

OGA

EAST COAST GAFFERS

EASTCOASTER

Newsletter of the East Coast OGA



What an exceptional spring we've had, in terms of sunshine! Let's hope it bodes well for the sailing season in store for 2025. Having decided to cancel the Easter Egg Rally, it was encouraging to receive helpful feedback which will inform our organisation of future events. Thankyou to everyone who responded to the survey. We report in this issue on the very successful winter and spring social events and, as usual bring three of our 'featured boats'.

There's a reminder from the Handicap Committee to measure your boat if you intend to take part in any racing this year.

For those who have Internet access, back issues of the past two years issues of Eastcoaster are available online as 'flipbooks'.

There's also special reports on very different boats with links to our Area: 'Nyala' and 'Excelsior'.

Finally, a plea from your Editor for more lively tales to share with photos or sketches . . . and thankyou to those who are regular contributors.

Cover photo: EC Gaffers enjoy a Day Out in London by Jodi Warren

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Summer sailing: 2025

Your Committee has been working hard on the 2025 Programme. Keep updated by visiting the Events page online: www.oga.org.uk/areas/east_coast/east_coast_events.html

24 - 26 May: Stour Rally

Join us for some sailing & socialising on the Stour!

24 May: sail in company to St Malo

Share plans via WhatsApp with others travelling south.

6 - 8 June, 2025: OGA Rally, St Malo

We're invited to join the French OGA for a three-day Rally. A small fleet will hopefully be sailing to St Malo in company.

27 - 29 June, 2025: Swallows & Amazons

Three days again in 2025 to allow a leisurely cruise on Friday for the rigours (!) of the race on Saturday. Walton & Frinton Yacht Club will be welcoming us to their excellent facilities.

5 - 6 July: EC Annual Race

We will be running a Small Boat Race alongside the larger boats on Saturday. If there is sufficient interest there may be a short open boat cruise on Sunday.

27 July - 3 August, 2025: East Coast Summer Cruise

We'll travel a little farther afield this year, visiting the Rivers Ore and Alde. The week will be the usual mix of socialising, sailing, racing and fun activities.

16 August: West Mersea Town Regatta, OGA Flags!

NW Area is planning this event for August Bank Holiday.

23 - 25 August:

NWOGA Ullswater Rally & Gaffling Championships

NW Area is planning this event for August Bank Holiday.



Event posters by George Hutley

AGM: Area 2025 & National 2026

8 November: Area AGM, RHYC

Once again, we'll be at the Royal Harwich Yacht Club. Put the date in your diary now.

January 2026: Association AGM

The EC Area is organising the National AGM in January 2026. It will be held at Harwich or Colchester.

Can you help with organising 'AGM2026'?

The EC Area is organising the National AGM in January 2026. Our 'scouting team', Marion Shirley & Evie Roberts are carrying out investigations and discussions to inform the Committee with forward planning.

We'll be setting up a sub-committee for AGM'2026 to ensure everything is planned and ready for this big event. PTK will be 'lead', along with Marion and Evie.

Please contact PTK if you'd like to help.



Featured boats

Continuing with our features of 'smaller gaffers' on Social Media and Eastcoaster, the Deben Lugger and Gaffling 4.1 were chosen in February and March. We returned to bigger boats for April with the well-known Essex smack 'Transcur'. Please contact the Editor with ideas for more boats to feature in 2025.

Deben luggers

Our featured boats for February were once again smaller gaffers. Not one but a fleet or class of locally built boats.

The Deben Lugger is a traditionally styled dayboat. Built solely in Suffolk, constructed in GRP with 2-pack foam buoyancy and oiled iron hardwood, the hull form has been designed to give superior performance over more dated designs. The Deben Lugger may be described as 'Family Daysailing at its Best'. As their name implies, many may be found on the River Deben and Deben Luggers join in with many East Coast OGA events.

The rig, fully complementing the hull, is incredibly efficient. Internally, comfort and versatility are assured offering space for onboard picnicking and overnight camping with purpose built storage areas. The cockpit has ample room for six adults and kit and is CE rated for category C waters. The rig is light and easily handled with a balanced lug mainsail and mizzen. This proven rig keeps the centre of effort low making a powerful stable boat. Being un-stayed the carbon fibre rig is quick and easy to raise and lower, allowing the boat to be de-powered off the wind.

She has a shallow long keel with centre plate that gives great stability and enables her to sail in the shallows in as little as 16". Coupled with excellent windward performance it makes her ideal for exploring estuaries and creeks. Her sealed centreplate is housed in the central locker maximizing space in the cockpit, increasing stiffness to the case and deck structure. The plate mechanism is easy to operate with its 10:1 gearing and is housed neatly out of harms way at the forward end of the locker. Down either side of the cockpit she has two substantial iroko rails for securing safety harnesses, fenders and warps. The helm seats are removable allowing for the helm to get out of the wind and shelter low down on the sole boards. The same seats also store the fire extinguisher and can accommodate canvas storage bins, for sail ties, warps etc.



