

SNAP, CRACKLE, POP

A 1956 Danish Dragon is fairly fizzing along after a major refit

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PHOTOS SALLY-ANNE MOORE AND ALAN DALE



Who could fail to be moved by the grace and simple elegance of a Dragon? Eighty-eight years after its inception, the Johan Anker design is still one of the most loved and widely sailed classes internationally and in the UK, where around 48 wooden Dragons exist, many of them keenly raced throughout the season.

"I first saw a new Dragon at the 1999 boat show – it was the most beautiful shape I had ever seen," says Alan Dale. In 2002 he bought *Snap*, a 1956-built wooden Dragon as a semi-wreck, and vowed to restore her to her former glory: she had won the Dragon Classics at Falmouth Week in 1998 and 2000. In 2015 she matched the new glassfibre Dragons and Alan decided there was more life in the boat yet, so Cockwells boatyard in Mylor, Cornwall, has given her a new deck, 15 new ribs, and a new transom in order to give her a new lease of life.

Snap was built by the Danish firm, Pedersen & Thuesen in 1956, who built an average of five Dragons a year. By 1962 the Pedersen & Thuesen Dragons had won Cowes Week, the European Championships, an Olympic gold medal, and the Gold Cup, as well as several national championships. They continued to dominate international sailing for many years, and are still popular today.

"*Snap* was named *Salar* for the first six years of her life," says Alan. "She was one of the 1950s Dragons with a slightly longer waterline. Tim Colman of Lowestoft bought her new in 1956 and raced her in the Edinburgh Cup in the late 1950s. Those were the same years that *Bluebottle* (the Dragon owned by the Queen and Prince Philip) was sailing in the Edinburgh Cup, so they probably sailed together."

A revived *Snap* using her longer waterline to good effect in light reaching conditions

Snap was sold to Edward Sudell of Waldringfield in Suffolk, then in 1988 Dr Alan Doyle bought her and took her to Falmouth in 1989, where she had her Classics success a decade later.

"Dr Doyle died in about 2000, and she was then sold to Daniel Wastnage at Burnham-on-Crouch who raced her in 2001 with good results, then I bought her in 2002," Alan says. "Despite 11 cracked ribs and two broken keel bolts, she still sailed competitively, but she had a lot of work done at Woolverstone, Suffolk, and we got her afloat again in 2004. She came to Falmouth in 2008 because it's such a fabulous place to sail, and also because I was born and brought up in Cornwall."

VARNISHED HULL

So why did Alan buy *Snap*? "I was looking for a performance sailing boat that I could also take several people cruising on," he says. "I wanted a boat with a displacement hull, which would be more comfortable, and I bought *Snap* because she still had a varnished hull."

Snap had had work done over the years. "I did all the original work from 2002 including new keel bolts in stainless steel, 12 new ribs and, helped by a wonderful joiner, cut down the coamings to the cockpit," says Alan.

Mylor bedded the keel again in 2015, but *Snap* needed a more extensive refurbishment, so Alan decided to use Cockwells boatyard in Mylor Bridge. "I was very impressed by its expertise and standard of work," Alan says. "I'd heard good reports that it was a wooden boat specialist and competitively priced. And its quote demonstrated its understanding of what the boat needed." So *Snap* went to Cockwells in March 2016.



"It's nice that owners are prepared to put the love, attention and cash into these treasures," says Dave Cockwell, managing director. "It's sad when boats are allowed to deteriorate, because you can't get them back. But *Snap* is now as good as new and will stand the owner in good stead for many years to come. What was important with *Snap* was staying true to the original and ensuring it was done on time and on budget, keeping the customer informed as we went along."

Dave continues: "We use traditional methods – for instance the ribs were all steamed in, but sometimes we use modern techniques with the use of glue and plywood, like for the deck, which makes it more watertight and adds rigidity which helps the rest of the structure of the boat. It's about understanding when to use which method. It's also giving a young person the opportunity to work on a lovely boat and the opportunity for us to demonstrate that we have the skills needed to restore these old boats – that knowledge is becoming lost in this industry."

That young person was 20-year-old Reuben Thompson. Reuben, who trained at the Boatbuilding Academy in Lyme Regis, and came to Cockwells two years ago as an apprentice, relished the challenge.

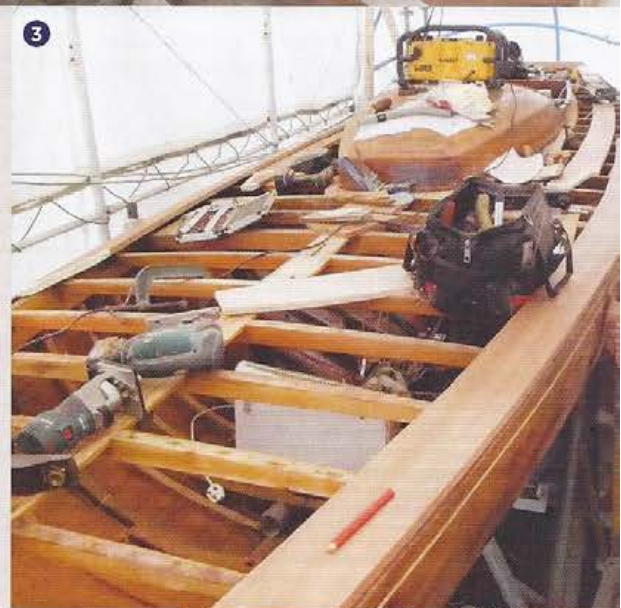
Reuben's brief was to replace the deck and ribs, and tidy the interior by scraping off the old dead varnish and oiling it all. "In the end I had to replace 20 ribs and steam new oak ribs in – 15 ribs were broken and I had to take the deck off to get to them," says Reuben. "I replaced several deck beams, and the deck was replaced with new sapele covering boards and king planks, and margin boards around the cuddy and cockpit. There was rot in the corner of the transom so it was easier to replace the

