the greatest single-hander of them all, even though his records may be beaten. He was so often the precursor.

His contributions to navigational thought were by no means negligible even though it is primarily as a practitioner that he will be remembered. During the war, prevented by poor eyesight from flying on missions, he worked on navigational training in the Royal Air Force, and he published a very clear and useful series of books on astro-navigation. As recently as 1966 he proposed an elegant variant of the lunar distance method of determining longitude at sea without reference to G.M.T.

Chichester was a founder member of the Institute and at different times a Vice-President, Treasurer and an ordinary member of Council. He held it in

enormous esteem and the *Journal* was one of the very few to which he regularly contributed on demand at a time when his writing fetched a high price. He was essentially a navigator and I think the awards the Institute made him gave him more pleasure than any others.

To some degree he was a controversial figure in sailing, largely because of his ready acceptance of sponsorship. But there was a kind of simplicity about all this; it was only in this fashion he could do the things he wanted. It never deflected his aim. He could as well be argumentative, and even fractious, as his unfortunate duel with the designers of Gipsy Moth IV showed. But he had the gift of friendship, and then no bond could be of nobler metal. There was a winning simplicity too about his apparent enjoyment of fame, his ability, as some wit put it, to back into the limelight. It came from a kind of humility rather than anything gross.

The last time I saw Francis was at the briefing for the single-handed transatlantic race. He asked me to sit next to him. The day before, he told me, he had been unable to stand. We both knew I think that there were sounder reasons than our difference in waterline length for not meeting in Newport. I for one was glad he was sailing out.

M.W.R.