Deben luggers by Alex Haig

Her substantial New England style 'Barn Door' type rudder gives a light balanced feel with minimal weather helm, it is the same depth as the keel allowing it to be left mounted while beaching, sailing in the shallows or leaving on a mooring. Launching and recovery could not be easier on her A frame multi roller swing beam trailer.

Words & photos: Alex Haig

'Gaffling 4.1'

The featured boat for March was the Gaffling 4.1, a new class of dinghy developed by the OGA and, in 2025, being promoted by the OGA East Coast Area.

Back in 2020 the East Coast OGA decided to invest in building not one but two of the new 'OGA dinghies', later known as the 'Gaffling 4.1'. 2020 was not a good year to start a project, as many will remember . . .

The two boats were finally launched, built by teams of East Coast OGA members led by Pete Thomas 'Suffling' and Pete 'the knife' Elliston 'Essling'. Since then, a further boat has been purchased for use in the East Coast Area and in 2024 the first Gaffling Championships were held on the River Deben.

Young Gaffer, Maddy Masters enjoyed sailing a Gaffling at the Swallows & Amazons event in 2024:

"I had the pleasure of sailing one of the East Coast OGA's very own Gafflings, it was an absolute blast! With Will Roberts on the helm and me as crew we whizzed round the course on Saturday's race, the conditions were excellent for this speedy little gaffer and it was great to get out on the water again. As much as I love my family's smacks dinghy, she can be a little lethargic at times and it was awesome fun so sail this twitchy little boat in conditions to which she seemed very well suited. I would definitely recommend taking one out!"

There are six Gafflings, built and ready for sailing with a seventh under construction in the North East. One is based at Arnside and four are on the East Coast. Members of the OGA may find an article about the Gaffling by Pete Elliston in the March issue of Gaffers Log. Visit the OGA website for information on hiring a Gaffling 4.1 . . . see you on the water!

Words: Pete Elliston

'Transcur': We wanted an Essex smack!

Our featured boat for April was the Essex smack 'Transcur', CK365, built in 1889. Find the full story with more photos on the Eastcoaster website.

It was clear to me that we couldn't afford a rebuilt smack and that the only way to get one was to find an old one and rebuild it. I remembered reading Terschelling Sands by Frank Mulville where he, his family and friends were going on their summer cruise heading towards the Baltic. They never got there and very nearly lost the smack 'Transcur' driving her aground on the ever shifting sands in the area. 'Transcur' was Bermudan rigged at that time. I pored over the many magazines we had collected over the years and found an advert for 'Transcur' in Classic Boat, 1996. In Practical Boat Owner I found a photo of her with an article about the teredo shipworm, a borer that might attack your boat. I was a little put off. What were the chances of the boat being for sale or even in commission? I phoned the number in Classic Boat. It was a friend who had advertised her



'Ruddy Darter' by Alex Haig



'Gaffling 4.1' by Ian Clarke



for the owner who still had the boat and it may be for sale. Two weeks later it was agreed we would meet the owner and view the boat on the slip at Lymington public quay. When we arrived at the quay the owner was there but the boat was still on a mooring, cover flapping. Not what we'd agreed but we rowed out to the boat and climbed on board. It was all a bit of a shock. There were ply patches in several places on her deck, the stanchions were clearly rotten and it was important to watch what you walked on for fear of making a hole.

That classic mouldy smell oozed out when the hatch was opened, the boat was rotten as a pear. Surprisingly the bilges were quite dry. The engine was not in the boat. Apparently a 'new' one had been acquired (turned out to be an ex military tank generator Morris Vedette engine). It seemed that years of neglect had allowed the boat to decompose. The rot in the frames, planking, deck and beamshelf was so extensive that a total rebuild would be necessary. The plus points were that she was the right size and had plenty of room below. However, there were too many negatives. We left thinking we had another wasted journey. Another year passed and we still hadn't found our Essex smack. We heard there was one at Boal Quay, Kings Lynn. Another day trip out. We found the smack lying against the wall by the carpark, used as mooring staging. She was originally a 40ft plus Wash smack, the 'Victorious'. By now I was becoming convinced that if we wanted a Essex smack I would have to rebuild one. We had the space at home, I had all the tools, I thought I could I do it.

We had just completed the OGA East Coast OGA race in 1998 and starting our summer holiday. As we sailed away from St Lawrence, Stone towards the Bench Head I said 'Let's go South.' We hadn't made any plans for the summer, well Clare hadn't, but I wanted to sail to Lymington to have another closer look at 'Transcur'. So we set out through the Swin Spitway and across the Thames Estuary. It was a bit lumpy around the Edinburgh Channel and poor old 'Margaret' started to leak a bit. One of the plank butts was not as good as it should have been. Two days later we were on the quay in Lymington patching the seam with mastic putty and a lead tingle. Leak fixed. It was a bright day, little to no wind and we saw 'Transcur' heading down the river pushed by a dinghy strapped alongside. The elderly owners were onboard. The boat looked just the same, run down, neglected, looking for a new owner. We watched her sail past the ferry terminal, heading for the Solent. She didn't really look much like a smack, tall Bermudan mast, short boom and bowsprit, long coachroof and cockpit. The once graceful counter had been sawn off with a bit of old ply making a sort of transom. You had to look at the boat in a special way to see past all the horrors, but underneath it all there was potential. We knew she was not going to be a fast smack but being built by Aldous we know she would sail well and she had good accommodation. When 'Transcur' returned to her mooring that afternoon we set off in our dinghy and had a closer look. Bluff in the bows, beamy, spacious, yes she would do. We contacted the owner again and a deal was struck. That was just the start.

