

MORGAN



A suitable case for treatment? Or a strong case for replacement? Trevor Cherrett tells his story.

With photographs by the author.

In 1970, my wife Stella and I took a holiday trip up the Thames with friends in their boat, reading Jerome K Jerome and Kenneth Grahame as we went. We had plenty of time to read because although it was in June, it rained. It rained solidly for 10 days. Eventually the river flooded, forcing us to abandon ship at Lechlade – moored to a tree from which to escape over waterlogged meadows to dry hotels. After 2 days the river went down a bit and we ventured on a hell-for-leather return downstream with the flood, blissfully ignorant of the lock warnings, shooting bridges at breakneck speed and arriving at Caversham in what was possibly a world record time. We never looked back, physically – except to see 50 moored boats watching us shoot a bridge arch at 10 knots – or metaphorically. Ignorance and youth were bliss.

Inspired by this dramatic introduction to inland boating, we bought a pretty 20' (6m) white, clinker-planked mahogany motorboat, decently converted to a small 2 berth cabin cruiser. It leaked a bit but looked nice and popped along very well with a 4hp Stuart Turner engine. It had a forward cockpit with wheel and a tiny aft deck. Our little motorboat was called *Uchi Mata* but we re-named it *Morgan*, from the cult 60s film *Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment*.

So *Morgan* became our new adventure. In truth, I was apprehensive, because I had previously shared the purchase of an old wooden motor-sailer *Lisa* on the South Coast and knew how much work old boats need. *Morgan* was of unknown age

and heritage. It could be troublesome and time-consuming...

And indeed it was, a domestic waterway version of the trials of Odysseus. For the next 30 years *Morgan* travelled the canals and rivers of England: from the comfortable Grand Union of the Home Counties to the desolate skylines of the Fens, waiting at Salter's Lode on the Old Bedford River for the tidal gate to open on to the River Ouse and Denver Sluice – and hoping the engine would start on time for the 10 minute window; up to Cambridge, St Ives and Huntingdon, freezing in the early Spring east winds; pootling down the Stort and the Lea to Tottenham and the East End, before sneaking into posh Regent's Park; back up the Thames and winding round Brindley's Oxford Canal; pattering under Spaghetti Junction and poking through the debris of the ruined Potteries, up to the lost paradise of the Caldon Canal in the Staffordshire Moorlands; mooring up on Sunday nights at whatever convenient spot presented itself and returning next weekend, hoping the boat was safe, to continue the journey.

And what a way to see the country – along and across the ever changing landscapes and townscapes of England and Wales, by intimate and forgotten waterway approaches. Looking at the new world from the old, whether mooring up behind Watford Gap Service Station to get petrol, stopping for lunch at one of Milton Keynes' new city neighbourhood pubs or popping by the town centre shops of Reading. But best of all for this bouncy little clinker launch, we motored up and down



Facing page: Morgan, the intrepid traveller, on the Thames.

Above: Pausing for rest and recuperation.

Below: Repair and rejuvenation... It was never evident why and where he was built, though davit lifting rings bow and stern suggest she may have been a ship's pinnace. The cabin was clearly added later. Have readers any suggestions?

the great and beautiful rivers of England: the Nene, the Great Ouse and its tributaries Wissey, Lark and Cam; the Stort and the Lea to the Thames and the Wey; the Trent and Soar; the Severn, the Warwick and Bristol Avons and the Kennet.

All this, of course, was not without incident. I had already carried out some initial repairs to the hull planking at the stem with a mix of glue and glass cloth during the first winter at the Bletchley Yard, a repair which amazingly lasted its whole cruising life... and an early unwitting attempt at composite timber boatbuilding? But more serious accidents followed: a seized prop on the Nene forced us to abandon the boat below the world's smelliest maggot factory; a cracked plank after a clumsy trailer transfer from the Ouse to the Stort; more cracked planks at Worcester from a wash-bashing trip boat and on the Upper Thames from a rare freezing of the river.

But all damage was repaired sooner or later at friendly local boatyards, with new planks, copper tingles and the occasional full re-fit. Boatyards such as Trevithick's old but masterful woodworking yard at Nottingham, which did such a brilliant job that I abandoned a venture to upgrade my boating with a splendidly converted 4-berth Naval Pinnace and returned to carry on with *Morgan*. So too at Bossom's Yard at Oxford and others at Sawbridgeworth, Pershore and Eynsham, even the Engineer's Depot on the Nene.

So although *Morgan* was an intrepid traveller, he – it was always a 'him' from the start – was also a regular patient for treatment. And there were continuous dilemmas, fed by contradictory folklore familiar to most wooden boat owners and the pages of their magazines: whether to haul out for the winter; whether a mud berth would help the hull 'take up'; and, critically, just how much caulking, tingling and re-planking can be sustained by a hull which has taken so much wear and tear in – and out – of the water. Put another way, can a wooden boat go on for ever if you maintain it well?

