



THIS Easter week recalls the famous gun-running incidents which landed the rifles that were eventually used in the 1916 Rising—at Howth by the yacht Asgard and at Kilcoole by the yacht Kelpie, owned by the famed Limerick voyager, Conor O'Brien, who was also involved with the Asgard. **PADDY MORONEY** reviews the Limerick connections



•Arrival at Howth, July 26 1914: the guns are handed up to members of the Irish Volunteers. On the right of the picture is Erskine Childers; the lady is Mary Spring-Rice.



•Scene from the 1914 gun-running: Molly Childers, the American-born wife of Erskine Childers (left) and Mary Spring-Rice on board the Asgard, on the way back to Howth.

Historic gun-runners: Limerick links

THERE is expected to be strong support from sailing circles in the Limerick area for the new drive to restore the historic yacht, Asgard.

The yacht will be restored to full seagoing condition at a cost of £850,000, half of it by public subscription, matched pound-for-pound by the Minister for Defence.

Asgard was the yacht used by one of the great figures of 20th century Irish history, Erskine Childers, to import arms for the Irish Volunteers in July 1914, in support of Home Rule.

The weapons, however, wound up being used in the 1916 Rising.

The Asgard did not visit Limerick until after it was brought back

to Ireland from England in 1961 by the Irish Government, which had purchased it as a sail training vessel, and had had it extensively repaired.

Initially, it was used to train members of the Naval Service and An Slua Muiri, with a large number of Limerick members of the naval reserve using the boat in its original condition.

Later, however, with some modifications above and below, it was used to train civilians, mainly boys and girls, under Captain Eric Healy, and paid a visit to Limerick docks for a much-publicised voyage downriver in the early 1970s.

Asgard was taken out of service in 1974, thirteen years after its pur-

chase by the Irish Government as a sail training vessel and historical artifact, and put on permanent exhibition in Kilmainham Jail in 1979.

A successor, the much larger sail-training vessel, Asgard II, championed by yachtsman Charles J Haughey, Taoiseach, was built at Tyrrell's boatyard in Arklow.

The replacement vessel has paid many visits to Limerick, over the past two decades, and a very large number of young Limerick people have trained with others as mariners and watch-leaders on board. It regularly wins prizes in its class in the Cutty Sark Tall

Ships race (spectacularly held in Cork, 1991, and, less flamboyantly in Dublin since).

One final Limerick area connection with Asgard is that half the cost of restoring the yacht will be borne by the Minister for Defence, Michael Smith, who has taken a personal interest in the project and who, for years, sat on the Mid-Western Health Board in Limerick city.

The other half of the cost will be borne by public subscription.

Asgard, in Norse mythology, is the home of the gods.