In October 1998 I was still working full time when a message came through to me stating that Berthons Boatyard would not lift out 'Transcur' without a signed declaration that they would not be liable for any damage. They had the boat on the quayside





but were worried about her strength for the lift. I quickly faxed through the signed declaration and she was out with mast removed. We had been given the name of a good transport company who would bring her to Suffolk. They used a massive trailer which usually moved the larger classes of lifeboats around the country. It was available at a fair price. At home we had a nice area of hardstanding which could be accessed through our neighbour's drive. He had given us permission to use it so we could then get the boat into our garden. A week before the boat arrived our neighbour leant over the fence and said that I might need planning permission to put the boat in the garden. Alarm bells rang. I called the Council. They had already heard about the boat and wanted photos and details of what was going on. I suspected my neighbour . . . On Monday my neighbour knocked at the door. He said we couldn't use his driveway after all. At 0700 Tuesday morning my neighbour parked his tractor across his driveway. We needed Plan B, the boat was about to arrive. Using our normal drive we put 'Transcur' alongside the garage. Access was very difficult and when the boat arrived the crane driver we'd booked said he couldn't lift the boat as the reach was too far for the weight. After frantically calling nearly all the crane operators in Suffolk we found one that was just passing on his way back to the yard. The 60 ton crane moved into the drive, picked up 'Transcur' and swung her alongside the garage block with fantastic precision.

I had set out some keel blocks for 'Transcur' to sit on and plenty of prop for the bilges. As the crane lowered 'Transcur' onto the keel blocks the rest of the boat kept on going down. She was very weak. This was the first time we had seen her out of the water. I managed to position the boat so that we could easily build a simple frame over her to carry a heavy PVC tarpaulin fitted with a couple of large clear panels. The enormity of the task hit me as I cleared out all the accumulation of rubbish and dirt from years of neglect. I had already come across an article about the teredo worm illustrated with 'Transcur'. I knew before we bought her that the keel would need to be replaced. A short survey down below indicated that most of her grown frames were seriously decayed along with deck beams and beamshelf. It was to be a total rebuild. Careful measurements were made to ensure we did not lose the shape. Clearly the sheer line had sagged over many years, especially at the stern where the last main beam attaches to the sternpost and fashion frames. There were no fastenings left and the ends of the beam had rotted away allowing the hull to move out and sag. Even though much of the counter had been cut off there was enough of the old structure to replicate the original full size.

By the end of July the boat was ready for planking. Having rebuilt the counter, archboard and fitted the new sheer strake and whale strake I decided that to move things on more quickly I would get a couple of skilled boatbuilders to complete the planking. I would work alongside them. We did stop for the eclipse in 2000, watching it through welding goggles. When Droid and Alan left at the end of the day I would go round and plug all the fastening holes and prepare what I could for the next day.

Words & photos: Pete & Clare Thomas

Event Reports: Winter & Spring 2024 - 2025

Winter talk and Social: 25 January 2025

East Coast Gaffers and friends gathered this afternoon at the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House for their first social event of the 2025 calendar. This wonderful building has its origins in the 17th century when a group of Dissenters (also known as Presbyterians and Independents or Congregationalists) met in Ipswich. Following this, the Presbyterians built the Meeting House in 1699. Now a Grade I listed building it has recently undergone extensive restoration work. The timber interior frame retains many historic features including wig pegs, a huge Dutch brass chandelier and spy hole used in times of persecution to check for approaching mobs as worshippers left the building.

After an introduction from John Warren, (OGA and Ipswich Maritime Trust) we settled down in the original box pews for our talk, on Admiral Sir Philip Broke, 1st Baronet, given by Cathy Shelbourne. We were introduced to this local Ipswich boy, born at Broke Hall on the River Orwell and buried in the Admirals' church, St Martins, Nacton. Despite many local place names in his memory, significant numbers of people remain ignorant of his achievements. After growing up with a fascination for small boats and gunpowder Broke left Ipswich School to become a midshipman in the Royal Navy. The culmination of his successful career was as commander of 'HMS Shannon', blockading the American coast. Daring to take on the much more powerful American frigate 'USS Chesapeake' off Boston in 1812, firing a broadside and boarding her, she struck colours to the 'Shannon' in less than 15 minutes.

Cathy's illustrated talk was interesting, informative and engaging providing us with an excellent insight into Broke's local connections as well as naval history of the 19th century. The setting added to the ambience of the occasion as the light filtered through the beautiful pastel colour of the original glass in the Meeting House windows.

After the talk we gathered round to chat and enjoy tea and home-made cakes. Our thanks go to the Meeting House staff, John and Jodi Warren and Cathy Shelbourne for providing an excellent social event on a rather chilly January afternoon.

