

Retire to restore

When teacher **Les Weeks** gave up work, he wanted 'a Project' to keep himself busy. He found it in a 100-year-old gaffer lying in a farmyard

After nearly four decades teaching craft design and technology, I was planning my final three years before escaping into retirement in July 2010. I was concerned about what to do with this well-earned free time – I didn't want to be watching endless repeats of *Midsomer Murders*.

Sometime early in 2007, sailing with a friend and our wives, we moored up in the Hamble River and I chatted to a guy on a beautiful Falmouth Quay Punt he'd spent 10 years restoring. I then had my moment of epiphany. I knew what I wanted to do, but how do I persuade my wife, Barbara,

that despite living, 60-odd miles from the sea, this was a workable plan! Eventually, I plucked up the courage and said what I thought I might do, "What a good idea," was the immediate, unexpected, reply.

I needed no further prompt and I hit the internet looking for 'A Project'. I had always admired the gaff-rigged wooden boats I learnt to sail on the Norfolk Broads on school trips, so the Project had to be wood and it had to have a four-sided mainsail.

I quickly found a suitable project and through the broker, Catherine Dines at M J Lewis in Maldon, arranged to go and have a look. She was in a farmyard in Kent where she had been taken to be restored by Rob Taylor, but sadly he had died having barely



Above: *White Cloud* being relaunched at Downs Road
Left: in an earlier life, at Dordrecht, possibly on her way to Finland in the 1950s
Right: at Maldon Town Regatta

White Cloud
1912
LOA/LWL: 25ft (7.6m)
LOS: c34ft (10.4m)
Beam: 8ft (2.4m)
Draught: 5ft (1.5m)

started. She was in a sorry state, open to the elements, mast broken, no cabin roof or external bulkheads and rats nesting in the sails – a previous viewer had concluded she was a 'basket case'. Not deterred, we sat on board and decided that there wasn't anything that I wasn't prepared to have a go at. We both agreed that she had a lovely shape out of the water and so must be even better in.

Shortly after this we became owners of *White Cloud*, a 25ft, 1912 Teignmouth yawl, built on the lines of a Falmouth Quay Punt. I needed space to work and Catherine (and Jim) Dines offered me space at Downs Road. I bought a large tent; 10 x 4.5 x 3.5m, which cost over half what I'd paid for the boat, but became my workshop and second 'home' for two or three days a week throughout the project.

I was determined to do all the restoration work myself and keep the cost to a minimum; after all, I would be on a teacher's



pension with no great reserves of cash. When I started, I was still teaching three days a week and hoped it would take me about four years to complete.

The first task was to remove anything that could be removed: paint, rubbing strakes, toe rails, hatch coamings, and the old, seized Bukh engine that had 8-year-old sea water in the cooling system!

Cleaning off the paint revealed some problems. The gaps between the planking were, in some places, large enough to put fingers through, but more worrying at this stage, the stem post would obviously have to be replaced. I had assumed that the planks were screwed to the stem and would all have to be sprung out of the way, but was relieved when Kevin Finch, a helpful shipwright at the yard, explained that the plank ends were attached to the apron behind the stem post, allowing that to be removed without bothering the planking.

The stem was a grown-oak piece, which couldn't be replaced as such, so I decided to laminate a new one. Still teaching at this time I had one thing that I couldn't easily find elsewhere – lots of bench space, so when the kids went home, I started my work. I reassembled the stem post and used it as a mould to make a former which I laminated over using oak strips and West Epoxy; a useful teaching aid for my A-level group, and guess what came up in the exam that year – laminating!

The mast was missing the top ten feet – the result of an unravelling Wickham Martin in a Force 11 gale – so that was the next workshop task. We're spoilt these days with the internet and I was easily able to find out how to make a splicing box and create a 1:12 taper on both the new top piece (female) and the existing main piece (male).

Any woodworker will never throw away decent timber. Over the years I'd hoarded lots.