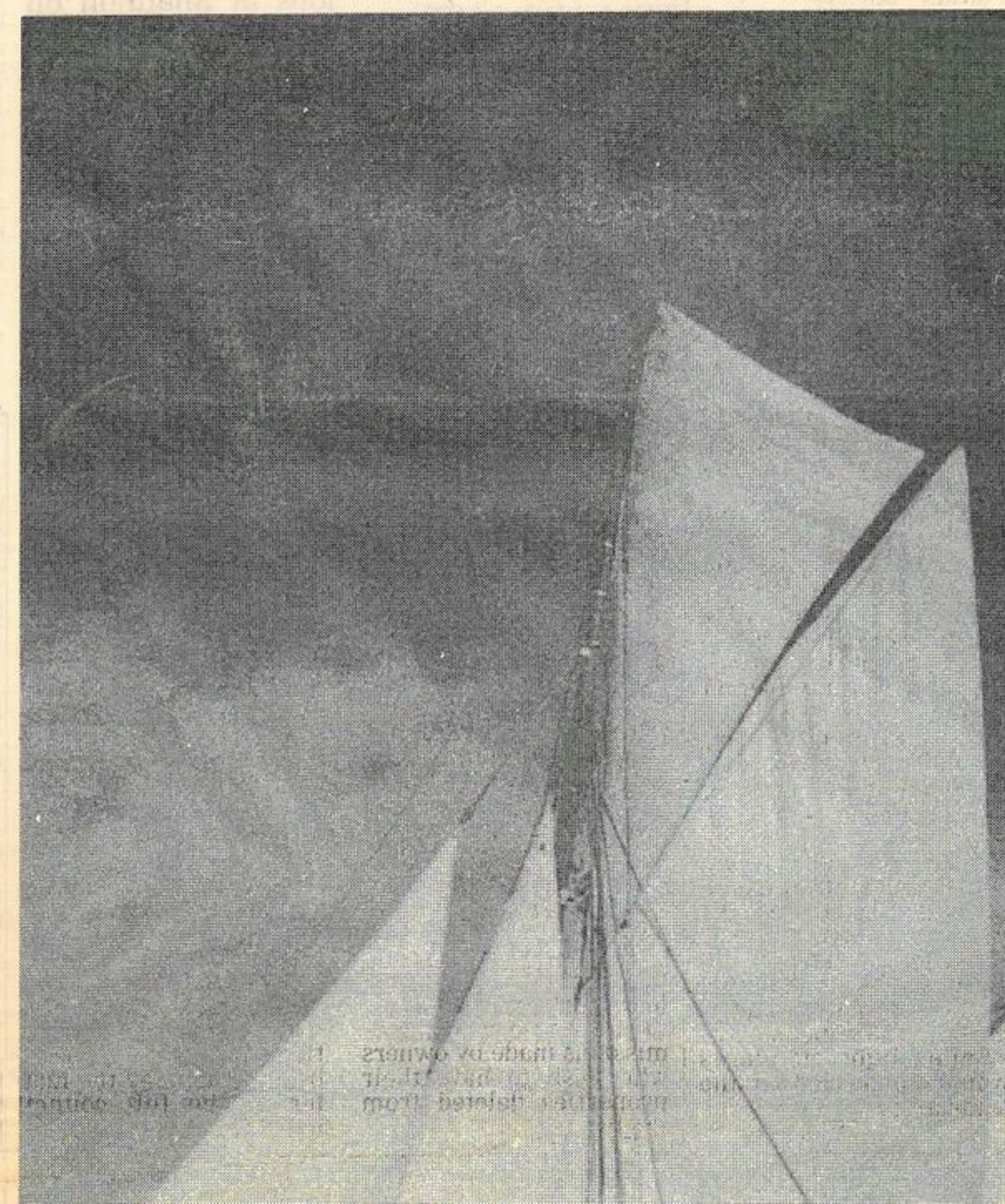
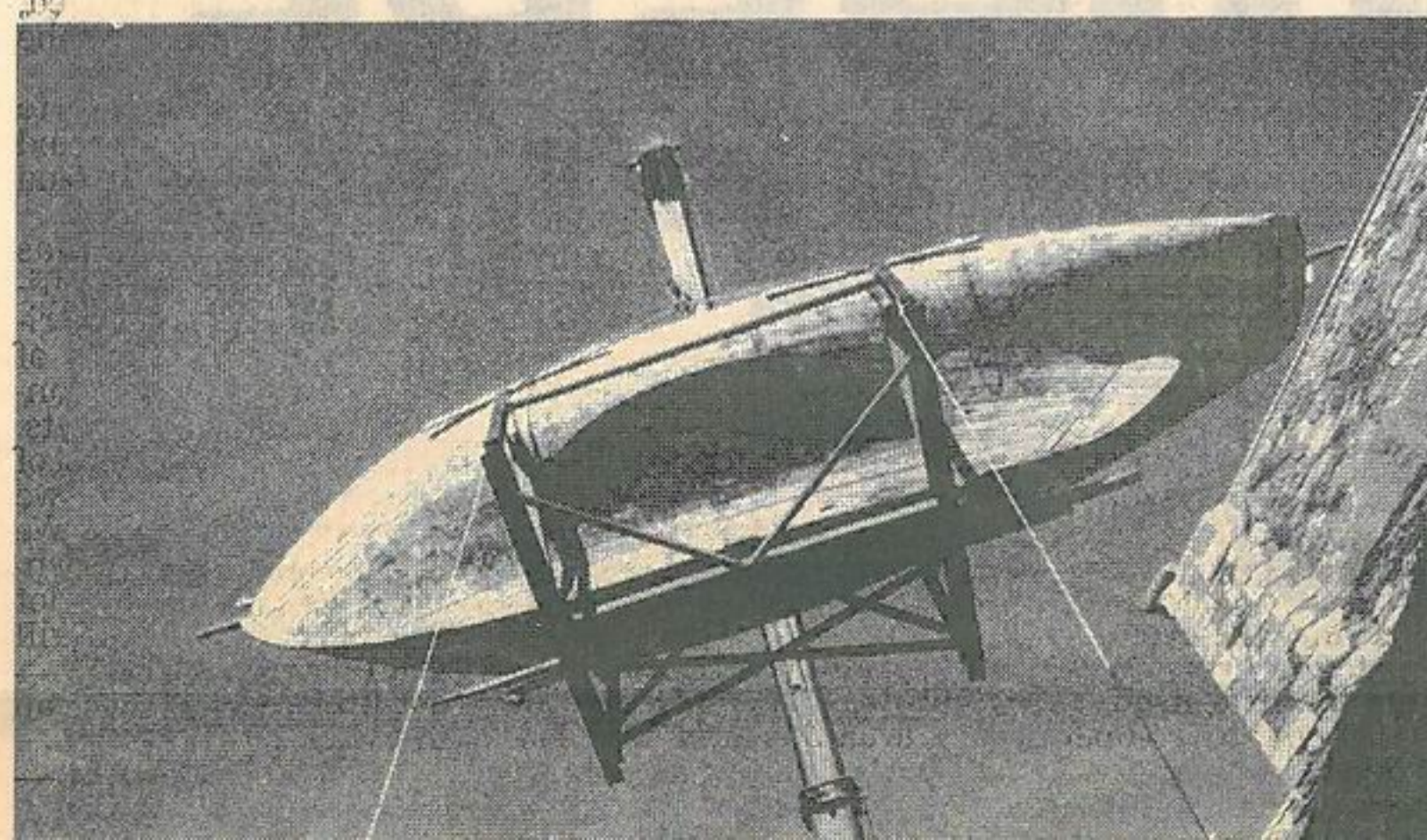
• Donations may be sent to The Asgard Restoration Project, 4 Lower Hatch Street, Dublin 2 (tel 01-6628000 or 087-2459463).

