

MONDAY was a very wet day. To my dismay it was raining inside *Coppelia* as hard as it was outside. I opened a locker door to be faced by a collection of rusty paint tins and old pullovers: this boat was definitely not for me. She was a Dancing Ledge class wooden cutter designed by John Tew and built in 1951. Her sister ship, *Dancing Ledge*, is mentioned in Adlard Coles' splendid book, *Heavy Weather Sailing* and when Newman and Sons had built her for John Tew, she had been reviewed in *The Yachtsman's Annual*. She was 30'3" (9.22m) overall plus her bumpkin and 24'6" (7.47m) on the waterline. Her beam was 8'10" (2.69m) and she drew 5'10" (1.78m). She had a long keel hull with a Thames measurement of 9 tons (9,1445kg). Originally she was built of mahogany on English oak with a cedar deck. Tew had worked with Laurent Giles and the Dancing Ledge class has a distinct 'Giles' feel. How many were built, I do not know as Newman's yard seems to have gone. *Dancing Ledge* foundered in an extreme gale off St. Catherine's Point and Adlard Coles' description of her sinking makes harrowing reading. However, no such disaster had befallen *Coppelia* and here she was, in a very sad state, laid up ashore at Shamrock Quay alongside the gravel works. I tiptoed away through the puddles, my city suit wet and muddy. What a wasted day!

Two years before, I had sold my beautiful Bowman 36, *Jubilate*, and had been boatless for the first time in years. Withdrawal symptoms were now setting in and with them the idea that I should have a wooden boat again. Hence my visit to Shamrock Quay in Southampton. I looked back at the boat: she was certainly very beautiful from afar with a high bow, tall mast and deep keel. Shame she was too far gone, she must have been very fine in her day. The squall momentarily blew itself out and the rain stopped. The scene changed from smeary grey to plain grey. The wind tugged at the green canvas cover inexpertly tied over *Coppelia*. Like a beckoning hand, a corner lifted and waved. Perhaps I would have another look



COPPELIA

Every boatyard worth the name
has at least one faded and forlorn-looking boat of
such appealing lines that you stop and say
"I wonder...?"

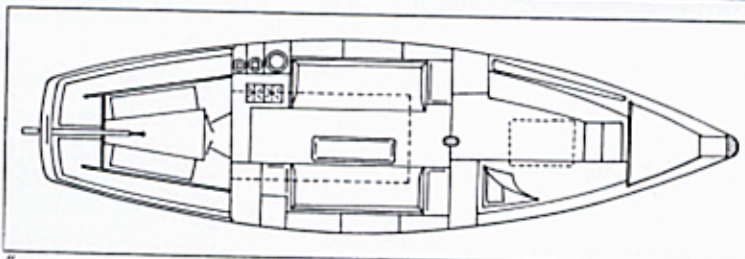
Anthony Chilver did more than just dream.

just to see how really terrible she was.

I sat in the sodden saloon. Water dripped from the decks. The paint was flaking and the varnish dull with damp and neglect. Well, she would need a new deck for starters. She would look better when that terrible hardboard - yes, hardboard - cladding was stripped out. Supposing all those cupboards were rebuilt, those brass lamps polished, the paint renewed and the varnish stripped? The solid fuel stove would keep us warm. There was no galley - not what you would call a galley - but supposing I rebuilt it with mahogany surfaces and cupboards, a brass Taylor cooker, a square sink...? That terrible plastic upholstery could be replaced with red fabric, she could be rewired, replumbed, rebuilt... Don't think such rubbish: get out before you do something stupid! I had to leave, I was getting very wet indeed. I bought her the next day.

Having fallen in love with and then bought a boat that no one in his right mind would touch, what on earth does one do next? I could not possibly rebuild her myself. I do not have either the time or the skill. In search of advice, I turned to the Kings Yacht agency who had handled the sale. A lady knitting a vast pullover thing with wooden needles handed me over to Richard. I could see from his eyes that he thought I was mad. "How," I asked him, "do I get this boat rebuilt?"

"There is a chap who might help you. He



"I sat in the sodden saloon. Water dripped from the decks. The paint was flaking and the varnish dull with damp and neglect." Once finished, Coppel's interior was a far cry from the cabin Anthony Chilver's had first seen.

has a shed over in the corner with his name on the window - Bob Hatcher".

