

Bonnie Wee boats

a story about a film about Iain Oughtred



left: Iain prepares for the Ceilidh – Struan Cottage, Skye.

far left: Shoot Day One – Balmoral Beach, Sydney.

by ANDY MCINTYRE

Growing up as an avid dinghy sailor I loved the monthly boating mags ... *Seacraft*, *Sea Spray*, *Modern Boating* and of course *Australian Sailing*. As soon as dad was done with them I'd set about memorising their contents for instant recall in maths, chemistry or whatever other torture the next school day offered up. In my era, those of us with a passion for sailing were likely to have had the same inauguration – a winter helping out in the garage while a new plywood dinghy took shape. In our household it was a Manly Junior – but the same scenario was replicated around the country with Sabots, Mirrors, Minnows, Cadets, VJ's and Holdfast Trainers. It was in those formative years that I first happened upon a chap named Ian Outhred – author of quirky articles in *Australian Sailing* magazine about featherweight plywood Moths and making your own sails. Years later I would make the connection between Ian Outhred the Moth/Gwen 12 guy and the revered Scotsman Iain Oughtred – successful naval architect whose beautiful hand drawn dinghy designs helped spark a revival in

traditional wooden boats and boatbuilding. Apparently after leaving Australia he adopted the Gaelic spelling of his name in recognition of his

ancestry. Nowadays similar sentiments would be expressed with less subtlety – probably via a trip to the local tattoo parlour.

Scroll forward another 20 odd years. I'm living in Melbourne, still bitten by the wooden boat bug and working in film and television. Inspired by the Couta Boat scene, the biennial Hobart festival and a race-tuned Mirror still in the shed I started to search online for DVD's about wooden boats and boatbuilding. Gary Kerr had produced a very informative doco on the Couta Boat revival in Victoria and Lauren Howard another excellent film on the restoration of Sean Langman's Ranger class yacht *Maluka*. WoodenBoat's online catalogue yielded a few titles but more up the 'how to' end rather than any sort of

wooden boat inspired journey. I decided then and there that one day I'd make a film about wooden boats and the extraordinary people that bring them to life. We even could upload clips onto YouTube entitled *Planking* and maybe it would all go viral, I thought. Anyway, it was now on the bucket list.

In the months that followed I'd completed a strip kayak and was in search of something a bit different for the next woodworking project. After a conversation with Robert Ayliffe a set of Iain Oughtred's plans arrived ... a pretty little day sailer with spritely flare forward and tumblehome aft. Adorned with sweet traditional lines yet undoubtedly conceived by someone with a racing pedigree. Iain had named her Shearwater.

Opening the plans package it seemed to me that these exquisite pages deserved the white glove treatment, so intricate were the hand drawn images on every page. My wife was equally impressed – "these belong on the wall, not in the workshop!" This was the work of an artist in the purest sense. Others, it seemed, shared our view. UK author Nic Compton had just completed Iain's biography, quoting many eminent sources around the world on Iain's accomplishments. Whilst unanimous in their acknowledgment that Oughtred's naval architecture was absolutely sound, all believed he was an artist first and foremost. Aesthetics always prevailed in his designs.



top: Iain aboard his first commissioned design 'Duyfken' on Sydney Harbour.
above: WoodenBoat HQ – Brooklin, Maine.

I was fascinated. If this guy happened to be an expatriate sculptor living in Tuscany and shipping his work all over the world he'd be front and centre on an episode of *Australian Story*. Yet hardly anyone outside the wooden boat community knew anything about him. As the Shearwater took shape many of my own friends took an interest and wanted the lowdown on this odd chap from the Isle of Skye. That he was an expat Aussie added to the intrigue. We gave away dozens of copies of Nic's book before working out the logical next step. My wooden boat film would tell Iain's story.

curves that were to follow on the drafting table. Ever the perfectionist, half-breadths are checked, sheerlines re-drawn and other, almost imperceptible changes effected until artistic perfection is achieved. Then (probably after a few more tweaks) the new design is shipped off to one of a growing band of Oughtred disciples around the globe. And so it goes that these elegant, functional designs emerge from the mind's eye of an artist and become entrusted to the hands of another dreamer, usually an enthusiastic amateur with a bucket list not unlike my own.