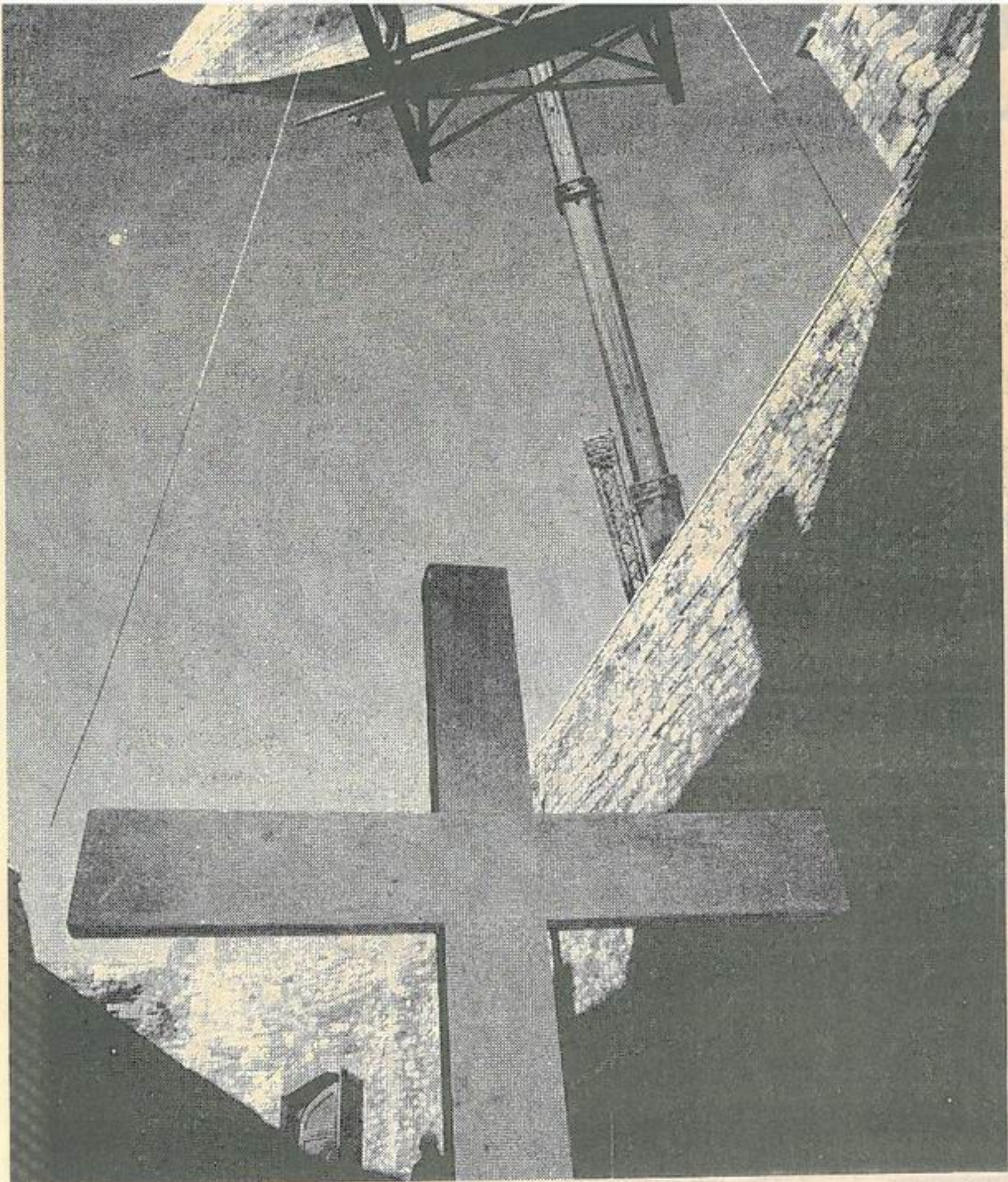
The gun-running: how and where it happened

