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The hunt for a wooden classic

We follow Mark Wightman on his quest to buy his ideal classic wooden craft

Buying a classic wooden motor yacht is a very different exercise to buying a conventional used GRP boat. No two wooden boats are ever the same and the decision is often based as much on emotional attraction as price and condition. But the decision-making process – the fears, the compromises, the surprisingly attractive features you come across – are the same for any boat buyer.

Reader Mark Wightman's inspiration to buy a classic came from his formative experiences. As a boy he lived on board his parents' 1932 wooden ketch *Duckling*, moored in Mylor Creek, Cornwall. He fondly recalls that the engine had to be started on petrol before being switched to paraffin, and that gas lamps were the only source of lighting. "This is what gave me a love for wooden boats," says Mark. "In fact, they were the best years of my life!"

Now, 40 years on, Mark is a nightclub owner in Germany with a track record of owning unusual boats in unusual places. His first was a 35-footer in the Baltic. His second – a 1968 steel ketch with "loads of teak" that he spent copious amounts of time and money getting just right. Now he has a 75ft

Formosa ketch in Ecuador on which he plans to cruise around South America. Like its predecessor, it's a labour of love on which he, along with his ever-patient wife Sylvia and numerous tradesmen, have toiled for three years.

Now Mark is looking for another boat. This will be his British bolthole, moored somewhere on the Thames, a base to live on when he's in the UK. The difference is that this boat is to be a motor yacht and made of wood.

By the time we meet Mark he has already looked at two Dunkirk Little Ships, both ex-navy pinnaces at 38ft and 43ft. Neither was suitable.

So why take on a classic wooden boat? "They do not depreciate like modern boats," he says. "But they are high maintenance and you shouldn't be thinking about the money. The real reasons for buying one are the way it looks and the pride of owning something that is appreciated wherever you go."

Mark is looking for something as near-original as possible, while still being practical. It has to be capable of cruising the Thames and the South Coast with space for two couples. He's prepared to spend up to £300,000, but after his previous restoration projects he wants something on which the hard work has largely been done.



"The real reasons for buying a classic are the way it looks and the pride of owning something that is appreciated wherever you go"



Mark and Sylvia give *Vagabond* the once-over

OPTION 1 £320,000



Wairakei II

The first boat we view with Mark is *Wairakei II*, a beautifully restored Dunkirk Little Ship built at the Silver yard. She is on sale through Henley Sales & Charter and currently belongs to a Spanish marina owner who brought her back to the UK to take part in the 70th anniversary of Dunkirk.

The first thing that strikes Mark is the glass-like finish of the varnish.

Apparently, the owner insisted on having her revarnished after every three months in the blistering Spanish sun.

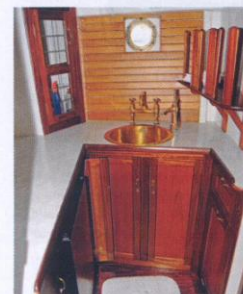
Stepping on board is like stepping back in time. Her interior is original but also immaculate with no evidence of her 78 years of use. Every brass fitting is pristine and the only concessions to 21st-Century living are the Raymarine electronics, the pair of 105hp Volvo TAMD22 engines and the bow thruster to help manoeuvre her long, thin hull into tight berths.

These features aside, the boat is original, which appeals to Mark. The downside of this is that in the 1930s boats were spartan affairs, the

emphasis being very much on practical solutions rather than family comforts. Mark would consider updating the toilets to electric ones, but anything more extensive would compromise its originality and this is where the boat falls short for him.

Also, Mark wants a boat that can accommodate two couples in comfort and *Wairakei II*'s cabins cannot offer this. The main cabin is located aft in the attractive but narrow tapering canoe stern. The two wooden bunks are ideal for children but not an adult couple. Its mid and forward cabins are even smaller than the aft cabin. As is often the case with boats of this age, the forward galley is also on the compact side. The saloon, on the other hand, is a beautiful space as is the wheelhouse, bridge and forward deck.

