

THE DUNKIRK SPIRIT

Inspired by tales of the boat that rescued his grandfather from Dunkirk, a Kent businessman decided to fulfill his boyhood dream and to build something just the same

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS **NIC COMPTON**





The mythology of the Dunkirk Little Ships still looms large, 77 years after they played their decisive role in the events of World War II. Around 700 privately owned boats took part in the Dunkirk evacuation of 26 May – 4 June 1940 and helped save over 338,000 Allied (mostly British and French) troops from being killed or captured by German forces. The operation has gone down in history as a miraculous escape in the face of seemingly certain defeat – and it played a great part in sustaining British national morale.

One of the men saved on the beaches of Dunkirk was a sergeant called Reg* who waded out up to his armpits and waited several days before he was finally picked up by the last wave of Little Ships heading back to Ramsgate. Tons of equipment was abandoned on the beach, most of it disabled so the Germans couldn't use it. Decades later, he retold the story to his grandson and, to help the boy visualize the scene, he made a sketch of the yacht that had come to his rescue.

That story and that drawing of the boat that saved Reg's life became seared in his grandson Andrew's brain, and he swore that one day he would own a boat just like it. Of course, many impressionable boys have childhood fantasies that fall by the wayside in the rush and struggle of adult life, but not Andrew*. He and his brother Mel, both of Irish descent, set up a toiletries company in Kent which did rather well, and in his early 50s Andrew decided it was time to fulfil his boyhood dream.

By then, his daughters, who had been brought up sailing the family's Pilot Cutter 30 out of Salcombe, had become teenagers and were less interested in crewing for their daddy. So Andrew decided it was time to buy a motorboat –

something that would be capable of crossing the Irish Sea to visit his relatives in West Cork. But of course this wasn't going to be just any old motorboat.

"The boat that rescued my grandfather was a 30-35ft motoryacht that looked like an early Rampart," says Andrew. "I was fixated on having a vertical stem, a Dreadnought type shape, but when I looked around I couldn't find anything like it. I had a vision of an RAF recovery vessel going out to pick up downed airmen!"

SEAWORTHY APPROACH

The opportunity to turn into reality the boat he had in his mind came when he met Win Cnoops of Star Yachts at the Southampton Boat Show in 2013. Win was exhibiting his new Bristol 27, a traditional-looking runabout with raised foredeck and lovely flowing lines designed by Andrew Wolstenholme. The boat was in the right style but was designed primarily for inland and inshore waters and fitted with a 52hp engine, giving it a maximum speed of 10-12 knots. Something more powerful and seaworthy would be needed to make that crossing to Ireland.

The first step to turning the relatively sedate Bristol 27 into a proper semi-displacement motorboat capable of 20 knots-plus was to add a spray chine.

"The chine stops the wetness climbing up the topside and defines the planing surface of the hull," says Wolstenholme. "So you get the best of both worlds: you have the comfort of a displacement hull at low speeds and at high speeds it's closer to a planing hull. It's not a ground-breaking concept, but it builds on ideas developed in the 1950s and 60s on boats such as the Nelson, which was powerful but very wet."

Wolstenholme produced some preliminary drawings of the Bristol 27 with a chine and a wheelhouse – another prerequisite for long-distance cruising – but soon extended that to 29ft to improve the boat's profile. The boat was further lengthened when Andrew's father declared it needed to be 3ft longer to cross the Irish Sea safely, with Andrew finally settling on 32ft.

But before Win could start building the boat, there was another twist to the commission. Andrew wanted two boats: the 32-footer and a 16ft launch to act as a tender, and he wanted Win to build the smaller boat first in the same style as her bigger sister, as a kind of test. And so the Bristol 16 was born: a dinky little workhorse that looks like she'd be just as handy towing boats around the harbour as carrying passengers to their yacht.

"The driver was the 32," says Wolstenholme. "It was important to get her right first. Once I'd sketched her out, I had to figure out how to follow the styling clues in the 16. The spray chine was a major part of that and, even though there was no requirement for the 16 to go fast, the chine prevents her squatting and allows the boat to run at around 7-8 knots with a 10hp diesel engine. Other styling clues were the subtle step in the sheer and the upright stem profile."

STRIP PLANK

Both boats were built in strip-plank cedar, epoxy sheathed, with varnished trim and scrubbed teak decks. The 16 was launched in summer 2014 and named *Verity* after Andrew's youngest daughter, while the 32 followed

Facing page: the B32 kept a dry foredeck on a lumpy swell crossing the bar outside Salcombe

Inset, clockwise from top left: nicely arranged controls; the forward bunk folds down to make a 6ft berth (shown) and the settees fold back to make wider berths (not shown); seating positions for the two Andrews and builder Win Cnoops (in red), the engines are in the boxes on either side; that (almost) dry foredeck, with Bolt Head and the Mew Stones gnashing behind

three years later in 2017 and was named *Annabel* after his eldest daughter.

I joined Andrew and his Uncle Andrew (known as 'Little Andrew' and 'Big Andrew' respectively) on board *Annabel* at the end of May – the exact week, as it turns out, that grandfather Reg was rescued at Dunkirk, 77 years earlier. With her gleaming new paintwork and great expanses of bare wood, still brown from the workshop, the boat positively glowed as she swayed in the mid-morning sun on Salcombe town quay. A steady stream of admirers ooh-ed and aah-ed and stroked her as if she was some kind of giant wooden Golden Retriever.

