

CORNISH CRAFT

By a sleepy creek near Falmouth, craftsman **Ben Harris** spends his days building traditional boats, using timber he chooses from a nearby woodland

Words: Alice Wright Photos: Justin Foulkes

For traditional boatbuilder Ben Harris, there is no better way to admire the beauty and grandeur of nature than in a wooden boat. Describing the unique experience of gliding through a natural landscape in a vessel crafted from natural materials, he says, "I think there's something in us that just knows that wood is right."

Now 41, Ben's love for trees and wood began during his childhood in Somerset's Mendip Hills, where he recalls hiding in a huge, hollowed-out oak tree and clambering up the sweeping limbs of a great chestnut. An inspiring school woodwork teacher helped cement his passion. "My interests in woodland and building have always gone hand in hand," he explains.

After school, he moved first to the Lake District, where he managed local woodland, and then to Scotland, working in oak framing and sawmilling. It was in Scotland that he got into sailing, buying himself a wooden Wayfarer. The dinghy was

40 years old so Ben spent a fair amount of time fixing it up, sparking an interest in how wooden boats are made.

Keen to learn more, he found a traditional boat-building course at Falmouth Marine School, and in 2006 moved there with his wife. But he left the course after just three

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months, frustrated at not getting enough hands-on experience. Instead, Ben decided to teach himself. He built a dinghy first, and then a nine-metre (30-foot) gaff cutter – a small to medium-sized sailing vessel that was historically used as a working boat; "That was my real apprenticeship," he explains. After launching his cutter

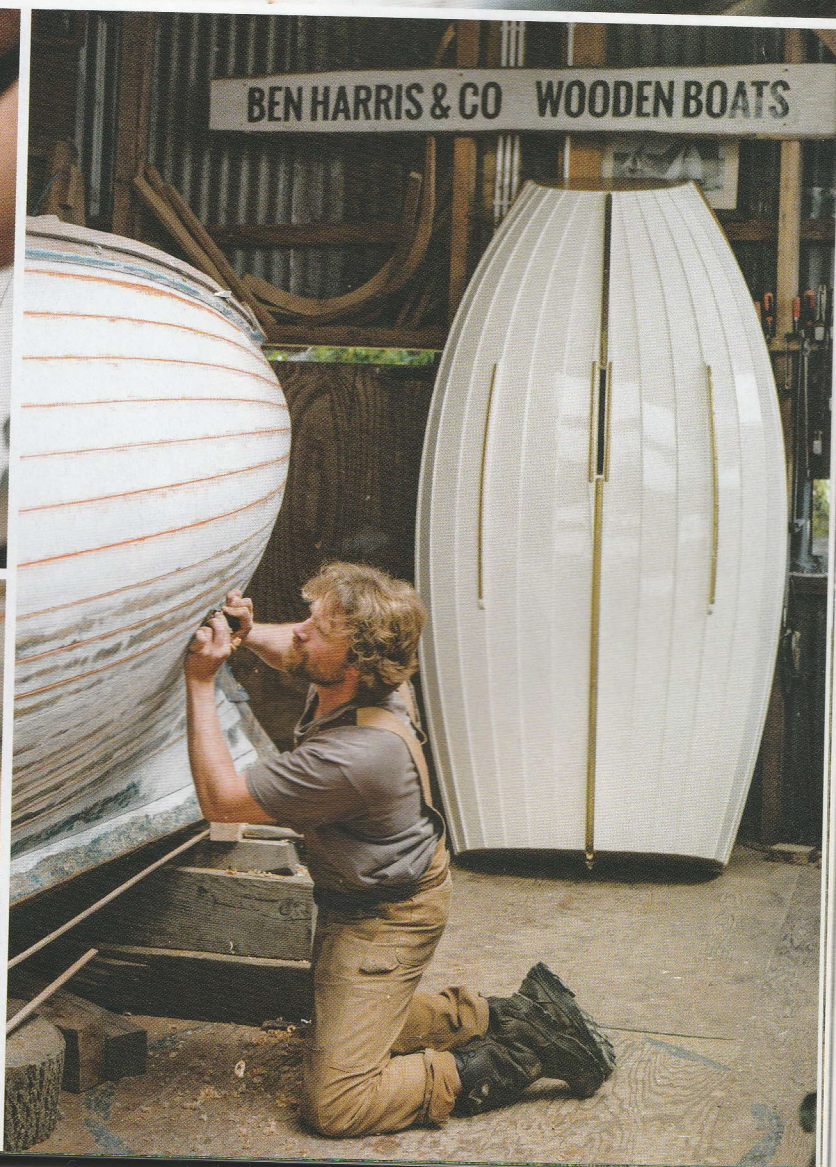
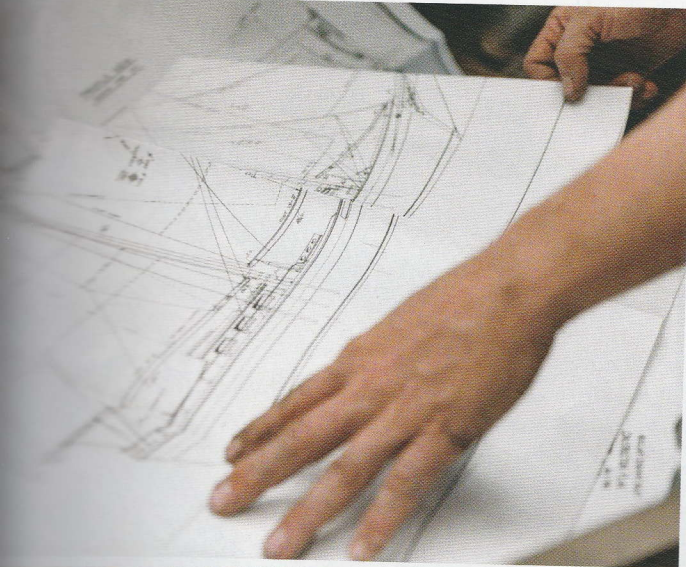
Alva in 2011, he then began to take on commissions.