Mark is full of admiration for *Wairakei II* and her condition but she's so pristine that it leaves him little room for adapting her to his own needs. Maybe his plans to buy a fully restored boat aren't so definitive after all. **MBT**



THE SPECS

Located London
Launched 1932
Builder James Silver of Rosneath
LOA 51ft 7in (15.75m)
Beam 11ft 0in (3.33m)
Construction Pitch pine on oak
Engines Twin 105hp Volvo TAMD22s
Berths Five in three cabins
Contact Henley Sales & Charter
www.hscboats.co.uk



Top: *Wairakei II* is immaculate Above: the cabins were too small Right: beautiful fittings Above right: a compact galley



Vagabond

Vagabond, like **Wairakei II**, is an original Dunkirk Little Ship and was built in 1937 at the Saunders Roe yard in Cowes. Although similar in appearance to **Wairakei II**, with a raised foredeck and near-vertical stem, she is some 7ft shorter and, with an asking price of £95,000, quite a lot cheaper.

At the time of our viewing she was being rewired with tools and equipment cluttering up her interior, which didn't help with first impressions, though it's hard to escape the feeling that she isn't as pretty as the first boat. But even if her varnish may lack the pristine finish of **Wairakei II**'s, Mark is rightly looking deeper. As far as he is concerned, the

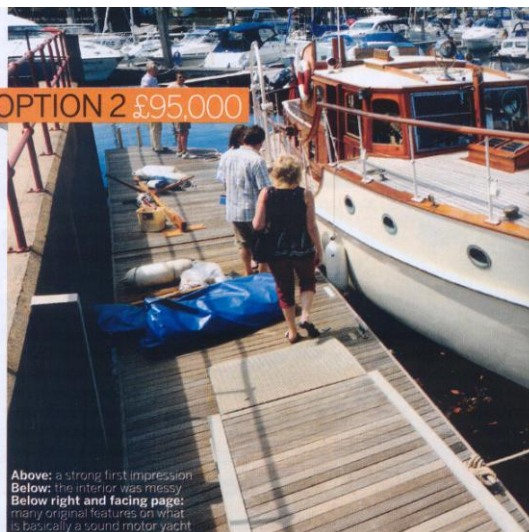
quality of the work done over the years on **Vagabond** is good – quite possibly better than on **Wairakei II**, he ventures. Though the yacht is smaller at 45ft, he does not consider her undersized for his needs. Good use has been made of the available space on board and in relation to her length she is beamier than **Wairakei II**.

Mark appears positive about **Vagabond** but her accommodation still falls short of their needs. All the berths are singles and Sylvia is hesitant at only having one shower on board.

Mechanically, the boat is powered by twin 70hp BMC Thornycroft diesels, which Mark estimates are 30 to 40 years old. "They look good with a fresh coat of paint," he remarks. "But they would have to be surveyed, and I would probably want to repower her with modern engines so that I could be sure she would be totally dependable."

Though sound, the boat poses some problems for Mark – the lack of accommodation and those elderly engines. As before, Mark will not consider altering her layout to accommodate their needs, as this will destroy her originality, as well as create a ton of work: "We don't really want to restore another boat as we are only just finishing our ketch in Equador". **MBY**

OPTION 2 £95,000



Above: a strong first impression
Below: the interior was messy
Below right and facing page: many original features on what is basically a sound motor yacht



THE SPECS

Located Hythe Marina
Launched 1937
Builder Saunders Roe of Cowes
LOA 45ft 0in (13.70m)
Beam 11ft 0in (3.33m)
Construction Teak on oak
Engines Twin 70hp BMC Thornycroft diesels
Berths Two berths in two cabins
Contact Henley Sales & Charter
www.hscboats.co.uk

OPTION 3 £42,000



This photo: Vanessa is the youngest of the three boats. Left: two double cabins below. Below left: the galley-up layout was ahead of its time



Left: some of the woodwork is finger-soft



This photo: Her original BMC Thornycrofts

Vanessa

Mark had already shown an interest in **Vanessa**, a 53ft classic wooden motor yacht built in 1953 by Graham Bunn of Wroxham, before we met up. He had even instructed a surveyor to check on her condition. However, the results were not good. Her retrofitted stabilisers

have allowed water to penetrate around the mounting bolts and now, decades later, with the bilge pump working on a near-continuous basis, you can push your fingers into parts of the woodwork.