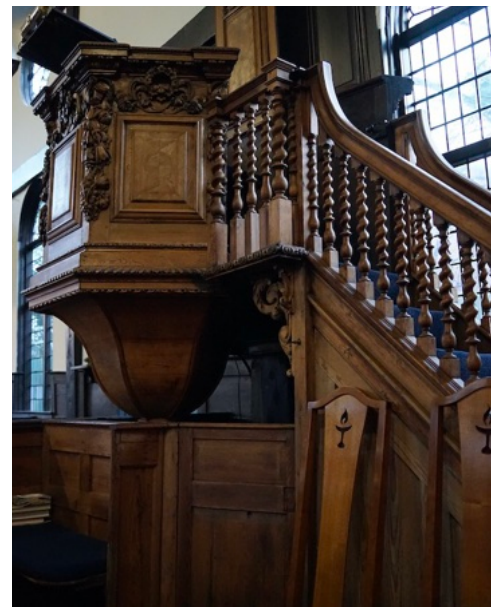
Report & photos: Beverley Yates

A Grand Day Out in London: 23 February, 2025

Having set sail from ports all over the east coast, 32 Gaffers mustered at Trinity Buoy Wharf on Sunday, 23 February, 2025.

Trinity Buoy Wharf was the base where lighthouse keepers were trained by the Trinity House brethren before being sent to keep watch on distant shores around the UK.

Our guide to the historic buildings was Eric Reynolds, founder of Urban Space Management, who in 1988 won a bid to keep this historic waterfront for the benefit of the community when the Docklands were decommissioned by the London Docklands Development Corporation. He is still very active on the site and you may have also seen him in white overalls driving the revival of the old Eversons boatyard in Woodbridge.



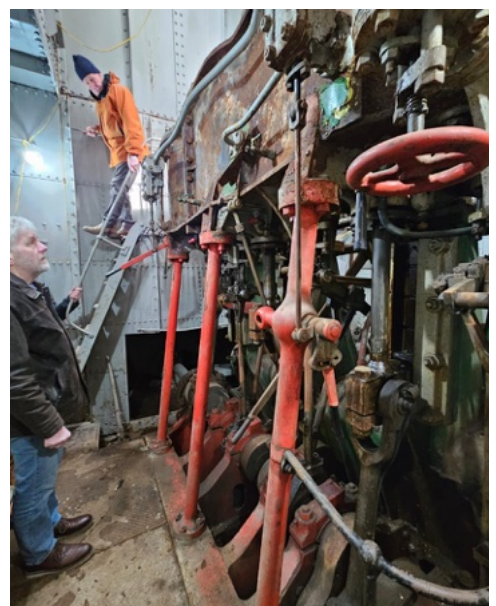
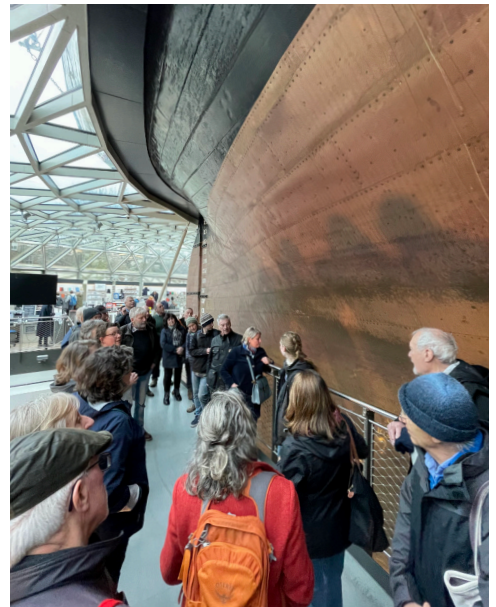
We climbed the lighthouse from which test beams were shone to the hills of south London and apprentices tested their signal flag technique. The big store houses are now used by art groups, schools and hired out to support charity projects. Artist studios in brightly painted shipping containers are piled into two Container Cities. The Victorian Long Shed, where heavy anchor chains were tested for lightships, navigation buoys and the Royal Navy, still survives. Eric commissioned a new pier, with two floors of space below the waterline, where Uber ferries now refuel. The huge steel pontoon weighs in at 640 tons and had to be lifted into the river by a giant crane hired for the day for £0.25m. A second new steel pontoon, with extensive stores and classrooms below, floats in the creek on top of which sits 'SS Robin'. This is the only Victorian steam ship to survive intact and was originally built on the site. Her triple expansion steam engine and boiler remain in her engine room.

The visiting Gaffers then set out under their own steam to various galleys in the area for lunch, under strict instructions to muster at the Cutty Sark by 2:15. We were ushered aboard by Maddie Phillips, EC OGA born and bred, who is now a Shipkeeping Technician on this beautiful clipper. Giving up her day off to give the gaffers a private tour, a highlight was seeing her fully stocked workshop in one of the deck houses on board.

Following the tour of the Cutty Sark, the group adjourned at a local hostelry for the usual Gaffer hijinks before making their way home after a Grand Day Out in London. Thanks go to all the organisers for making this event such a resounding success.

