



A Proper Gaff Cutter - From A Kit

She may look like an Edwardian yacht but you can build Whisper Boat's Secret from a thoroughly modern pre-cut plywood kit. Dick Phillips took her sailing at the wrong end of the year.

With photographs by Peter Chesworth

In the late summer of 1996, I was taken for a sail around the Falmouth River by my friend, Colin Oakes, in his new boat. For some time he had been bending our ears at the Watersports Association about a boat he was busy putting together from a kit he had bought at the Southampton Boat Show the previous year. The boat turned out to be a hard chine plywood craft with a generous beam, no centreboard and a single lugsail. It was with some misgivings that we stepped aboard for our first experience of sailing the Scruffie 16, not the least of our concerns being about our mate Colin's acumen as a shipwright!

Our worries proved totally groundless on all counts. This simple workmanlike boat sailed really well, even pointing respectably to windward. The long ballasted keel not only provided directional stability and lots of grip, it also meant

that without a centreboard case in the cockpit, you got the feeling of the wide open spaces of much larger boats. She put me in mind of the honest working boats in which our forefathers would have put to sea through the ages, to catch a few fish or to take the bullocks across the estuary or loch. And the workmanship was fine: Colin and his friend Rex had assembled it properly and made a good job of finishing it in time for Judy Brickhill to sail test her.

The designer of the Scruffie dynasty is Derek Ellard, who emigrated from England to Australia in the 1980s. By 1990 he had introduced his new design the Scruffie 16, describing it as a knockabout dinghy which was built to be used and could get scruffy. The beauty of the build is that when it does get a bit scruffy, it can quickly get spruced up again by applying another coat of paint. These no nonsense qualities were the



either an open boat or with a forward cuddy cabin. The largest kit boat he has produced to date is the Scintilla 24, described as a large trailer sailer, available as either a four berth cruiser or a two-berth camper with a huge cockpit.

An Edwardian Gentleman's Yacht

Kit boat enthusiasts Max and Elaine Campbell were looking for a boat design to build for themselves when they found Derek Ellard's kits. With a background in dinghy sailing, the Campbells were looking for a boat to explore the shoal waters of the East Coast, with the option to pop the craft on to a trailer and explore further afield as the whim took them. In 2003, they bought the first Secret kit destined for the UK and were so pleased with the design that they formed Whisper Boats to market the Scruffie range in the UK and Europe. The Secret became their own boat but has proved to be a very effective demonstrator. Built by their own hands, she is a credit to them and their experience of the build process has formed the basis of much of their highly informative and helpful web site which not only advertises the Scruffie range but also provides their customers with a valuable source of information and support.

The kits are still imported from Scruffie HQ in Queensland, Australia and are advertised as being available at various stages of completion. Whisper Boats offer a delivery and unpacking service as their experience has shown that some of the 445lbs (200kg) packages in which the Secret kit comes are more than the average couple can manage. For the price of the usual delivery service, they will bring the kit to your workshop by trailer and help identify all parts.

The Secret kit consists of a keel assembly which is already loaded with lead ballast, a 22' (6.7m) long package with spars, chine battens and planking, an 8' x 4' (2.4 x 1.2m) package of plywood sheets and a crate containing various smaller timber parts and the epoxy resin. When unpacked, the keel is set up and the frames assembled on the keel. The fore and aft components – seats, seat backs, shelves – then fit into pre-cut slots in the frames, making up much of the internal fit-out. At this stage, with its accurate and easily assembled tab and slot techniques, the Secret resembles many other kit boats in the process of being built but Secret departs from the norm in that she has a round bilge rather than the hard chines associated with the rest of her family.

The round turns to the bilge are achieved by assembling the kit to the frames and stringers stage in the normal manner and fitting the plywood hull skin above the bilge as usual. Next a small intermediate chine strake, approximately 9" (225mm) wide, is fitted, which runs from the transom to within a few feet of the bow. Cedar planking is fitted to this small chine which forms the packing which, when faired in, produces a round bilge. As a traditional boatbuilder, my initial reaction was *That's cheating!* but on reflection, it's a really neat way of allowing kit builders to produce a round bilged boat. I wish I had thought of it.

Derek Ellard has obviously put a lot of thought into Secret's design, especially the fairing-in of the round bilge with the 'flat' panels, as well as the well-raked transom. Simple structural elements are cleverly combined to give her the look

very ones that attracted Colin Oakes whose plans to market the Scruffie kits in the UK were overtaken by his success in his other line of business, that of building houses.