THE 1914 gun-running operation with Asgard recalled, in a curious sort of way, the espionage novel, "The Riddle of the Sands", written by none other than Erskine Childers himself, some years earlier. The book was, in recent years, made into a film and screened on television several times—the most recent being only a few weeks ago. The book was set in the

conditions at the time. The rifles were meant to be in support of the Irish Volunteers and Home Rule, in opposition to the already-armed Ulster Volunteers who were opposed to Home Rule for the whole of Ireland and who had earlier imported a larger cache of weapons and ammunition from Germany, also clandestinely. However, the weapons for the Irish Volunteers and

pistol given to him as a present by Collins—he had taken the Republican side during the civil war, but had not fought. Sheppard, for his part, continued on with the Royal Navy to become—by an incredible irony—the head of Naval Intelligence during the Great War: a touch again of Childers' own "Riddle of the Sands". Asgard itself had its own share of irony—it fell





• The historic yacht, Asgard, being lifted by crane, during its transportation from Kilmainham to the Dublin quays, prior to restoration work.

The gun-running: the leading personalities

ERSKINE Childers, hero of the Howth gun-running of 1914, was father of the late President of Ireland, Erskine Childers, and grandfather of the recently-deceased Erskine Childers III, the highest-ranking Irishman ever within the United Nations administration in New York.

In its long history, the yacht Asgard, with which the gun-running operation was carried out, has had a number of connections with Limerick. One of those who travelled on board the Asgard with Childers, for the gun-running, was Mary Spring Rice.

