

Onboard

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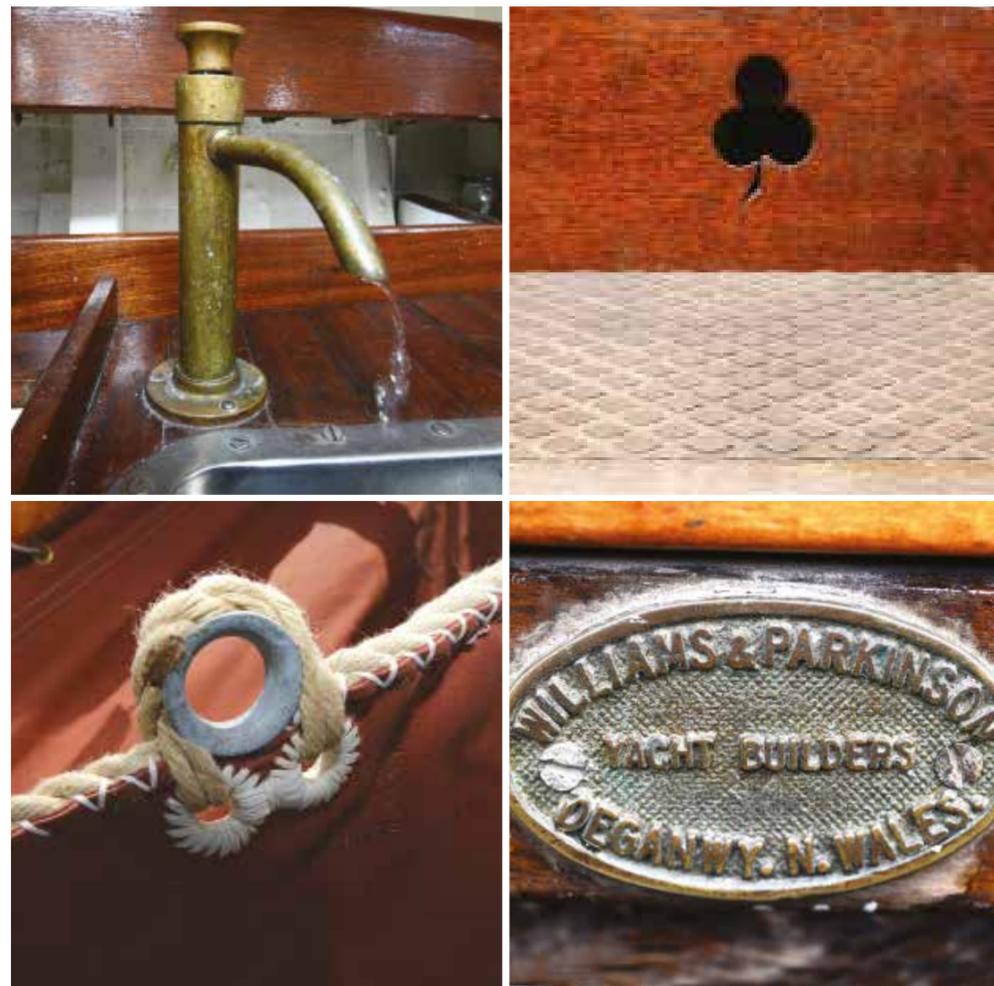
Text



OWNING A MASTERPIECE

First-time gaff-rig sailor Dick Durham buys a 1930s cutter and ponders...who's the real owner?

STORY **DICK DURHAM** AND PHOTOGRAPHS **SALLEY NEEME**



Above: Brass fittings and lovely details abound on *Wendy May*

Boarding a classic boat is like stepping into a three-dimensional masterpiece and as soon as I laid eyes upon *Wendy May* I had to own this piece of floating fine art. With my name on the Small Ships' Register I could make a legitimate appearance in a Turner, a Constable, a Gainsborough: this picture would be mine.

But as soon as I put myself in the frame with a Bill of Sale I realized how mere ownership was utterly meaningless because I'm not the artist.

