

# Dame Ellen



By **Bill Moulard**

BRITAIN'S youngest, newest Dame sailed home yesterday to a spectacular welcome – and a possible £5million fortune – on what seemed like an ocean of champagne.

There were so many vessels churning the water into froth outside Falmouth harbour that Ellen MacArthur might have used them as stepping stones to the shore.

'I have never seen so many boats, so many people,' she said. 'It's quite an extraordinary experience. It's quite overwhelming.'

From dawn, the flotilla had been leaving moorings and quays to rendezvous with her 75ft trimaran B&Q eight miles out at sea.

The boat was easy to spot – the 90ft mast dominating the skyline next to the Royal Navy's offshore patrol vessel HMS Severn, which was sending up twin plumes of spray from water cannons.

Sea King helicopters from the Navy and RAF whirled overhead and Hawk trainers made a flypast.

Miss MacArthur – who had accepted Downing Street's offer to become a dame just hours before crossing the finishing line as the fastest, solo, non-stop,

**DOWNING** Street's sudden decision to announce Ellen MacArthur's damehood yesterday prompted suspicions that Tony Blair was trying to gain political capital from her feat.

The complex process of awarding honours normally takes many months. Recipients are formally announced twice a year – in the New Year's list and the Queen's birthday honours in June.

Instead, Number 10 took the unusual step of fast-tracking Miss MacArthur's award and releasing a press statement just as she was sailing into Falmouth. Last night, MPs demanded assurances that the timing was not driven by political motives.

Downing Street officials claimed there was nothing to prevent honours being announced outside the twice-yearly lists, but could name only one precedent. In 1967, Sir Francis Chichester's knighthood was announced as he returned home from becoming the first person to sail solo around the world.

round-the-world sailor in history – had been up for only a few hours.

After the triumph of setting a new record of 71 days, 14 hours, 18 minutes and 33 seconds – 32 hours and 35 minutes quicker than Frenchman Francois Joyon – she had collapsed on her bunk and slept for six hours as her back-up crew brought the boat home.

'I got more sleep yesterday than in the last two months,' said the 28-year-old.

Sleep, it emerged yesterday, won't be her only luxury. Miss MacArthur may have saved up her school dinner money to buy her first boat, but she could now bank up to £5million.

Nigel Currie, director of sports marketing agency the GEM Group, said: 'She has the potential to earn between £3million and £5million over the next 18 months purely from endorsements, quite apart from any money she might be paid to race people's boats for them.'

Yesterday, however, all around her were yachts and dinghies, inflatables and Cor-

nish rowing gigs, gin palaces and trawlers, lifeboats and even the little St Mawes ferry, flying their flags and messages of congratulation.

One had even anticipated Downing Street's announcement with the banner: 'Welcome Home Dame Ellen.'

The Queen had praised her 'remarkable and historic achievement' and told her: 'Your progress has been fol-

lowed by many people in Britain and throughout the world, who have been impressed by your courage, skill and stamina.'

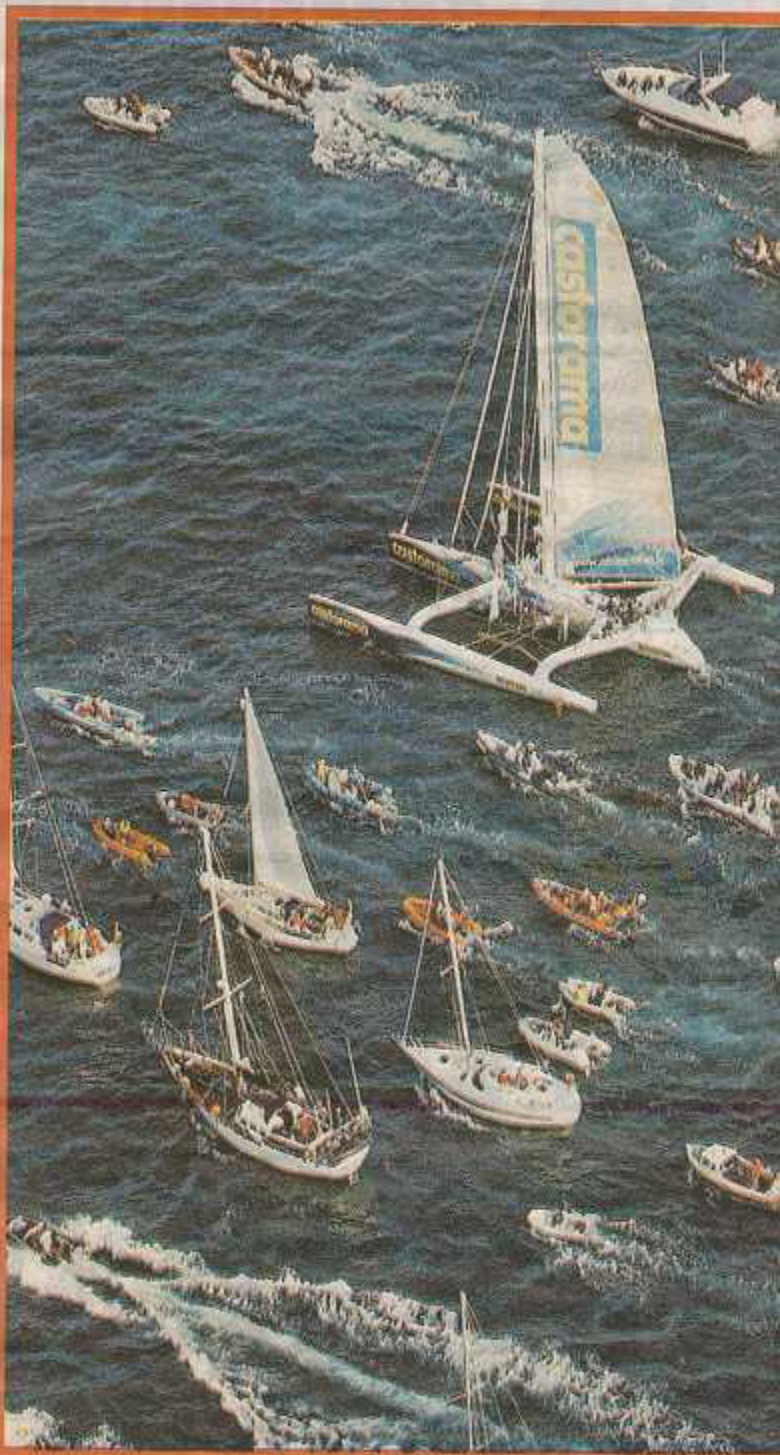
'I cannot believe it,' said Miss MacArthur. 'I feel incredibly privileged.'

'It doesn't make you feel any different from who you are, it's just an extraordinary experience. That on top of everything else... my head is spinning.'

Her anxious crew constantly waved the armada away in case it got too close. But one inflatable, carrying project manager Mark Turner, was allowed to squeeze close to the stern so he could jump aboard.

He and Miss MacArthur were in tears as they hugged each other in a long embrace.

'We shared a lot,' said Mr Turner, who had kept his phone on day and night in case



Home is the sailor: Ellen MacArthur's trimaran is surrounded by a flotilla yesterday on the