As with all good designers, Derek soon set his mind to other projects and by the end of the 1990s he had a growing family of Scruffies. He had developed a larger craft called Stornaway at 18' (5.5m), and a smaller one called Shimmy at 12' (3.7m), both of which followed his trend of designing simply assembled, tough, seaworthy boats with satisfying performance. The smaller one was even easier to launch and retrieve than the Scruffy 16, while the Stornaway came as



Secret Specification

Length over Spars: 27' (8.2m)

LOD: 20' (6m)

Beam: 7' (2.1m)

Draft: 2'3" (0.68m)

Weight – all up: 1430lbs (650kg)

Sail area: 259 sq.ft (24.06m²)

of a very traditional thoroughbred gentleman's yacht of the turn of the 19th century. This appearance is enhanced by the long bowsprit jutting out over the plumb stem and the low, steadily sloping sheerline. Wearing her gaff main and cutter rigged headsails, she really looks the part.

Like a boat half as long again

Our task over a blustery few days at the end of last year was to find out whether she performs as handsomely as she looks. We met Max and his crew – brother Craig and friend Paul – in Weymouth harbour on a day in November when there was far too much wind for the ideal sail. Thinking, as we always do when we have turned out to have some fun, that the forecast may be wrong and that lull which is expected may come early, we set out into the Bay under shortened mainsail and staysail only. Yes, it was exciting and at no time did anyone feel concern about her behaviour but it was no way to put her through her paces and so we decided to trust the weathermen and postpone the sail until the next day..

Sure enough, come the following morning we were worried about not having enough wind to do her justice but in true South Coast fashion, the wind filled in, albeit a cold one from the north-east. While we motored from Weymouth Quay out into the bay, Craig started to rig the boat. The gaff main has the usual mileage of running rigging: both throat and peak halyards together with a topping lifts with lazyjacks to gather the sail in. The two reefing lines on the boom and the main sheet, rigged to a stainless steel horse aft of the cockpit complete the mainsail controls which all sit comfortably where they work best. Secret also has an optional trapeze wire fitted which is a little unusual on a gaffer but maybe required for racing especially when flying the genneker in any substantial amount of wind. The jib and staysail are comfortably rigged from the large hatch opening in the coachroof.

Out in the bay, we tidied away the outboard motor and settled down to a broad reach parallel to the beach. The outboard well has an insert which fills in the hole for the outboard leg, reducing turbulence in this area. As soon as I took the tiller, I could feel how well balanced Secret is. In fact, for those who prefer a little weather helm, she may be too well balanced, giving the tiller a somewhat neutral feel – this is no criticism as she feels perfectly responsive to helm movement. To give room to manoeuvre, we eased sheets and ran off downwind away from shore picking up a little more wind as we went.

Her downwind performance was good. With the main doing most of the pulling in around 10-12 knots of wind, she was soon up to hull speed with the wake flowing up level with the middle of the transom. Having given ourselves some sea room, we rounded up, hauling in the sheets to try out her upwind performance. Once trimmed properly and steering a steady course feeling for wind-shifts, the gaff cutter is a powerful rig which performs well upwind and Secret is no exception. The long straight ballast keel gives good directional stability and plenty of bite allowing her to point well. The combination of the ballast and substantial amount of reserve buoyancy is made apparent when close hauled in gusty conditions, giving the Secret the feel of a boat half as long again.



As the wind strengthened somewhat, with three average – to above average – sized men aboard, we felt no need to reduce sail or ease sheets. In fact, Max suggested trying out the reaching genneker which met with general approval. It took very little time for Craig to haul in the jib and replace it with the genneker, getting it pulling nicely in the breeze. This made a noticeable difference to performance – though I was not tempted to hike out on the trapeze.

Derek Ellard says that in 8-9 knots of wind, Secret points up to 45° while making 5 knots and after several hours of sailing her around Weymouth Bay I have no reason to disagree. Similarly, I would back his claim that when reaching in a moderate breeze she is capable of a speed of 7 knots and with her very shallow vee-bottom I'm sure that she will plane in a good breeze, especially carrying her genneker.

Both Max Campbell's Whisper Boats website and the Scruffie Marine website provide plenty of information to trigger off plenty of inspiration and many will find the costs of building a Scruffie kit encouraging. The complete kit for the elegantly Edwardian-looking Secret costs £12,500 including VAT – currently at 15% – and delivery. Normally customers prefer to pay in two instalments of approximately 50%. The first payment covers the delivery of the hull kit and spars, while the second payment, typically a year or so after the first, triggers the delivery of sails and chandlery. In these difficult times, a stage payment system as sensible, practical and downright user-friendly as Secret herself.

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