

Making Mischief

When shipwright John Raymond-Barker wanted to build a traditional wooden boat he went for a Bristol Channel pilot cutter - in fact, he decided to build a replica of perhaps the most famous pilot cutter of all, namely Major H W (Bill) Tilman's Mischief. Colin Green went to see John at work in Bristol



DAVE WHEELER PHOTOGRAPHY



KARN KEOGH

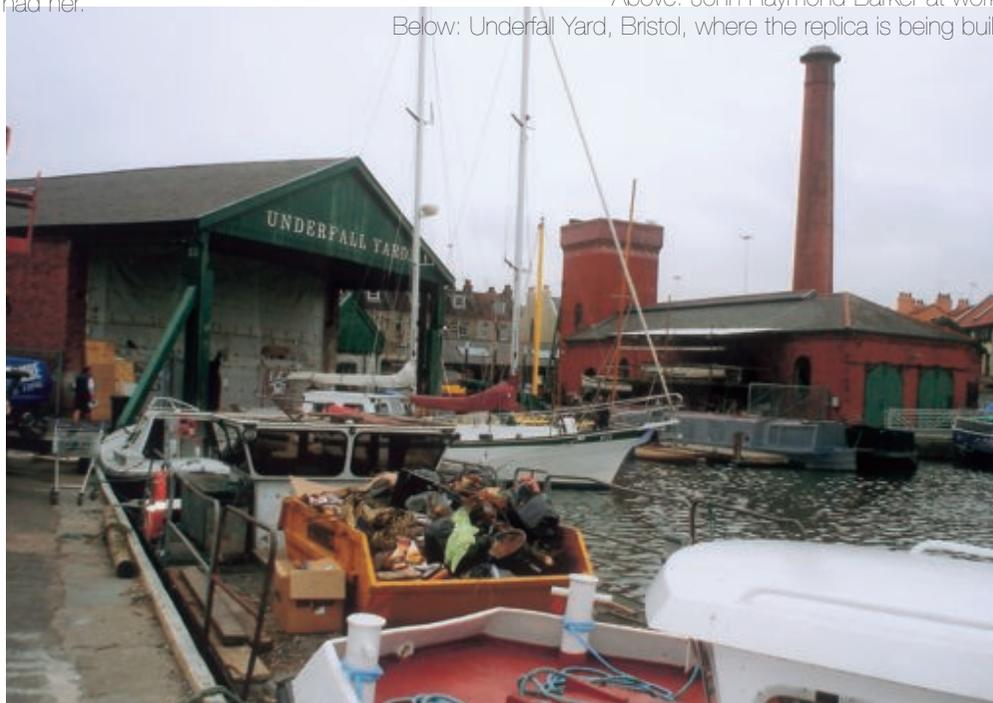
Far from home: Mischief in the days when Tilman had her.

THE EDITOR made a plea in the December 2004 issue of the magazine for more replica craft to be built which would recapture the spirit of a bygone age, and particularly that of places associated with Nelson in the year of the 200th anniversary of his finest hour.

Now, although the great maritime city of Bristol has but tenuous connections with our hero, the spirit of adventure epitomised by him and others of his ilk has been manifest at that place for hundreds of years and represented in no small part by the tradition of the pilot cutters and their hardy crews.

There is another heroic figure who could be introduced, perhaps as a worthy successor to Nelson in his own way, and that is Major H W (Bill) Tilman. For those who have not encountered his story, Tilman was a welcome anachronism; a throw-back to an age of derring-do epitomised by his extraordinary adventures over a very full lifetime, including participation in two world wars (both resulting in decora-

Above: John Raymond-Barker at work
Below: Underfall Yard, Bristol, where the replica is being built





Above: Oak frames and futtocks after cutting

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tions), many mountaineering expeditions and, of more relevance to this tale, sailing a succession of pilot cutters many thousands of miles throughout the world.