CHRIS FORMAN



Clockwise from top left: the new laminated stem; replanking the coachroof; three-metre length of oak for the keel being lifted into position

Bits of old lab benches were used for grab handles, an iroko workshop table became cockpit seats and locker tops and more iroko from a room divider became sheerstrakes, toe rails, rubbing strakes and the frame of the sliding companionway. I was also given some heavy section oak which became replacement floors for those that had rotted; the school bandsaw with a canting table made the shaping relatively easy.

Whilst removing the stem post I had found the breasthook had exploded due to rusting bolts. There was more rot around the bowsprit, mast bits, mast partners, foredeck hatch and the mahogany sheer strakes were in a very bad way. To replace these, the deck had to come off and I remembered that, when telling people I'd planned on taking four years, they'd said I'd better make it six!

All the deck beams were loose, some were split, joints had slipped and the port side was sagging out by an inch. With this pulled into shape and some new beams fitted I replaced the decking. Luckily, the bunk tops were made from the same pine as the decks and these were sacrificed for patches.

Amazingly there were only four cracked or broken frames, which were replaced with laminated elm made from an old fireplace lintel donated by a friend.

White Cloud's planking is pitch pine on elm and was in almost perfect condition, but all the nails needed hardening-up. A good friend stands outside the boat holding a heavy dolly against a nail head while you are inside hardening roves and re-riveting over the nails. I got through a lot of good friends! Many hundreds of nails were hardened and 250 or so replaced. Thanks guys!

The planks were over 100 years old and, although they still gave off a beautiful resin smell when attacked with a blow torch, they had lost their elasticity and ability to 'take up', opening up the gaps significantly.

Ask three people their opinion on a boat building matter and you'll get four answers! In the end, having weighed up the alternatives, I decided to spline above the waterline and 'feather' (i.e. glue a spline to just one side of the gap between the planks) below the waterline leaving a caulkable gap and allowing the boat to take up.

To achieve a consistent 7mm gap between the planks, I machined each side of each joint, running along a guide batten, with the depth set to a little less than the thickness of the planking, creating a rebate to glue the spline against. This job took many days and left the boat even more 'porous' than before. I slept on board throughout the restoration and during the icy winters, wind rushed through the gaps. One reason I joined the Maldon Little Ship Club was to have a warm, friendly place to while away some of the long, cold Friday evenings. I got lots of encouragement from the members and a number of offers of a box of matches!

The splines were machined from pitch pine and epoxied in with monel staples. The feathers were more difficult to glue firmly to just one plank edge, leaving a gap for caulking. However, at school we had acquired a laser cutting machine, which I used to convert a Perspex shop sign into hundreds of wedges; problem solved. With the staples removed and the splines faired and sanded, a coat of primer was applied and she began to look like a proper boat again – well



enough. So a 5mm mahogany marine ply cover was applied using polyurethane glue and plenty of bronze nails. Titebond 3 water-proof PVA was applied and a hot iron was used to press the canvas into the glue, before a generous application of thinned glue over the canvas to shrink and seal, before primer, undercoat and finally deck paint.

The jobs now became smaller, but no less complicated. Making the navigation table, the electronics box and fitting the new galley was fun, but testing. As the bunk tops had been 'stolen' to patch the deck, new bunks were made using mahogany T&G fronts with plywood tops. One Ikea double mattress made pads for all three bunks and the foam was cut with an electric carving knife! Barbara upholstered the pads in marine tolerant fabric.

By this time I was on course to re-launch *White Cloud* in her centenary year. But the keel timbers had large gaps which might not take up. Jim Dines recommended replacing the lot. 'Phew, that's a big job' I said. 'Nah, just a lot of little ones' was the reply. Re-launch was put off for another year!

Two big hydraulic jacks held the keel in place as I removed the keel bolts and the keel was lowered onto greased 'sledges' to be pushed out of the way. I made hardboard patterns and removed the offending timbers.

I'd calculated the size of the oak required and received two quotes, both £700, but John Rogers, restorer of *Essex Melody*, recommended a call to John Bissell, relatively new owner of Hazeleigh Wood near Maldon. The trunk of an oak tree was found and a deal was done for £100. Much better!