Finally, battered and frail but still mobile after 30 years, *Morgan* embarked on what proved to be his last trip: from Eynsham Lock to Oxford and a long stay at Folly Bridge after colliding with some very inattentive Sunday rowers. Then





Above: Morgan's fate was finally sealed by a dramatic storm in Bristol Harbour and a failed bilge pump. Here he is on Life Support and... Below: Though Morgan was taken from Intensive Care to a Special Recovery Unit in Hull, it was discovered the hull was too hogged for realistic restoration. He was condemned to a Pauper's Grave in a faraway place he had never known.

down river to Reading and into the Kennet and Avon Canal, stopping at Aldermaston, Newbury, Great Bedwyn and the famous Barge Inn at Honeystreet. Down the 26 locks of the Caen flight – starting the trusty Stuart on the handle after each lock – through Bath and down the Avon to Bristol. Entering Bristol Floating Harbour with a sense of destination which proved to be permanent...

Morgan's fate was sealed by a dramatic storm in Bristol Harbour and a failed bilge pump. After three reputable wooden boatbuilders had gazed upon his worn timbers and shaken their heads, I finally gave up the attempt to restore *Morgan* myself and sought a good home. One cold Sunday, Huw Jones came down from Hull and took him away. From Intensive Care to the Special Recovery Unit. It was my last shot.

But it was *Morgan's* last trip too. Two weeks later Huw confirmed the hull was too hogged: *Morgan* was doomed.

It's funny how boats grab you. *Morgan* was never a classic and he lacked refinements. But he sat comfortably in the water and he moved beautifully through it too, with the lightest of washes. Crosswinds were rarely a problem to this solid little displacement craft. Only 5' and a bit (1.6m) wide with a draught of 18" (0.46m), he could nose up the smallest and shallowest waterways.

Sitting on the aft deck, watching the bubbling wake and listening to the pop-pop-pop of the little Stuart Turner, was one of the continuous pleasures of travel in *Morgan*. And with the wheel on the foredeck you always felt close to the water, never detached from it. He provided decades of enjoyment.





The Search for a Successor

After *Morgan* disappeared to a pauper's grave, I began to look for another boat, a new venture worthy of the last. It was an opportunity to buy or even build, the perfect boat. But what was the perfect boat? And could it recapture the magic of lost times?

For me it had to be as special, indeed unique, as *Morgan* had been. I favoured wood but wanted a break from heavy maintenance. I wanted rivers and coast rather than canals. I wanted it to be big enough to sleep 2 to 4 people but small enough to get up shallow creeks. I had a reasonable budget but could not justify big spending.

I looked at scores of beautiful old wooden motor cruisers, newish steel cruisers, new GRP cruisers. I talked to boatbuilders across the UK. All of them were unfailingly helpful and informative. I was fascinated by what they had to offer and came very close to buying... indeed I often felt guilty when I did not finally purchase. Especially helpful and worthy of high commendation were Mark Rolt of Bristol Classic Boats, Paul Burborough of Trusty Boats and Nick Smith, builder of beautiful classic wooden boats near Christchurch. I loved Paul Gartside's designs. Catherine Dines at the M J Lewis brokerage at Maldon was especially helpful, along with Gillian Nahum at Henley Sales & Charter and a host of other brokers, builders and owners. I am grateful to them all and can only hope that I did not waste their time; I certainly did not intend to.

I think Hilaire Belloc, a great lover of boats and a great defender of tradition, would have been impressed by how 'proper boats' are still being restored, designed and built – as well as the other sort, of course. In his essay *The Death of the Ship* he grumpily chided: *My boat was the best sea-boat that ever sailed upon the sea. The reason of this was that her lines were of the right sort... But nowadays, what with their boats made like spoons and their boats made like table-knives, and their boats made like tops, and their boats made like scoopers, and their boats made like half-boats, cut away in the middle... Boats have nowadays fallen into chaos, like everything else.*

A boatbuilder who did not make boats like 'spoons' and

whose time I did not waste was Win Cnoops, formerly of the Cooperative Slipway at the Underfall Yard in Bristol Harbour and now Star Yachts. To meet my specifications we discussed the possibility of building a completely new boat, something special. Wood composite to provide classic style with lower maintenance and trailability. A simple cabin with spacious aft deck, not dissimilar to the break-deck motor boat *Lisa* of my youth. Ample room for rear deck activities such as fishing, swimming, sightseeing and socialising. Basic but comfortable weekend accommodation. All at a reasonable budget.

The prospect of a new boat built to a personal specification was highly compelling, along with the fascination of being involved in the design process itself. The new boat would be unique: a 'one-off', just as *Morgan* had been. There were risks, of course, venturing into unknown territory, for both myself as the buyer and Win as the builder. But a decision was made. We shook hands on the project at the Beale Park Boat Show in 2009. The Bristol 22 was born, as her designer Andrew Wolstenholme described in W82's Grand Designs.

Construction began by Easter 2010 and the Bristol 22 was substantially ready for the Southampton Boat Show in September. There it attracted much attention, for it is without question a beautiful boat. Quite stunning, in fact, so much so that I was tempted to name it *Trop Belle Pour Moi*, after another much later film. But instead it has been named *Morgana*, *Morgan's* spellbinding younger sister.

