

I BLAME ARTHUR RANSOME – AND THANK MY WIFE!



... writes James Gilchrist as he launches his first build from a kit.

With photographs by the author.



As a child, the first books I really enjoyed were Arthur Ransome's stories. My sister Anna, my brother Fran and I would try to emulate the adventures of the Swallows and Amazons. We camped in the Lake District, borrowed or hired boats and learned to sail. We were the Salamanders, intrepid explorers..

In 1996 I was 19, taking a year away from studies by working for a local authority, trying to develop a work ethic. I was living in a bed-sit for a year before I headed back to finish my education. Like most teenage boys I had a pile of magazines next to the bed, all full of stunning pictures which fuelled my naive desire. The magazine was *The Boatman*, now extinct and it was Dick Phillips' step-by-step build of the Andrew Wolstenholme 12'3" (3.7m) Mallard which made me think I might just be able to build a boat.

At this time, several professional boatbuilders were building Andrew Wolstenholme's smaller design, the 11' (3.3m) Coot, "a Swallows and Amazons style rowing and sailing dinghy intended for clinker plywood construction". I fell in love with this cat-rigged dinghy; the high arched mast support which just blends in is a thing of beauty and as far as I am aware, unique.

I duly sent off a cheque to Andrew and an immaculate set of plans arrived, complete with lines and offsets, full-size frame patterns, g/a and construction drawings, sail plan, spar drawings – but without building instructions. What I thought I was doing I am not quite sure; small as Coot is, she wouldn't have fitted in the room. However, the plans would be laid out

on the bed and thoughts would turn to how I would build the boat – reference back to *The Boatman* would help me plan the build.

I completed my further education and began managing parks and leisure centres, jobs quite far removed from boatbuilding. I was now reading *The Boatman's* successor *Water Craft*, soaking up information and making mental notes of the bits of boats I thought were attractive.

In 2005, I met Claire, my wife to be, who on learning all of this suggested we should get a boat. We talked to her family who have a farm down the road and a plan was hatched. I was given a stone outbuilding and lots of encouragement. I grabbed the plans for Coot but my initial confidence about boatbuilding all those years ago was no longer there... And I had done no woodwork since I left school.

In a moment of madness I bought a wooden Enterprise on Ebay which had no decks and a rotten section in the transom. This allowed me to start gathering tools, learning skills and building confidence. I refurbished the Enterprise and Claire



and I sailed her for a few years. The Enterprise was definitely a good idea; I dread to think what a mess I would have made of Coot without that experience.

The one thing I wasn't sure of – in fact am still not sure of – was whether I could get the lining off of the planks right. If I was to emulate those stunning pictures in the magazines, the varying plank widths and curves had to flow properly to look good.

It was then that I came across an advertisement for Jordan Boats. Alec Jordan was offering CNC-cut kits of planks and building moulds which meant the lining off was already done. Back then, Alec was mostly cutting Iain Oughtred designs but beautiful as they were, I wanted to build Coot.

So in 2008 I called Alec for a chat. He was very encouraging and said that it should be possible with Andrew's agreement. An order was placed and shortly afterwards, the kit arrived... although as Alec explains, it is not a flatpack which includes every last component. You get the building moulds cnc-cut from MDF, nicely notched to receive each plank and ensure they are located properly. You also receive the planks cnc-cut to shape from marine plywood. Since Coot is longer than a standard 8' (2.4m) sheet of ply, the planks come in two pieces and need tapers cutting for the scarf joints; Alec has an ingenious method of aligning the two halves of the plank to ensure the right shape is achieved. Everything else you need to source and make yourself, including stem, keel, transom, thwarts etc... This allowed me to spread the outlay required for the boat over a longer period and allowed me to build a boat which was truly mine. It's half-way between a complete kit and a scratch build, ideal for the ambitious amateur.

Above: The great advantages of the plywood planking kit is that the lining off looks far more professional...

Below:... and the interior is that much easier to clean up.





Above & left: *After the kit, the craftsmanship. The arched mast support was laminated and trimmed with oak and the inlaid name fabricated from laser-cut oak characters let into the neat mahogany quarter-badge on the sheerstrake.*

I made a start quite quickly by setting up the moulds in the building frame. At this point, I also made the decision that I was going to build this little boat as well as I possibly could; all those mental notes of the various details of boats I liked would be incorporated into my Coot.

Every visitor to the workshop asked the same two questions: Will it fit through the door? and When will you finish? I assured them that the moulds had all passed easily through the door and that it would be finished when I was. I purposely took my time. The only mistakes I have made have been when I have rushed and when they happened, the HBBR web forum has been able to advise and help me out. I messed up the first few planks in not getting enough bend to the stem and Alec Jordan kindly cut me some more. I learned from that mistake and from then on, I approached each job by building each sub-assembly on the bench and then adding it to the boat.

I love wooden boats and enjoy the beauty of the wood itself, so much of time was spent scribbling on Andrew's plans about how I thought the various timbers would look together.

The plans specified oak for the gunwales which I wanted to build with integral scuppers. I decided that the blocks between the outer gunwale and the inwale would be utile, like the thwarts and transom. I spent quite a lot of time on

the computer working out the maths for a standard spacing of the blocks to ensure that the sockets for the oars fitted perfectly in between two blocks and yet still met nicely at the breasthook and knees. I got carried away with the contrast between oak and utile and maintained this style through the attractive mast thwart, knees and breasthook. The mast thwart is a trick though; it is all laminated oak except for the very top layer which has the utile through the middle.

I also used the interplay of light and dark wood in the way I built the name into the boat in a marquetry style. I would love to tell you I am an expert with the chisel but once again, it's the computer doing the clever stuff – not cnc-cut but laser-cut this time. The name was cut into boards of mahogany and oak. Then the mahogany letters were discarded, the remaining mahogany surround was fashioned into the sheer plank and the oak letters inserted into it.

The build was slowed by getting married and starting a family but I really didn't mind; as long as the quality of the build felt right I was happy. As the saying goes: Time wasted enjoying yourself is not time wasted.

Then last year my Dad had a significant birthday and the whole family booked a lakeside cottage on Windermere. For the first time the pressure was on: the boat would surely have to be ready. It was ready – just; with purchased oars but no mast, she could still be rowed. The oars were not quite right but what a joy to see my boat on the water at last.

I still remain quite relaxed about how long the next stages may take but I have much more confidence in my ability as a result of my progress thus far. Boat kits vary considerably; if



Launch Day at last and James' sister, Anna names this ship Salamander with all the appropriate ceremony.

you want a boat quickly and don't have that much experience, the sensible solution would be to buy a kit with every component included. However, if like me you are prepared to take your time and create something bespoke in which you can express yourself, then a set of planks and building moulds is a really good way to start as it takes the most complicated and potentially difficult bits of the build out of the equation.

What I hadn't quite appreciated is just how many tools I would accumulate. The old adage that you can't have too many clamps is absolutely true but you do need somewhere to store them; I now have over 50! Having the right tools does make a real difference to the quality of finish you can achieve and how quickly you can get to that finish. The addition of electric power to my workshop half-way through the build was a massive help.

A launching ceremony took place and of course, she was named *Salamander*. Interestingly, a species of salamander also has one of the longest gestation periods in the world. Rather appropriate I think.

So 12 years of planning and dreaming and 6 years boatbuilding – hopefully! Now I need to finish the rigging and rudder and build some bespoke oars; I might then be able to report on how *Salamander* sails.



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