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The romance of a wooden boat

When Georgie Hare accepted an invitation to sail to the East Coast she fell for the boat – and the boatbuilder. The enchanting voyage led to a whirlwind year setting up Butler & Co, a traditional wooden boatbuilding firm

There's Harty Ferry, and Whitstable and my family home! There, see, across the marsh! I wonder if Mum and Dad are watching us sail home? Ashley's voice was filled with the anticipation of arrival at a destination, as only a sailor can really know.

In the sepia light of late summer dusk, with the tide far out revealing the East Coast mud and marsh of the Swale in Kent, wading birds cheered us as we glided along with a following breeze and flood tide. In a few moments of stillness, I felt the magic; the presence of history, of a circle completed; a physical and emotional end and new beginning, which I felt enthralled to experience.

I'd stepped aboard *Sally B* in Cowes, but for Ashley this was a homecoming from Martha's Vineyard, USA where he'd built 9.76m (32ft) *Sally B* to the design of a fishing Bawley.

Before we knew it the shores of Harty Ferry and entrance to Faversham Creek were upon us and it was time to down the sails and drop the hook. Our trusty *Sally B* gracefully and confidently took up on her anchor among the other traditional rigs as if she had been doing so for years.

Before the crew had time to take breath and wait for further orders, Ashley had the dinghy over the side and was rowing in the twilight towards four small dark figures waving on the shore. Out of the dark Ash's life-loving laugh greeted his family, so I hurriedly went below to light up the lamps. Our voyage was complete.

New beginning

For me arrival in Kent on *Sally B* in August 2004 was the end of a sailing voyage as well as a step onto another

path of life's journey. The invitation to join Ashley on his boat for the final leg of her journey seemed a brimful of adventure – a voyage into the unknown. I simply had to go.

To a wooden boat girl from the West Country the energy and atmosphere of *Sally B*, which is striking to anyone who has stepped aboard, together with Ash's animated style of storytelling about East Coast traditions, weaved a captivating web. As we sailed past the white cliffs of Dover, Ramsgate and North Foreland – a coastline almost instilled into the subconscious of any seafarer's mind – I became more aware of the significance of the passage for Ash.

For Ashley, arrival in Faversham was the final leg of a long journey and signified both a homecoming and a fresh start. He had not seen his family for more than a year, and hadn't sailed up the local muddy creeks for more than six years.

Sally B, an engineless yawl with no electrical or self-steering aids, had been his trusty home for more than 6,500 miles including his single-handed transatlantic crossing. And while alone in mid-ocean, the idea of building traditional wooden boats on a commercial basis became his new goal.



▲ Ashley Butler learnt boat building on the Thames Estuary. He met Georgie Hare at Cowes where she joined him to sail *Sally B* back to Faversham in Kent

▼ *Sally B* with almost every sail up, taking her place among the Tall Ships at a traditional boat festival

Building wooden boats

After a summer of racing *Sally B* with Ash, and an autumn of commuting between Kent and Edinburgh (where I was living at the time), I decided to move south in January to help him realise his ambition to set up Butler & Co, a traditional wooden boatbuilders.

After quite a struggle to find a suitable workshop for the new build, we located a barn four miles outside Faversham in the village of Selling and the dream gradually became a reality. With the barn cleared out, electricity installed, wood and fastenings ordered and a lead keel poured, by February we were ready to start on a new project – a 9.76m (32ft) smack yacht called *Lucie B*.

During those freezing preparatory weeks in the depths of winter, I became aware of the reserves of passion, focus and single-mindedness that Ashley had for the project. I stole a glimpse of the months ahead and saw how the building of a wooden boat was all-absorbing for him. His quiet,



▲ Without following a strict set of plans, Ashley determines the shape by eye



▲ *Lucie B*'s counter-stern added a considerable amount of time to the build

unassuming modesty shackled to a determination, sense of self-belief and boundless energy to work flat out is inspirational and could even fill you with disbelief.

Laid back

'Arh tha'll be awright!' Ashley 'gnarled' as the wood arrived in a 60ft juggernaut that had managed to navigate along treacherous snowy lanes in February. This understated catchphrase is one he often asserts in moments of others' caution or when faced with difficulties.

Unloading and stacking a 40ft iroko tree from South Africa and several logs of four-inch thick English oak in almost a foot of snow without the aid of machinery is no mean feat, but when faced with an enormous pile of ancient tight-grained crooks of oak, Ashley's face positively glowed with anticipation. It was the prospect of being able to create a new boat and he was itching to get going.

Ashley learnt his trade on the hardy working boats of the Thames



▲ *Lucie B* proudly emerged from her shed. It was the first time it was possible to see her profile from a distance

Estuary and uses the same traditional techniques as boatbuilders from the 19th Century.

Scale model

First he carves a 1/4in:1ft half model based on a water line length/beam ratio of 3:1 for a smack. He then scales up the proportions to life size. With the keel laid on 1 March, the four primary building frames were erected shortly after. Around these the ribbons were hung to gain the shape of the hull, and then a jig used to determine the shape of the remaining frames.

