

THE RISE OF A PHOENIX

Rhys Walters

(Rhys grew up in the countryside of West Cork 'allowed to roam free after six years in a housing estate in Kent'. He credits his father, 'a hardcore Welshman' for his name, adding that 'Dad spent a long time at sea in the merchant navy and Mum is from Portsmouth ... so the sea is in my blood'.

As someone who is obsessed with both photography and videography, in addition to charting Zora's rebirth at www.sailingyachtZora.com Rhys also set up a YouTube channel to share the project with friends and family abroad. To date it has some 10,000 subscribers from all over the world which, he says, 'blows our minds'. Search for 'sailingyachtzora' on YouTube.)

From a very young age, the idea of taking small or even larger boats out into the unforgivable offshore world seemed frightening, yet somehow appealing. The stories of Columbus boldly sailing to the edge of the earth were a big part of my childhood, but it was only when I read about Sir Robin Knox-Johnson and Bernard Moitessier that I slowly started to realise that adventure was there for anyone to take – you didn't have to be well-funded or wealthy to see the world. It appealed to me that little 30 footers with two adults and sometimes even children aboard were able to cross vast distances, then anchor next to a superyacht, enjoy the same view and sail on to the next destination, all on a shoestring. The only difference I could see was the level of luxury or, if you were on a really small boat, the lack of!

Life slowly moved on and so did my focus. My late teenage years were spent working on cars, going to school, and working, and the idea of sailing off on the trades slowly faded away. They had nearly gone completely by the time I was in my second year at college in Cork, but that was when I met my good friend and partner in crime, Irial Kennedy. One afternoon after a few drinks with friends, he casually mentioned that he had lived on a boat in Crosshaven during his previous year in college, and I couldn't get enough of the idea. The boat in question was *An Gobadán*, a 38ft steel yacht to a Van de Stadt design which his mother and father had built in Baltimore when Irial was a child. They had been running a sailing school there for years with Irial as an instructor, and he offered to take me out to see if I actually liked sailing after so many years of dreaming. To say I liked it may be an understatement. It buried itself so far into my psyche that since then it's taken over a vast part of my life, and I decided there and then that I would one day own a boat just like *An Gobadán*.

I took an engineering job after college, and worked away with the idea that 'someday' I would do something about the nagging feeling in the back of my mind. I quickly learned, however, that saying 'someday' is very dangerous and a sure killer of your dreams. I started saving what I could, and before very long I couldn't wait much longer, which led me to the Irish online classifieds for something that suited my measly budget. I spotted a 38ft Dick Koopmans bare steel hull that was way out of my budget and seriously considered it – I even saved the owner's number in my phone – but after a day or so it was marked as sold and I continued my search. After a further week of looking I found a 7m GRP boat called *Frantic*, which needed far more work than I realised at the time, and bought it without a second thought. After two years of struggle, misery and being



Frantic finally gets launched under her new skipper, Matt

perpetually itchy I gave the boat to a good friend without having even launched or sailed her. Lesson learned.