This unique craft was designed by a magician called Maurice Griffiths. But is he the artist? She was built by the craftsmen shipwrights of Williams & Parkinson in Deganwy, North Wales. But are they the artists? She was commissioned by sailmakers, spar-makers, and blacksmiths. Are they the artists?

Wendy May was built in 1936 when much of the world was part of the British Empire. She couldn't be

built today because her 25ft 6ins of pitch pine planking came from forests now under environmental protection. Her beefy, grown oak frames and 14ins' wide keel would require half an acre of a non-existent New Forest to yield the correctly-shaped trees. Not only that but they are pinned together with fastenings of copper, the contemporary search for which has left the Chinese accused of neo-colonialism in Zambia.

Her design came about because a yachtsman called Tom Riggs from Aldeburgh, Suffolk, ordered a craft which among other considerations was 'dry, and well able to heave-to; not over 25 ft overall, but with sitting headroom under wide side-decks and bulwarks 9ins high. In short, a hard-weather packer'.

Maurice Griffiths, with his own great love, Lone Gull, in mind, then drew a spoon-bowed hull with a full midship section, pleasing sheer, flush deck, low coach roof and raked transom. This gave her the required accommodation but with the ability for her to

hold on to her canvas in a hard blow.

As Griffiths said at the time: 'So many small yachts, whose lines look so pleasing on paper, actually have far too much deadrise and too little bilge, and in consequence lack power to claw to windward in a strong wind, but sail usually on their ear.'

And so *Wendy May's* predecessor was born: Olive Mary, built in 1931 by Harry King of Pin Mill, Suffolk alongside a sister ship *Singapore*, which had a flatter sheer. A fourth Olive Mary design, *Silver Fox*, was also built at Pin Mill two years later in 1933 for John Truscott, then a leading member of the Little Ship Club and was last heard of in the USA and re-named *Silver Seal*.

In a letter to a former owner of *Wendy May*, Robert Munro, a retired Maurice Griffiths wrote: 'I have a photo of her (*Silver Seal*) in a creek in North Carolina, where her owner wrote me that she causes much interest amongst the glossy modern yachts.'



Above: Traditional boat, traditional kit. Dick savours the authentic approach

ROBIN WHISTLER



DOUGLAS WENT

“They were, I think, good sturdy little boats and able to put up with a lot of bad weather and, as the late Tom Riggs who had Olive Mary built said “as handy as a top””

Wendy May has had several owners and has been kept at all points of the compass around the UK, including Kirby Creek in Essex, Itchenor in West Sussex, Findhorn in Scotland and Deganwy, in North Wales.

I bought Wendy May from Phil Slade, former editor of the Old Gaffers Association newsletter, Gaffers Log. He and his wife Lynn had made some long-haul coastal passages during their 17-year ownership of the boat, including to much of Ireland, the west coast of Scotland, the Isle of Man and Wales from her base at

Above: *Silver Fox*, built in 1933 and last heard of in the USA

Deganwy.

When they retired they settled in Normandy and so they sailed her from North Wales to her new home port of Cherbourg.

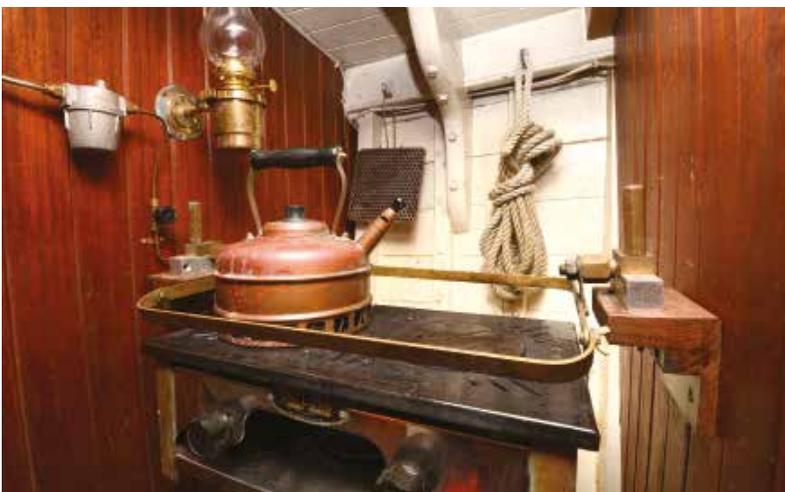
Which is where I found her during a hunt for a good boat which took my wife Cathy and I down to the Morbihan one October half-term a couple of years ago to look at the second-hand boat show which takes place there annually. There had been nothing of interest for sale in south Brittany and as Phil had a potential buyer arriving from the UK five days after we looked Wendy May over, I made him an offer over the mobile from Vannes.