Report by Jodi Warren

Photos: previous page, Trinity Buoy and top, 'Cutty Sark' by Daniel Stoker, middle Maddie Phillips & bottom left her workshop by Jodi Warren, bottom right 'SS Robin' by Colin Stroud



Annual Dinner, March 2025

For so many years and only too few tides, we have been going to the Royal Burnham Yacht Club for an Annual Dinner. This had been arranged by Trevor Rawlinson (Trev) for as long as anyone could remember. Indeed, no-one could be found who could testify to his length of service! We asked him and it was 37 years.

Since Trev had decided to resign his position on the East Coast Committee at the 2024 AGM, it seemed fitting to break with the 'Burnham Dinner', as it had been called for all those years. Following a consideration of many other options, on 15 March (the day England thoroughly beat Wales 68-14!) we were hosted by West Mersea Yacht Club for the 2025 Annual Dinner. As always the Club put on a superb menu and even arranged a great sunset for us! Many thanks to their team, 'first class'.

We numbered 36 which is about 10% of our total membership, a good turnout so thank you for all who attended the three-course meal. My main course choice of 'feather blade of beef' was of melt-in-the-mouth quality!

Trev was of course the 'main attraction', well Trev have you ever been described as that before? So, we started off the evening with a welcome and a presentation for Trev of a set of four glasses with a ship's port decanter, all set into a wooden base, kindly and expertly made by Rik Graham. The backboard and an appropriate plaque, complete with a paraphrased quote from the late Jon Wainwright, completed the presentation set. Oh! Also, a bottle of port. Trev, as part of the 'Burnham Dinner' would always supply, at his personal expense, port and cheese for those diners wishing to partake – so the gift was most appropriate.

We finished off the sweet course and fell to the raffle for which Yvonne Graham had been sidling up to people selling tickets for a table of prizes donated by diners, many thanks to all those who contributed. Thanks also go to Tony Judd and Richard Bailey for their auction items which will be saved for a later date in the season. Once more I was seen walking away from an event with an anchor over my shoulder which will appear again!! The raffle raised around £150 for the East Coast Younger Gaffer fund.

Report: Pete Elliston, East Coast Area Secretary

Photos: top, Marion Shirley, right, Colin Stroud



Racing & handicaps: 2025

If you race, please help the EC Area Handicap & Racing sub-committee. They have been working hard to update information for EC boats and make this available. There are many boats for which information is incomplete or very out of date. Please visit the updated page to check your boat's class and handicap.

www.oga.org.uk/areas/east_coast/east_coast_racing.html

Boats that are missing or with a status of 'UPDATE' need to send new measurements using the instructions on the Racing page . . . maybe a job for the Spring while you're fitting out?!

Photo: EC Race, 2023 by Sandy Miller



'Nyala', a valiant nonagenarian

We bring an article originally written by Pascal Lutz for the French OGA Newsletter in November 2024 where he reports on 'Nyala' and her current owner, Loïc. This translation is published with permission from the Fédération des Vieux Gréments de France (French OGA). It tells the tale of 'Nyala', now resident in France, built at the Woodbridge Boatyard, River Deben in 1933 to a design by Maurice Griffiths.

'Nyala' and Loïc are now part of the landscape at the 'Ponton des Classiques' in Breton waters at the port of Paimpol. This endearing couple deserve to be introduced. 'Nyala' arrived in our waters in the summer of 2017, but she started life in England. Built in 1933 she was designed by Maurice Griffiths for a commission by American film director, FC Culbert. Culbert's idea was twofold:

1. a boat to shoot the screen adaptation of the maritime spy novel 'The Riddle of the Sands', set in the shallow waters of northern Germany;
2. a versatile family boat, suitable for deep-sea cruising, coastal navigation in the areas rich in muddy shoals of the east coast of England, as well as for French canals.

Maurice Griffiths, yacht designer and maritime writer, designed a long-keel hull with an unusually moderate draft for the time (1.24 m), with soft and balanced shapes, and equipped with a 'folding' gaff rig, half-ketch, half-yawl, whose mainmast tilts to the rear and the mizzen to the front. Thus, on inland waterways, nothing protrudes. The accommodation has the wonderfully cosy character of classic British yachts, all in varnished woodwork. You can stand up without discomfort, cook on a big old oil stove and heat yourself with a traditional Taylor's stove.

Specification

Hull length 10.50m, LOA with bowsprit and bumpkin 14m
Beam 3.10m, Draft 1.24m

Displacement 8t, including 3 of ballast (half in cast iron over the entire length of the keel, the other half in mobile lead pigs in the bilge)

Auxiliary power: Volvo 2003 3-cylinder 29 hp engine

The original sail area was deliberately under-canvassed at 56 m², Loïc increased it to 74 m² all above close-hauled (with jib and 3 jibs) and 120 downwind under spinnaker.

Wheel steering with cable lines.

History

'Nyala' was built in 1933 at Everson & Sons boatyard in Woodbridge (now Woodbridge Boatyard) on the River Deben, Suffolk. Unfortunately, the yard's archives were lost in a flood in the 1950s which deprived us of the original plans and documents. She changed hands in 1935 but continued to sail well during the 1950s and 1960s. She remained abandoned for a while until she was bought in 1982-83 by Sylvia Murphy who carried out a renovation of the interior, the structure still being in good condition.