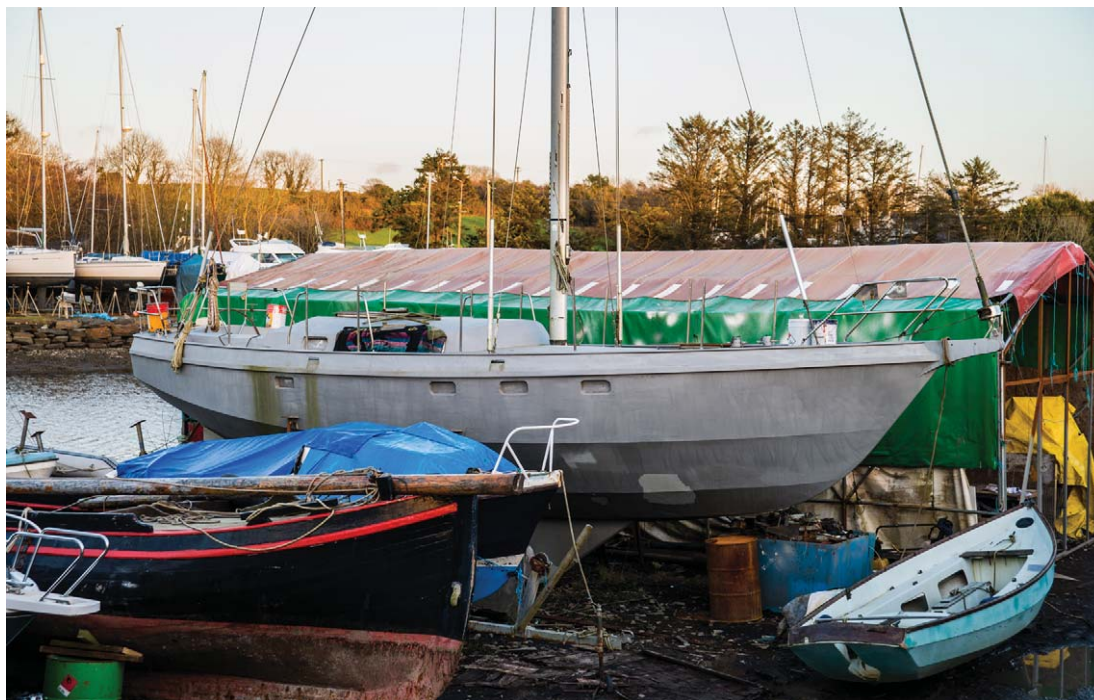
The experience with that little boat didn't, however miserable, put me off my dream. The year before I gave *Frantic* away I had moved into my Ford Transit Connect in an effort to save more money for a bigger boat – an experience that not only taught me a lot about small-space living, but also allowed me to put a little honey pot to one side for when the 'right boat' came up for sale. The

year I spent living in the van while working full time is a whole other story, but it's an experience that I'm very glad I had and would recommend to anyone.

In December 2017, the opportunity to sail across the Atlantic with two of my best friends, Irial and Ciara, who had left that summer to sail *An Gobadán* to Canada via the Intracoastal Waterway, popped up. I took six weeks off work, left Niamh, my always-supportive girlfriend, behind and set off on my big adventure and to see if this cruising thing was all it was cracked up to be.

An Gobadán in Cape Verde on the way to Martinique





Zora on the day we found her in Hegarty's Boatyard, Baltimore

It was. If I was obsessed before I left, I don't know what I was when I got back. Seeing the stars in their millions in a pitch dark sky, the vibrant bioluminescence that spills out along the tops of the waves, and the flying fish bursting out of the water as you pass slowly by are memories I will keep for ever. We spent 23 days at sea, arriving in Martinique to a welcoming party consisting of Niamh, who'd flown out to meet us, and the customs officials who signed us in. After a week of sailing around the island it was time for Niamh and me to head home, find our own boat, and begin our own little adventure.

Two weeks later we were standing in a wet and windy boatyard in West Cork looking up at a Rival 32 that was for sale. Despite the legendary status of the Rival 32 as a capable cruiser, it didn't take us long to realise that 32ft might be a little bit small for what we personally wanted from a boat. At this stage I had been living in my van for six months and knew that a bit of space wasn't a luxury, so we decided she wasn't for us. While standing on the Rival's deck, however, I spent some time looking around the yard at all the other potential projects. In the corner, standing quite a bit taller than a lot of her neighbours, was that same Dick Koopmans bare hull that had been advertised in the classifieds when I bought *Frantic*. The cogs started turning and I remembered that I still had the owner's phone number, and thought there would be no harm in asking him if he still owned her even though she'd been marked as sold before. Miraculously, he (Nick) still owned her and, even better, he was willing to part with her. Once I got to hear the story of *Zora* and how she ended up where she was I knew that she was a special boat that needed to be returned to the water.

