

ME & MY BOAT

THE

HOMECOMING GLORY

Owning a boat can take many different guises and paths, none more interesting than the journey from a small modern dinghy to a 56-foot displacement classic cruiser from the 60s

Text & Photos: **Nick Burnham**





The “classic elegant lines of a true gentleman’s motor yacht” are what first attracted Gary

Fully restored, *White Mouse II* is an eye-catching sight around Dartmouth

Like many of us, Gary Walker’s boating career flourished from very humble beginnings. In 1975, not long after the birth of his first child, he and his wife Alison began holidaying in a cottage at Stoke Gabriel on the River Dart. A small dinghy introduced him to the joys of getting afloat, and a few years later a tiny Shetland driven by a 25hp Evinrude was purchased and trailered down to the river for those family holidays. What started as a mere adjunct to a quiet break soon blossomed into the main purpose of those trips, and as the metaphorical tail started to wag the dog, boat size inevitably crept upward.

In the mid 90s Gary bought his first serious vessel, a Nimbus 27 Familia called *Hebe*, powered by a single Volvo 150hp diesel and kept in Langstone. But as any owner will tell you, boats shrink when you get them wet so two years later the Nimbus went in favour of an Oyster Powerline 390. A 40-foot flybridge boat powered by a pair of Cummins 300hp diesels, it granted more space on board as well as increased range, handy for family cruising.



A clever mechanism allows the helm seat backrest to flip over creating sociable rearward facing seating

In 1999 he used the Oyster to accompany his friend and adventurer Jock Wishart on an attempt to break the rowing record from London to Paris. In a time of four days ten hours and 54 seconds Jock and his fellow rowers broke the record previously held by the Metropolitan Police, and Jock later went on to develop the attempt into a bi-annual rowing race, the inaugural event accompanied again by Gary who by this time had moved on to a Nimbus 370 Coupe fitted with twin Volvo Penta 230hp diesels. But after three GRP motor cruisers, and following a wholesale move to Dartmouth in 2008, close to where Gary’s boating adventures had begun, it was time for something completely different.

MAKING A CONNECTION

With the boat now virtually on the doorstep and semi-retirement freeing up far more time, the decision was made that speed was no longer important. A large displacement cruiser that could comfortably provide accommodation for weeks away rather than just days was on the cards, and it was in the classified section of *Motor Boat & Yachting* that Gary first saw *White Mouse II*.

“I had no preconceived ideas for the next boat, beyond a slow speed craft of 50 to 60 feet,” says Gary. “It could have been a steel boat, a fibreglass boat or, as it turns out, a classic wooden boat.” The “classic elegant lines of a true gentleman’s motor yacht” are what first attracted Gary, but when he enquired further, there were three emotional connections that strongly resonated with him. The Perkins engines that power her were made in Peterborough, just half a mile from where Gary grew up. The first owner was the grandson of the founder of the British Aeroplane Company, later the Bristol Aeroplane Company, which became British Aerospace – Gary’s first employer. And the boat was built at Philip & Son in Dartmouth, one mile from Gary’s home.

Today the huge sheds no longer echo to the sound of shipbuilding, but through the early 20th century Philip & Son was a prolific builder. Passenger and cargo steamers, tugs and tankers, the yard even built the Trinity House lightvessels. In the early 60s, before Princess Yachts, Sunseeker and Fairline even existed, it was decided that the yard should turn to yacht building, and a series of wooden motor cruisers was planned. In 1963 the Philip Fifty was launched. Costing just over £20,000 and weighing in at 35 tons, it was fitted with a pair of Perkins 105hp shaftdrive diesel engines. This very magazine tested the first example, recording a precise top speed of 9.91 knots and concluded that, “The Philip Fifty is a well built and well appointed craft and we look forward to further developments at the Philip yard.”

Six Philip Fiftys were built, four still exist (one sank and another caught fire). Of the remaining four, one is now owned by the Taymara

charity in Scotland, another is owned by Mike Spear who created Suffolk Yacht Harbour, and the final two are back in Dartmouth, one of which is called *White Mouse II* and has belonged to Gary for the past six years.

The name dates right back to the original owner, George White. Grandson of the founder of the British Aeroplane Company, George is credited with having created the subsidiary, Bristol Cars. George’s son was very shy which gave rise to his nickname ‘Mouse’, hence *White Mouse II* (it was his second boat).



The smart boarding steps stow away on the port side

GETTING UNDER THE SKIN

A quarter of a century later and lying in Antibes she was purchased by David Glass who decided to bring her back to the UK for a ‘tidy up’. An engine failure en route through the inland canals of France resulted in the decision to bring the boat the rest of the way home by road, which meant dismantling the wheelhouse. *White Mouse II* eventually arrived in the UK in 1990 and entered the care of Ken Brown Boats Limited. But what seemed like a simple job became more complex the deeper they delved, to the point where eventually the decision was taken to undertake a total restoration. Conveniently, the Glass family business was creating high-end aircraft and yacht interiors, and so it was decided to turn the situation into an opportunity to create a showcase of the company’s work. And thus began the process of crafting a significant update, but one that would remain appropriate to the style and era of the vessel.

The original layout featured a crew cabin forward ahead of a galley and heads. The next level up was a simple saloon and steps that led to a wheelhouse with a small cockpit behind it. Back aft were two cabins, the rear most one with twin beds, the second smaller room having bunks. The revamp saw the wheelhouse lengthened to enclose the small cockpit while the saloon on the lower level was fitted with a curving sweep of sofa around a large table opposite a sideboard. And while the galley stayed in the same place, the forward crew cabin was turned into a comfortable guest cabin with a central double bed. The previously central aft companionway was moved to starboard allowing the forward of the two cabins to have its twin bunks transversely. The heads was then positioned between it and the aft cabin, allowing both to become ensuite. The aft cabin itself was converted to a central double berth from the rather unsociable twin beds.



