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BMS Meetings Reviews

Wooden Narrow Boat Building - Jem Bates

by Graham Beard

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| Dates: | The Rolt Centre, 18th November 2005 |
| Speaker: | Jem Bates: (Puttenham, Aylesbury http://batesboatyard.co.uk/) |
| Reviewer: | Graham Beard |
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Jem Bates is a modest and quietly-spoken man, yet he held a well-attended meeting in thrall all evening as he shared his enthusiasm for wooden narrow boat building - the craft which is not only his trade, but his mission and his way of life.

Jem's love of boats and waterways began early, when he lived in Leighton Buzzard as a young lad and went sailing with his grandfather - who had also been a boat builder. The family trade skipped a generation when Jem, whilst at university studying English, found part-time work at Tooley's yard in Banbury. These were the twilight years of Tooley's, and Jem found it a rather chaotic and anachronistic workplace where the suspicions and trade secrecy of previous generations prevented the yard from moving into the future. However, Herbert Tooley, though retired, still visited the yard every week and gave Jem many useful tips and the invaluable advice of years of experience in the trade. Jem eventually worked full-time, for three years, and then decided to go solo. The 'Heath Robinson' steam-box arrangement at Tooley's left a lot to be desired, and Jem built his own portable box from pieces of scrap and set about looking for permanent premises.



Yard work



Slipway



Yard restoration

Though Tooley's yard was chaotic and ramshackle, it was still possible to build anything there. Today, depressingly, it is enclosed within a soulless shopping centre, sanitized and all but useless for serious work (simpler jobs such as blacking are still carried out). Similarly, most of the other old boat-yards have disappeared, or - as at Bulls Bridge Depot or Walker's at Rickie - supermarkets now occupy the site and are therefore no longer available. Jem found it really galling that the dry-dock at Bull's Bridge survives and could be used, but instead has become a dumping ground for rubbish. Equally galling is the thought that in all probability no-one even knows what it is or what its was used for.



Restoration

With no traditional sites available Jem was initially itinerant, taking his work - his mobile steam-box and strings of breasted-up wooden boats - up and down the system to wherever he could find a little space to work, which was mainly

at cheaper docks in the north. Eventually he found an acre of waterside land below Puttenham locks on the Aylesbury Arm, where his yard is now well established and where Jem lives with his family aboard the star class G.U. butty Mira. Latterly he has taken over the dry-dock at Bulbourne too, where work can be carried out undercover. The two sites are always busy.

At Puttenham Jem restored his 1937 Claytons boat Severn. Converted to a motor in 1944 Severn is known to have been paired with Gifford on the oil-run to Stanlow in the '40s and '50s. Severn ended up sunk at Banbury where it was known as 'The Gunwales Boat,' because that was all that was visible. After Severn was restored Jem still suffered the jocular taunts of old boatmen, such as Arthur Bray who would make bailing-out gestures as he passed by.

Severn won the Narrow Boat Owners Club Keay Award for its restoration, and its launch at Puttenham was used to promote the new yard and to persuade local councilors to secure the yard's future. Severn then went to work loading timber from Leicester, winning another award, this time from SAVE for the environmental benefits of water-carrying. For a while Severn was paired with ex-G.U. butty Serpens laying fibre-optic cables. Severn is still in use for towing at the yard and round about.

Jem gave an outline history of the wooden narrow boat, which has its origins, along with craft of all kinds, in the ancient dug-out log boats of prehistoric times. On canals the long, thin 'starvationer' coal tubs of the Duke's mines at Worsley were perhaps the proto-type narrow boat. Boat-builders from the Severn and from Wales were brought up north to build craft for the Bridgewater Canal. The form and dimensions we are familiar with today, however, are the result of the way that the canal system developed and are largely owing to James Brindley's choice of the narrow lock when building the original Grand Cross of the English waterways. The form of the boats remained virtually unchanged until the introduction of engines in the late 19th century, then first iron and later steel for hull construction.

Until relatively recently all boats were built in wood. The ancient methods were tried and tested. As late as the 1950s the steaming and bending of planks, the pegging, the nailing, the chalice-making, caulking and tarring; all this was as familiar to boat-builders as the husbandry of boat horses was to those who operated the system. Today, after only a short passage of time, both wood-working skills and the keeping of horses are for most people ancient history and unknown trades. For this reason Jem is keen to take the fear and mystery out of wooden narrow boat ownership and maintenance. A wooden boat would originally have had a working life expectancy of between twenty and thirty years. Yet there are boats on the system today that are seventy years old, or more. Jem admitted it was understandable that people are wary of becoming involved with wooden narrow boats, which are seen as a bottomless pit into which money must be poured.

With some excellent pictures and video clips Jem showed a wide selection of the many boats that he has worked on, and which he has encouraged their owners to work on too, trying their hand at some of the simpler tasks. This leaves Jem free to concentrate on the specialist work, such as steaming. In this way basic maintenance and even major restoration is made less daunting and expertise is shared.

Jem aims to make his yard a place where people come to learn and explore; where skills can be passed on so that all the while more and more people become enthused by the idea of working in wood. He has a handful of full-time employees, but owners and others are welcome to use his yard for D.I.Y. purposes and to benefit from the presence of the skilled workers.