It seemed that about 20 years earlier she had sailed into Baltimore harbour under a Swiss skipper who was on his way around the world. As stories tend to do when they

Zora (painted red) can be seen in the background, surrounded by fire engines

aren't documented at the time, the ones about *Zora* were passed by word of mouth over the years until I heard them for myself. While somewhere off Morocco on their way to Ireland via the Mediterranean, *Zora* and her then skipper were approached by two small wooden boats manned by armed pirates. *Zora* was used as a battering ram, inflicting major damage on one of the boats, which left the other boat busy enough for *Zora* to slip away unharmed. Whether or not this story is true is up for debate but, as the saying goes, there is no smoke without fire.

Speaking of fire, *Zora* and her skipper's plans were cut short, as one night while at anchor in Baltimore harbour she burst into flames and had to be towed to the nearest pier and a waiting fire

engine. (As a side note, you can see *Zora* in the background of the photo with a fire engine and crew in attendance. In the foreground is *An Gobadán*, the boat that sowed the seed of this whole saga in the first place.)

Zora, before her resurrection began following many years of serious neglect. Photo Nick Kottler



After the fire *Zora* was bought from the insurance company by the yard owner and sat relatively untouched until 2012. In that time rust took significant hold, especially on the deck, which resulted in a boat full of holes and unrepairable steel. Most would have considered her too far gone for economic repair and it was clear that she would need a huge amount of vision and work to get back to a useable state. This was where Nick, a local boatbuilder in search of his next challenge, stepped in. He heard that she was going to be scrapped along with the steel shed that she was sitting in, and made an offer to buy her. The offer was accepted, and work began in Hegarty's Boatyard at Oldcourt, downriver from Skibbereen, soon after.

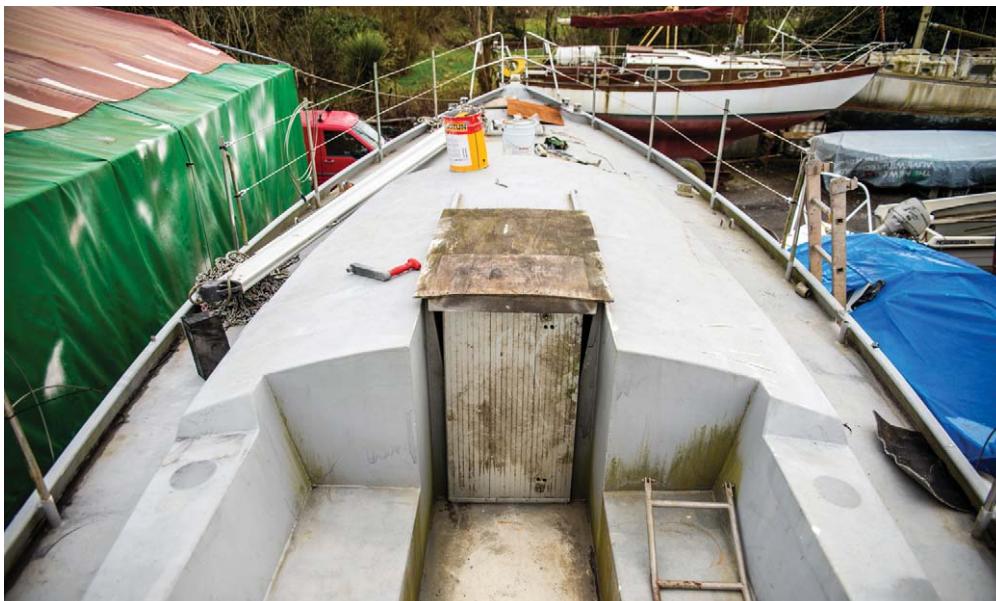
Nick worked tirelessly on *Zora* from 2012 until 2017, removing every inch of badly rusted steel and laying a new deck from bow to stern, as well as repairing much of the hull. The cockpit was moved a foot aft and the aft cabin replaced by an extra couple of feet in the cockpit, giving a nice helm position and more space for crew. The hull was strengthened by adding a compression post on either side, and extra ribs were added



