



# The sorcerer and his apprentices



A boatbuilder who stands out from the crowd, Dave Cockwell is different for all the right reasons. *Mike Smylie* talks to him at his Falmouth boatyard, a place where new talent is nurtured with pride

*Photography by Dan Houston*



During an open day in February visitors are free to look at the work being done in the yard – including the building of a replica Bristol Channel pilot cutter

Although I've met Dave Cockwell several times before, on this occasion we sit in his office, going through his history. He moved here, to this yard at South West Shipyard, Ponsharden, Falmouth, in 2002. The yard is a bustle of activity as he races to complete an Ed Burnett-designed 32ft (9.8m) twin-screw, Gentleman's picnic launch called *LIIT* – known as L2T. Alongside lies the National Maritime Museum Cornwall's 'park and ride' ferry *Kingsley II*, which is almost ready to be relaunched after a paint job and the fitting of a forward hatch. Next door, his workforce are silently having their lunch break. I suspect straining ears are keen to hear what their respected boss has to say.

Dave appears reticent and unpretentious at first, although what soon becomes apparent is he is a man of determination, one who enjoys his work, and perhaps, above all, is a fun-loving family man. Given

he has a young family with four kids, three of whom are under the age of four, that's not surprising. I also hear he's a good dancer! But what really makes him different is his attitude to developing new talent, an attitude that becomes apparent in the everyday running of his boatyard.

Like many boatbuilders I've interviewed, Dave Cockwell began his sea apprenticeship at a very tender age. He was just two when his dad, a plasterer, bought a 1944-built 28ft (8.5m) clinker lifeboat – and thus began a lifetime of continual work and sailing on a vessel he still maintains today.

As a child he sailed various dinghies, often adding an outboard and earning petrol money by towing old wrecks around Bristol Docks, close to where he grew up. At about 12 he admired the 17ft (5.2m) GRP yacht of a family friend, which came his way to restore and sail. About the same time he passed his RYA Day Skipper. That

was 1983, after which he spent two years doing up the yacht before sailing off alone, out into the Bristol Channel.

Thus, he declares, he's largely self-taught. "I owe a great deal to David Williams and his father Denis, and Bob James, all of Pill [home of the Bristol Channel pilot cutters]." It seems they realised an ability within him and nurtured an early seed of boat construction. Thus, with no qualifications, Dave left school at 16 and got a job as a builder's labourer-cum-joiner. One weekend soon afterwards, however, he hauled an old 28ft (8.5m) plywood vessel out of the water and was asked if he could "fix 'er up". He estimated the time and cost, gave a price and got the job. Six weeks later he was £100 better off, so abandoned the apprenticeship and became a 'professional boatbuilder', immediately spending half his wages on tools to begin work on Bristol's Mud Dock.



**Above and inset:** With her stem taken out, this Edwardian day racer looks in sad condition. But she can be restored to race with a classic fleet somewhere and bring a new owner a lot of joy. **Left:** A past patient, the St Mawes ferry was restored

Dave then worked in Portishead on composite catamarans – 64ft x 38ft (19.5 x 11.6m) Shuttleworth designs – as laminating labourer, and after one year was taking drawings from the drawing board right through to completion. Nick Hallam, his boss, offered him a job as a joiner on a luxury steel yacht he was fitting out. Thus began several years of working on aluminium, steel, composite, wood and glassfibre boats.

As for his own vessels, he was given the 17ft (5.2m) yacht – which he was hoping to buy at the time – for his 18th birthday. He promptly sold her and bought the wreck of a 1914 Falmouth Quay Punt, *Sea Teal*. Rebuilding her, he sailed her for some years before swapping her for the 36ft (11m) *Girl Pat*, *Fanfare*, which was lying half wrecked in Alderney. After two weeks of fixing her up to get her back on the water again, he and his dad sailed her home for a restoration.



