

# Yard filled with Thames history

BY MARTIN SMITH; PHOTOS BY RAY LITTLE

If you, dear Classic Boat reader, were strolling along the Thames towpath between Staines and Chertsey, on entering Laleham reach just beyond the waterworks, your gaze would undoubtedly be drawn to the inside of the bend by the ranks of attractive classic watercraft rafted out into the stream. The exact make-up of the collection alters, but the urge to stop awhile and admire the boats on show is always irresistible.

The boatshed and slipway of Dennetts yard have been a focal point for owners of elegant craft seeking rebuild, refurbishment or repair since Mike Dennett built the place in 1987 and there are always plenty of rivercraft moored along the yard's 120ft (37m) of river frontage. The site had been used for boats long before Mike took over, though, as he found when he started turning the soil and loads of old enamelled river licence plates emerged.



Mike started his boat working life, after dropping out of school at the age of 15, at the Horace Clarke boatyard in Sunbury-on-Thames before undertaking an apprenticeship at Walton Yacht Works, producing MTBs for the Royal Navy. Finishing his time back at Sunbury in the George Wilson yard, at the age of 22 he soon set out on his own. From working out of the back of his van he soon progressed to renting space in other yards until he eventually invested in his own site when land became available and began building his slipway and sheds. Today, the business is a partnership along with his son, Steve, who has inherited his father's affinity for timber vessels. There are five other permanent workers and Mike is proud that many of his workforce have been with him for more than ten years; some, like himself, who couldn't see out their mainstream education.

"That slipway is the best thing I've ever built," points out Mike, who is still in charge at the yard and still on-site every day. "It's always in use and must have earned us a fortune over the years. I found that the land was for sale when I was working along the river, and then built the slip and buildings myself. We add to the facilities when we can afford to - we've just bought the bit of land on the far side - but it's pretty much the same as when I moved here." The slipway may have shown Dennetts a profit, but it saves customers money too, costing just a fraction to remove a boat from the water compared to a crane lift-out.



**"That slipway is the best thing I've ever built"**

**Mike Dennett**

The thin strip of land that comprises Dennetts' yard stretches a surprisingly long way back inland and is home to all manner of classic craft in various states of undress. There seems to be a grading of craft from the grand, glossy, up-and-running vessels in the water, such as Malcolm Campbell's ex, *Bluebird of Chelsea*, and the Dunkirk Little Ship *Gay Venture*, through those in various phases of repair within the shed - most notably, Admiralty pinnace *Sea Witch*, in for a new transom - to the hulks at the back of the yard that have not smelled the opening of a fresh tin of paint or varnish in a very long time.

The back of the yard is where dreamers can wander and fill their heads with imaginings of how these boats - some not much more than collections of planks and ribs - might be resurrected to and beyond their former states of glory, sweeping up prizes at shows and gaining admiring glances on days out along the Thames. But the desire, along of course with the funds, are all that is needed to turn the dream into reality, because Mike can provide everything else to return any of these gently ageing piles of timber back to a pristine state.

Among the hulks are some seriously important boats too: classic day launches are becoming a fairly common sight on the Thames and of these the Andrews marque is perhaps the best known, but tucked away in Mike's yard is Andrews Day Launch No 1, the very first to be built. Mike