Me wondering 'Oh no, what have I got myself into' on the first day

to the underside of the deck. An uninsured boat broke its mooring in a storm and was wrecked nearby, and her Selden mast, good sails and Sole engine were acquired for *Zora* as payment for cleaning the beach that she'd run up on. Once the steelwork was finished, *Zora* was sandblasted and coated with quality primer inside and out to protect all that hard work from rusting again. One paragraph can't do justice to the amount of work that Nick had done, and nor can photos show the quality of his work. When seen in person, however, it speaks for itself.

It was then that Nick heard that a boat he had wanted for a long time was going for a reasonable sum. He decided to buy her, leaving him torn between finishing



*The first day of work, and a mountain to climb.
The decks were good, however, and free from rust*

Zora – which would take several more years and a considerable amount of money – or improving the boat he just bought. He chose the latter, which resulted in the advertisement that I had seen, but had a change of heart and marked her as sold. (Nick has, incidentally, been a huge part of the project and we still share ideas very often. As someone who didn't have much experience in boat-building I am very grateful for his guidance, help and friendship.)

*Niamh in the paint suit that she wore
all summer. The cross beams at the bow helped to mark a waterline*





Zora attracted lots of attention from our friends in the lead up to launch day

Because *Zora* had been painted with good primer, leaving her idle for a while hadn't caused any problems. The painting had been done immediately after sandblasting was complete, which resulted in a very well-protected boat that only needed a top coat to look pretty again. Niamh and I got right to work, with the goal of getting *Zora* into the water as soon as possible. This resulted in a lot of long weekends and some evenings over the following eight months, washing in the sea in the evenings or under a hose, and generally just slumming it to get the job done. One of the bigger jobs was to paint the entire boat, which first meant sanding her from top to bottom before, using mohair rollers, we painted the topsides and deck with blue and very light grey. (Huge thanks to all my friends who helped get her painted in record time.)

One of the more expensive jobs was replacing the standing and running rigging. I'd known when I bought *Zora* that this was a job that wasn't going to be optional, so I set about finding a rigger who would do it without breaking our already sorry-looking bank account. I was put in touch with Gavin from Masts and Rigging Ireland, who was able to answer all my questions, give me a very reasonable price, and do the job in no time at all. We were able to get the mast down, change all the wiring, bulbs and rigging, and then re-step the mast without any unforeseen problems.

The engine had a new prop-shaft and FeatherStream prop, but although the engine was sitting on its mounts and the shaft was in place they had yet to be aligned and connected. The engine also had no wiring loom and needed a new alternator and starter motor. The shaft passed into the stern tube through a dripless PSS bearing and a new bellows from the manufacturer gave it a new lease of life. I made a new loom for the engine and, using a ratchet strap, fitted a temporary fuel tank in the form of a 20 litre jerry can next to the engine. After a couple of days of head scratching I



The crane gets into position while a nervous crew waits for the big moment

managed to get all the wiring correct, then changed all the filters on the engine and it fired up without a problem. Much of the next few months was spent painting below the waterline, fitting a forehatch, rebuilding the cable steering system and generally tidying the boat up ready for launching.

