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SEAMANSHIP SKILLS: POINTS OF SAIL



Putting the pilot aboard the Queen Elizabeth II (or trying to) in Nova Scotia, 1998

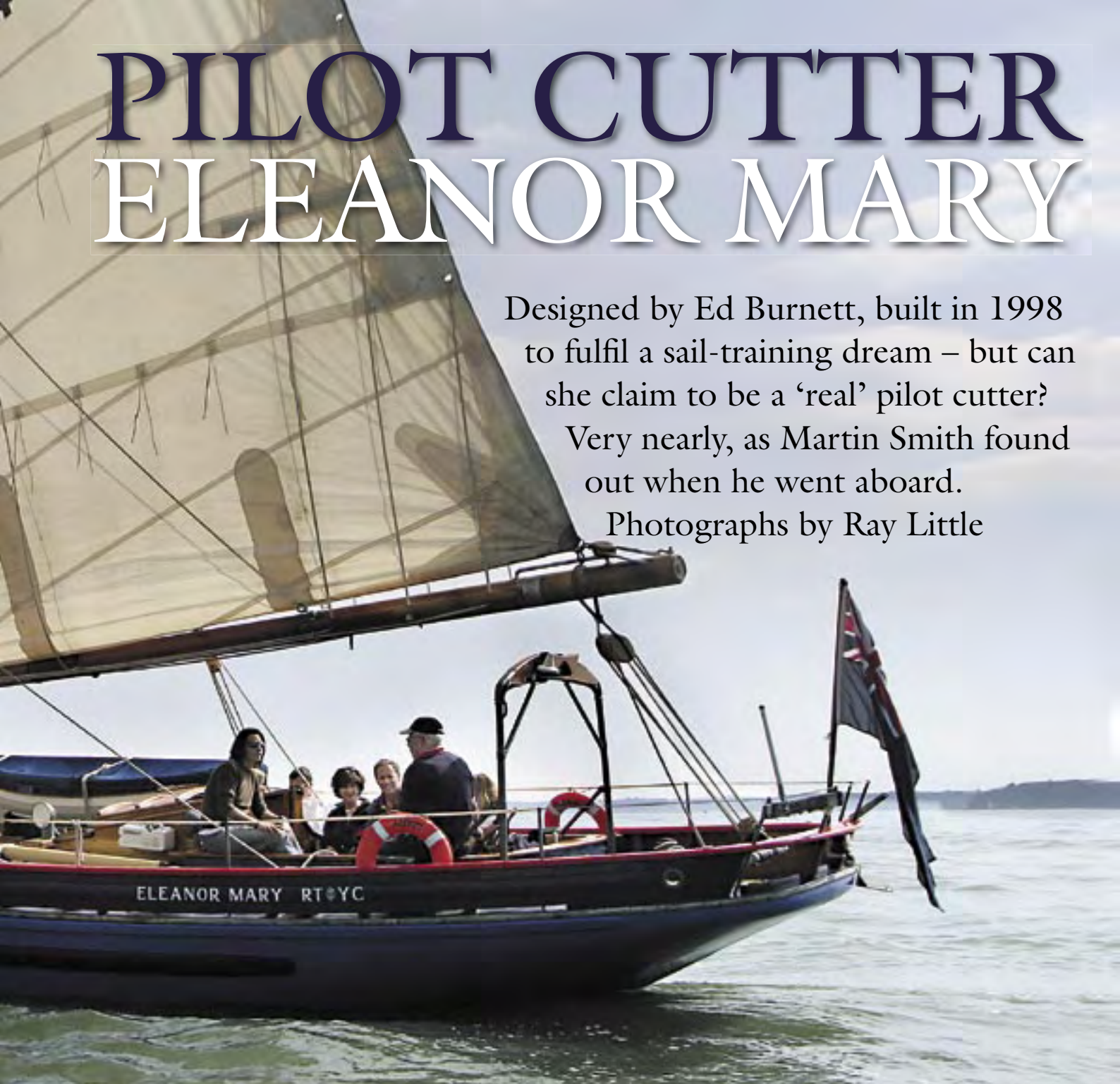
CHRIS RAWDON

PILOT CUTTER ELEANOR MARY

Designed by Ed Burnett, built in 1998 to fulfil a sail-training dream – but can she claim to be a ‘real’ pilot cutter?