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Tilman came to sailing fairly late in life, having been a mountaineer for many years prior to 1954 when he joined the ranks of those sailors who had a deep regard for the qualities of the Bristol Channel pilot cutter. In his search for a suitable vessel to take him and his equally intrepid (or crazy) companions to the ends of the earth where lay its wild, unexplored places, he was introduced to the pilot cutters by men who knew them well and respected their sailing and sea-keeping abilities. He bought *Mischief* in Malta and sailed her around the world until 1968, only to have her sink 500 miles inside the Arctic Circle east of Greenland.

She was a cutter built at Cardiff in 1906 by Thomas Baker for pilot Billy Morgan who developed quite a reputation for being a hard man among hard men, a description which typified the pilots of the Bristol Channel. They thought nothing of sailing their craft several hundred miles, out into the Southwestern approaches from the Atlantic, 'seeking' incoming merchant ships which needed their skills to make safe landfall at Bristol Channel ports. They were not averse to voyaging up the

English Channel to 'speak' ships bound from the continent for Bristol or Cardiff, or northwards as far as Liverpool to pick up Irish or Scottish vessels. Morgan, himself, is said to have sailed his vessel into Ilfracombe harbour in such severe sea conditions that his exploit went down in the annals of pilot folklore!

WORTHWHILE PROJECT

At this point another man enters our story. John Raymond-Barker has also developed a high regard for pilot cutters, and when he was seeking a worthwhile project for his traditional wooden boatbuilding business in Bristol it was, perhaps, natural that he would think of one of these vessels. John followed a career in logistics and project management with an international aid organisation for a few years, but soon decided that he wanted a more fulfilling life and returned to his previous work as a shipwright. He learned further skills and finally set up his own business at the old Underfall Yard in Bristol's City Docks, an area where ships of all types have been built for hundreds of years.

The yard is, in fact, operated as a trust dedicated to keeping alive the heritage of boatbuilding in Bristol. The several boatbuilders who work there are all dedicated to 'proper' boats, properly built. John is still a young man and it is heartening to find that he is so intent upon ensuring the survival of traditional skills. He also took the view that, although



Above: first frame laid out on loft floor
 Below: completed hull in frame

the vessel was to be built for sale, he could use it to go adventuring on his own account if 'push came to shove'. Although this is an attractive option he is also a businessman and will be more than pleased if he is able to make a sale (who knows, a buyer might let him take the odd sail as well!).

VISUALISING THE REPLICA

Fortunately, there are still some people around who sailed with Tilman and they have been of great help in visualising the replica, given that no original lines existed. It has, therefore, been a process of using photographs of the original and interpreting these with the help of Ed Burnett, a naval architect from South Devon, where also dwells one of Tilman's original crew, Roger Robinson. The completed lines look absolutely right and, as the hull has grown it can be seen that it is right, the typical profiles of the pilot cutter developing on a daily basis within the build shed.

The new *Mischief* (like the original) is 45 feet 3 inches in length overall, 39 feet three at the water line and 13 feet in the beam, with a draft of seven-feet-six. She displaces 27.44 tons, an average tonnage for a pilot cutter of this period. The grown English oak frames, of 3-inch by 5-inch section, are doubled with similarly sized futtocks to make a very substantial structure which is built upon an opepe stem, stern post and keel block, all of seven inch thickness. In keeping with the

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philosophy of the builder, no nasty epoxy glue is used; good quality galvanised iron bolts hold the framework strongly together and should last a very long time.

The one-and-five-eighths-thick planks are cut from Scottish larch. They are steamed in the cramped confines of the workshop and hurriedly clamped in place before being attached to the frames with galvanised iron spikes, in the approved manner of the old shipwrights. This operation, as it always has been down the ages, is a matter of 'main force and ignorance' as an old Bude shipwright once described it. Actually, it involves more 'main force' than ignorance since it is, of course, a well-planned and skilful task and is one of the few jobs with which that John has needed help. More help is on the way, though, because he has been recently approached by a couple of apprentice shipwrights who, having served their time, are now looking for more practical experience. They will work on the same principle that Tilman himself gave to his potential crew members – 'No pay, no prospects, not much pleasure'. Actually, John will provide some pay, but I think, though, that

Above: completed framing, looking aft
Below: driving spikes to attach planks to frames



KEITH RUSSELL



Above: planking partially completed at bow end
Below: positioning steamed planks; a tough job!



