



RESTORING PEGGOTTY

My name is Abbey Molyneux, I'm 25 years old and had never been good at anything... until I discovered boatbuilding and Michael Dennett Boat Builders. This is the story of my first major restoration.

With photographs by Heather Dennett and the author.

There had been talk of *Peggotty* in the mess room at Dennett's for weeks but it wasn't until I heard the words 'clinker planking' that my ears pricked up. After many phone calls and some fairly heavy persuasion, she was sold for £1 and was on her way to the yard.

She was floated up the Thames from Teddington to Chertsey, patched with bin bags, plywood, sealant and loaded with car batteries and bilge pumps. She made it to us in good time and didn't sink on the way thanks to her enthusiastic crew. Built in 1937 by R J Perkins & Sons of Whitstable as the pilot boat *Nayland*, she had been part of Operation Dynamo at Dunkirk, rescuing an astonishing 83 soldiers from the beaches. Everyone at Dennett's has a passion for the Dunkirk Little Ships, so to us the risk involved in undertaking a project like this is worth every second.

It wasn't until *Peggotty* – she was re-named after the war – rolled up the yard's slipway and sat smack bang in the middle of all the other boats, making them look like dinghies and making me feel like an elf – I'm 5'1" (1.6m) tall – that I realised quite how huge she was. And how sad she had become. The transom was desperately trying to wiggle its way free from the rest of the boat and you could stick a finger

through most of the planks. I'm a bit soppy when it comes to boats; not too keen on humans but show me a sad boat and I fall in love in an instant. I fell in love with *Peggotty*, all 37' (11.3m) of her. When my boss finally gave me the nod and said I could restore her, I was prancing round the yard doing my happy dance for days.

MAYBE I'D BITTEN OFF MORE THAN I COULD CHEW

Before arriving at Dennett's I had done a basic 2-year apprenticeship, so this was by far the biggest project I had ever taken on. The first thing on my list was replacing the transom: I swung at it with a hammer and it didn't take long for it to crumble beneath the claw and fall to the ground. Once it was out I sat in the hole where it used to be and wondered if maybe I'd bitten off more than I could chew.

Five days later I had replaced the aft deck beam, four fashion pieces and a 9' (2.7m) wide and 2" (50mm) thick transom. Done in three pieces of iroko, they were not the easiest things to manoeuvre. Even getting them through the thicknesser was a challenge as I tried not to pull the whole machine over. They did wonders for my biceps though. I nearly



broke my right hand and several of my toes but I got it done and it was beautiful, not an imperfection in sight and ready to be faired and varnished once I'd rebuilt the hull.

I always find with any boat that once you've got the first new piece of timber in, it starts to get really exciting. You can see the work ahead of you and a fraction of the finish line.

Next on the list was to get all the old planks off in as few pieces as possible so I could use them as templates for the new ones. This was a painstaking task; I am not a fan of monotony and this was beyond monotonous. I do not deal well with being bored and I start to talk to myself – I mean more than usual. But while slowly hammering out old roves, I did find a satisfaction in watching her construction unfold.

The joys of gerals: while the lands – overlaps – give clinker construction its strength, the bevels must be tapered at stern and stern to ensure the planks lie smoothly, without 'steps'.

BENDING MYSELF INTO A THOUSAND DIFFERENT SHAPES

Over the next five weeks I replanked the starboard side from the garboard right the way up to the sheer at the stern and to the waterline at the bow. This was no easy task. The hardest bit by far was bending myself into a thousand different shapes to fit a 15' (4.6m) stern plank to... well... mid-air. I had to convince my arms that I had a 15' wing span while



Top: Using a cordless drill and hole saw to remove the old fastenings as cleanly as possible.

Left: The original joggled ribs – 60% of the them were so far gone they had to be replaced.

Above: A steambox was used to steam all the oak ribs before shaping them round the hull.

precariously balancing the ends of planks on wobbly staging and banging in shores to make up for my lack of strength. All my ribs were rotten, my stringers had long since fallen out and I was left cutting, planing and carving gerald's, lands and the dreaded reverse gerald's, quietly hoping that my guesses were right. If I failed to get these angles right, I would just end up building a box! These angles are what shape the hull of the boat, they are what make it so beautiful and I had nothing to work from but fresh air. No solid formers, no nothing.