So began a long association with a craftsman of exceptional skill. We eyed each other, eyed the boat, had a brief discussion as to whether I wanted a botched job or a real job and started. At no stage did we really discuss money. Bob never gave me a price for the job - we just did it. We decided that without a watertight deck, we could not really begin. The old deck was of pine fastened with iron nails. In places the timber was worn to at least half its thickness. There are few things worse on a boat than a leaking deck, so all of it had to come off. Fortunately, for about four weeks, while we cut the deck off the beams with a power saw, it did not rain. As the old deck fell away, the first of many horrors appeared. The oak deck beams were soft and black, most were loose but luckily none was broken. At this stage I learned a very good lesson from Bob - "If in doubt, wait and don't do anything".

By the time the deck was finally cleared away and all the old fastenings drawn, the beams had dried out, returned to their



normal oak colour and were steel hard. After they had all been refastened we found that the camber on them was very erratic: some had been made to fit the old deck by leaving the fixings loose. We evened up the beams so that there was a gentle matching camber on them all. We had decided to lay a 1/2" (13mm) layer of best quality marine plywood, scarf jointed and glued and screwed to the beams. On this Bob would lay a 1/2" (13mm) traditional teak deck with half-thickness lap joints so that, in effect, we would end up with a continuous sheet of teak on a continuous sheet of ply. The first day of real excitement came when the teak arrived - a single solid lump of wood - and I was introduced to the next member of an incredible group of craftsmen who work at Shamrock Quay. He turned out to be a wizard with a power saw and in next to no time had reduced the block to beautiful deck planking.

While this work was taking place, I spent endless weekends removing masses of junk from the inside of the boat. It is amazing what some people keep aboard. Old food and clothes are understandable but endless paint tins, rusty nails, pieces of Lego, underpants and general dirt seem unnecessary. Once it had all gone, I went into a fully destructive phase: tearing out old hardboard, terrible plywood cupboards and a dreadful apology for a galley. The fuel tank, diesel oozing through its rusty bottom, was thrown out and the water tank, equally rusty and lined with cement, followed. The engine, a 20hp Bukh,

irked at me from the gloom. I ignored it
ts time would come!

As the summer wore on people would
ss by and watch. You could see the looks
pity in their eyes as two madmen tried
beat the boat into submission. But at last
e deck was finished and for the first time
realised that there was a chance that my
eam that day in the rain could possibly
me true. The first few visitors arrived.
aces would appear at the top of the
dder "Can we look at your deck?" It was
beautiful sight.

With the completion of the deck, the boat
ecame watertight and began to dry out.
ain water had seeped into everything so
at inside she was streaked with rust from
e hanging knees. We had also found that
e chain plates - said to have been
placed were precariously fixed to the
uter planking only, with no inner backing
lates. The iron floors were rusty and
ecayed. Several frames were broken,
ome were very badly repaired, the keel
olts rang with a dead fractured ring. It
as time for a council of war. We had come
o far that there was really no turning
ack. I took a deep breath and told Bob to
eep working.

By now *Coppelia* must have lost half a ton
f fluid from her planks. Like an old
luchess with swollen ankles she seemed to
hange shape as the water ran out of her.
he became trimmer and more shapely.
Alas, as she dried, her swollen planks
egan to crumble and the rot in her was
revealed. Everything dead had to go. New
unks of iroko were purchased and
submitted to the saw. The iron floors were
removed in lots of three to be remade by
Roger the engineer and then galvanised by
Chris who ran the secondhand chandlers, a
mine of useful bits and pieces! Keel bolts
were drawn and new ones installed, the
engine bearers were renewed, the rudder
was dismantled for rebuilding.

The really exciting day came when Bob
began replanking her. We had decided to



Above right:
The V-shaped bunkin with twin bobstays provides a
substantial attachment point for the fixed backstay.

Above:
In a restoration, it is the attention to detail that is all
important, right down to the leather protection strap
for the bunkin.

Colour photographs by Peter Chesworth.

replace almost everything below the water
line so this part of the project took several
months but gradually she became a boat
again. Her bottom developed that
beautiful curve that only long keel wooden
boats can have and every weekend
passers-by were stopping to admire her.
Those who had once thought we were
mad, now looked on with envy.

The inside of *Coppelia* was like an assault
course with timber, screws and copper
nails everywhere. I spent my time, when I
wasn't getting in everybody's way,
painting the underside of the new deck. I
had already removed the existing wire and
fittings and knew pretty well how I
wanted things. A few months before I had
visited Davey & Co, then in the east end of
London and had spent a king's ransom on
brass berth lights, cabin lights, waterproof
switches and a million other things.