Loïc bought her at the end of 2016 (Sylvia Murphy was to die three years later) in Perpignan where he worked on her for nine months. He brought her back to Brittany first by the canals, according to her original passage, then navigated through the Ponant islands, landing at the end of August 2017 in Binic.





Current renovation

In recent months, 'Nyala' has been taken over by Marc Nicolas at the Charpente Marine du Légué shipyard (St Brieuc) for an essential major renovation. The structure had some more than worrying weaknesses, for example the sternpost, which caused problems during a tough return from Ireland. One thing led to another, and it became essential to change the floor frames, the sternpost and 70% of the planking, which run the entire length of the boat in one piece from stem to stern. Her hull has the particularity of being lined with copper (like the 'Hermione'). Under this lining, the pitch pine planking proved to be incredibly sound, like new, except in the areas damaged by old corroded bolts. The work of changing all these parts required dismantling this lining.

Currently, the framework completed, 'Nyala' is housed in a hangar in the port for the end of the work, meticulously carried out by her skipper. Once perfectly aligned with the laser, Loïc can tackle the giant puzzle: putting back in place all the copper plates, which were hot-unglued, cleaned, hammered, and cleared of their damaged edges (which requires replacing 20% of them). First, coat the hull with coal tar, glue a sheet of felt, adjust the sheet metal, and finally fix it using copper nails of the large upholsterer's seed type.

Of course, this major overhaul is an opportunity to start over with many points from scratch: the electrical circuit, the piping, the engine mount, the floors, the through-hulls, etc. In the meantime, Sylvain Le Tinnier from Voilerie Paimpol will cut a new mainsail. Armed with a lot of courage, patience and great manual skills, Loïc plans his work for the coming months, with the goal in sight: la Semaine du Golfe du Morbihan, May 2025! At the end of this long-term work, one thing is certain: the beautiful 91-year-old lady will be ready for another long life of adventures!

Original article written in French by Pascal Lutz

Published in Fédération des Vieux Gréements de France Newsletter, November 2024

English translation published with permission

Photos: Loïc le Marchand



Lowestoft trawler, 'Excelsior'

We bring the first of a series of articles about the Lowestoft trawler 'Excelsior', contributed by one of the volunteers at the Trust. 'Excelsior' was built in 1921 and fished under no. LT472 before being sold to Norway in 1930.

Unlike many of her sisters, the Lowestoft trawler 'Excelsior' is still very active in the North Sea, accruing a tremendous annual mileage. The 2024 season included a trip to the Faroe Islands, the Orkneys and the Shetlands. Later on, she revisited Svinør, the Norwegian island she was sold to. It's incredible to see her at the same pier, in the two photographs, above in 2024 and overleaf, 1947.

For me, it was pure chance that I became a volunteer with the Excelsior Trust in early 2024. The Trust staff were open, helpful and trusting. Almost immediately I was asked to undertake some remedial work, which included spiling/fitting an oak plank, 16ft long and 3inches thick . . . add into that, a rolling bevel on both edges, it was a test (!). Proof that it wasn't too bad came in the fitting. Having steamed for 3 1/2 hours, the gang which fitted the plank did so in early February, in the dark. What felt like an eternity with sledge hammers and wedges, when filmed showed it was 7 1/2 minutes from the steamer to in and chocked into place (gulp).

My work is now much more focused, and allows me to speculate a little. For example we've all heard the phrase "wooden ships, and iron crew", but how true is it? There can be no doubt that sailing in the late 19th and 20th centuries in engineless vessels, throughout the year would have been an extreme test. Add into that mix that most skippers couldn't read and navigated by the colour/taste of the water and it becomes more remarkable. They also had minimal crew, to keep running costs down. So they'd have had to be tough, no doubt. However, that said, heavy boats and gear demand a simplicity and robustness to ensure the return on any catch, given the variable prices at market. First boat home got the best price. So function had to include speed. Frequently you'd see skippers weren't shy of 'pressing on'.

Anyway. The question being, how do you minimise effort, reduce wear and add lightness to an 80ft (?) vessel, allowing for the fact she operates intensively for five months of the year, covering 17,000 miles in the 2024 season alone. High mileages come with increased wear and it was noticed that the gaff tumbler had uneven wear. The battons on the mainmast were sprinkling sawdust onto the deck if tallow wasn't liberally applied. Onboard there was also a distinct disadvantage, in that no lockers contained a spare Ox (or two) to render more tallow. So, this winter, the gaff has been removed and a plan made. To reduce the wear, I had to increase the angle/spacing at the jaws and also address some shakes which had opened, given the excessive loads the tumbler was exerting on the spar. To counter this, chisels were wielded, to create a space for a graving piece. Greenheart was chosen, in that not much will better it in terms of compressive loading. Care was taken to think of this as cross-grain loading. Clearance from the tumbler



'Excelsior' in Norway, 1947
Photo: Excelsior Trust Archives

will be everything. As an amateur sawdust maker, I have really benefitted from the presence of machine tools in the yard, the making of the piece actually didn't take too long. With X6 No. 12 bronze CSK woodscrews and some WEST to see that it hopefully doesn't move and with the hole for the pin centred and bored, it's all glued up. I've also made a decision (brave) to change the metalwork here. The luff/throat pin would benefit from a slightly larger plate, to spread loading.