She sat out her first winter, under my ownership, in a dusty backwater dock at Cherbourg and I arrived the next spring with crew Martyn Mackrill, himself the owner of a classic gaffer, *Nightfall*, a 31 ft cutter once owned by Maurice Griffiths, although not designed by him, to sail her home.

I had always owned wooden boats from an 18ft dayboat, *Mallard*, an Essex One Design drawn by Morgan Giles, through *Almita* a one-off 26ft Bermudian cutter built in 1906, and designed by F.B.Howden, followed by *Powder Monkey* a 30ft Yeoman Junior sloop designed by Alan Buchanan. All are still sailing.

But I convinced myself that GRP was the answer and next owned *Minstrel Boy* one of the legendary John Sadler designed *Contessa 32s*.

After nine years of ownership I realized that glass also needs upkeep if it's not to look shabby and I began to miss the rituals of wooden boat maintenance.





So I sold her and with *Wendy May* have returned to the plank. The first thing I discovered was just how stiff she is under sail. We left Cherbourg with a North-Easterly Force 4-5 and had full main, staysail and No. 2 jib set. In such a breeze I would have been tucking in the first reef on my *Contessa*, a bigger boat, and yet we were barely heeling more than 5 degrees.

This is undoubtedly due to the 1.25 tonnes of cast iron keel bolted to her deadwood and a further 1.75 tonnes of lead ingots laying in the bilge. I noticed, too

Above left: The 6ft Oregon pine bowsprit; Right: She's a lot stiffer than Dick's old GRP *Contessa*

that her Taylor paraffin double burner cooker, which was seated on the engine hatch just inside the companionway was not on gimbals. That's because on a little ship as steady as a rock it didn't need to be.

Upon arrival in Yarmouth, Isle of Wight we were joined by Martyn's wife, Bryony the co-owner of *Nightfall*. She it was who looked through the ship's paperwork and the line drawings of *Olive Mary* to discover that these boats had their galley amidships. Martyn set about re-fitting the stove amidships, on the redundant gimbals we found in a locker. This allowed more room in the companionway and in the saloon, as I was able to dispense with a 45 degree ladder which was not original, but which carried the crew down into the saloon over the stove. Bryony found the original steps, which now, as originally, hook onto the front of the engine box, stowed away in the hanging locker.

She was once fitted with a coal stove: a glass roundel in the deck, which throws light in the head, was once the orifice for the flu. Instead she now has a Taylor paraffin stove on the forward bulkhead which radiates heat as quickly as it takes to toast bread and makes living aboard just as warm.

Under the skylight there is about 5ft 9ins headroom so it is here I yank on my trousers in the morning. There is sitting headroom beneath the wide decks.

And it is her wide decks and spacious foredeck with forehatch off-set to starboard, so that the Oregon pine bowsprit can be run in when she's moored up, dropping moorings fees from 32ft to 26ft, that my children love. They can sunbathe, and even sleep on them in hot weather. They are also a boon for raising sail which is done at the foot of the mast.

Her 35 lb CQR is on 200 feet of chain and I keep it shipped in the snatch to starboard of the bowsprit, and ready to drop at a moment's notice. There is a manual Simpson and Lawrence windlass with detachable handles in the foc'sle, but so far I've managed to haul 'old cold nose', as Maurice described his ground tackle, aboard manually.