She was the unmarried daughter of Lord Montague, of Mount Trenchard, Foynes, himself one of the Spring Rice family noted for their contribution to Irish affairs.

The tall stone column at the centre of the People's Park, the Spring Rice memorial, bears lasting testimony to the esteem in which the family was held. Atop the column is the effigy of Thomas

Spring-Rice, who became Chancellor of the Exchequer, and who was born at 2 Mungret Street.

In the Chamber of Commerce building, on O'Connell Street, is the painting of the Chairing of Spring-Rice, to celebrate Thomas' defeat of a unionist rival.

The mother of the poet Aubrey de Vere, of Curragh Chase, Askeaton, was a Spring Rice.

Mary Spring-Rice, one of the outstanding women of her generation and, as one noted authority put it, an outstanding example of Protestant Irish nationalism, was involved in the Gaelic League, and conducted Irish classes at Mount Trenchard and aeriochta in the grounds of the mansion. She was a friend of Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League, who was later to become the first president of an independent Ireland (1938).

She was also a kinswoman of the celebrated pioneer yachtsman, Conor O'Brien, of nearby Foynes Island, and was a kinswoman too

of the Young Irelander and parliamentarian, William Smith O'Brien, of Cahermoyle, Ardagh, one of the great figures of 19th century Irish nationalism.

Conor O'Brien himself was a great patriot: he helped out with the logistics of the Asgard gun-running, along with Bulmer Hobson and Darrell Figgis.

He later managed a gun-running effort of his own, sailing his yacht, the Kelpie, into Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, with a consignment of weapons. O'Brien, whose house can still be seen on the shore of Foynes Island, facing the village, was later the first Irish yachtsman to circumnavigate the globe, in the 1920's, flying the tricolour of the new Irish Free State all the way. His exceptional skills of navigation and seamanship were reaffirmed when he delivered the Ilen, a sailing workboat, from Ireland to the Falklands—the boat has now been brought back to Limerick for permanent exhibition.

Childers himself, some years earlier. The book was, in recent years, made into a film and screened on television several times—the most recent being only a few weeks ago.

The book was set in the Frisian Islands, a string of low-lying islands off the North Sea coastline of Germany and Holland, with which Childers had become familiar while sailing in Asgard to the Baltic with his wife, Molly, in the years after their wedding in 1904.

By an incredible coincidence, it was to those very same islands that Childers, recruited by Roger Casement, later returned on board Asgard, in July 1914, to secretly load on board the Asgard a total of 1,500 German Mauser rifles and 49,000 rounds of ammunition for the Irish Volunteers.

The loading operation took place at sea, the weapons being brought out on a tugboat from Hamburg, with the rendezvous off the Ter-schelling Island lighthouse. A contemporary photograph of the tug, taken from Asgard, suggests dense foggy condi-

tion. Childers and Gordon Sheppard, a fellow Englishman who had travelled on the Asgard for the gun-running and who was also a supporter of the Home Rule cause, were called up into the Royal Navy, following the outbreak of "the Great War"—they had both been Royal naval reservists.

Years later, Childers became one of the 1921 Treaty negotiators with Michael Collins, but was later executed by the new Irish Government for being in possession of a

royal navy to become by an incredible irony—the head of Naval Intelligence during the Great War: a touch again of Childers' own "Riddle of the Sands". Asgard itself had its own share of irony—it fell into the ownership, for years afterwards, of members of the senior British military.

After the famous 1914 gun-running incident, the Asgard remained on in the Childers family until 1928, when Erskine's widow, Molly, sold it off—it had been out of service since the Civil War, when Erskine was executed. Asgard was bought in 1928 by a Colonel Mallock, of the British Army, who sailed it to England. Four years later, he sold it on to a colleague, Major W P Branston.

The latter eventually sold the Asgard back to a brother of Colonel Mallock. During World War Two, Asgard was laid up at Fowey, in Cornwall. Later, it was discovered and brought back to Ireland, as much an historical artifact as a vessel suitable for training young people in sailing.