1 The deck, several beams and 20 ribs were replaced

2 Replacing the rot-ridden transom was one of the trickiest jobs

3 *Snap* under wraps...

4 New king plank in sapele



whole thing than just part of it, so that was replaced as well. The hull was revarnished, and needed a coat of antifoul, then the deck had to be finished and the interior of the hull oiled.”

Reuben had some help. “When I was glueing the deck down I needed someone else to help because they are big panels and you need to get them down quickly,” he says.

Alan was very impressed by the way the ribs were steamed. “The oak (for the ribs) was straight-grained wood,” he says. “The original ribs were rock elm but that’s not readily available now because of Dutch elm disease.”

“Some splining was done a good few years ago by a builder not specialising in wooden boats, who hammered in the splines,” Alan continues. “Several years later, more splining was done properly by another builder who advised that the splines should not have been inserted so tight, but should have just been pushed in by hand to allow for ‘take-up’.” Sadly the earlier job caused the ribs to crack again in 2015.

MITRE JOINT

The most challenging part of the job was replacing the transom, Reuben says, “because it’s all varnished rather than being painted. Also the join between the hull planks and the transom was mitred, rather than the planks running over the transom as they do on most boats, so that meant a lot of fettling and fiddling to get it to fit. So there was a mitre joint all the way round the changed angle which meant a lot of fettling and fiddling to get it to fit.”

He also had problems with the ribs. “We had quite a few snappages on the ribs because we struggled to get a good source of wood; we ended up with wood coming from three different places. There’s a really tight turn down in the bilge,” he grins.

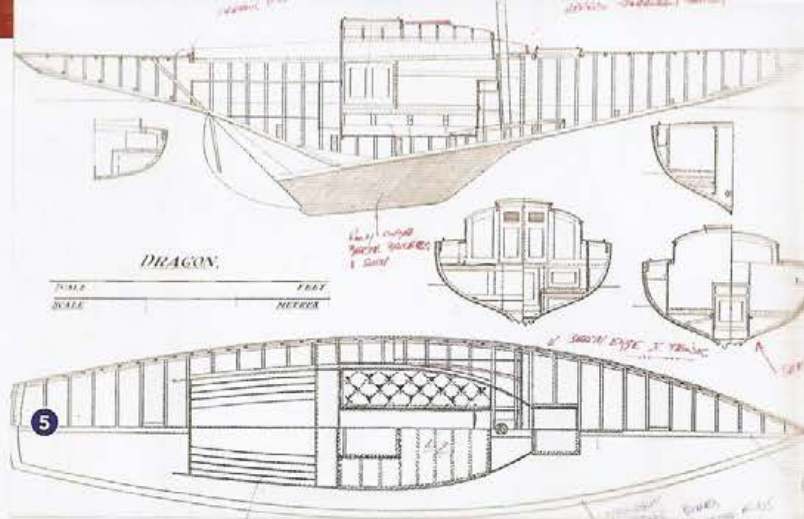
Reuben enjoyed the work on the frames best. “I like the more difficult tasks because an easy day is slightly dull! I really enjoy the steaming process of the frames – it’s almost wood magic when you bend it round really tight curves,” he smiles. “I love the whole process – I really enjoy wood and it’s been a pleasure to work on the boat.”

The wood used for *Snap* was carefully sourced. The sapele for the transom, covering boards, king planks and margins was bought from a hardwood supplier who sourced it from central Africa. The iroko used to replace the rotten deck beams also came from Africa, most likely the west coast. The multiple steam bent ribs were constructed from English green oak, supplied by Jo Sawmill which is based in Penryn.

Reuben definitely prefers working with wooden boats: “GRP is so uniform whereas wood has more variation – it’s more appealing to work with a plane than a grinder making a big pile of dust (far more beautiful, as well). With GRP it’s always the same...”

But the last word must go to Alan who was desperate to compete in Falmouth Regatta Week 2016. “I used to have problems getting a crew,” he says. “But the big push forward was establishing links in Falmouth with a star local crew, and a helmsman friend from Derby. We have had some great results including second place in a handicap race in 2016, which was the best a competitive GRP Dragon achieved last year.”

He smiles and it’s clear just how much this boat means to him. “*Snap* is a very special boat – she talks to you and tells you just what she wants you to do.”



5 Annotated Dragon plans by Uffa Fox

6 Original tiller and fitting

7 Restored cuddy and deck

8 *Snap*'s keel is re-bedded at Mylor

9 Mast stepped in time for Falmouth Regatta Week

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