



Harbour Marine Services

The yard that John built

Peter Willis visits Southwold and meets John Buckley, owner of the yard that can do anything - but prefers to be restoring wooden boats

Southwold Harbour lies at the mouth of the River Blyth in Suffolk. It runs along the river's north shore, locally known as Blackshore, for about a mile, and has been used by fishermen for centuries, and by yachtsmen for many decades.

The shoreline now is dominated by the main shed of Harbour Marine (or HMS - Harbour Marine Services). It looks as if it has been there as long as the ancient tarred-wood fishermen's sheds that surround it, but in fact it's been there less than 20 years and is a steel-framed building, covered at the council's insistence with blackened planks.

It was built by Harbour Marine's owner, the young John Buckley, who had started the business in Lowestoft a few years previously, in 1987, repairing Dragons and Flying 15s for the Royal Norfolk and Suffolk YC. He moved to Southwold, initially into the building next door, in 1990.

John was indeed very young, not yet 20, when he set up in business. He'd just graduated from the International Boatbuilding Training College (IBTC) in Lowestoft, where he'd gone at the age of 17.

He'd grown up far from the Suffolk coast, but in a boaty environment at Weybridge near the Thames. "I started messing around there when I was eight years old," he reminisces. "Got a Saturday job at Terry Tappin's yard. In fact he's just died - our brokerage may be selling his motor yacht."



Above: Harbour Marine's main shed, with *Gralian's* bow
Above right: Conservation of the steam ship *Robin* last year was the yard's biggest job to date

Left, clockwise from top: In the main shed: *Leila*, the current major project, *Gralian*, and YW 5-tonner *Dynamene*

The original shed quickly became too small, explains John. "We built three boats in there, then took a contract to build two 12-metre Simpson catamarans. We started them there, but it wasn't wide enough so we built this one and moved into it. In fact we've just taken over the old shed again - we now call it the No 2 shed - about a year ago, to give ourselves some more space."

John quickly found a rapport with traditional wooden boats, and although Harbour Marine operates as a general-purpose yard, capable of carrying out whatever work any local or visiting boat might need, it's easy to see from a look around the two sheds that wooden-boat owners seek out his services for in-depth

restoration as well as routine maintenance. He's restored any number of the Peter Duck class yachts and looked after Arthur Ransome's *Nancy Blackett* for many years, for both the previous and present owners.

Occupying the main shed at the time of CB's visit late last year - and probably still there - were four very varied traditional craft, two of them - *Leila* (see below) and *Gralian*, a gentleman's 45ft (13.7m) motor yacht built by Saunders Roe in Cowes in 1937 - major long-term projects.

Also in the main shed are *Blue Waters*, a 38ft (11.6m) Thornycroft TSDY and *Dynamene*, a sweet little Yachting World 5-tonner. Next door in No 2 shed we find *Mera*, a 1936 Silverette cruiser undergoing a "virtual rebuild" and the only clinkerbuilt Maurice Griffiths Tidewater.

A fair guide to the level of expertise and dedication to be found in any yard is the boats owned by the staff themselves. John's is *Tranquebar*, a 1958 Molich-type Danish ketch, 41ft (12.5m) in mahogany on oak with teak topsides, which he gets to sail one or twice a season.

Grace of Sole Bay is a wooden new-build project by shipwright Tim Kirk and wife Barbara, who is John's PA. At 49ft (14.9m) she's a slightly stretched Bruce Roberts Spray 45 design. They started her in 1997 and hope to be sailing her next summer.

And between the two sheds is *Xanadu*, a 55ft (16.8m) Curtis and Pape cruiser being rebuilt by engineer Steve Buckell. She's Steve's fifth rebuild.

John has around 16 people on the payroll, covering a wide range of trades, which is how Harbour Marine landed the biggest and most unusual single job it has ever undertaken, the major conservation of the coaster SS *Robin*, one of the National Historic Ships' Core Collection and described as 'the world's oldest complete steamship,' built in 1890 at Thames Ironworks in Blackwall - not that far from where *Leila* was built, in fact.

The culmination of the job last summer was to lift the 143ft (44m) ship onto her newly-built floating dock, a never-previously-attempted job using two of the

UK's biggest cranes.

Back at Southwold, Harbour Marine's foreshore is lined with winter haul-outs, and beyond that are the newly-installed Walcon

pontoons with uprated power and lighting, ready to welcome visiting yachtsman.

The Blyth has no bar, and deep water, but the entrance can be tricky at certain states of the tide. Many a visiting yachtsman has been grateful to spy the figure of John Buckley walking out to the north pierhead with a mobile phone or handheld VHF (or sometimes coming out in a rib) to guide him in. John likes to look after his customers.

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Restoration of *Leila*

Leila, a 42ft (12.8m) gaff cutter with a fine lute stern, was built in 1892 at Bow on the Thames. She's owned by the *Leila* Sailing Trust which, once she is restored, intends to use her to provide sail training for local young people. Restoration has proceeded with the help of the Heritage Lottery fund - though there's still some way to go in raising funds. So far John and his team have attended to the frames (50 per cent renewed) and other structural members, and she's now 50 per cent replanked in Honduras mahogany ("reclaimed, thank God," says John). John's brief is to get her afloat with new bulkheads, whereupon students of Great Yarmouth College and Lowestoft College will complete the fit-out either at HMS or Lowestoft's Heritage Quay.

