

We Bought a Boat for £20

Matthew Power



Matthew with his son, John Joseph

of Woodbridge in 1938 of pitch pine on oak. Initially the asking price was £1.00 but we felt we ought to pay more than that. I wonder how often the price paid for a boat is more than was actually originally asked?

To cut a long story short this acquisition involves friendship, increasing infirmity on the part of *Zenith's* former owner and his desire to see her refitted and sailing again. 'Fools own boats for wise men to sail' and we have belonged to the latter group for some years whilst our son was being brought up and educated.

My sailing heroes include the famed sailing couple Peter and Anne Pye who voyaged extensively in their gaff cutter *Moonraker* back in the 1950s and 60s. Aficionados will remember how they bought *Moonraker* for £25.00 and converted her from a fishing boat to an ocean going vessel.

In comparison to their bargain we did slightly better and this summer, for £20.00 became the proud owners of *Zenith*, a Deben 4 ton gaff cutter built by Whisstocks

Zenith looking neglected



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Zenith prior to restoration 2021

So what kind of boat does £20.00 get? Well she has a Yanmar 1GM diesel installed in about 2000, a sound pitch pine hull, a fairly recent suit of sails and epoxied decks that were refitted in 2000 when she had an extensive restoration. In short, an absolute bargain. The bad bits, inevitable in a boat with this price tag are: the rubbing strakes are rotten, the varnish is hanging off in ribbons, there is some damage to the stem and everything that can corrode has corroded.

Zenith was lying in one of those yards that we have all thought had long gone, the ones you used to discover skulking in the marshes or down a narrow rutted lane, dotted with derelicts with wonky 'For Sale' notices fading to magenta on their peeling topsides. But this yard looked as if it might have built boats in the past, its tarred clapboard sheds slowly being replaced by poly ones. The rafters bearing the wooden masts of long deceased yachts deep in dust and draped in cobwebs. Somewhere there is a little office in which may lie the 1950s correspondence between the owners of the shapely Buchanans or Holmans that might have once emerged from the tarred shed. Beautiful yachts that took your breath away with topsides like bone china and spars the colour of stripped willow.

In this aura of nostalgia *Zenith* seemed at home; despite nowadays sharing her mud berth with her nonstick fibreglass cousins, whose owners look at me with expressions of smugness or pity (I am not sure which). Shipwrights that kept the yard alive are now retired and riddled with arthritis although one or two stroll down the pontoon ready with a gum sucking comment or two 'You have got yourself a job there' or 'At least someone is saving her from the bonfire'.

Zenith demands to be slipped, and not before time, where she may bask in admiration. At least from those who know a good 80 something year old wooden boat when they see one. It is clear that I am a lover of such craft but really we should

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have acquired something far more sensible with less demands on time and financial resources. Most of the work I will attempt to do myself no doubt with advice from the time served shipwrights with pipes clamped to yellowing teeth who will ‘tut tut’ at my clumsy caulking and none too politely suggest a witches brew of red lead stopping instead of epoxy, surely the amateur wooden boat restorers best friend?

But it seems that I am not alone in finding solace and satisfaction in refitting a wooden boat. I notice that our erstwhile commodore Henry Clay has enjoyed restoring a 1930s Tumlar (see *Roving Commissions* 61). I have got a long way to go with freezing cold days down at the boatyard, hands covered in grease, chipping rust and scraping away years of paint and varnish. My carpentry will be put to the test and there will be times when it will all be too much and I will wonder why I was daft enough to take on such a boat in the first place. The carrot will be when *Zenith* returns to her natural element with gleaming topsides, the varnish golden in the sun, people will (hopefully) say ‘What a pretty boat’.

I am inspired by my heroes to go cruising. Theirs were great feats accomplished in small vessels with skinny budgets, but a brush with cancer a few years ago has left me requiring marina facilities most nights, hardly the ethos of the RCC. But I suppose I am lucky as, at the time, it looked as if my next journey would have been across the Styx. My wife Lell who is whole heartedly behind this project having grown up on a gaff rigged yawl says with typical feminine logic “Can’t we just explore places that we have never been to as our boats have always had too deep a draft?” We may even attend the RCC meet when you can all go ‘tut tut’.

First coats of varnish on the coach roof

