



Model maker Malcolm Darch at his home office in Salcombe, England.

OFF THE SCALE

A MODEL MAKER APPLIES ZENLIKE FOCUS TO CREATING MASTERPIECES IN MINIATURE.

story and photos **ALAN HARPER**

There is something magical about a really good ship model. They no longer seem to be the fashion in mainstream museums, but I can remember those enchanted galleries of vessels arranged in no particular order, their sole purpose to ignite my juvenile imagination (or so I thought). It really didn't matter if it was a trawler, a tea clipper or a burly battleship. To press my nose against the glass was to immerse myself in a perfect, miniature world.

I don't think I ever quite grew out of it, and I'm in good company. Malcolm Darch, one of the world's preeminent model shipwrights, sells his masterpieces to collectors for six-figure sums. He works in a cramped upstairs studio overlooking the water in Salcombe, a pretty fishing port in England's scenic southwest. A craftsman of breathtaking skill and unnatural patience, he originally trained as a timber shipwright, only to change careers when a local businessman saw what he was capable of and commissioned a model for display in his seafront hotel. Today, at age 70, Darch has been a full-time model-maker for 45 years.

Although two of his recent projects—a 64th-scale rendition of the British frigate *Minerva*, built for display in an American client's home in Minerva, New York, and the even more ambitious ship of the line HMS *Agamemnon*—suggest a focus on the navy of Horatio Nelson's time, Darch has a remarkably eclectic view of the maritime world. Steamships, old Salcombe trading schooners, the square-rigged *Moshulu* made famous by author Eric Newby, a South Seas whaler, an ornate ceremonial barge and a tank landing craft commanded by the client's father on D-Day are just a few of the vessels that draw the eye as you peruse his portfolio. Nothing seems to be off-limits.

"I've always liked the idea of building a clipper-bowed Gloucester fishing schooner, or a Baltimore clipper, any of the big American classic schooner-rigged racing yachts," he says. "But then I'd also like to build the oceangoing steam tug *Empire Dennis*."

He has built yachts, too—and such yachts they are. The magnificent William Fife III schooner *Cicely*, launched in Scotland in 1902, trounced the Kaiser Wilhelm's mighty *Meteor III* not once, but three times. Olin Stephens' legendary racer *Dorade* was built in 1930 and is now, incredibly, fully restored and again winning offshore races.

If a list of past work suggests a prolific output, consider that Darch's current project is only his 57th in 40 years. Some take months, others take years. When he delivered *Minerva*, she was his biggest commission with more than 6,000 hours to complete. Work on *Agamemnon*, estimated to take 9,000 hours, has been underway for three years. Darch reckons there's still a year to go.



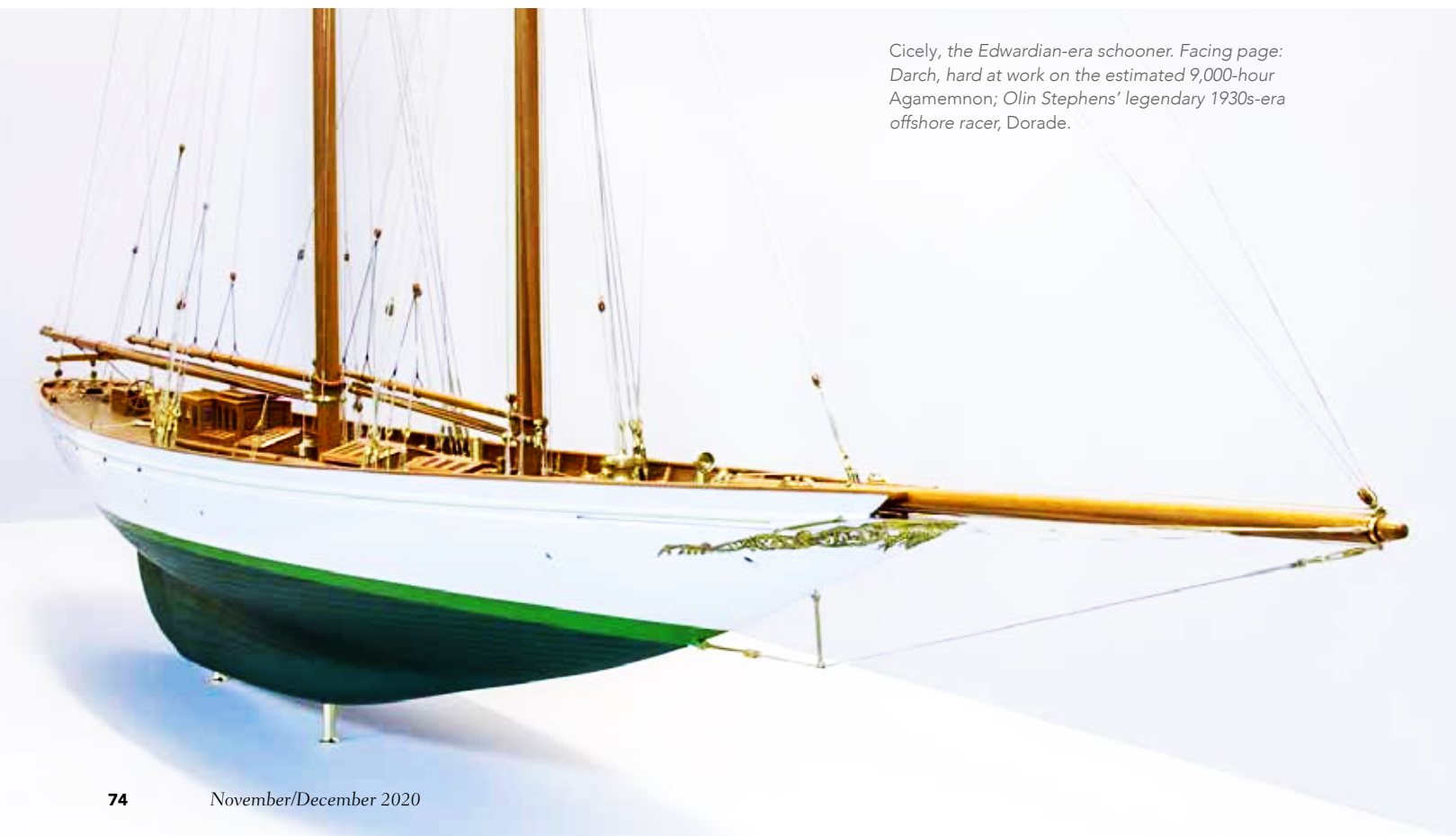
Gun deck detail inside *Minerva*'s transom.