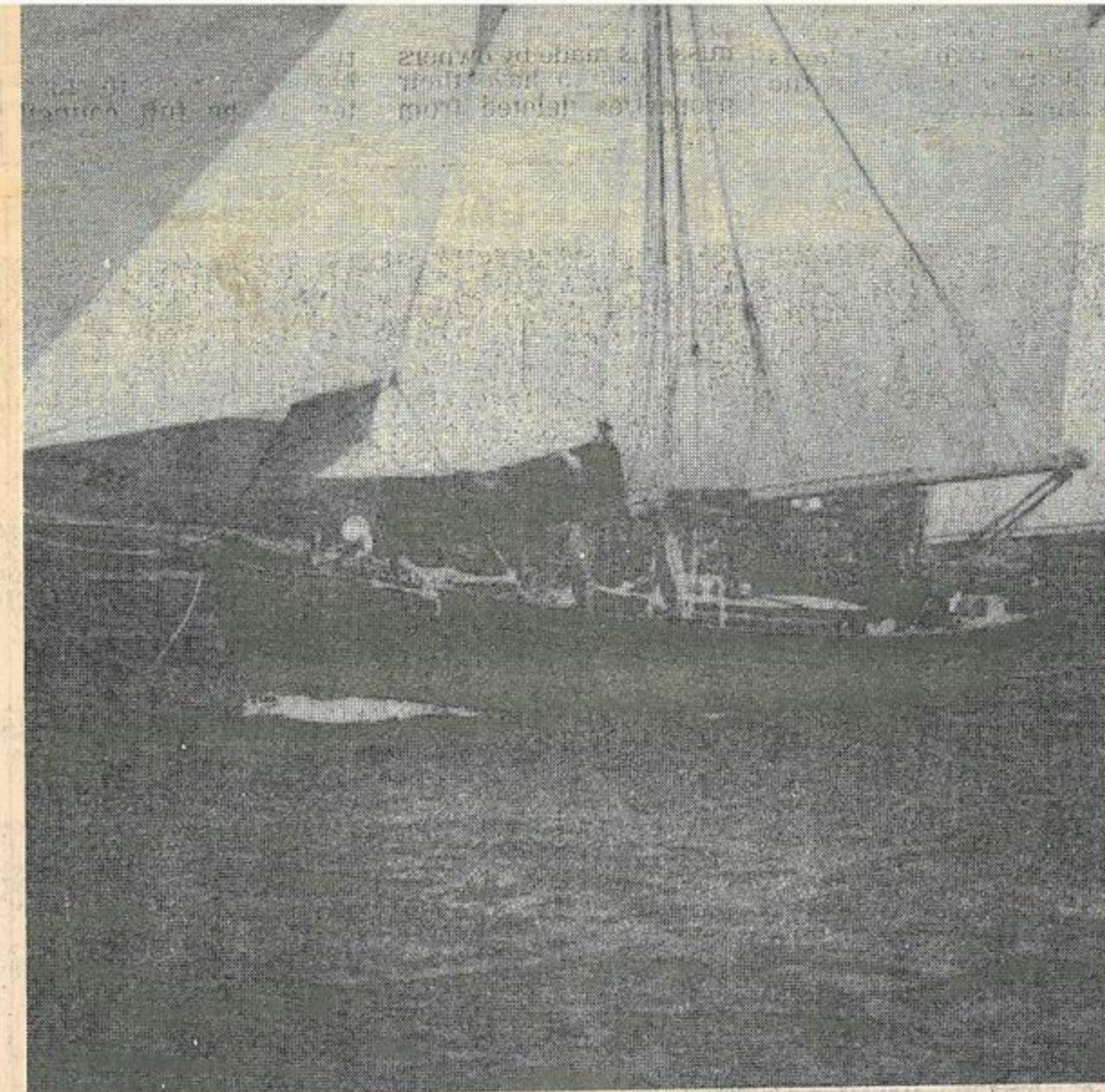
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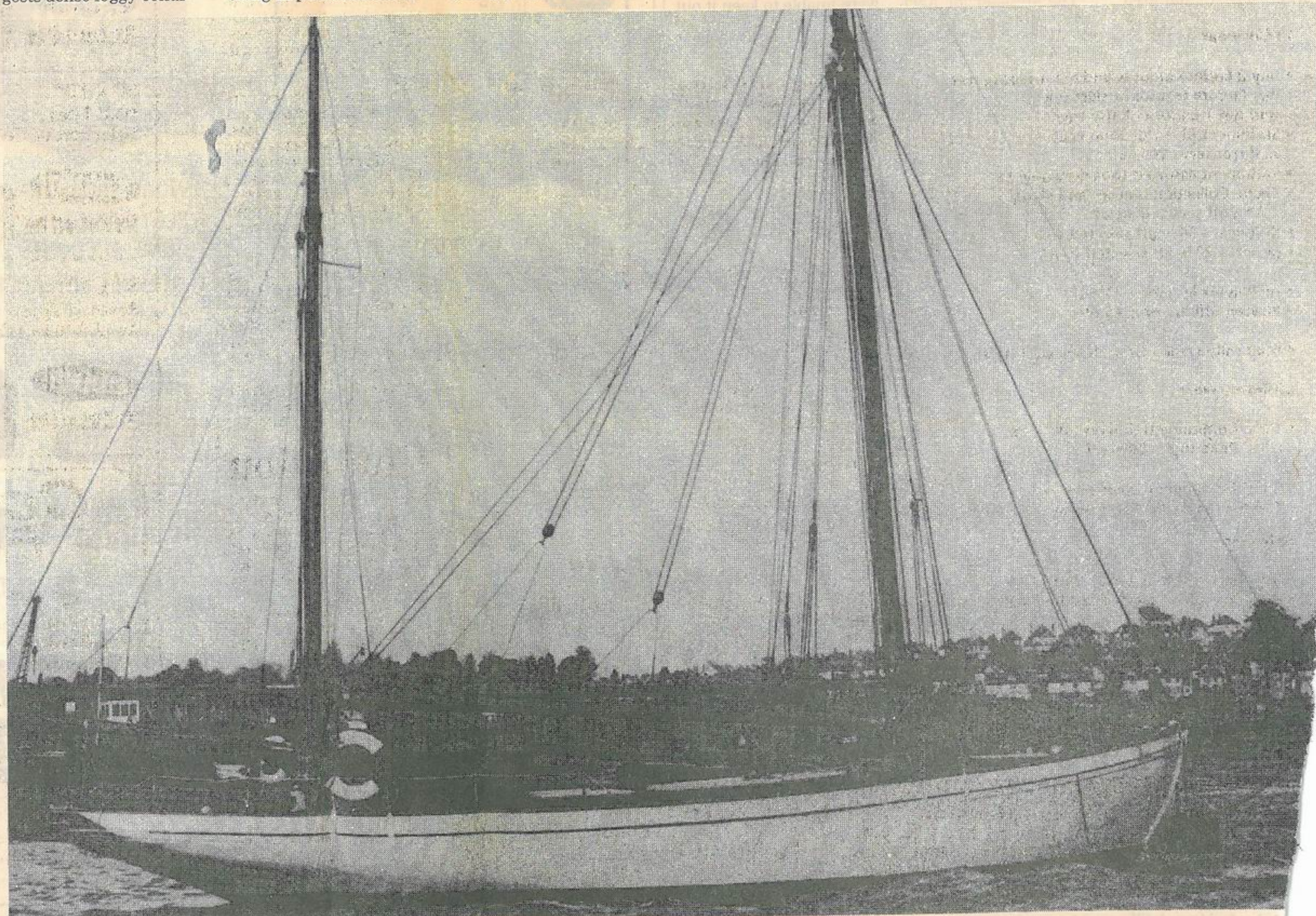
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• Asgard in full sail, subsequent to its return to Ireland in the 1960's.



• The yacht Asgard lies at moorings in England while in British ownership, during the inter-war years.