Win and his team have done a great job. Everyone – and especially those who really know about these things – has praised very highly the quality of construction and finish. This is a well designed boat which has been built with great craftsmanship. Not surprisingly, another larger boat in similar style, the Bristol 27, was commissioned from Andrew and Win and appeared at the Southampton show in 2011.

Afloat Again

In October, *Morgana* made her first acquaintance with the water and successful 'sea trials' took place in Bristol Harbour and in the Bristol Channel in March. She had an early outing in Milford Haven in May. A trip to Bath and back followed. In July she was displayed at the Thames Traditional Boat Rally, followed by a delightful cruise up the Thames to Oxford and above. Now the Severn beckons, via the Avon Gorge, Bristol Channel and Sharpness Canal: river, sea, estuary and canal.

The prospect of setting off for new journeys is a kind of magic. At long last I have found a worthy successor to *Morgan* and his odyssey of the waterways in what looks and feels like the perfect boat. It is a happy conclusion and I have learned much from my experience.

There are obvious lessons but ones I had to work through. Firstly, the 'perfect boat' can only be perfect for the purposes intended. *Morgana* is perfect for weekend cruising on rivers, the wider canals, harbours, estuaries and inshore coasts in benign weather. Other versions of the Bristol range would be perfect for longer sea cruises or day tripping on rivers and canals; I'm sure Win Cnoops would build them for you. But the specification needs to be clear from the day building commences.

Secondly, commissioning a new boat is a great privilege



In the cockpit and down below on Morgana. She was built using modern wooden boat construction methods – epoxy glued western red cedar strip planking over CNC-cut moulds and glassed inside and out – by Win Cnoops at Star Yachts, Bristol. She's a Bristol 22, designed by Andrew N Wolstenholme who also took these pictures at the Thames Traditional Boat Rally in 2011.



and a great joy but also a demanding one. There is much to learn about the possibilities and limitations of alternative materials and construction techniques. Ideally for the buyer who wants to be engaged in the design and building process, a good three-way partnership between buyer, builder and designer is desirable.

Thirdly, has my Proustian search for lost times been successful? To be properly back on the water after nearly a decade is very satisfying. To be back on the water in such a beautiful boat is a joy but to bring back all the magical ingredients of *Morgan's* sojourns is in the end, of course, impossible. They will rightly remain unique, part of particular past times, places and people. But *Morgana* is already creating her own magic – her own special times – on river, harbour and sea.

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BUILDING MORGANA

Win Cnoops offers the builder's perspective.

The Bristol 22 came about by a fortunate set of circumstances: a boatbuilder who wanted to recreate a type of boat he admired; a prospective client who was looking for 'something special' on traditional lines; a designer we bumped into on the day the builder and client came to an understanding and who had already done much of the development work to come up with a design that had in a way matured.

Strip plank construction was not my automatic choice but for a boat that might travel regularly on a trailer and live out of the water as an indirect consequence, it does make a lot of sense. Traditionally built boats do not like drying out, either by fierce winds on the motorway or during a long term rest ashore. I was happy to oblige Trevor and have my first full-scale foray into this building method.

There is plenty of literature about strip planking and the fellow members of the WBTA – the Wooden Boatbuilders Trade Association – who are familiar with the process were incredibly generous – and diverse! – in their advice. Epoxies and glass cloth are already a standard tool of the trade in day-to-day boat building and repair, so going from traditional boat building to modern timber construction is not such a big step.

You have to adapt your way of thinking for the basic construction set up but even then it is not always easy to decide where you can glue and bond and where the traditional way of bedding compound and mechanical fasteners is more appropriate. As a boatbuilder who has repaired many boats, I also tend to think of the

consequences for the future: if this fails, how am I going to take it apart? In the right places, glue can produce longer lasting joints and therefore finish but it will inevitably be more difficult to repair should it be needed. It definitely is a balancing act, with probably as many different choices as there are boatbuilders!

The build starts with a building 'table' set up accurately and level in all directions, which makes setting up all the CNC-cut moulds quick and easy. The planking stock was Western Red Cedar which we milled up ourselves into tongue and groove strips. The hull is built upside down and planking starts from the bottom – the sheer – up after the backbone of stem, hog and transom are attached to the moulds. We were lucky that we didn't need to adapt the run of the planking halfway through as is often the case

We chose to use epoxy and not polyurethane for gluing the planks even though it's much harder to clean up. When planking was complete and faired, bi-axial glass cloth was applied, set in epoxy. After filling with an epoxy fairing compound and sanding back, the hull could be turned over for glassing the inside. This created the base for bonding in all the plywood bulkheads and other structural elements like engine bearers, floors and decks. Apart from the mahogany sheerstrake which is a thin plank glued to the hull, the rest of the building process is basically a traditional fit out.

The building process of the larger Bristol 27 – see W86 – is described in more detail on Star Yachts' Facebook page and she will be reviewed by Peter Goad in our May/June issue, on sale 26 April.