The only job I didn't do was replace the ribs. Once I was half way up on each side, Guy Riviere came along, a giant in comparison to me and with great efficiency steamed, bent and replaced almost every rib. He made it look as though he was

just bending rubber bands. I'm very thankful he was assigned the job; although I don't like to be defeated, I think it would have been an impossible task for me to have done alone. It took us a long time to source the timber for the ribs; it is essential that it's green and sopping wet. We eventually had an oak tree delivered but it was cut the year before and was already too seasoned. A few weeks later another log arrived and although it was freshly cut and sawn, we still ended up soaking it in the river for a week before we could use it.

The only thing I regret from the starboard side was wasting time using old planks as templates. I quickly learned that over the years, *Peggotty* had had so many repairs I could not assume that the lines from old planks were the lines I should

be following. However I had never done it before and although Steve and Michael Dennett were always at hand to lend advice I felt much safer when I had a plank to draw round.

The best bit of boatbuilding wisdom that clicked in my head was 'the smile'. Every time I cut out a length of plank for the boat, it would end up frowning at me. Yet if I looked at the belly of the boat, she clearly smiled from ear to ear. Even after a very strange explanation involving my boss breathing in and out and drawing smiles on his stomach to try to explain it, it still took me a good few weeks to grasp. Every time I clamped the plank on for its final fit, it would smile at me like the Cheshire Cat, I'd take it off to spread the glue on and there it was frowning like a kicked puppy. It just seemed to be one of the many mysteries of boatbuilding. But when I began planking above the waterline it all changed. That was the widest part of her belly and from there on up, all the frowns turned upside down. With the hilarious image of my boss drawing smiles on his sixpack, it all clicked into place.

Below: *Work outside through the winter and with the first sunshine of spring, a boat tent arrives!*

MY ENTHUSIASM TO SEE HER FINISHED HAD NOT DWINDLED

With the starboard side all planked up and ready for the boys to come along and paint, I moved over to the port side, where things were much much worse. Aside from a few of the top planks at the bow, I had to replace everything on this side. Working through the coldest part of the winter by the time I had started on the garboard I was beginning to feel a little sorry for myself but my enthusiasm to see her finished had not dwindled. And another positive note: she had finally been given a tent over her so I no longer had to put up with the rain dripping down my back.

Determined not to make the same mistakes as I did on the other side, I abandoned the old template planks and began to trust my eye as a real shipwright should. I faired the lines of each plank in situ to ensure I made the most of her natural beauty. By now I had mastered the art of the reverse gerald and with my rebate plane, I could create the perfect landing for the next plank so that everything curved, joined and followed on neatly, flowing sweetly from the keel up to the top of the transom.

One of many amazing build techniques I discovered in *Peggotty* are her joggled ribs. We tried to leave as many of the original ribs as was possible but unfortunately by the end there was only about a third of them remaining. At almost 2" (50mm) moulded depth, each steamed rib had been located





Above: Progress! The replaced ribs are clearly visible. **Below:** Abbey with her boatbuilding mentor – and boss – Steve Dennett.

and then neatly notched out by hand in situ to fit the clinker planks, an incredible level of craftsmanship. She was certainly built to last. The joggles in the ribs came in very handy when re-planking because although I had changed the lines slightly to create a fairer shape it was very reassuring to lay up a plank and see it neatly slot into the joggles from the chap in Kent who built her in 1937. I was doing something right.

The final plank on this side really got me! Directly below her top rubbing band lay what may as well have been cotton wool. It took me a day and a half to fit and nearly sent me flying through the yard on several occasions. Being only 13' (4m) long and on the most pronounced curve of the boat it really didn't want to bend naturally. Balanced on some rather precarious staging, I slowly tried to determine the best methods of clamping to ensure it didn't snap or spring out and take my front teeth with it. Tapering from 3½" (90mm) at the bow to 7" (180mm) wide at its aft end, it took me some time to get the final shape but by the time I had, I had also developed the best method of clamping. The last plank is



always the hardest as it has to sit perfectly on the land of the previous plank but the gerald also has to slide neatly up beneath the following plank and when there is that much pressure from the bend it can be very tricky not to mess it up. With lots of slow clamping and gentle tapping, it slid in perfectly for the last time. The planking was complete.

Over time I had begun to dread finishing her. Over 72 days – aka 1,728 hours! – of intense boatbuilding, I have never had so much fun, learned so much or worked so hard. I will be sad to see her go. Thankfully though, she is now owned by two great couples who are going to keep *Peggotty* on the Thames and take part in all of

the Dunkirk events; if you see her out on the water be sure to give them a wave. It's safe to say I will never give up building boats and I am really looking forward to the next big project.

CONTACTS

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