

## A Tale of Two Birds - *Puffin and Teal*

The realisation of a dream and two chance encounters

John and Linda Andrews



The story begins many years ago as a dream to build a clinker built boat; a big one, maybe 20 feet long, that we could sail away and spend happy times in sheltered waters, up shallow creeks and rivers, taking to the mud and waiting for the rising tide to float us off as the sun rose in a cloudless sky, across reed beds and tidal flats, awakened by the dawn chorus of thousands of water fowl.

With retirement looming with its endless empty hours, now was the time to put dreams into practice. Basic woodworking skills were already in place, honed by hours in the school woodwork shop under the watchful eye of a brilliant teacher universally known as 'Chippy'. I never knew his real name. Specific boat building skills were required now, so a week was booked at the Boat Building Academy in Lyme Regis. There the additional techniques of modern clinker construction were added to the woodworking arsenal. However, also added was the realisation that building a 20 foot clinker boat from scratch would take upwards of 2,000 hours for an amateur. That could be three years' work, allowing for other things in life, in the rather cold, draughty garage at our home, 1,000 feet above sea level in the Peak District National Park. A modified plan was needed.

This came in the form of chance encounter number one. We were sitting on *Suilven*, our Oyster 47, early one morning, moored on the pilings in the Hamble River, when we spotted the prettiest clinker built dinghy being rowed up river. We

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hailed the rower who came alongside. It turned out his father had built the boat. She was a Nutshell, nine foot LOA, designed by Malcolm Goodwin in 1983. She has a balanced lugsail sail plan with daggerboard and transom hung rudder for sailing, but also usable as a rowing boat or with a small outboard. This looked like something an amateur could build in one or two hundred hours and the dream of *Teal* was born.

The purist in me was attracted to the idea of starting the build by buying plans, lofting, purchasing timber and plywood and setting to. However, the week at the Academy in Lyme Regis had also taught me that practicalities must be considered and there would be no shame in buying all the timber bandsawn to nearly final shape together with all the fittings and spars. This required a trip to Barrow Boats in Loddon, Norfolk, to pick up the kit and back to the Peak District to start the build. The months needed soon turned into years as the garage did indeed prove to be a particularly hostile environment for both boat and builder. There was no question of being able to finish the project in that climate, particularly the varnishing and painting, so the half built boat moved with us when we re-located to Sussex to be nearer to children and the increasing number of grandchildren.

I was in no particular rush to complete the project as the grandchildren were still very young, but they would come into the workshop on their visits to the house to check on progress. She still hadn't been named but our oldest grandchild came up with the name *Teal*, not after the bird it has to be said, but after a children's television programme, but a good name nevertheless.



*Teal*, out of the workshop and onto our lawn

The summer of 2021 with Covid restrictions lifting brought the possibility of a launch so renewed energy was put into completing the build. In July, she came out of the workshop onto the lawn and was fully rigged with her tan coloured balanced lug sail. There she was photographed. However, circumstances have meant that a launch is still to take place, now planned for the summer of 2023.

So now what? We still had dreams of sailing away in a 20 foot centreboard boat up creeks and rivers. It was our plan to leave *Suilven* in Scotland for the time being giving easy access to that fabulous cruising ground, so we would be needing something to sail nearer to our home in Sussex. Also the grandchildren were growing up, an

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ideal time to have a smaller boat in which they could start to get the experience and pleasure of mucking around in boats. This was when we had chance encounter number two. Walking along the pontoon in Lymington Haven Marina in late summer of 2021 we had both separately spotted a very elegant small boat made by Swallow Yachts. Could this be the boat we were looking for?

The Swallow Yachts website revealed that they were now mainly building GRP boats, and although these were ballasted with water which could be pumped out to make the boat lighter for towing, the boat would still be pretty heavy. Southampton Boat Show gave us the opportunity to see the Baycruiser 23. This revealed that although John, at 6ft 8in tall, would be able to sit down in the cabin without having to slump, none of the berths would be long enough for him to be able to sleep on board. Matt Newland, the owner and designer of Swallow Yachts came up with a possible solution. They used to build a Baycruiser 20 from epoxy plywood and he could modify the plans to incorporate a long bunk. She would be lighter than their GRP Bayraider 20 at 450 kg but with a much bigger cabin, increased beam, and more freeboard and still ketch rigged. They had the original plans and over the winter they could build her in between their other GRP work. A deal was struck.

We were in no particular hurry to take delivery of the boat as we had a full summer programme planned on *Suilven*, including attending the Scottish meet and going up to the Faroes. This was just as well as the project met the usual delays, not helped by post Covid supply problems. We did however have a deadline of the August Bank Holiday. Meanwhile we debated what she should be called. The grandchildren had always got postcards depicting wildlife from our various cruises and it was pictures of puffins which seemed to give the greatest delight so we settled on *Puffin*.