**Main picture and insets:**  
Steaming in new timbers  
into a 12ft (3.5m) clinker  
dinghy, ready for clenching

That was in 1995, at which time he was working in Falmouth building luxury yachts. Being homesick, he returned to Bristol the following year and attempted to set up a yard in the Severn Shed, just up from the Mud Dock. This proved impossible because of competition from a dockside leisure development – the Severn Shed is now a restaurant. So, instead, he sailed away in the restored *Fanfare* for three months, working some of the time in France for beer money. When he returned to Bristol, he was offered a small workshop at the Underfall Yard where his first job was restoring a 45ft (13.7m) diagonal carvel 1936-built Brit Powerboat Co motor boat. “It could have been a military boat, no one knew. Like my first project, they all said it was impossible. But we did it!” At the same time he trained his first apprentice. From then the workshop continued to grow in size and he became involved in the Patent Slipway and yard

development. Thus, the business flourished and grew. But, at what he considers to be the pinnacle of his business, when it was about to make proper money, his family grew almost as quickly. He and his partner Jo decided upon an uprooting to Cornwall and he gave the business to the people working there.

And this is what sets Dave apart from many other boatbuilders. Even at the relatively young age of 33 he has a commitment to bringing new talent into the industry. Although, like many boatbuilders, he struggles to make ends meet, he is determined to take on as many apprentices as is possible, and without government handouts. Cynics might say this will reduce labour costs but he pays them fairly and dedicates time in training them. In a workforce of between 7 and 13 people, he currently has three apprentices. He believes that they should be trained for a minimum of four years and that one-year courses are

nowhere near enough. And the other important factor: “We work as a team; I’ll do anything, from engineering work to joinery; painting if necessary.” He munches through his fish and chips, thinks awhile and continues. “People working here are keen and want to get on with the job, and do the best job possible.” I guess that must be termed ‘worker commitment’ and explains why the people who work for him respect him so much. “We have set up a comprehensive machine shop and we have mechanised as much as possible and this gives us our competitive edge. Over the last year I’ve been developing a computer system to work out exactly how long a job will take. Then a price will be the price. No extras. I hate them!”

When he moved to Cornwall, the overriding factor was to give his children a taste of the country. Falmouth was chosen because he’d been sailing there for many years and because Jo’s parents live up the



**Clockwise from top left:**  
The workshop with a new frame and pattern ready for fitting; the sternpost of the cutter; a stemless *Mildred*, a Falmouth workboat, awaits a restoring owner; Peter Bindloss turns up belaying pins on the yard lathe

road. He rented this yard, derelict at the time, with the intention of building a Bristol Channel pilot cutter. After setting up the loft floor and ordering timber, one day a guy popped his head around the door and offered him the contract to find, maintain and repair vessels for the new maritime museum's 'park and ride' ferry service. "I was skint, so accepted straight away. They've now got 10 ferries, four of which we found in Scilly. Last year we also rebuilt the St Mawes Ferry *Queen of Falmouth*. The *Kingsley* is the last, although they'll need repaint jobs in the winter."

So what of the future? "Now I have such a highly skilled team, I would like to fulfil my life-long ambition and build the Bristol Channel pilot cutter from the original lines, using traditional methods and in a commercially viable time schedule. However, I do like to run a couple of jobs side by side and we are also being tempted by some other bespoke jobs. We'll consider

anything that makes simple business sense. Our existing customer who commissioned us to build *LIIT* is also talking about commissioning a larger 38ft (11.6m) launch after we've finished this one. So the future definitely looks interesting!"

I can see Dave is itching to get back to work. We've already spent an hour talking and he's finished his fish and chips. We walk across to the shed and he shows me the Ed Burnett launch under its polythene shroud. The gleaming blue hull sparkles under bright lights. He explains that the shell of the hull has been built in strip plank Douglas fir and laid on top are double diagonal 6mm mahogany veneers. The hull was built upside down, turned over and fitted out. Engine beds await the installation of two 125hp Yanmar engines. Construction has taken eight months. The interior has been handcrafted as per the owner's and designer's requirements and is luxurious. There's a large cockpit, a light and airy

deck saloon converting into two berths, and below a very spacious head and galley with some personal touches: a custom-built liqueur tantalus to house spirits and shot glasses and a special drawer designed to store crystal glasses, to name a few.

In contrast to this hedonism, I noted a dinghy sitting on a trailer diagonally placed atop the framework holding the polythene, almost like some intentional work of art. Senior shipwright Johnny Mills is laying the teak deck. "We needed the space," he said when I remarked on the dinghy. Johnny shows me the chestnut and walnut internal units that had been removed for painting and were awaiting refitting. I was going to ask Dave about it, but by then he had already disappeared, possibly engrossed in some detail, maybe talking to the launch's owner, or checking on the apprentices, or touching up the paint on the ferry. Or, just perhaps, on the phone ordering timber for his next project.