Very nearly, as Martin Smith found out when he went aboard.

Photographs by Ray Little



RAY LITTLE

“If it hasn’t put a pilot on board a ship, it isn’t a pilot cutter.” This view, from yacht designer Ed Burnett, is endearingly simple in a world increasingly populated – and confused – by yachts claiming to be pilot cutters.

Coming as it does from someone with the entire wooden boat design range at his fingertips, you get the feeling that he’d like to see some balance brought to the discussions over the much-lauded type. A review of *Eleanor Mary*, a modern strip-plank-and-epoxy, pilot-cutter-based yacht that Ed had a large hand in creating while he was sub-contracted to Nigel Irens Designs in the late 1990s, seems a good place to, at least, enter the melée about where to bestow the historic title.

The objectives of the historic pilot cutters are well documented: first, to get, as safely as possible, further out to sea, in worse weather and quicker than their rivals, then being able to lie hove-to in bad weather while waiting for a ship, and, finally, having the ability to be sailed home by a single hand and an apprentice once the pilot had been dispatched.

And these were simply the performance requirements; minimising building costs would have been a huge influence on the design of these commercial vessels. Double cabins, diesel engines, watertight compartments, ease of maintenance, fridge-freezers, holding tanks, classifications, certifications and the other paraphernalia expected of a yacht today are another matter.

The popularity of pilot cutters today – initiated by the exploits of some very well-travelled and publicised examples, such as *Hirta* (aka *Cornubia*) *Mischief*, *Kindly Light* and more – has led any number of boatbuilding companies to offer up their take on ‘up-dated’ versions of the burly breed.

But over 100 years ago the boats were intended to perform a highly-defined task, one that no longer exists, and to cap it all, there was no specific design as there might be in a racing class, so every owner, not to mention builder, had his own way, and every geographical area had its own characteristics. Any standardisation that occurred would have come about from what worked best in doing the job.

PILOT CUTTER ELEANOR MARY



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All of this has fuelled debate about whether it is necessary or even possible to produce an ‘up-dated’ pilot cutter, let alone what practical reasons there are for incorporating their attributes into a boat built for today. So, assuming that the original design criteria fulfil at least some of today’s owners’ requirements, I was interested to find out how ex-accountant David Darbyshire decided on and undertook the building of *Eleanor Mary* in 1997.

David’s pilot cutter-infused dreams of sailing the globe started in 1957 when, as a 16-year-old boy he and some school friends spent the summer sailing the Dutch coast aboard *Kindly Light*. At that time, the ex-pilot cutter, then known as *Theodora*, was being run by Christopher Ellis – who, along with the Reverend Christopher Courtauld, would go on to found what was to become the Ocean Youth Trust – and David was one of the small group of youngsters fortunate enough to be given a life-lesson by one of the pioneers of educating afloat. It was a lesson he was not to forget through the ensuing years of his working life.

Forty years later, and directly as a consequence of his experiences on *Kindly Light*, David set out to recreate something of

those early days. On the day his retirement began, he signed the contract with Covey Island Boatworks in Nova Scotia to build *Eleanor Mary*, his aim being a family yacht that could be run as a sail-training ship to get youths afloat.

Of the construction process, David says, “Thank heavens for email, Ed Burnett and David Cox, our surveyor. It was them that made sure everything kept on track.” The process was complicated further than might be expected of building a 50ft boat 3,000 miles across an ocean, by the need to obtain a Category Zero – Unrestricted Service rating under the Department of Transport’s Code of Practice for Small Commercial Sailing Vessels. The certificate was necessary for her to work in any ocean of the world as a sail-training vessel.

David’s choice of yard was influenced by the fact that two smaller versions of *Eleanor Mary*, Tom Cunliffe’s *Westernman* (CB115) and another of the same Nigel Irens and Ed Burnett-designed 40ft 6in (12.4m) LOD, strip-planked pilot cutters, *Iris*, had been built there the previous year. The yard’s owner, John Steele, was a fellow pilot cutter devotee and owner, having just rebuilt the pilot cutter *Marguerite T*.

