



Left & right Geoff Holt on his epic round-Britain voyage, which took him past many inspiring sights of the British coast, including the Isle of Wight's Needles (right). His latest endeavour is a more personal journey.

SETTING SAIL

An inspirational man, a tireless fighter for disabled rights and, above all else, a masterful

sailor, Geoff Holt speaks to *Robert Yarham* about his life, voyages, achievements and being quadriplegic.

FOR SOMEONE who spends so much of his life in a wheelchair, Geoff Holt is not a man you can push around or patronize, even if you wanted to. A fiercely independently minded man, Geoff is also one of the most personable and eloquent people you could hope to meet. And it is his eloquence and honesty that immediately strike you; here is a man who tells things as they are. 'One thing I've noticed is that those who have been disabled from birth can seem more accepting of the way things are, of the way they're treated. I expected respect, and I found it astonishing that I was treated slightly differently. I tended to be different, outspoken and challenging.'

Determined to inspire others, Geoff campaigned for disabled rights and was instrumental in setting up RYA Sailability, the charity that helps people overcome their disabilities and learn to sail, introducing them to the experiences and environment that have so inspired him. 'When we began, back in 1995, we were supporting around 40 people and had set up eight to ten clubs. Last year, there were nearly 200 clubs helping 20,000 people.'

Today Geoff is probably best known for overcoming challenges of a different kind. In September 2007, he became the first disabled sailor to sail single-handedly around Great Britain in aid

of RYA Sailability. The journey took Geoff and his support crew of seven 1445 miles and 109 days to complete. It was a remarkable feat for any single-handed sailor, let alone someone with quadriplegia – with no use of his legs or arms, and very limited use of his hands – and he had done it in a small trimaran yacht that he had appropriately named *Freethinker*. Geoff had previously been the first disabled person to sail around the Isle of Wight in 1992, and he began to dream of a more ambitious voyage around Britain. He planned the trip meticulously and recruited a team of dedicated volunteers and sponsors to help him. He called the journey his 'Personal Everest'.

Geoff was an active young man, and grew up near the Hamble in Hampshire, where he became obsessed with boats and sailing. It was inevitable that he became an accomplished young yachtsman. Not relishing the prospect of school beyond the age of 16 and dreaming of a life doing what he loved, and being a determined and sociable young man, Geoff found work providing sailing trips for corporate customers and working in a resort in Tortola, in the British Virgin Islands. It was there in 1984, when he was aged 18, that Geoff had his accident. He dived into a shallow bay, too shallow as it turned out, and damaged his spine.

From that moment on, his life was a struggle, firstly to get home without medical or travel insurance, and then to rebuild his life. But with the love and support of others, particularly his wife Elaine, Geoff forged a career in marketing, surmounting one obstacle after another, including sailing again and helping other disabled people to discover the joys that a trip on the water can bring.

And this December he intends to try something that seems altogether more ambitious – making the 3000-mile trip across the Atlantic. The trip is in support of the Ellen MacArthur



"'Tis the set of the sail that decides the goal, and not the storm of life."

ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

Trust, the charity founded by the yachtswoman, and friend of Geoff, that helps young people recovering from serious illness to go sailing and to regain their confidence. But Geoff claims the crossing is not as daunting as it appears to the layperson. 'Well, it's very much a perception thing. It's the easiest route, and the winds should be about force 4; it will take about 18 days.' It will be the first time he's sailed across the Atlantic since the accident, and the destination for his journey is the place where his accident happened in Tortola. 'It's something I thought I'd never, ever do,' he reflects, 'and it brings a nice sense of closure.'

'It's not about being disabled, though,' continues Geoff. 'It's not about sailing the Atlantic Ocean. It's about demonstrating that disability need not be a barrier to achieving something positive in your life.'

This time, his only support crew will be an on-board carer – an experienced nurse to help him with the many daily routines, such as going to the loo, that many of us take for granted. 'She's already passed the "wife test",' he laughs. But Geoff is being careful; just in case anything untoward

should happen, he is also taking an experienced yachtswoman to act as video cameraman, and also to help in any emergency. He is now completing his final preparations and trials on the specially adapted catamaran. In spite of the precautions, he still says that the round-Britain trip was much more difficult.

'The trip was logistically so much more complex,' he insists. 'And the psychological pressure so great.' Starting something that inspired so many drove him on, but it also weighed heavily on his shoulders. Didn't he enjoy it at all? 'To be honest, I didn't while I was doing it. The pressure was so intense. I'd have nightmares and wake up in tears thinking that it wasn't going to happen. There was the guilt, the sense of responsibility – and not letting go.'

But today he harbours many fond memories of his journey. 'It was the first time I'd travelled around Britain. The thing that hits you is how big the country is, and you also realize just how beautiful it is. There was the scenery and the wildlife – seeing the sharks, whales and puffins was wonderful. And I shall always have

an abiding memory of the people; how complete strangers would stop and help for no other reason than that they thought it was a good cause.'



Walking on Water, Geoff's gripping account of his life and voyages, is priced £11, including postage and packaging. Call 01394 420789 or visit www.walkingonwater.info. To sponsor Geoff in support of the Ellen MacArthur Trust, visit www.justgiving.com/geoffholt. To find out more about Geoff's latest news, visit his website www.geoffholt.com.