Initially, when I started working on boats I believed that it would mean I just had to learn which end of the chisel to hold. Reality though is much different. My first wooden boat was an absurd learning curve. To make progress, you need to try most things. Or know someone who can. Thinking like this, well it needs to sit with an understanding of causes of failure, or how to improve something. For any boat, the people who sail them will have insight into what's needed. It'll give you more perspective on ways to repair, or even improve gear/components you're working on.

The next stage is a classic example of having to adapt and learn new skills. I spoke with the crew. Knowing the incredible distances the boat covers, they know more than me. A little extra inspection showed that compression had caused some of the damage and some changes were required. Firstly, removing sharp edges! This is dual purpose, it not only improves the aesthetic of something, but also reduces friction of the chances of something 'grabbing'. With a quick sharpen beforehand, the spokeshaves were brought out. Our first job was to round off some edges, balancing this against strength and anticipating how much the jaws might 'twist' in use.

As an aside, most handtools are incredibly tactile and give you lots of signs when they're unhappy. Now, it's very niche, but you can hear when they're sharp. For the sawdust makers amongst the readers, sit back and savour the 'ssccchoomppfff' of a clean cut with the blade. Go on. We'll wait. If you don't hear that, consider sharpening, adjusting, changing the direction of cut, the 'lay' of the grain, or several other things. Just remember the tool will 'talk' to you. Visually, the changes to the jaws were immediately apparent, but the hardware also needed thinking about. Again, this is an area I've no experience of. However, my good friend Rolls L'plate was on hand to help.

As I say, I'm not an experienced fabricator, so my general principles are/were; it MUST spread the loading across a larger surface area, and personally it also MUST look 'right'. 6mm steel was then cut, rolled, blued and fitted to the gaff. I was incredibly lucky to be working with some extremely capable volunteers. It's a pleasure to be able to work like this, especially when cold-rolling 6mm steel (it's good for them). With any job, it can feel like the final stages take the longest. Certainly it does in my head, so loud music and headphones provided a solace while I shaped and tidied up the fitting (note, it's stopped being just material and is now a 'thing').

Again, I'd not ever 'blued' something before, so setting up a quenching bath and a source of heat, plus handling the red-hot fitting was a new 'experience'. Still. It's worth doing as well as I can, especially given that I've detracted from the original set up, using my own thoughts (risky...) The generous/skilled volunteers then stepped in for painting and reassembly, with a few other 'snags' tackled. It'll never be as easy to address an issue than when the object in question is in a shed, level and well-lit, etc., etc.

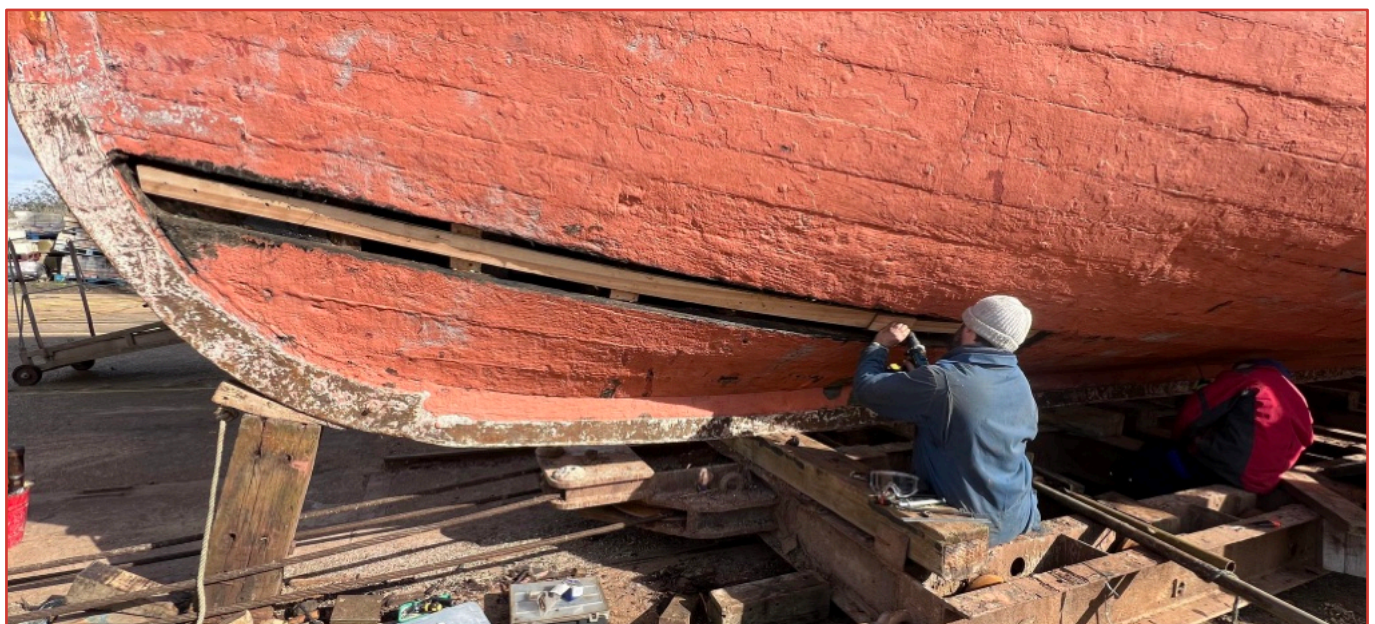
Tightening the clenches was, well it was bloody hard work if I'm honest. Thankfully the boat has an excellent bosun, who resembles some biceps with a sailing knife and deckshoes attached. Giving him a sledgehammer and roving tool was like giving a giant a toothpick if I'm honest! And, as a side-note, he's 16years younger than me, without tennis elbow. Decision made!

