

The little ship that sailed again

Eighty years ago, in the darkest days of World War Two, *Fleury II* was one of the legendary little ships sailing to the rescue of thousands of troops trapped at Dunkirk. Now, after her own dark days, she has been restored by Cornish craftspeople. Pictures: **Andrew Wright**

Once she was part of one of the most famous fleets in British history: the little ships sailed by their owners into the blazing inferno surrounding the French port of Dunkirk, where hundreds of thousands of Allied troops were besieged by victorious German forces in June 1940. By 2018, her glassed deck was leaking and beneath, the hull was rotting.

But next summer, after a remarkable restoration project carried out in Cornwall, *Fleury II* will sail to Dunkirk again in a commemoration delayed for a year by coronavirus.

Fleury II was delivered to the Mylor Creek boatyard of Cockwells Modern & Classic Boatbuilding in autumn 2018 for much-needed structural repairs.

Built in Christchurch, Dorset, in 1936, the motor yacht, was designed by Eric French of Poole. She was named by her original owners, the Fleurets.

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The miracle

- Operation Dynamo, the evacuation from Dunkirk, involved the rescue of more than 338,000 British and French soldiers from the French port of Dunkirk between May 26 and June 4, 1940. The evacuation, sometimes referred to as “the Miracle of Dunkirk”, was a big boost for British morale.
- Admiral Bertram Ramsay directed the evacuation. Ramsay had retired before the war but was recalled in 1939. He and his staff worked in a room deep in the Dover cliffs that had once contained a dynamo, a type of electrical generator, giving the operation its name.
- Strong defences were established around Dunkirk, and the Royal Air Force sent all available aircraft to protect the evacuation. More than 800 naval vessels of all shapes and sizes helped to transport troops across the English Channel. The last British troops were evacuated on June 3, with French forces covering their escape.
- The gently shelving beaches meant large warships could only pick up soldiers from the town’s East Mole, a sea wall which extended into deep water, or send their boats onto the beaches to collect them. To speed up the process, the British Admiralty appealed to the owners of small boats for help. These became known as the “little ships”.
- Churchill and his advisers had expected it would be possible to rescue only 20,000 to 30,000 men, but in all 338,000 troops were rescued from Dunkirk, a third of them French.
- Ninety thousand remained to be taken prisoner and the British Expeditionary Force left behind the bulk of its tanks and heavy guns. All resistance in Dunkirk ended at 9.30am on June 4, 1940.

Imperial War Museum
www.iwm.org.uk



Now, combining the artisan traditions of the shipwright with modern technology, Cockwells’ craftsmen and technicians have now restored her to her former glory.

Shipwright Mark Curnow said: “Originally, solid strips of thicker wood would have been used in the deck’s construction and steamed in but today, we can laminate thinner strips, in situ, to repair hard-to-reach areas. We have also maintained the aesthetics of the deck but have gained durability by using marine ply and a layer of fibreglass/epoxy where, traditionally, wooden boards covered with painted canvas would have been used.

“One of the highlights of *Fleury II* is that her original keel is intact and her backbone can be seen in its original state. This is a tribute to the fine craftsmen who built her, who we are proud to follow today.”

The deck fittings, stanchions and one of the aft-cabin sides have also been replaced; the wheelhouse and skylight have been repaired and the windlass has been overhauled, whilst the interior has been painted to lighten the space and the exterior has been stripped and re-varnished.

“Another rewarding part of this project has been the new

owner’s eagerness to respect the history of this vessel whilst making sure that she can be fully enjoyed during the next chapter of her life,” explained restoration project manager, Holly Latham. “The traditional feel of the boat has been enhanced with modern engines and electrical systems, a new galley and period light fittings powered by low energy LED. These practical changes have been introduced sensitively and are hidden, where possible, so as to complement *Fleury II*’s heritage and ensure her survival for decades to come.”

“At Cockwells Modern & Classic Boatbuilding, we take great pride in delivering the highest levels of craftsmanship, whether we are designing an exquisite tender for a superyacht or restoring a classic yacht with copper nails and oak ribs,” said founder and managing director, Dave Cockwell. “When renovating a much-loved craft, we stop at nothing in our quest for perfection.”

Fleury II will participate in The Association of Dunkirk Little Ships’ return to Dunkirk to commemorate the 80th anniversary of this daring mission, which was planned for May 2020 but has been postponed until May 2021 in view of the coronavirus pandemic.