In the same way people bring their own talents to the yard too. Such is the potential for cross-fertilisation of skills and ideas that when the sculptor Nick Davis and his partner Anita Boose brought Hood to the yard for restoration, Nick was persuaded to use his mobile foundry to cast new parts for boats. He also made new bollards for the moorings - but these were no ordinary bollards! Nick formed moulds using the heads of everyone on the site (the 'death-mask' process), then cast them in bronze. Now each individual is immortalised as a bollard, bolted to the staithe.

Perhaps the oddest spin-off from the meeting-of-minds concept was an approach from the editor of Gay Times who wanted to do an article on 'Narrow Boats and Bondage.' Though non-plussed, Jem entertained the idea on the basis that any publicity is good publicity!

Jem and his team have recently built a completely new full-length wooden narrow boat, the aptly named Maid of Oak. On its tests up the cut at Bulbourne Jem assured us Maid of Oak went "like chalice off a shovel." The boat's 'Semi-Trad' form may not satisfy the purists, but it has moved the concept of wooden boat-building into the future. Maid of Oak is a remarkable achievement - not least because most people think that wooden narrow-boat building died with the completion of Raymond in the 1950s.

Whilst respecting the past Jem takes a practical attitude to the traditions of wooden boat building. He is not afraid to employ more efficient modern tools where possible and certainly doesn't share Tom Rolt's romantic view of the old long-saw pits. At Puttenham, timber for bottom boards is planked using a chain-wheel; and a bandsaw cuts timber for the keelsons. Side planks are steamed in Jem's steam-box which generates steam in five minutes. Chalice, however, is still made from the traditional ingredients, and the junior employee's first job will most likely be to gather horse manure from the nearby field - pacifying the resident stallion meanwhile. Caulking is still mixed from horsehair, hemp and tar, and caulked seams are rolled with a coal-tar and pitch sealant. Timbers are selected for each individual job; the shape and grain of the wood dictating the purpose for which it is eventually employed - stem-posts, knees or counter blocks. Since good quality elm is now almost impossible to obtain, oak is substituted (there are some historic precedents for this). Recently Jem stocked up on mature timber when the estate Forester at Luton Hoo was thinning out woodland in the park. Completed boats are launched in the traditional sideways fashion, sliding towards the water on greased steel girders assisted by carefully operated pulleys. This process (in an icy winter scene) was dramatically illustrated in one of

Jem's video clips.

All kinds of work are carried out at Puttenham and Bulbourne yards; from simple maintenance jobs to complete restorations, some completed quickly, others an ongoing process. Mostly work is concentrated in the important areas of bottom-boards, chine-planks and keelsons. It was very encouraging to find that, far from being a dying trade, wooden narrow boat building and repair seems to be booming - in no small part owing to Jem's enthusiasm. Bates' Boatyard is one of few that are actually expanding. Above all Jem's yard is a modern, forward-looking business. He admits that in many respects the building up of skills and conserving of traditions is more important to him than the boats. He wants to ensure that the low-profile, everyday jobs are given as much priority as the glamorous 'Heritage' high-profile developments.

Jem's talk was extremely heartening, and inspired great hope for the future - not least in respect of the urgent task of restoration and conservation at the Port. His words will have encouraged many listeners to take a greater interest in wooden narrow boats and the crafts surrounding them.

Boats mentioned by Jem in his talk included the ex-Barlows Kent, which once carried coal from the Warwickshire coalfields. It passed to Blue Line and then was converted for the unlikely purpose of modelling brassieres! A full-length cabin had seats down either side of a central cat-walk. Kent underwent two stages of restoration, the first in 1978, and then in Jem's hands in 1998. Hood, mentioned above, was an 'Essy' (S.E.) Barlow boat - the company's only wooden motor. Built in 1943 it transferred to Blue Line in 1957. Its present owners have worked hard on its restoration. Relunched in December 2004 Hood was awarded the 2005 Keay award by the HNBOC.

When BCN Joey number 305 (built in 1922) came to Jem for work he made the interesting discovery that there were different numbers of planks on each side. Narrower planks made for a greater number of rows on one side, whilst broader timbers meant fewer on the other. Jem saw this as a good example of the practical mind of the wooden boat builder who had made best use of the materials he had to hand.

The 1936 BCN Tug Progress was a product of Keay's yard at Birchills (now, like all the others, gone). It towed strings of joeys between Cannock and Tipton before being sold on to Leonard Leigh. It later became a hire boat before returning to Ken Keay's ownership in the 1970s.

The oldest boat in the yard was Peary. Built in 1912 and named for a (now forgotten) polar explorer it is, appropriately, an iceboat. At 44' it is somewhat longer than other iceboats, like Marbury.

Drake was built by Walkers in the 1930s as the butty Taunton for the G.U. It was towed to Jem's yard by Severn.

Hagley was another big Rickie butty, built in 1938 and one of the last of the huge fleet that the G.U.C.C.Co. commissioned during that decade in anticipation of a great revival in trade. Venus, built in 1934 was a motor in the first, prototype pairs that developed into the G.U. star class.

Carp 2 is a tug, originally built inside (or on top of) the hold of Carp the wooden Jasher (now defunct), and eventually separated from it in a rather unorthodox (and non-BW approved) maneuver in a lock.

Alongside the narrow boats Jem's yard has also accommodated Henrietta, a wooden cruiser.