I think I've made maybe two metal fittings, ever. Having the opportunity to use the correct tools, understanding the loading involved and having some limited experience to draw from all worked in my favour. Maybe I'll be there on the throat when the boat goes sailing to see if there's a difference! Cumulatively, small changes add up. My suggestion would always be to make initial changes that are reversible, except where you are confident. 'Sailing Trawlers' and 'The common sense of yacht design' were my 'go to' throughout. Reference materials, especially with old boats are helpful, but where you can, talk to the people who sail the boat.

The 'Excelsior' operates as a charity, primarily aimed at giving young people a chance to experience adventure, learn skills and gain confidence. I'm delighted to have finished this job, using materials and tools that were available to us, in the shipyard. Made, not bought is usually better and I lost count of the things I had to tackle. If you are interested in sailing on 'Excelsior', or wish to support the Trust in other ways, please do get in touch. There are multiple opportunities for everyone at all stages of their sailing. The boat is wooden, gaff rigged and the people you'll meet are remarkable.

www.theexcelsiortrust.co.uk

Photos and words contributed by 'an unconfident wood butcher'.



Harwich Harbour

Many of our events involve sailing in Harwich Harbour. Take a look back 300 years in this short piece by Daniel Defoe . . . The illustration is from Harwich 'The Ports, Harbours, Watering-places and Picturesque Scenery of Great Britain Vol. 1'.



What would travellers from the days of sail make of Harwich Harbour in the 21st century? Writing in 1727, Daniel Defoe takes to his boat from Manningtree to Ipswich by 'Maningtre-Water' and 'Ipswich-Water' . . .

"From Harwich therefore, having a mind to view the harbour, I sent my horses round by Maningtree, where there is a timber bridge over the Stour, called Cataway Bridge, and took a boat up the River Orwell, for Ipswich; a traveller will hardly understand me, especially a seaman, when I speak of the River Stour and the River Orwell at Harwich, for they know them by no other names than those of Maningtre-Water, and Ipswich-Water; so while I am on salt water, I must speak as those who use the sea may understand me, and when I am up in the country among the in-land towns again, I shall call them out of their names no more.

It is twelve miles from Harwich up the water to Ipswich: Before I come to the town, I must say something of it, because speaking of the river requires it: In former times, that is to say, since the writer of this remembers the place very well, and particularly just before the late Dutch Wars, Ipswich was a town of very good business; particularly it was the greatest town in England for large colliers or coal-ships, employed between New Castle and London. Also they built the biggest ships and the best, for the said fetching of coals of any that were employed in that trade. They built also there so prodigious strong, that it was an ordinary thing for an Ipswich collier, if no disaster happened to him, to reign (as seamen call it) forty or fifty years, and more.

But to return to my passage up the river. In the winter time those great collier-ships, abovemention'd, are always laid up, as they call it. That is to say, the coal trade abates at London, the citizens are generally furnish'd, their stores taken in, and the demand is over; so that the great ships, the northern seas and coast being also dangerous, the nights long, and the voyage hazardous, go to sea no more, but lie by, the ships are unrigg'd, the sails, &c. carry'd a shore, the top-masts struck, and they ride moor'd in the river, under the advantages and security of sound ground, and a high woody shore, where they lie as safe as in a wet dock; and it was a very agreeable sight to see, perhaps two hundred sail of ships, of all sizes lye in that posture every winter. All this while, which was usually from Michaelmas to Lady Day, The masters liv'd calm and secure with their families in Ipswich; and enjoying plentifully, what in the summer they got laboriously at sea, and this made the town of Ipswich very populous in the winter; for as the masters, so most of the men, especially their mates, boatswains, carpenters, &c. were of the same place, and liv'd in their proportions, just as the masters did; so that in the winter there might be perhaps a thousand men in the town more than in the summer, and perhaps a greater number."

Daniel Defoe, A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain, divided into circuits or journies Letter 1 part 2: Harwich & Suffolk, 1727 (London: J.M. Dent and Co, 1927)

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www.oga.org.uk/areas/east_coast/east_coast_events.html

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Above: 'Laerling' EC winner for Spirit of Tradition CB Awards, 2025

Below: Gaffers visit to Trinity Buoy Wharf February 2025. 'SS Robin' by Daniel Stoker

