



MISSION- READY, AGAIN.

A STORIED BRITISH BOATYARD
BREATHES LIFE INTO CLASSIC YACHTS,
INCLUDING A FEW WWII HEROES.
BY ALAN HARPER



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It's a strange part of the world, in the heart of England's overpopulated southeast and just a few miles from Heathrow's kerosene-cooked runways, and yet it has the feel of a remote backwater.

Hard to get to, but easy to find, Michael Dennett Boat Builders lies at the end of a single-lane road just downstream of Penton Hook, on the Surrey bank of the River Thames. We are a long way from the sea—the five canal locks and 16 miles down to London's tidal waterway represent a solid half-day's cruising at river speeds. If you head upstream—or uphill, as the numerous locks will constantly remind you—it's about eight hours to Henley, another 12 to Oxford, and if you have a boat that is small enough, you might make it to the head of the navigable Thames in two or three days. By car? An hour and a half, tops.

You can't rush things on the river, although no one seems to have said that to Stephen Dennett, a compact, wiry, human dynamo, who at 56 seems to have the energy of a hyper-active teenager. "Right, I'll give you the 20-minute tour," he says, as I look for somewhere to leave the car among all the old boats, engines and pallets of timber. "Come on, keep up," and before I have had time even to glance around, we embark on a brisk inspection of five or six projects in the yard, climbing ladders, peering into half-built cabins and picking our way carefully along encumbered side decks, while keeping one wary eye on the concrete floor 12 feet below.



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It is a busy time for the yard. Refits and restorations are Dennett's stock in trade, and in the springtime especially, everyone wants their boats yesterday. The place is full, and the past is a constant presence. The names of long-dead British boatyards live on in the sheds and under tarps: Thornycroft, Brookes, Bates, Staniland, Gibbs. There is an electric canoe of double-skinned construction—mahogany over teak—that dates back to 1907. Alongside her sits a beaver-stern launch from the famous Taylor & Bates yard in Chertsey, just a stone's throw away. Of that other classic Thames design from the Edwardian era, the Andrews slipper launch, there are numerous relics.

Along the waterfront, yachts are moored two deep. Some have just arrived while others are being finished off as craftsmen, electricians or engineers sort out the last small snags before their owners take them off to moor them at the bottom of their immaculate riverfront gardens. Many of these boats are well known at the yard. There is Janthea awaiting her turn on the slipway, an unusually elegant example of the type of craft known around these parts, inevitably, as a gentleman's motoryacht, and a regular customer at Dennett's. Forty-five feet long, she was built by the Suffolk yard of Whisstocks in 1938. Taking up most of the quay at the front of the yard is the 77-

foot steel-built classic Llanthony, from perhaps the most famous yard of all, Camper & Nicholsons. She dates back to 1934, but Dennett's has just completed a long restoration and rebuild, inside and out. With her gleamingly fresh paintwork, brass and varnish sparkling in the sunlight, she looks brand new.

Stephen Dennett is a natural engineer, as people who work with wood so often become, having gained an appreciation down the years of their chosen material's strengths, weaknesses, properties and capabilities. Given time, decision-making and problem-solving become almost instinctive. But there is nothing old-fashioned about it. New technologies have their place. Pointing out the graceful, curved strake along the side of Janthea, capped by its brass rubbing rail, he says: "That's glued on. Bolt holes are weak points, and weak points are where the water gets in. It's where the rot starts." He invites me to take a closer look. I see no signs of weakness, no cracking, no splitting, no water ingress. "We put that on 27 years ago," he says.

Stephen has worked at the yard that bears his father's name since he was the teenager that he still sometimes resembles. He took over the reins about 15 years ago, but his father never quite got around to retiring. Michael Dennett, 82, was born during the War and left

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calls. “He bought the land, and I planned the buildings and designed the slipway. He was in construction, so he knew everybody.” Michael Dennett Boat Builders was born in 1988. After renting the yard for five years, his benefactor offered it to him at cost price. “It took 12 years to pay off the loan,” says Michael. “Best thing I ever did.” He still comes in to the yard five days a week.

The third member of the triumvirate that today runs Dennett’s, Stephen’s wife Heather, 40, arrived comparatively recently—but she came in her own vessel. Gay Venture was her family’s much-loved cruising boat, a 45-foot motoryacht built by Watercraft, down on the south coast, in 1938. She joined the family when Heather was two, and by the time Heather was in college studying fashion, “She

had got a bit tired and needed a lot of work when my parents split up,” Heather remembers. Heather was just 18 at the time, but thanks to a sizable inheritance from her grandmother, she was able to take the boat on. When Heather says Gay Venture was “a bit tired,” what she actually means is that a complete restoration was urgently needed, and the boat arrived at Dennett’s in 2004.

One thing led to another. Not only was Gay Venture reborn, but in 2010 Heather Dinler became Heather Dennett. She swapped fashion for interior design, and now runs that side of the family business, offering fresh ideas for owners who want to update their venerable yachts’ interiors.

Many of the boats at Dennett’s wear a discreet brass plaque that reads,

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simply, “Dunkirk 1940.” It’s another reason why the yard is so busy. The Association of Dunkirk Little Ships stages a return to the beaches every five years, and this year’s, at the end May, commemorated the 85th anniversary of the famous evacuation. Boatyards up and down the river worked frantically to enable proud owners to take their boats to the grand occasion, down the Thames and across the Channel, and Dennett’s probably had more than most: Gay Venture is one of these fabled Little Ships, as is Llanthony, and Janthea and many others, which have passed through Stephen’s and Michael’s hands over the years.

The Dunkirk story still has the power to amaze, with its ragtag armada of civilian vessels that included several hundred motoryachts requisitioned by the Royal Navy and sent across to do their bit among the

German bombs and bullets. Some of the yachts were helmed by their owners, but the majority were crewed by reservists and young naval ratings, and although most of the soldiers were rescued from Dunkirk’s dock walls by British destroyers six of which were sunk the contribution of the Little Ships was enormous. Of 338,000 British and French men rescued over the nine days, some 98,000 were lifted off the beaches.

The “miracle of Dunkirk” quickly took hold in the British imagination, ably assisted by effective Westminster propaganda. Newspaper headlines made an effortless switch from disaster to triumph once news of the evacuation was released. Judging by public mood, it was as if a great battle had been won. Churchill himself felt obliged to remind the country that “wars are not won by evacuations.” In London, Motor Boat & Yachting gave its “Dunkirk Regatta” story seven pages, tracking down readers who had been across in their own boats, but its editor distanced his magazine from some of the more sensational accounts of the Little Ships: “The part they played has been exaggerated in some quarters. There was no need for this; it was great enough without any such exaggeration.”

And it’s probably not much of an exaggeration to say that Dennett’s performed their own miracle of Dunkirk this spring, in getting all those historic craft into the yard, and then out again, pristine in the sunlight, ready for their big day. □