My second big mistake came next, with a borrowed chainsaw. My first cut was a near disaster. Following a line with a chainsaw is very difficult, but I realised it was possible to run the saw against a fence clamped to the log and the situation improved.

Early on in the restoration it had been suggested that I contacted the Transport Trust and perhaps apply for an award, but I didn't think they would be interested in a small project like *White Cloud*. However, I completed their application form and a representative of the Trust came to have a look. I was delighted when several months later I received a letter informing me that I had been awarded a Restoration Award with a generous cheque for £1,000. In June 2013 I was invited to Brooklands and was presented with my Award certificate by HRH Prince Michael of Kent. Mentally, I allocated that money to pay for the keel timber and then a new mainsail, but I actually spent it several times over!

It was a great day when the engine came on board, lifted over the boat on Jim's JCB arm, transferred to my hoist, slung from the well supported apex bar of the tent, and lowered onto the waiting engine mounts. Using a computer graphics package, I'd calculated

their position and angle carefully and hoped all would be well. It was pretty good and only minor adjustments were needed.

I thought it was a good idea to have a survey done whilst the boat was unfinished, so things could be corrected if necessary. Lawrence Wheldon of Ark Surveys in Maldon came and did a thorough job, offered plenty of advice and a few compliments. There was only one significant recommendation; he felt that there could be movement at the hood ends and the garboard planks; so the fixings should be doubled up. The next weekend 170 1¾in No10 bronze screws were inserted, filled, faired and painted. The caulking was covered with red lead putty and the hull painted and anti-fouled.

By now the cabin interiors were completed and varnished. Gas piping had been run from the new gas locker in the stern, oil lamps and LED lighting positioned and all the electrics for the navigation lights (also

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LEDs) and VHF radio run to deck glands. The Faversham smokeless fuel burning stove had been refurbished, tested, and installed with a new chimney.

Andy Nichols, my blacksmith friend, had cast a gunmetal mast crane for the throat halyard and Jim Dines, aka TS Rigging, had made up the standing rigging, bowsprit shrouds and running backstays. It was time to return to books and photographs to sort out the running rigging. There's an awful lot of string on an old gaffer!

On 23rd September 2013 *White Cloud* was re-launched. Kevin asked: "Is she leaking?" I jumped on board to see. "It's pouring in!" A quick look and he said "Nah, that's nothing. We had to put two pumps on a boat a little while back". Three tides later there was just a mere trickle; amazing! Masts were stepped and the engine tested.

Two weeks later all was set and *White Cloud* felt the wind in her sails for the first time in nearly 12 years. It was just a short trip down river and back with Chris Foreman who had helped on the project from the start and Bill Sutters, now sadly no longer with us, who was navigator for the trip whilst I worried about everything else.

I was off to Australia to visit my daughter the following week and so it was the next season before *White Cloud* sailed away from base and beyond Osea Island. Hopefully she'll now have many years ahead of her. Whether or not it's another hundred, I'll not be around to find out. ★

almost. A little later on I had a short lesson in caulking and made a start on the 600 feet of gap.

A new aft bulkhead for the cabin went in, followed by a lazarette created with mahogany T&G and the cockpit was designed around these and the proposed engine.

The cockpit coamings were shaped and capped, portholes fitted – and then my first big mistake. I'd been watching trials for varnish in another boating magazine and had seen that Sadolin Ultra Woodstain scored highly. Only three coats necessary and only recoat when in obvious need. Of course I used this, but it just wasn't durable; any serious rubbing and it peeled away. On a test rig, or the timber facing of a building, I suspect it's wonderful, but I had to varnish over everything with Le Tonkinois. There's no such thing as a free lunch!

Originally decks from this era were water-proofed with canvas, laid over thick gloss paint and pressed down firmly before being sprayed with water to shrink the canvas as the paint dried. I wanted to canvas *White Cloud*, but the decking was not sound