I wanted an electrical system that was
completely reliable. I cannot bear
electronics that do not work or, worse still,
work when you do not want them to. I

have sailed on too many boats where, at
the vital moment when you want to put on
the steaming light, you find that most of
the navigation lights do not work. At the
end of his job, Nigel had little to show us
except that everything worked: all the
wires were hidden in plastic trunking and
any surface wire was behind beautifully
fitted mahogany conduits. Peter had made
up the switchboard and this was set by the
new chart table. *Coppelia* was all powered-
up but still far from finished.

Wooden boats are living creatures and
without a doubt female. *Coppelia* egged us
on to greater and greater efforts. We were
obsessed with restoring her to her former
considerable beauty. All Bob's craft and
artistry were deployed. To keep us on our
toes, she would suddenly become stubborn
and difficult or produce a new and
unexpected problem. We had to persuade
her, seduce her and occasionally will her
into submission. Over the two years of the
rebuild we got to know her very well.

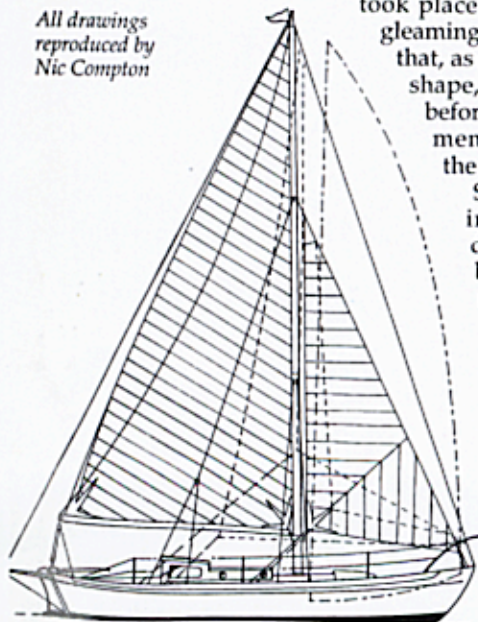
The aft window of the cabin is a



With a waterline length of only 24'6" (7.47m), Coppelgia's deck space is impressive.

pleasantly large opening and the glass was held by a wooden frame. We thought this was a definite weakness as the window could easily be pushed in. We decided to have gunmetal window frames made up which would bolt in place with toughened glass in between the two frames. These were fearfully expensive but are reassuringly robust and enhance the appearance of the boat no end. Her appearance was further improved by the arrival of Bill, the painter. Much filling and rubbing took place until her topsides were gleaming white. I was firmly told that, as she was bound to change shape, it would be three years before she was really perfect. I mentally booked her in for the next two years.

All drawings reproduced by Nic Compton



Suddenly we were talking about a launching date. Cyril had made beautiful red upholstery for the interior. Stephen Ratsey had returned the sails, the engine burst into life, sounding pleasantly smooth through its new exhaust system. The new electronics were in place and the Decca told me that we were indeed still at Shamrock Quay. The 45' (13.72m) mast

was craned into place and the riggers set it up. It dwarfed the surrounding metal poles and gleamed beneath litres of Dek's Olje 1 and 2. For months friends and family had been asking "How's the boat? When is she being launched?" My answer of "soon - soon" was wearing a bit thin.

Suddenly one morning Bob phoned to say she was going in that very day. I leaped in the car and arrived in Southampton in record time. Just as I drove past the launching bay at Shamrock Quay, I saw her: she was suspended in her slings just above the water. As I got out of the car they lowered her gently into the water. Bob was on board looking like a potential mother in the last stages of labour. A voice called out "Well done Bob - she looks alright!" She certainly did. Two years of effort and skill had reached their climax. *Coppelgia* was reborn and looking very pleased with herself.

Now that she is complete and has had her engine and sea trials, it's worth looking back over the last two years. A number of things stand out. Firstly, old wooden boats are very beautiful, safe ships, much in demand and worth preserving. Secondly, they are very expensive to rebuild and expensive to keep up. There are no short cuts to a rebuild; it must be done well with traditional materials and no 'botching' can be tolerated. The most important factor however, for a successful outcome is to find skilled craftsmen to do the job. The real surprise for me was to find so many skilled men of various trades gathered together in one place. Such a coming-together should be encouraged and Shamrock Quay should nurture such people.

The trouble with rebuilding a boat like *Coppelgia* is that not only do you become very attached to her, so do the people working on her. When someone as skilled as Bob Hatcher has spent two years on *Coppelgia* it is not surprising that he says to me "You realise this is my boat now. You'll just be borrowing her!" And of course he is right.