Stepping on board, my first impression was a comfortable feeling of space. *Annabel* has a large cockpit, with generous U-shaped seating aft and a central walkway that goes through the wheelhouse up to the companionway. It's an easy arrangement only made possible due to the boat being fitted with twin engines. You could easily get away with having a single engine and save money on installation, the extra drive and rudder, etc, but the twin engine approach transforms the boat's ergonomics and aesthetics. It's no exaggeration to say that, from a purely passenger point of view, it's the making of the boat. Plus, from a practical perspective, it makes the boat more manoeuvrable and means you don't have to bother carrying an outboard (with petrol, yuck!) for emergencies.

The engines themselves (a pair of 110hp Yanmars) are located amidships, with a pair of rattan seats (£200 each from John Lewis, made of FSC-certified eucalyptus, with the legs taken off) fitted over the engine boxes. A cleverly designed awning covers the entire cockpit, right up to the open-ended wheelhouse, and folds away somewhat miraculously onto the small aft deck.

BELOW DECKS

Below decks, the galley and saloon have a nice airy feel, with white-painted tongue-and-groove bulkheads and seat fronts, pale oak trim and hull sides of varnished cedar. There are two set pieces: the pale oak-panelled compartments in the galley and heads – both beautifully crafted and designed to impress as well as being extremely functional.

There are some nice touches, such as the fold-up extension on the forward bunk which stretches it to a full 6ft, and the adjustable seat backs, which slide back to increase the width of the settees for sleeping. And who could resist the cool Wallas combined diesel cooker and heater, which works as a hob with the lid up and blows out hot air with the lid down?

What you don't have is standing headroom in the saloon or the heads – unless you are 5ft 6in (1.67m) or under – but then that's only to be expected on a boat with only 2ft 6in (0.75m) of draft. There is full headroom in the galley, if you stand in the companionway with the hatch open, but otherwise you just have to stoop or sit.

It was all very lovely but it looked a bit genteel for Andrew's stated aim of crossing the Irish Sea – never mind circumnavigating the UK. "I'd like to go to the Scillies, or to Honfleur," he said. "I'm not frightened." And indeed only two weeks earlier he had motored up from Plymouth with the boat, with a Force 5-6 on the

ANNABEL

LOA
32ft 5ins
(9.87m)

LWL
31ft 9ins
(9.68m)

BEAM
9ft 2in
(2.79m)

DRAUGHT
2ft 6in
(0.75m)

DISPLACEMENT
5 tonnes





nose, and claimed he'd had a great trip. I felt a bit sceptical about that, but kept my thoughts to myself as we let go the lines and headed out towards the harbour entrance.

Salcombe is guarded by a shallow sandy bar at the mouth of the estuary which can become quite dangerous in certain conditions – particularly when an outgoing tide meets an incoming swell, as was the case on the day we went out. It might not sound like much, but it was here that the local lifeboat *William and Emma* foundered in 1916 with the loss of 13 lives. It's also the main reason Salcombe isn't a major fishing harbour and why yachtsmen are advised not to pull in there in rough weather.

Not that this seemed to have any effect on the Bristol 32. She ploughed through the lumpy sea with absolute relish, pushing out great clouds of spray with carefree abandon. As I watched her from the little 16-footer (which provided a steady, if wet, ride) I assumed the two Andrews must be having a spine-crunching, wet time of it. It was only when I climbed on board and we started powering through the waves at 20 knots that I fully appreciated the benefits of that semi-displacement hull: even in a confused sea, there was not the slightest hint of slamming. And, incredibly, the foredeck was practically dry.

OPEN UP THE THROTTLE

It's possible I forgot I wasn't on a sailing boat, or perhaps the boat's motion lulled me into a false sense of security, but within a few minutes I found myself lashing my legs across the front of the foredeck and signalling to the two Andrews to power the boat up. It was only as 'little Andrew' opened up the throttle and we drove into the first wave that I thought: "Maybe this isn't such a good idea." But I needn't have worried. As we roared past Bolt Head, with the Mew Stones gnashing ominously in the foreground, the boat bounced from one wave to the next wave as if they were so many pillows laid across her path, and the spray simply scattered on either side like so many clouds of pillow feathers (to stick to the metaphor!).

It wasn't what I had expected and as soon as I got home I rang the designer to find out how he had

Above l-r: snug cockpit cover; the galley, with its Wallas cooker/fan heater

achieved what seemed like a magic trick, almost a sleight of hand. He was reassuringly calm, like a doctor talking to a hysterical child. It's all about the spray chine, he told me. Not only does the chine help the boat get on the plane, it also reduces drag and helps generate dynamic stability to reduce rolling, making the boat faster, more efficient and more stable. Clever stuff.

Combined with the upright stem, the chine also gives the boat her distinctive look which, Wolstenholme says, is "more retro than traditional". Or, as Andrew put it: "I could have bought a Princess for the same price, but in a few years' time the Princess will look old, whereas this boat will always look old – in a good way!"

So it turns out you don't have to incur lifelong spinal injury motoring through waves at 20kts. Welcome to Wolstenholme's world, where high-speed motoring and comfort are not mutually exclusive. It might not be revolutionary, but it was certainly an eye-opener for this sail-biased author. And I'm sure it would have been appreciated by grandpa Reg and all those thousands of other soldiers who couldn't get away from Dunkirk fast enough. While *Annabel* might take her aesthetic inspiration from the 1930s and 40s, in functional terms she's a 21st century gal – and all the better for it.

* Surnames withheld at the owner's request.

See also *'Dunkirk: The Film and the Boats'*, p70.



VERITY

LOA
16ft 1in (4.9m)

LWL
15ft 10in (4.8m)

BEAM
5ft 11in (1.7m)

DRAUGHT
1ft 7in (0.4m)

DISPLACEMENT
0.6 tonnes