Lucie B has iroko deadwoods and sawn oak frames every two feet with a steamed frame in between. Throughout the early stages of the build I would work sporadically on the boat, and as a practical person I am not unfamiliar with wielding a hammer and saw. Working on the smack, however, immediately made my previous experiences fade into insignificance. All the tasks in hand were very heavy-duty.

The old and the new

Ashley's method of boatbuilding is a fusion of old and new in that he combines traditional methods of construction with the advantages of using modern machinery.

When instructed to build a set of frames, I cautiously set about cutting myself a piece of wood with a chain saw before defining the shape on the 50-year-old band saw. Although the frames were heavy and the machinery daunting at the outset I soon found some confidence.

The difficult bit came later – the skill of being able to fit the frame, to 'see' the shape of the curve and the bevel required. Many times I can recall a look in Ashley's eye, a sort of half blurred, dazed squint with severe lines of concentration on his



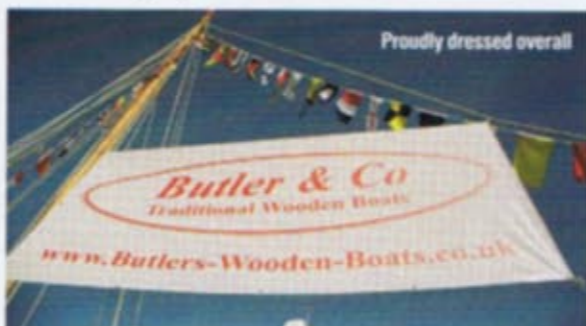
brow as he studied the form of his construction. Without strict lofted plans to follow he determines the shape of his boats by eye. He can see if a line is even a few millimetres out, thanks to a good eye and his years of experience.

By 1 April we celebrated the long-awaited signs of spring, the completely framed up smack and the launch of my newly-built birthday present, *Peggy B* – a 2.9m (9ft 6in) clinker-built sailing dinghy. Time also became a priority in April, for it was then that Butler & Co made the financial commitment to have a berth at the 2005 Southampton Boat Show. Suddenly it became necessary to work backwards from a deadline with a timetable to try and keep. From May onwards the project grew dramatically in momentum, 10- to 16-hour days, seven days a week became the norm.

Once she was all planked up, the number of tasks and aspects of the



▲ *Lucie B* being gently lowered into the water for the first time



Proudly dressed overall



ABOVE: The hand-crafted interior of *Lucie B* showing the galley – a blend of the traditional and the modern

LEFT: *Peggy B*, a 9ft 6in clinker-built sailing dinghy – George's birthday present from Ashley

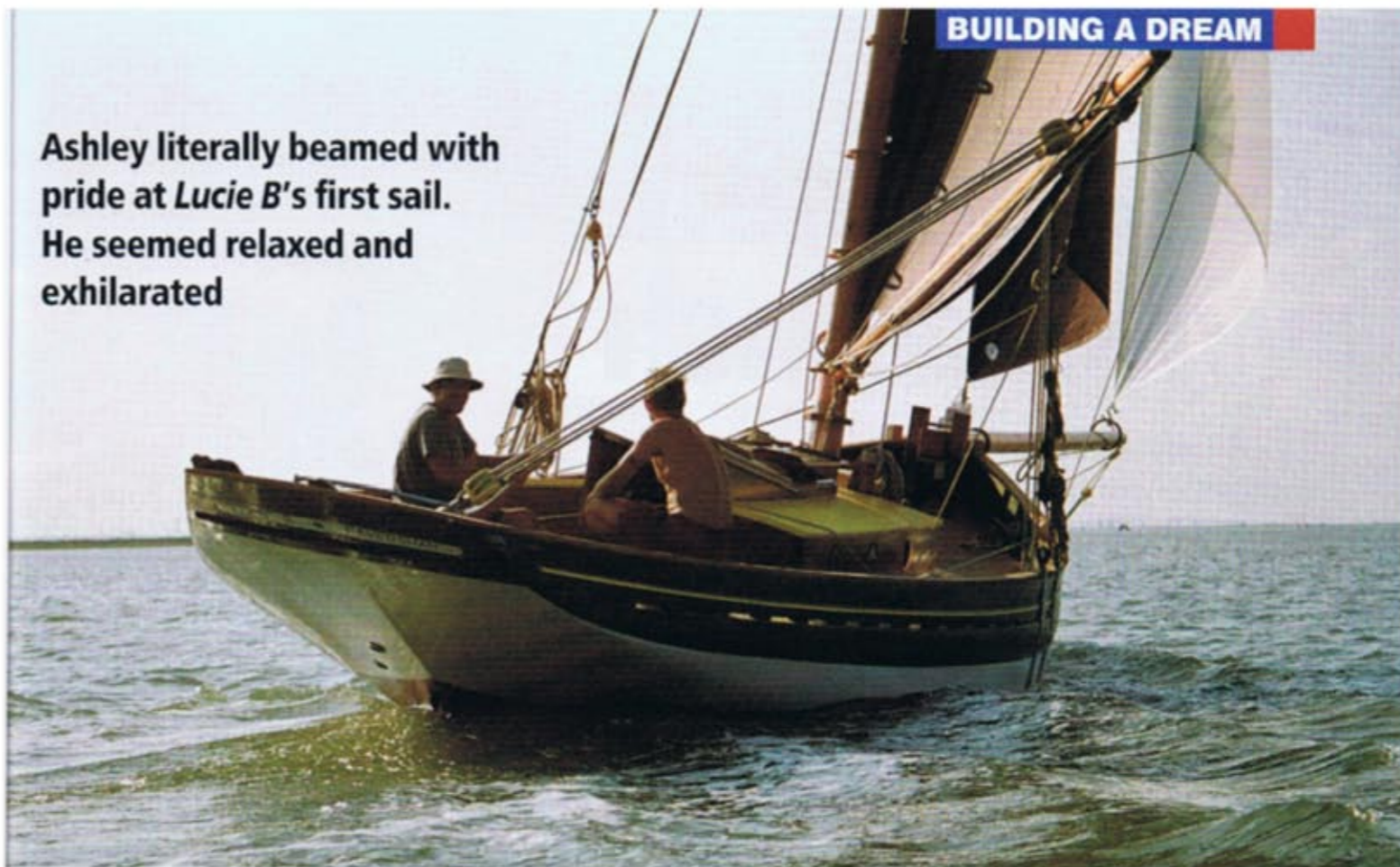
build became multi-faceted. Ashley had to keep his finger on and beyond the pulse, setting the pace for work, multi-tasking and, with sometimes four people to keep working at full speed, always thinking ahead.