Ben admires the aesthetic of the gaff cutter and recently built a seven-metre (23-foot) version for a customer in Australia, but his work depends on customers' requirements and he will consider making any boat as long as it has a traditional design and is made of wood. Dinghies, with or without sails, are something of a staple as they're more affordable.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Ben builds the boats in his workshop on a farmyard at the mouth of Restronguet Creek, north of Falmouth – one of a cluster of outbuildings used by various joiners, furniture makers and boatbuilders. The sound of electric tools mingles with birdsong while the warm aroma of cows drifts in from the barn next door. Inside, shelves and racks are crammed with tools and materials in a kind of organised chaos. An almost-completed dinghy is in the middle of the floor, waiting to be oiled, while a finished dinghy is propped up in one corner.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP In Ben's Restronguet Creek workshop, farmyard aromas blend with the smell of freshly planed wood; each handmade boat involves many hours of crafting, sometimes working on your knees; planing needs to be done with precision; boat plans are works of art in themselves





Ben's day varies depending on the project in hand. A dinghy develops quickly, but when working on a cutter, one task – such as planking or riveting – may take several weeks. Then Ben will be up early and working late, often with apprentices alongside him.

Whatever the style, building a wooden boat involves painstakingly fashioning and then fitting together many component parts. "With a fibreglass boat you're basically just slapping a load of matting and resin into a pre-existing mould and that's your hull made," says Ben. "With a wooden boat, you've got to build the keels, the frames, the planks. Everything has to be patterned and shaped and assembled and fastened and caulked and puttied and painted."

Although Ben had a strong grounding in woodwork, he has learned how to do most tasks by simply getting on with it. Lofting was one of the hardest aspects to master; this is the process of drawing up a full-scale set of plans for the boat, which Ben taught himself. Casting the lead ballasts needed for larger boats is another challenge. "I think that's probably the tensest moment throughout the boat build, because it's hot work and it's dangerous, and it can go wrong."

ANOTHER FAMILY MEMBER

Ben has also continued to learn through sailing *Alva* and making improvements to her; this constant engagement with a wooden boat is part of the attraction. "It's not just something you can shelve and then come down to when it's convenient," he says, comparing wood to fibreglass. "That's part of what makes it such an enduring and enjoyable way of life with a wooden boat. It's the care, the maintenance, the adaptation."