Despite this, Mark wants to take a second look. Though not a Dunkirk veteran, **Vanessa** still has all the character of a wooden classic. Her decking is in good order as is her

She has the potential to be a usable cruising boat, not just an attractive boating icon, but the work needed on the hull is formidable

joinery. Her varnish is tired but nothing that could not be sorted out.

Once inside I understand why Mark is so interested in her. The sociable galley-up layout was ahead of its time. Most importantly, she has two good double cabins as well as two heads. She also has an additional external helm position and plenty of deck space.

Clearly she has the potential to be a usable cruising boat. However, the work required on part of the hull is formidable and given Mark's desire to avoid a restoration project, it seems a longshot. **MBY**

THE SPECS

Located Hayling Yacht Company
Launched 1953
Builder Graham Bunn of Wroxham
LOA 53ft 6in (16.20m)
Beam 12ft 0in (3.65m)
Construction Double-skin teak
Engines Twin 55hp Thornycroft
Berths Six in three cabins
Contact Boatshed
www.boatshed.com

WHY BUY A WOODEN BOAT?

The pleasure of owning a classic wooden boat is derived from time spent pottering on the sea or river in a beautifully crafted historic vessel. It's ideal for the person who loves 'messing about in boats' as much as the cruising itself.

Being wooden, these boats are subject to frequent alterations and upgrades at their owners' whim. Rather than a fixed plastic moulding, carpentry and individual touches are everywhere on a wooden boat.

The enjoyment of researching the history of a boat built many years ago and the custodianship of a piece of history such as **Wairakei II**, a Dunkirk Little Ship, is all part of the pleasure. It gives you the opportunity to enjoy the pageantry and comradeship that these boats encourage among fellow owners, whether its the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships or clubs such as the Bates Starcraft Owners' Club and the British Classic Yacht Club. Owning a yacht like this opens up the opportunity to attend rallies and gives you automatic membership of the 'eccentric owners association'!

The fun of exhibiting your pride and joy at boat shows such as the

Thames Traditional Boat Rally, or trundling down to the South Coast for the Cowes or Fowey Classic Weeks, adds a whole new dimension to owning a boat. Who doesn't stop and stare at a varnished wheelhouse and polished brass wheel?

If properly looked after, classic wooden boats maintain their value well and at point of purchase there is no VAT. For that reason you tend to get more boat for your money than you do when buying a GRP production model, most of which shed value as they age, rather than acquiring the patina of heritage.

Wooden boats also have a lower carbon footprint both in terms of the energy required to build and operate them (most have relatively low-powered engines), and because they are biodegradable.

Finally, there is a spiritual and emotional connection between a proud owner and his treasured wooden boat – an affinity between mankind, his materials and his tools evolved over the millennia, and that's still as relevant as ever even in the age of the iPad and BlackBerry.

Gillian Nahum, Henley Sales & Charter, www.hscboats.com

THE VERDICT



This photo: Mark takes a second look

Much to my surprise Mark calls a few days later to say he has agreed to buy **Vanessa**. She was on the market for £42,000; Mark offered £30,000 to take account of the surveyor's findings. He has also set aside a further £80,000 to sort out the hull, fit new engines and tidy up the interior. To save costs, Mark will send over two of his own carpenters to work with the local boatyard and renew the beams. He intends to

replace the original 55hp Thornycrofts with twin 86hp Perkins to give him the modern reliability he craves while still retaining the character of a traditional engine brand.

After all his good intentions to avoid another labour-intensive project, Mark couldn't resist the allure of bringing an old girl back to full fitness while reconfiguring it to suit his own needs. We'll keep you posted on how project **Vanessa** is going. **MBY**