KETH FUSSEL

At the time of writing (coincidentally in the week of the 200th anniversary of Trafalgar) the hull planking is about a third complete and John is planning to have the hull finished by the early part of 2006, exactly one hundred years after the launch of the original Mischief

Below: framing about half complete, with stern post to right



they will gain a great deal of pleasure from seeing their labours rewarded as the vessel nears completion.

ARTISTRY IN WOOD

It certainly gives pleasure to those 'in the know' who find their way to the shed where these fine deeds are being done, and the first impression when one enters the place is almost of a piece of architecture reaching up some 15 feet into the roof. Whichever way one views the vessel it is markedly impressive and, as one begins to look more closely at the woodwork, the degree of expertise and skill that has been put into that work becomes more and more apparent. It is a rare privilege to be able to look at such artistry in wood at close quarters, and at the successive stages of build.

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removed from the hull of the *Peggy*, during restoration work, old lemonade bottles (empty) were found embedded in the concrete at the after end; a simple expedient in weight saving. *Mischief's* ballast will be a combination of iron and concrete judiciously positioned within the bottom of the hull, but without the old artillery shell which was apparently found in the bottom of the *Pet* when she was broken up 40 years ago!

IN THE MANNER OF THE MASTERS

Much work will still remain, of course. The internal structure, consisting of a main cabin, saloon, galley, four-berth forepeak and heads, together with a compartment for the Nanni 50hp diesel and fuel and water tanks, will take the rest of next year to complete to the same high standard as the hull of the vessel. All the joinery will be in larch or pine which will be painted and all oak trim properly varnished in the manner expected by the old master pilots of the early 20th century.

In the tradition of the pilot cutters, access below decks will be by way of a companionway just forward of the tiller, with an opening skylight forward of this giving light and air to the main saloon. The accommodation aboard a pilot cutter is quite luxurious in comparison with many other working vessels, the reason being, of course, that no cargo space was required and the needs of the pilot and his crew of 'western man' and boy could be paramount. This was not really luxury, though, given the often appalling weather conditions in which the vessels operated, and it was not unreasonable for the hard-worked crew to be offered a little comfort in between tours of duty.

The rig, of course, is to be that of a sloop (the only cutters which carried more than one mast were those of Swansea) and the mast, topmast, boom, gaff spar and bowsprit will, as traditional, be in Douglas fir. The main sail may be furled by the 'Appledore' roller reefing gear carried by many of the old craft, which enabled a rapid operation to take place. This will be at the discretion of the buyer, though, since roller reefing is not universally preferred.

An important 'optional extra' would be the traditional punt, which was the means by which the pilot approached and boarded the ship requiring his services. The punt, a 13-foot clinker-built dinghy, was normally carried on the port side of the deck of a working cutter, from where it was launched and rowed or sculled to the incoming ship by the apprentice, or 'boy'. Having dropped the pilot it was the boy's job to get the punt back to the cutter, sometimes a difficult and dangerous job. It was normally white painted to make it easier to see in darkness.

FOURTEEN-YEAR FRIENDSHIP

So, what would Bill Tilman think of it all? He is said to have spoken of the loss of *Mischief* in the ice of Jan Mayen Island that he 'felt like one who had first betrayed and then deserted a stricken friend'. He had, indeed, had the benefit of the vessel's friendship for 14 years and continued that friendship with two other such boats, *Sea Breeze* and *Baroque*, but one comes away with the distinct impression that *Mischief* was his favourite.

Regrettably, Tilman met his end in mysterious circumstances in the South Atlantic in 1977 when he took his last voyage of adventure aboard a converted tug which disappeared without trace, but I am sure that he would very much approve of what is being done by John Raymond-Barker at Bristol.

The author will re-visit *Mischief* next spring.