She easily averages 5 knots on passage but with the new mainsail I bent on this summer we had 6 to 7 in a stiff Force 5-6 under full main and No 2 jib in the Thames Estuary recently.

WENDY MAY

LOS
32ft (9.75m)

LOD
26ft (7.92m)

BEAM
8ft 6in (2.59m)

DRAUGHT
4ft 4ins (1.32m)

SAIL AREA
350sq ft (32.5m²)

DESIGNER
Maurice Griffiths

BUILDER
Williams & Parkinson

But this is my first foray into owning a gaffer and I am realising very quickly there is a lot more to making sail with throat and peak halyards hoisting a hooped, loose-footed mainsail and handing a jib hooked to a traveller run out on a 12 foot bowsprit, than there is to setting a Bermudian sail. I've already shackled on the peak halyard to the gaff upside down, mistaken the clew for the tack on the main, and reeved the mast hoops too tight to the luff. But I'm getting there.

And there's the help of dead poets. I've had their books on my shelf for years. In the past I've flicked through and admired the pictures and line drawings, now I hunt out their trials and errors. The greatest

Below left to right: Dick's "dead poets" have provided much inspiration; under sail on the River Deben

among these are *Yacht Cruising* by Claud Worth, John Leather's *Gaff Rig* and good old Eric Hiscock's *Cruising Under Sail*. From all three I've gained priceless knowledge.

Finally for all the beauty and craftsmanship wrapped up in Wendy May's build and heritage there is something basic, primal about her. Maintenance, therefore, is not beyond the layman. And in maintenance lies redemption, well anyway a little: although I will never be her creator, I can look after her, learn her ways, and maybe, just maybe become worthy of appearing on board.

Become, in other words, an artist if not the artist.



Cruising East Coast rivers

Charts

You will want a full set of charts for the Thames Estuary as the banks change regularly, especially the mouth of the River Crouch in Essex and also the shingle bars at both the rivers Deben and Ore in Suffolk.

There have been a lot of changes over recent years: turbines added to offshore shoals, which by the way act as useful aids to navigation, and a major dredging program from Harwich to Sea Reach in the Thames to accommodate the world's biggest container ships at the new port of London Gateway on the Thames at Stanford-Le-Hope in Essex.

I use the Admiralty Leisure Folios for the Thames and the East Coast, but Imray cover the

same ground with award-winning cartography.

Pilot guides

East Coast Rivers by Janet Harber and published by Wiley Nautical is the old favourite for this area and has been in publication since 1956. Years of experience shine through in the well-thought out use of photographs and chartlettes. The newer pilot, *East Coast Pilot* by Colin Jarman, Garth Cooper and Dick Holness, published by Imray Laurie Norie & Wilson, came out in 2005 and is now in its third edition. It covers the sailing area between

Lowestoft and Ramsgate and also uses 'rolling road' diagrams with bearings en route.

Kit plan

All the rivers, backwaters and swathways have an abundance of anchorages which are all free to use. So you will need a dinghy, inflatable or rigid. I use an 8ft rigid Tepco pulling dinghy which tows well, is buoyant, and adds minimal drag. The Thames

Estuary being on the leeward side of England's prevailing westerlies, it is for the most part a sheltered delta and towing a dinghy is therefore usually without hassle. Take

three fathoms of extra line in the dinghy plus a small collapsible dinghy anchor. Then if you spend too long in the pub the dinghy will be either high and dry or well afloat at the bottom of a causeway.

The bower anchor and 12 fathoms of chain will suffice in all situations. The holding in boulder clay or dense ooze is always excellent.

Auxiliary engine

Useful for pushing over the tide, which runs at up to three or four knots in some rivers, when the wind has failed.

Wendy May is fitted with a Vetus 16hp engine which throws a three-bladed prop and shoves her along over the strongest tides.

