

Wooden Boat

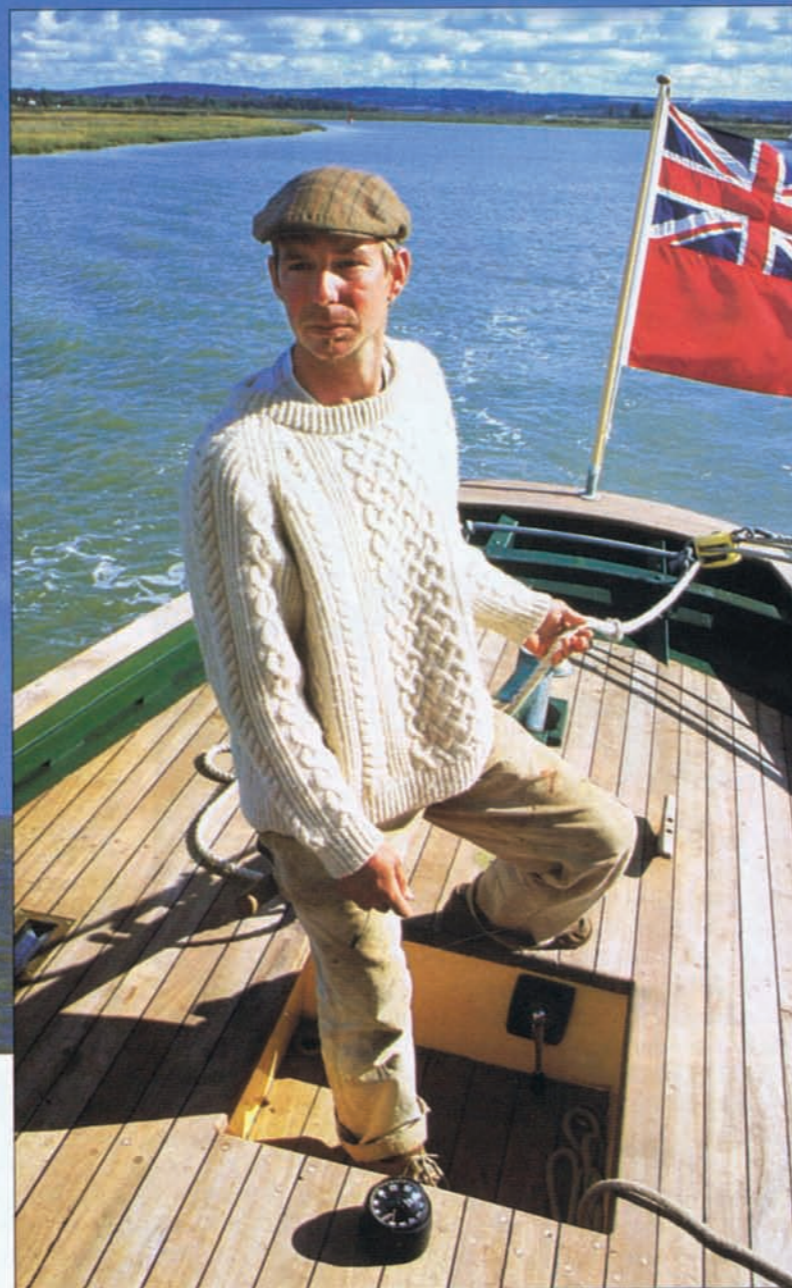
THE MAGAZINE FOR WOODEN BOAT OWNERS, BUILDERS, AND DESIGNERS



Ashley Butler: An Education in Working Sail
Center-Console Skiffs
Build a Small Daysailer
Vintage Yachts for Charter
Commercial Sail in Haiti

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Ashley Butler



Since the age of 10, Ashley Butler has been building and rebuilding wooden boats. Now in his mid-twenties, the builder has a small fleet of British workboat-inspired yachts to his credit—and continues to build more under his own shingle. On the opposite page is his latest, LUCIE B—an oyster smack-inspired yacht.

They call Kent “the garden of England” and, driving through its back lanes last spring, I could see why. The trees were bursting with fresh new leaves and the hedges overflowing with cow parsley and daffodils. As we clattered about under sun-dappled bowers in Ashley’s Land Rover, the scene around us looked every bit as if it had sprung straight from a Tourist Board brochure. After a 20-minute drive, we stopped in the quaintly named Perry Woods, four miles inland of Faversham, and parked next to a barn directly opposite the Rose & Crown pub, purveyors of the best steak-and-kidney pie in the county.

This, it transpired, was Ashley Butler’s new boatyard and the birthplace of his new boatbuilding company, Butler & Co. A more unlikely setting would be hard to find. Yet, once we’d stopped to admire the stacks of stickered lumber outside the building—sampling the steak-and-kidney pie and the local “bitter” would come later—the big corrugated doors were rolled back to reveal

a boat in the early stages of construction. Although only the backbone, a few frames, and the ribbands were in place, the shape was unmistakably that of a small oyster smack, one of those legendary workhorses of the British East Coast.

That was March 2005. Who would have thought that, just six months later, not only would the boat be planked, rigged, and launched, but that I would be sailing her on the waters of the nearby River Swale and that, by then, Ashley would have already completed a 400-mile voyage in her? And he did it all without the benefit of a single lines drawing and he used only rudimentary machinery. It was a feat that most long-established boatyards would have struggled to match, but for this young man it was just the latest in a series of impressive achievements—including building a 32’ yawl “by eye” in the U.S. and sailing it singlehanded back to the U.K.—which have propelled him to the forefront of the wooden boat scene in Britain.



An education in British working sail

Text and photographs by Nic Compton

Ashley Butler was brought up near Faversham, a small town with a large, muddy creek which has been an important oyster fishery and boatbuilding center since at least the 12th century. His father spent all of his spare time fixing up old cars and old boats, and Ashley’s very first memory is of looking out the back door and seeing the latest arrival in the back garden: a dilapidated Robert Tucker-designed Lysander “in need of some TLC.” Inevitably, he got drawn into helping—though his efforts weren’t always appreciated. “I remember trying to square-rig dad’s windsurf board using 6” nails to hold up the mast,” he says in his distinctive Kentish brogue. “I got into quite a lot of trouble for that.”

From an early age, Ashley struggled with reading, writing, math, and pretty much any academic skills he was asked to perform. He was fortunate, however, that his mother spotted the problem early on and took him to see a specialist, who confirmed that Ashley was dyslexic. From the age of six, he attended a special school in nearby

Ramsgate and for a time was home-schooled, as well. His condition didn’t seem to affect his manual skills, however, and when he was just 10 he and his father rebuilt a 16’ Yachting Monthly Senior and took it sailing on the Norfolk Broads—the young Ashley sailing her on his own for much of the time. Two years later his father got him a job helping out summers and weekends in Alan Staley’s yard at Iron Wharf in Faversham, then one of the last outposts of wooden boat building in Kent. “I was mostly sweeping the floor and chipping off bungs,” he says, “but every tea break I would pick their brains about how wooden boats were built until they got fed up with me.”

Fifty years before, the sight of a 12-year-old apprentice helping out in a boatyard wouldn’t have raised an eyebrow, but this was the late 1980s and most 12-year-olds were out skateboarding or playing Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. They weren’t stuck in some boatyard talking to old-timers about boatbuilding techniques. But Ashley seemed to be inevitably driven down this path. Soon after