For those who commit to building an Oughtred design, what lies ahead is a journey that borders on the spiritual. Finely honed edge tools hum away unveiling the aroma and texture of the chosen timbers ... and in doing so transport the builder back to a simpler time.

Research is always fun and we had a ball learning more about Iain from his friends and associates. An amateur boat builder, designer, part time author and skiff champion that up and left Oz for the lure of hippy 1960's Britain. Disillusioned by Australia and determined to find his place in the world, London offered up more answers. Perhaps more importantly though it allowed Iain to mix with other young people asking similar questions about life. Here he could don the bell bottom jeans and wander barefoot alongside like-minded free thinkers down the Portobello Road. Times were indeed a'changin.

I was surprised to learn that it took some decades before Oughtred would heed the call of his forebears and lay down roots in Scotland. Like many others I'd opted to fast forward to the romantic images of the lochside stone cottage on the Isle of Skye that Oughtred now calls home. For many of those interceding years Oughtred would contemplate his unique set of skills, interests and sensibilities, conjuring up ways to eek out a living doing what he loved most – drawing little wooden boats. Taking inspiration from tried and tested working vessels in Scotland, Scandinavia and North America, coupled with design principles developed during his skiff racing days, small sketches captured the seed of a new idea ... many heralding a tapestry of sensuous

Shavings fall, grain reveals, troubles of daily life fade temporarily and in those moments the world becomes a happier place. Of course many people don't build boats from the plans they acquire – content with the pleasure derived from the drawings themselves. Whatever the ultimate purpose, Oughtred's work speaks volumes to his loyal devotees, most as intrigued by the philosophy of the man himself as they are by his extraordinary body of work.

But back to the film. I wrote a letter to Iain at Struan Cottage. No dice. Iain was flattered but didn't think his life was interesting enough to be the subject of a documentary. Then we had a "wee chat" on the phone and I explained A) why I thought he was interesting enough and B) that this was a passion project, motivated by a lot of common threads going right back to my own days as a kid – building and sailing wooden dinghies in Sydney just like he did. A hint of progress. Next step was to scrape the air miles together and pay Iain a visit to discuss the idea face to face. More progress. What about if I built the Shearwater and document its construction as part of the story? Iain quite liked that bit and finally said okay.

On the way home it occurred to me that producing a film, wrangling a young family and constructing a

glued lapstrake wooden boat all at once might be a bit tricky, but what the hell? Life is supposed to be about good stories and this was certainly going to be one. Our production commenced in early 2011 when Iain returned to Australia for the Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart. We were fortunate to shoot with Iain in Hobart and Sydney. It was a great sight to see Iain ghosting past the Opera House, then sailing into the Sydney Amateur Squadron in one of his first designs, rigging up a dinghy at Balmoral with his brother David, then joining the crew of *Britannia*, the historic 18ft skiff for a blast out of Kirribilli in a spanking nor' wester.

We had a lot of great vision, marvellous interviews with Bruce Stannard, Bob Ross, Rob Ayliffe, Andrew Denman and of course Iain himself. Then things ground to a halt. Passion projects sometimes have to sit on a backburner while the bills get paid and as a consequence we missed the northern summer.

Several months ago the planets aligned again. A paid gig in Montreal allowed us to bolt on a visit to nearby Maine in order to document another important chapter in Iain's story. A road trip to Brooklin, interviews with Jon Wilson, Peter Spectre, Greg Rossel, and Rich Hilsinger added unique perspectives. Sailing around Eggemoggin Reach in a Caledonia Yawl yielded some splendid vision too. Past half way – this was starting to feel like a real film.

Then, within days of returning from Maine the opportunity arose to attend the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in late summer. This was meant to be – the final phase of our shoot could be completed. The UK production plan was quickly rekindled and within a fortnight we were back on the plane. Day trips from London were arranged to meet Iain's biographer Nic in seaside Brighton and to spend a morning in Oxfordshire, home to Kathy Mansfield – a maritime photographer who has devoted much time to capturing Oughtred's work in still form. A road trip was mapped out to shoot vision of the Scottish Coastal Rowing regattas on the east coast, interview several of Iain's long time associates plus a cavalcade of other people whose lives had been changed by Iain's work – participants in Coastal Rowing and the amazing Galgael project in Glasgow. Then we'd climb into the highlands to visit Iain. He'd even promised to put on some soup.