This took place on a sunny August afternoon with a high spring tide – which we needed to float her into a deeper part of the Ilan river. Niamh and I had a somewhat sleepless night in the van with ‘what if...’ thoughts running through our minds, but we reassured ourselves that we had done things properly and had not cut corners. We had a nervous breakfast and finished off a few little jobs while waiting for the crane to

It was really surreal feeling the boat move under my feet for the very first time



arrive. At around 4pm we spotted a big, yellow, 100 tonne beast making its way down the narrow West Cork back roads towards us. After almost seven years of sitting in one place and 20 years since water was under her keel, *Zora* moved again with a crowd of my close friends watching. It was hard to see the movement at first, but once the pressure came off and the supports began to fall away it was obvious that the boat was starting to lift into the air, and in one big arc the crane brought her around and lowered her into the river. There are some first experiences in life that you always remember, and feeling my own boat move under me for the first time will stay with me for ever. It's a strange thing to feel emotional about what to many is just an object, but this was one of my most significant milestones to date and it's that feeling that's keeping me pushing hard through the remainder of the project.



*After nine hard months of work and 20 years since her last day afloat,
Zora is finally back in the water*

Zora spent the next couple of months rafted up to some other boats on the river while I fitted winches, new running rigging and the sails and associated hardware. I bought the two three-speed Harken sheet winches from a friend – they had spent many years buried in sawdust so needed a full rebuild. (One thing I have learned over the years is that if you are willing and able to repair secondhand equipment you can buy quality gear very cheaply.) I didn't have a mainsheet track, so lashed a line across the cockpit and attached the mainsheet to that, and attached some blocks to the toe-rail in lieu of jibsheet tracks. It wasn't perfect but it did the job. Once ready, we did a quick test-run under motor to check the engine was okay and all went well. Then, about three weeks later, Nick and I decided to go for a test sail in Baltimore harbour to check the rig. We wanted to make sure she was safe to sail to her new home in Kinsale, where I planned to fit the interior.



As seen from a drone in the evening light. Photo Josh Beecher

The weather was shaping up well in the week before our planned test sail and we agreed that if the weather was as forecast on the day, and if we were happy with the rig once the sails were up, that we would go for it and attempt the eight-hour sail east to Kinsale. We arrived at Baltimore harbour from the mouth of the Ilan to a moderate southwesterly and raised a double-reefed main to check whether she was able to carry it. When Zora was launched we had noticed that she sat several inches above her designed waterline – doubtless due to the fact that, apart from the engine and sails, she was

The skipper takes the helm of his own ship for the first time. Photo Nick Kottler



*Zora in Kinsale, her
current home*

completely empty of any interior – which resulted in a slightly tender boat. We were, however, happy that the wind was favourable and that the boat seemed perfectly capable of taking the main and full genoa, so we left the harbour, passing the Baltimore beacon and heading out to sea.

The following eight hours were almost dreamlike. It was a beautiful sunny, warm day, with clear blue skies and a fresh breeze pushing us gently along. *Zora* had her sails wing and wing and in my mind looked like a huge bird stretching herself at last. I think she enjoyed being on the move again just as much as her crew did, and we made great time all the way to Kinsale where my good friend Simon was waiting in his RIB at the harbour mouth to escort us home. As if the day hadn't gone well enough already, while we adjusted our course to a beam reach across the flat sea we were joined by a huge pod of dolphins which swam with us while we sailed up to the village. All in all, a very successful day for *Zora*.

Zora on her first sail, entering Kinsale with a dolphin escort. Photo Josh Beecher



She is currently in the marina in Kinsale and the last few months have been spent installing bulkheads, fitting a cabin sole and substructure for the joinery, and installing some temporary insulation in the forepeak so I can stay warm while I live aboard. The plan is to have the boat professionally insulated very soon with polyurethane spray foam to eliminate the potential for steel boat-killing condensation, and to begin fitting tanks, wiring, cabinetry and other systems. We estimate that the remainder of the project will take until mid 2020, but if doing the job right means it takes longer, then so be it.

Footnote

I want to thank everyone who has supported the project either financially, by watching the series, or by working in person on the boat. There are too many to name, but without you *Zora* would still be sitting on the hard in Baltimore. Special mention goes to Niamh, who has been instrumental in bringing the project to life and continues to keep me motivated when it all gets a bit too much, which it often does. Fair winds to all, Rhys.