“building a 50ft boat 3,000 miles across an ocean”

Being larger is not the only thing that set *Eleanor Mary* apart from *Westernman* and *Iris*, however. The Category Zero rating and the need to build the boat to the newly-introduced European Recreational Craft Directive (RCD) standard meant different sets of build criteria. These modifications included the screw fastening of planks to frames as well as the standard edge fastenings from plank to plank.

The man tasked with surveying the boat through its construction process and ensuring that the vessel conformed to the Code of Practice was Falmouth-based marine surveyor David Cox. He says: “It is still too early to assess at this stage whether the increased scantlings to satisfy the Code are justified, bearing in mind that many vessels, which would not have satisfied the Code requirements, had been built at Covey Island to their own scantlings prior to *Eleanor Mary*.” He adds that having the construction closely monitored must have helped to produce a durable hull.

This view was borne out when *Eleanor Mary* was re-surveyed in 2005, in the light of problems that arose with *Iris*, and she was given a clean bill of health by Isle of Wight-based surveyor Chris Temple. Following David’s own survey of *Iris* in 2005, he was able to give Chris a strong

BENJAMIN WENDLOWITZ

RAY LITTLE



Eleanor Mary: specifications are those of a sail-trainer; details (opposite page) those of a family cruiser





Built to give young people an experience of the sea



Down below: note the cosy stove



RAY LITTLE

lead as to the areas to look at on *Eleanor Mary*, but none of *Iris*'s problems was apparent. It's also worth noting that *Eleanor Mary* adheres to a now compulsory MCA standard that requires any commercially licensed vessel carrying more than six persons more than 120 miles away from a safe haven to meet the standard for watertight subdivision. As David Cox puts it, "Retro-fitting watertight bulkheads to wooden boats is unlikely to be economically viable or, indeed, possible in many cases. And unless the vessel in question has watertight subdivision or is an 'existing vessel' under the code... they will be limited to carrying six persons or less."

By June 1998 the boat was in the water, paperwork finished, certifications in place, and David Darbyshire could take control of *Eleanor Mary*. Though little had been done by way of commissioning, the aim was to cross the Atlantic as soon as possible with a long shakedown in UK home waters in the run-up to competing in the Tall Ships Race in 2000. John Steele, owner of

“set off on her first voyage across the pond”

Covey Island Boatworks, was in little doubt that more commissioning was needed before crossing the pond, but David was keen to set off. On 22 July, just four weeks after her launch, *Eleanor Mary*, with a crew of six, set off on her first voyage – almost immediately disappearing into fog.

