

Riverwatch: Little ship may have changed course of history

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BOATBUILDER Michael Dennett has a very special reason for his love of Dunkirk Little Ships - his dad was one of thousands of British servicemen plucked from the beaches outside the French port back in 1940, as part of what was known as Operation Dynamo.

So when Michael heard from two of his customers that one of the historic little ships was about to be scrapped at a Norfolk boatyard, he and his son, Stephen, stepped in to rescue it.

MB278 - a 30-foot ex-naval pinnace built in 1914 - was transported back to their boatyard at Laleham Reach and is undergoing a complete rebuild. The idea is to have the work completed in time for the boat to join with up to 50 more of the 'little ships' making the journey back across the Channel to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the evacuation in May.

Michael said: "Every time I work on a Dunkirk boat - and we've got six of them here at the moment - I think it just might have been the one that rescued my dad. And if he hadn't been brought back to England neither I, nor Stephen, would probably be here now - it's a sobering thought."

The Dennetts have done a lot of research into the background of the boat - which was called Roma when they took it over - and discovered that it has a fascinating history. It was used as an admiral's launch aboard a number of famous Royal Navy ships including HMS Resolution, HMS Barham, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Erebus.

It nearly missed the Dunkirk evacuation because it was crushed in an accident in Portsmouth Harbour and sank. But it was quickly raised, restored and had a new engine fitted and made the trip along with hundreds of other small craft.

Michael and Stephen are funding the restoration work themselves, but they hope to find a buyer for the little ship during the 70th anniversary celebrations.

"We couldn't let this piece of our heritage die," said Stephen. "If you look in the forward cabin, you can still see a line of bullet holes in the hull from a German machine gun - she's got so much history about her."

Historic she may be, but by the time the Dennetts have finished with her she'll be as good as new.

"She'll have a new engine - supplied by Nanni Diesels - and she'll have been completely refitted inside," said Stephen. "She'll be a perfect river boat - but strong enough to take to sea as well because we've sheathed the hull in fibreglass."

The Dennetts expect MB 278 to fetch around £60,000 when finished, which is a great deal of money. But for someone interested in buying a unique slice of British military history, she's a snip.