That care and attention means wooden boats become intertwined with the lives of their owners, and almost part of the family. "Certainly with my kids they talk about *Alva* as



Ben's much-loved cutter, *Alva*

"For Ben and his daughters, *Alva* is a sanctuary and a means of adventure"

a member of the family, because being on board her has cemented so many aspects of our relationship as a family." Ben's daughters, aged eight and 10, now live in Glasgow but visit during school holidays. While they're staying, Ben downs tools so he can devote his

time to them, and inevitably many days, and nights, are spent on the water. Last summer, they sailed *Alva* to Brittany and this year plan to take her to the Isles of Scilly.

For Ben, his daughters and his friends, *Alva* is a sanctuary and a means of adventure. Countless happy times have been spent on board and Ben believes that wooden boats have a unique ability to absorb something of those memories, holding a spirit of the encounters they've had. That sense of the vessel having a life of its own returns when Ben describes sailing a wooden boat. "The sounds they make as they're slicing through the wind and the water give you a sense that they're lifting and rising, and are excited and energetic about the conditions."

Of course, part of a wooden boat's unique character comes from the fact that it's crafted from a material that was once living. Ben uses native timber wherever possible, sourcing much of it from Tregothnan, an estate just a few miles up the Fal where he previously worked overseeing felling of trees for a project to build a

ANATOMY OF A BOAT: A CLINKER DINGHY

The process starts with a building table, which has moulds or templates made out of wood to define the shape of the boat at stations along its length. The transom, stem and stern are cut, shaped and attached to the building table. Then the keel is made, bent on to the mould and attached to the stem, stern and transom. Once the keel is in place, the planks are patterned, shaped and fitted, starting at the keel and working down towards the gunwale. On this dinghy there are eight planks each side. Then the gunwale is fitted, followed by the knees, which stiffen the corners of the boat, and the inwales – strips of wood along the top edge of the hull. Next, the case for the centreboard is made and the thwarts, which also serve as the seat, are fitted, followed by the floors and then the sole boards.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT An apprentice works on the latest dinghy in Ben's workshop, a treasure trove of tools and wood; a well-used caulking iron; a crucial part of the process, caulking seals the gaps between each plank to make the boat watertight; Ben checks the plans for a new project

Photo: Simon Holman



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT Sanding each board to perfection; the mark of a beautifully handcrafted Ben Harris boat; Ben enjoys the fruits of his labour

replica of the *Mayflower*. Depending on the boat, he will generally use oak for the skeletal structure and larch for the planking, with oak, larch and chestnut for the interior. It's difficult to anticipate what he will need ahead of a commission, but he has lengths of Douglas fir and larch stacked outside his workshop, and a load of oak knees – naturally curved wood – stored on woodland near his home.

Ben lives in a yurt in a field near the village of Gweek and, when not at his workshop, he spends time here growing vegetables. Whether building a boat or tending his garden, he

finds harmony in connecting with the natural world to create things for his own use, and for others. "There's a great sense that you're creating your own habitat," he says. "You're engaging with your world more fully."

With such respect for nature, Ben is currently considering plans to build a schooner that would transport cargo under sail, as well as offering space for environmental research groups. "I want its purpose to have some way of giving back to the forests and woodlands that have given the timber for the boat."

This brings us back to the idea of a wooden boat as part of a natural cycle, that there is completeness to a wooden boat that can never be matched by the generic fibreglass boats jostling in a modern marina. As Ben puts it, "There's so much more life and soul and romance in a wooden boat."

To find out more about Ben's boatbuilding, go to benharrisboats.co.uk



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TRY SAILING ABOARD A WOODEN BOAT

Classic Sailing in Cornwall offers expeditions and taster sessions on classic wooden boats, including gaff cutters and luggers. classic-sailing.co.uk

Hunter's Yard in the Norfolk Broads offers sailing with a skipper, allowing novices to take the helm. huntersyard.co.uk/sailing-holidays

Trinity Sailing in Brixham, Devon, owns a fleet of historic sailing boats. It works primarily with disadvantaged young people but also offers sailing holidays. trinitysailing.org

Glenridding Sailing Centre in the Lake District has a fleet of boats, including traditional wooden Lune Whammels. glenriddingsailingcentre.co.uk



Working Sail, based in Penryn, Cornwall, provides adventure sailing holidays on its pilot cutter *Agnes* (above), which is a copy of a working boat built in 1841. workingsail.co.uk

The Excelsior Trust, based in Suffolk, offers sailing holidays on board its historic wooden boat, the proceeds of which fund its work with disadvantaged youngsters. theexcelsiortrust.co.uk