Up to this point Ashley's friend of old, David Shoal, had been methodically working on the project. In the final stages, however, we were joined by Richard Hunn, a well seasoned wooden boat sailor freshly out of Falmouth boatbuilding college and ready for a baptism of fire. Hot sunny days of bunging, sanding, puttying and painting together with endless errand running and organising absorbed my summer.

Seeing the light

On 19 August 2005 *Lucie B* proudly emerged from her shed. It was a moment of truth, particularly for Ashley, as it was the first time it was

Ashley literally beamed with pride at *Lucie B's* first sail. He seemed relaxed and exhilarated



▲ Ten days at the Southampton Boat Show generated lots of enquiries and expressions of admiration

possible to see her profile from a distance. The first major deadline had been reached. Dressed overall, in front of a crowd of 70 well-wishers, *Lucie B* was named after my cousin and blessed as she was lowered into the water at Iron Wharf, Faversham.

As we were towed to Hollowshore, hardly believing we'd achieved so much, I saw Ashley at last had a relaxed expression on his face again – exhausted, but relaxed.

With just three weeks till the start of the show in September, however, the tasks still to do seemed infinite and the hours in a day too few.

Admiration

Lucie B's maiden sail was on a hot and breezy day in the Swale. Ashley's exhilaration at the sight of her sailing was one of the few times when I have seen him express sheer pride at his abilities. He was surprised to find that seeing *Lucie B* sail for the first time seemed to hold so much

more for him than the maiden sail of *Sally B*. *Sally B* was built in America as a potential home in his spare time, and although she is three tons heavier and much more ship-like than *Lucie B*, *Lucie B* was much the more demanding challenge.

As a business venture and Butler & Co's first build, she required much more in terms of time, investment, deadlines, employment and reputation. Together with the business strains, her traditional smack counter stem (a much more technical construction than a Bawley transom) put at least a month onto the building time and was a test-piece of boatbuilding skills.

Still, we made it, and the 10 days of positive response and praise at the Southampton Boat Show made the last few months' worth of gruelling effort disappear into sawdust.

Among the sea of white, somewhat sterile glassfibre yachts, *Lucie B* seemed to have a living soul and joyful spirit, and it was satisfying and

reassuring to think that she would still be on the seas in a hundred years time.

From a business point of view, introducing the concept of a new-build wooden boat in this environment was effective, and has led to many enquiries.

Heading home

Before we could stop to draw breath it was time to leave Southampton and head back home to the east. Just over a year had passed since I first made the decision to jump onto *Sally B* and sail to Kent. As we neared the entrance to the Swale, we both looked towards the familiar shore of Whitstable while picking out Butler & Co's next project – the restoration of the smack *Favourite*.

As I turned to see Ashley's face in the sun, his eyes had that faraway stare as if they were seeing beyond the horizon to blue oceans on which to sail... or was he dreaming of new boats waiting to be built?

IN THE WORKSHOP

- As we went to press, Butler & Co has started work on several new projects. Ashley has shaped and completed the keel, deadwoods, mast and deck beams of a new-build 'Ichen Ferry'-like 7.9m (26ft) yacht. With the help of Richard Hunn, a 3.2m (10ft 6in) clinker sailing dinghy is nearly complete and ready for collection.
- Butler & Co is also restoring a 6.1m (20ft) Plymouth Hooker, *Little Pearl*. She is in need of a new deck, floors, bulwarks and interior. Any information regarding the history of this vessel would be most appreciated by her owner.