‘Timbers’ from a Shrub

The king of materials for the scratch-build model shipwright is English boxwood. A slow-growing evergreen shrub, it has been prized for centuries by joiners, musical instrument makers and engravers for its hardness, stability and invisibly fine grain. You can buy it from specialist craft suppliers, but Malcolm Darch acquired his stash from a timber merchant in Bristol, England, who was clearing out his inventory. He has since topped it up with donations from local gardeners.

“The trees take 400 to 500 years to mature,” Darch says. “When given green, the wood has to be seasoned in a cool atmosphere. I have lots of branches drying under my studio, behind cold walls. They need five years, minimum.” Darch converts the branches into the desired shapes using a thicknesser, band saw or lathe, and can create hand-finished planks just 1 millimeter thick for decks and topsides.—A.H.



Cicely, the Edwardian-era schooner. Facing page: Darch, hard at work on the estimated 9,000-hour Agamemnon; Olin Stephens' legendary 1930s-era offshore racer, Dorade.



He charges by the hour. The numbers quickly become incomprehensible, but perhaps even harder to understand is the level of exactitude the obsessive miniaturist puts into each model. On *Cicely*, for example, the individual deck planks are accurately tapered in the Edwardian style and caulked with black paper. An ornate, balustraded staircase leads down from the yacht's main hatchway—and will only ever be visible to someone brave enough to take the model out of its case and look down there with a flashlight. The spoked wheel is assembled from brass spindles turned on Darch's watchmaker's lathe and connects to the rudder via the same system of bevel gears used on the actual yacht. Less than half an inch in diameter, the capstan on *Cicely*'s foredeck is a working replica, its gears made from watch parts and hidden for all time beneath the deck.

“That was a personal thing,” Darch admits. “It took weeks. But I was determined to get it right.”

His research is equally painstaking. To gain accurate insight into the details of *Agamemnon*'s stern carving, for example, he tracked down a painting by the 18th-century artist Nicholas Pocock that the National Maritime Museum in London had mislaid. Its keepers had lent it to Admiralty House in Portsmouth, England, in the 1930s and forgotten about it.

Each model, when finally delivered to its eager owner, comes with a fat historical dossier detailing the career of the original vessel. There are copies of letters, bills, documents, plans, diagrams and anything else Darch has managed to unearth in museums



In the Wake of the Masters

Since the completion of his model of HMS Minerva, Malcolm Darch's work has been compared with the famous Navy Board models made for the British Admiralty in the 18th century. These were frequently left partially unplanked to display the internal hull construction and are acknowledged as a pinnacle of quality in the model shipwright world, fetching vast sums on the rare occasions when they come up for auction. The world-record price for a ship model is about \$1,023,000, achieved at Christie's in London for a Navy Board model of 44-gun fifth rate, in exceptionally original condition, dating from the time of Queen Anne.

Darch uses many of the same tools, materials and techniques as his illustrious yet anonymous forebears, but unlike the old Lords of the Admiralty, his clients for both Minerva and Agamemnon requested their models to be fully rigged and fitted out, down to the last quoin, train tackle and clew garnet.—A.H



The South Atlantic whalecatcher *Southern Joker*, built for a client who served time as her engineer in the 1950s.

and archives during months of research. Simon Stephens, curator of ship models at the National Maritime Museum, describes Darch's thoroughness as "amazing" and regards the model-maker as an academic equal. "The quality and detail he goes into, and the amount of research, are of the first order," Stephens says.

Agamemnon's dossier is still a work in progress, but as the record of a busy and historically important ship, it will include copies of letters written by Lord Nelson during his three years as her captain. According to Darch, it will eventually amount to eight 200-page volumes.

Darch has no plans to retire, although after the rigors of

Agamemnon he might take things a little easier and scale back to a four-day week. His next commission is already in the diary. *Ceres* was a famous Salcombe smack that used to ferry supplies out to the Duke of Wellington's armies in the Peninsular War and come back laden with Spanish fruit and nuts.

The contrast could hardly be greater between this unassuming little trading vessel and Nelson's mighty ship of the line, but it befits Darch's portfolio. To thumb through its pages was like finding myself in one of those old museum galleries, enchanted by the imaginative possibilities of perfect, miniature worlds. ✱