A curved sofa sits opposite a slim sideboard in the saloon



The galley, with Corian worktops



Sculpted door handles were added in the early 90s restoration

OWNER PROFILE

GARY WALKER

Current home port ?

We live in Dartmouth and I can see *White Mouse II* from my study window. If the weather is good we can be under way in 30 minutes!

Fondest memory?

Arriving back in Dartmouth from the Med – a memorable homecoming encountering so many people with memories of Philips and the boats they built.

Furthest from home port?

The Mediterranean.

Worst sea conditions?

Rounding Berry Head with my wife on board when I chose the wrong state of tide, wind, and anything else I could get wrong. And the stabilisers weren’t working!

Funniest encounter?

In Cowes at the start of the Classic Week in 2014. The MD of Suffolk Yacht Haven came on board and said, “My

boss has one of these Philips Fiftys and we use her as the committee boat for the Swan Yachting Regattas.” Obviously Philips Fiftys make great committee boats!

Future cruising ambitions?

We plan to cruise northern Brittany this summer, support the Tall Ships Regatta in Dartmouth in 2016 and fulfil an ambition to cruise from Dartmouth up the western side of the UK to the West Coast of Scotland.



The result is a much more modern layout better suited to family cruising. But how the changes were done is as important as what was done. Pale grey Alcantara with inset halogen downlighters grace the deckheads. Polished teak forms the bulkheads and doors (finished off with sculpted door handles) while teak and holly flooring is both practical and attractive. The galley now features Corian worktops and comes equipped with modern niceties such as a washing

'Man maths' helped justify Gary's decision to purchase White Mouse II from the Glass family in 2009



The aft cabin was converted into a double, and now has an ensuite

Homecoming up the Dartmouth estuary

machine, freezer and microwave oven. The helm was thoroughly updated with the then latest Furuno radar and Philips GPS (since updated again by Gary with the addition of a new Raymarine chartplotter), and the engineering wasn't forgotten either. The original twin Perkins 6.354s were reconditioned and a NAIAD fin stabiliser system fitted. Hydraulic steering replaced the original rod system, four 16,000 BTU air-conditioning units were added and the original 370 gallon fuel capacity upped to 800 gallons (Gary last filled up the year before last!). It's a transformation, but a sympathetic one – step inside from the deck of this classic and you don't feel like you've time travelled 30 years into the future. It offers the best of both worlds – vintage style with modern amenities.

BALANCING THE BOOKS

'Man maths' helped justify Gary's decision to purchase *White Mouse II* from the Glass family in 2009. Against the circa £1 million cost of a brand-new 57 footer, £150,000 bought a massive amount of boat for the money. Even allowing for some work that needed doing (an engine rebuild, a strip back and re-varnish and the decks re-caulking) the total cost once returned from the South of France to Dartmouth was well under a quarter of the price of a new boat. And it has so much more character, often being recognised by people who have seen it in different ports on their own travels.

Running costs, often the biggest concern of an older wooden boat, have so far worked out at less than the oft mooted 10% of purchase price per year, including the mooring and running the Dory tender. Local craftsmen carry out maintenance, additional work over previous GRP boats mainly amounting to varnishing. "When we stripped the varnish back to bare wood we had ten coats applied and I was told that two coats a year should see me through a decade," says Gary.

In terms of actual fuel costs, *White Mouse II* consumes a relatively parsimonious 3.5 gallons per hour on average, that massive tankage

giving a range of about 850 miles with a 20% contingency, enough that Gary normally fills the boat in the Channel Islands during summer cruising that typically extends to the Solent, down to Falmouth and across the Channel.

White Mouse II has also stood duty as committee boat for the Classic Channel Regatta race two years ago and the BCYC Mid Summer Classics held at the Royal Dart Yacht Club in 2014.

Statesmanlike best describes the feeling of slipping the moorings in this magnificent 50-year-old cruiser. Significantly heavier than a modern day flybridge cruiser of similar length, in combination with nearly five feet of draught it equates to a distinctly planted sensation – everything happening in slow motion compared to the sometimes flighty feel of a monster-engined planing boat. But it's not just the sheer physics, there's a very different ambience to the old girl too. The vertical wheel, the traditional ball-topped stainless steel throttle levers that connect to the motors via cables rather than the light yet remote electronic link of the latest systems. The whole boat just feels more physical somehow, like a living breathing entity that requires gentle coaxing rather than being bent to the skipper's will via a pair of thousand-horsepower motors and a set of bow and stern thrusters.

It's the same story out at sea, the two solid Perkins rumbling quietly at low revs deep in the bowels, the boat absolutely rock steady. Wide side decks combine with the 8-knot cruise to positively encourage strolling those teak decks under way – an area out of bounds in anything but flat calm conditions on a fast boat. It's the same story inside; make a cup of tea, prepare some lunch, read a book – enjoy a leisurely life on passage rather than clinging on and waiting until the next marina for normal life to resume.

This is gentlemanly life aboard a real gentleman's yacht, and it's not hard to see the attraction in this alternative style of cruising. The joy is in the journey, not just the destination, and the feeling that *White Mouse II* will keep going all day for another half a century. **MBY**

THE DATA

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH OVERALL 56ft 6in (17.2m)

BEAM 14ft 0in (4.3m)

BUILT 1963

BERTHS 6

FUEL CAPACITY:

800 imp gal (3,637 litres)

ENGINES Twin Perkins 6-cylinder 6.354 diesel engines

CRUISING SPEED 8 knots

COST NEW IN 1963 £20,750