

WOODEN WONDERS

The first part of our step-by-step look at how one of the UK's last wooden boatyards produces a superb 37ft launch

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In a market overflowing with GRP boats of every possible size and shape, you'd be forgiven for thinking wooden craft had had their day. Amid the army of volume-based builders, a yard offering wooden custom builds might struggle. Yet at Cockwells, in Falmouth, Cornwall, business is booming. The steady stream of recent projects has included a ferry, several stunning yachts and a 37ft motor launch from the drawing board of top designer Andrew Wolstenholme. Despite – or perhaps because of – the mass of standardised production craft on the water nowadays, it seems custom wooden craft are making a small but significant resurgence in the UK.

We have spent the past 18 months at Cockwells, following the build of their new 37-footer. Visiting the yard is a fascinating experience. The smell is the first thing that hits you: not the chemical stench of a modern production line but a pungent aroma of raw wood. Long strips of cedar are stacked up, waiting to be shaped and bent into place around the framework of the hull. Craftsmen crouch over the half-built structure, repeatedly sanding and slicing millimetres from pieces of wood until they find the perfect fit. Amid the sawdust and whine of electric cutters, the aesthetic and artistic appeal of what is going on is intoxicating. Here is our photographic diary of our time there. The boat was launched in July and next month you can read our tester's thoughts. ➤

STAGE ONE

Hull stripping applied and coated in epoxy



The first stage is to erect the bulkheads and removable frames (1), then fit the engine beds. Then, working from the keel down, the team place cedar strips around the frames and bulkheads (2). Each strip has been perfectly machined in the yard (3). Epoxy resin is applied as a glue and a coating (4). The end result (5) and (6).

STAGE TWO

Hull cleaned and glassfibre cloth put in place



2



3



1



4

The hull is cleaned and resin is applied before sheets of transparent glassfibre cloth (1) are wrapped over the wood for strength (2). As the cloth dampens (3), it becomes pliable, rather like tissue paper, and a trowel is used to flatten it out (4). The final layer is protective and is later ripped off to leave a perfectly clean and smooth surface on which to apply the first filler coats of paint.

STAGE THREE

Boat turned over; engines and tanks are installed

2



1



The boat is turned over inch by inch, resting it on the ground while straps attached to a crane are adjusted (1) around the hull. The inside panelling is installed before being coated in epoxy and painted. Then the fuel and water tanks are installed (2), as well as the two Volvo engines, with shafts and P-brackets fitted through the hull – all done by the yard team.



STAGE FOUR

Teak deck is cut and fitted; interior takes shape



2



1



3



4

Each 6mm deep teak strip is machined on site and cut into the edging by hand (1). There is an epoxy layer under the teak to ensure watertightness all over, meaning the boat is really an epoxy composite construction with wooden core. Meanwhile the wheelhouse is taking shape (2) and (3). The roof, made of a ply/foam sandwich sheathed in epoxy laminate, is completed (4).

WHO BUYS A COCKWELLS BOAT?

The British businessman who commissioned the 37 is a long-standing customer of Cockwells, already owning a 32ft wooden launch. Indeed he is quite a fan of wooden craft, also keeping a classic Olin Stephens-designed racing yacht *Argyll* in the South of France.

As the owner of a US-based airliner leasing agency, he lives in Texas with his Russian wife, who is a doctor, but has a holiday retreat in Cornwall, hence his knowledge of the yard.

He says: "Our first launch built by Cockwells was a stunning looking small boat perfectly suited for picnics and exploring the rivers of south Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

"It was great but we now want to be able to travel further afield. This new launch is more of a longer range weekend boat with comfortable sleeping accommodation. We will most likely keep it in the Channel Islands for local excursions, plus trips to Cornwall and Brittany.

"My wife and I have nothing against production boats, but to us

the choice is made from personal taste and economics in pretty much equal measure. We also greatly enjoy the process of producing a boat from initial concept, design, commissioning, and throughout the build. We have looked at many production boats in various categories, but the vast majority are built with GRP, obviously with economy foremost in mind, and all too often are indistinguishable from each other.

"This is our second experience of building a custom boat from scratch at Cockwells. We were delighted with the results of our first launch. The style was perfect and the quality of craftsmanship was superb. We were comfortable that Cockwells fully understood what we expect in terms of style, taste, and quality.

"Informed buyers are aware that contemporary wooden construction is technically the equal of GRP at least for boats up to this size category and far superior aesthetically."

Next month: how does the 37 perform on the water?

STAGE FIVE

Hull is painted and cabinet-makers move in



1



2



3

The hull has been coated and finished in the customer's choice of blue (1). The joinery, cut and hand-made on site, is installed (2), with the woods chosen by the customer. Even the wheelhouse window frames (3) are custom-made.