The Road to the Isles is as haunting as the highland tune that bears the same name. Perhaps of greater significance to those of us with Scottish ancestry, but few could pass this way and not be awestruck by the landscape. The weather added to the drama with low cloud shielding the cuillin peaks and rainsqualls lashing the traditional white stone cottages that lined our route. This was summertime in the Isles and Skye was living up to its reputation as one of the most eerily beautiful places on earth.

Five hours on from Glasgow we arrived in Portree. It would be hard to find a friendlier village anywhere in the world. Happy people wandering about laneways adorned with stores, pubs and restaurants, each worthy of its own picture postcard. So timeless was scene that one might even consider buying an actual postcard, writing something on it with a pen, licking a stamp and mailing it back home to



Iain's doorbell, cleverly disguised as a telephone box ...

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above: Iain in his workshop – with Fabian Bush, Andy Mac and some Huon Pine.

right: Iain carving Huon pine.

below right: The Shearwater takes shape – St Andrews Beach, Victoria.



Mum like the olden days. Facebook just felt out of place in Portree.

Of course Iain doesn't actually live in Portree, it's too crowded. He lives in Bernisdale, a small hamlet a few miles out of town. His instructions are the same for everyone who visits for the first time. "Take the Bernisdale road until you see a red telephone box on the left. Call from the box and I will guide you in." Iain doesn't answer the phone though ... instead a bewhiskered grin greets you from the driveway. The box is out the front and doubles as his doorbell.

Steaming hot green tea is served in rustic mugs (i.e. minus handles) and in no time at all we are sharing in one of the most important rituals at Struan Cottage. For warmth and sustenance in equal measure.

Iain seemed little overwhelmed that we were a crew of seven, but if we've travelled all this way it's worth doing things right. We record interviews, shoot landscapes for overlay, chat to a few old friends including Alec Jordan, Fabian Bush and Welmoed Bouhuys who have conveniently timed their visits to coincide with ours. On the final evening Iain arranges a Ceilidh – a traditional highland celebration with stories, instrumentals and singing (many provided by the multi talented host himself). Boats don't even rate a mention as the villagers gather in Iain's bespoke timber shed (picture a structure Santa's elves might call home and you'd be close). Instead it's all about the people ... hard working, clean living, no nonsense local people celebrating life and getting about their business. What was all this videotaping about anyway? As low key as we were attempting to be, Iain played it down further with modestly vague responses.

Strange as it may seem we hardly saw any small wooden boats in Skye. It is however blessed with a rich maritime history, so what it lacks by way of a modern seafaring culture it makes up for in legend alone. The cottage itself reflects



above left: Iain rowing Ned Trewartha's beautiful Acorn Skiff – AWBF Hobart 2011.

above right: Coastal Rowing Regatta – Dunbar Scotland.

right: Iain and his tea mug are rarely separated.



Iain's unique way of life. The starving artist tag is perhaps a little extreme, but not by much. It may be a chosen lifestyle these days, but it's impossible not to admire the simplicity and focus rendered possible by eliminating the materialistic obsession of modern society. I have no doubt that this special place adds something unique to Iain's ongoing work, both new designs and his refinement of the existing catalogue. Unburdened by many distractions of a contemporary lifestyle he is free to do what comes naturally, and the world is a better place for it.

From this point we have some 60 hours of vision that needs whittled down to 50 minutes, a process we expect to complete in mid 2013. We are currently presenting the film trailer to broadcasters and hope that it will be possible to do a few special screenings at festivals once complete. A longer version will be released on DVD together with a raft of extras suited to wooden boat and Oughtred enthusiasts. It has been a richly rewarding project to date and we are

honoured that Iain has allowed us to document parts of his life and work in this way.

Andy's Shearwater *Ghillie Callum* and a trailer promoting the film will be part of the Boatcraft Pacific display at the 2013 Australian Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart.

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