For our first cruise, all the family including four grandchildren aged from two to six years old were booked to go camping on Brownsea Island in Poole Harbour and the launch of *Puffin* was to be a key part of the adventure. As the delivery date kept being pushed back, we got more and more nervous, but 20 August saw us in Cardigan, taking ownership.

Although we had long dreamed of being able to launch our little boat in sheltered waters, taking to the mud overnight to be lifted off by an early morning tide, the reality has proved significantly more testing. For a start, where to anchor the boat overnight on Brownsea Island? The photograph of the so-called slipway at the campsite looked more like a rubbly pile of old bricks and was totally unsuitable for an overnight stop. Secondly, once we started looking at the tides, we realised that we would have to do really detailed calculations which we haven't done for years. We also learned not to rely too heavily on the tide tables and tidal curves because of the dramatic effect of barometric pressure in an enclosed water like Poole Harbour. Beaching at high water would mean a 12 hour wait before we could float again, and beaching at low water would mean we could easily get ashore but a long wait before we could get back to her. We compromised by anchoring such

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Linda aboard *Puffin*, fully rigged in the car park

that she would ground for about 90 minutes either side of low water and we would still be able to wade out to her for most of the tidal range. We also took a long line ashore which was tied to the root of a convenient tree. As luck would have it, the spot that was suitable gave us easy access to the campsite where we were all staying. However thoughts are already turning to acquiring a small inflatable dinghy or kayak to afford us more flexibility for getting ashore.

Our first launch was carried out at Rockley Point in the northwest corner of Poole Harbour. Although the boat itself was very much admired by a gathering crowd, our own launching efforts were observed with some interest. There was much shaking of heads and words of advice.

It had dawned on us that launching a boat was one thing, but unless you could launch next to a pontoon, someone would have to stand in the water holding the boat while the car and trailer were moved away. Then how were you to get aboard when you were already knee deep in the water? The gunwales are really quite high. As it turned out there was a pontoon of sorts and one way or another, with the aid of an extremely long painter, the launch was successful.

Recovery at the end of the weekend also provided some spectator amusement. As we approached the slipway we were relieved to see that there was a spare slot on the pontoon. However as we made our rather cautious approach, we were suddenly grabbed by a ferocious current, kicked up by the ebb tide sluicing out of Lytchett Bay under Rockley Bridge. Luckily, locals had been watching our arrival and knowing the risks themselves, were able to grab us before any harm was done. Then there was the reverse process to recover the boat. This time, we pre-positioned the car and trailer, and John remained on the boat to motor her up to the slipway, leaving Linda to attach the recovery strap to the bow fitting and to fend off the helpful advice that was coming from all sides. Despite the words of 'you'll never do it like that' ringing in our ears, we did get the boat onto the trailer and up the slipway where we were able to de-stress and take our time taking the masts down and preparing the boat for the tow home.

Camping proved a great experience. Once launched, we motored the boat round to Poole Quay Marina where we were given a berth at the end of a pontoon in



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the shadow of two huge Sunseeker motorboats. The next morning two cars containing all the gear and food for two nights' camping for six adults and four small and very excited children arrived. They happily climbed into the cockpit of *Puffin* for the first time and looked around the cabin, checking it out for



All aboard

future sleep-overs. They took the passenger ferry to Brownsea Island and *Puffin* took all the gear, which had to be carried across the fast receding tide, wading up to knee depth. However it was achieved without complaint from the juniors.

"But what about the sailing?" I hear you ask. We did have a short sailing excursion the next day but it was blowing F4-5 and not sensible to take the children out. Also, as always with a new boat we were having a few teething problems. How could we get enough rig tension? How could we get enough tension on the main and jib halyards? We did however learn that with her ketch rig she fairly zipped along under jib and mizzen at that wind strength. Amazingly *Puffin* also comes equipped with bowsprit and asymmetric spinnaker. As yet it hasn't been launched but in anything above about a F3 we judge would be extremely lively indeed. We also gave the quick release mechanism for the centre board a good test, with it popping up several times as we inadvertently strayed into shallow water. It looked as if there were acres of open water in which to sail, but we soon discovered that

there weren't! You had to know where you could go even at high tide.

Since then *Puffin* has been launched in Chichester Harbour (with a very good pontoon arrangement at Northney Marina). Winches are resolving the rig tension problem, we are getting much slicker with the launch and recovery and plans are shaping up for next year. Reversing her into her home in our garage remains a rather tense operation still, but I'm sure practice will make perfect!



*Puffin* in Chichester harbour