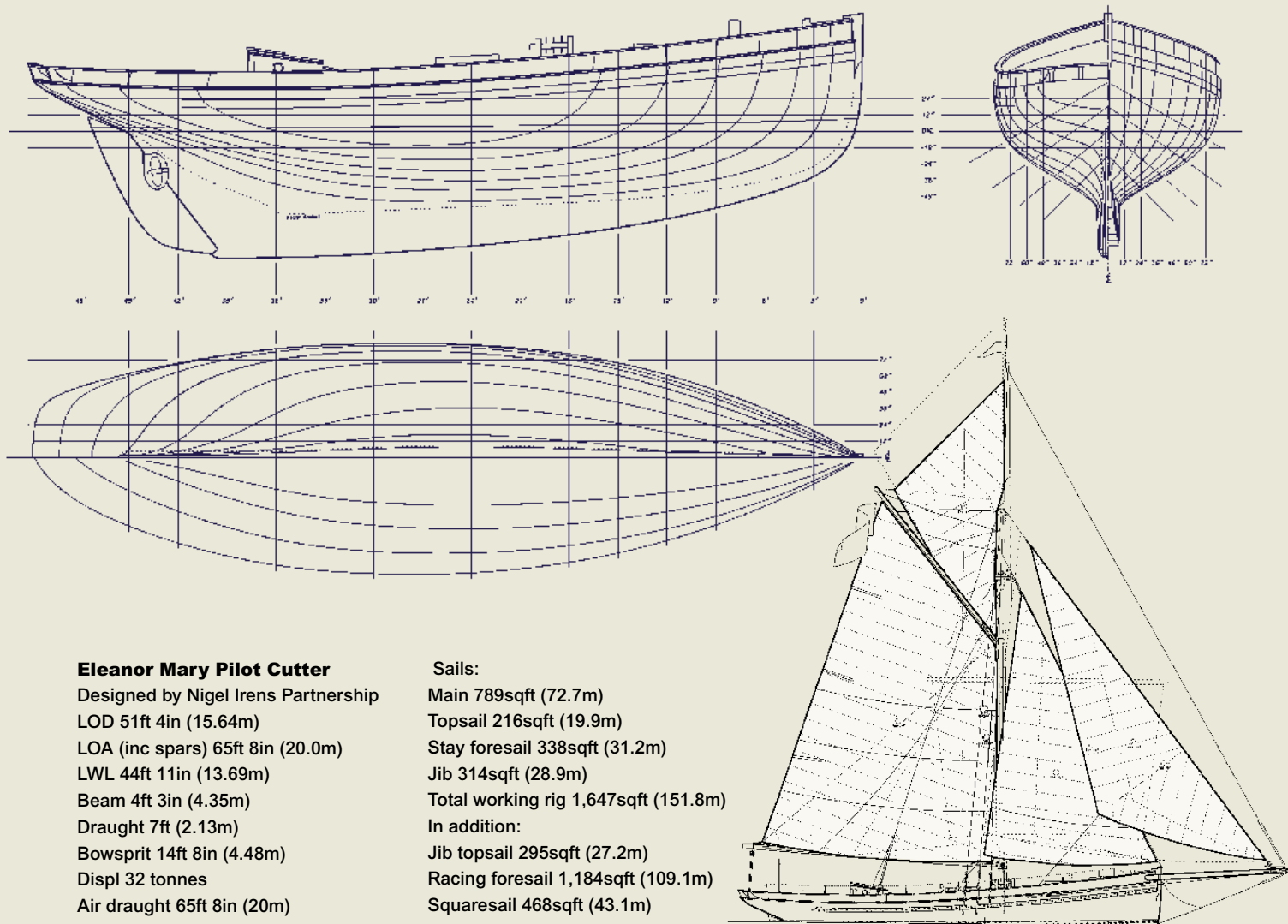
There followed three days of what might be termed 'technical issues', including a constant battle to fix a slipping engine fan belt, an intermittent Inmarsat C aerial connection and life-jackets that inflated at will due to the dampness of the atmosphere. On 26 July, after making 400 miles to the edge of the Gulf Stream, *Eleanor Mary* turned back, sending a Satmail message to John Steele listing a string of minor but annoying problems, and asking that some workshop time be allocated to fix them.

It was an inglorious beginning, but one that at least got much the expected snagging list sorted out. Once the issues were all resolved David's wife Lizzie and the crew enjoyed a summer cruising the south shores of Nova Scotia, by way of a holiday.

At the end of that summer, though, David was unable to skipper the delayed trans-Atlantic crossing as he'd intended, instead entrusting *Eleanor Mary* in to the hands of professional charter skipper, Willie Fleurbaaij. The trip across brought bad weather and highlighted more areas where gear needed attention, but Willie obviously found a boat that pleased him, sending a message to David during the trip saying, "Lovely sail. Boat shows her colours. Good ship. Just some minor details."

Once delivered to Cowes, the work – aided by John Steele's son Dorian, who was boat-sitting *Marguerite T* there – began on utilising the intervening 18 months to get the boat in the kind of shape needed to take trainees around the Atlantic on the Tall Ships 2000.

The race proved to be the making of *Eleanor Mary*, with much fun had by all. Though for David, a qualified RYA Yachtmaster Ocean, there were some difficult aspects of sail-training that he had not foreseen. As he puts it, "What happened at sea was one thing, but keeping control of everyone in port was by far the



Eleanor Mary Pilot Cutter

Designed by Nigel Irens Partnership

LOD 51ft 4in (15.64m)

LOA (inc spars) 65ft 8in (20.0m)

LWL 44ft 11in (13.69m)

Beam 4ft 3in (4.35m)

Draught 7ft (2.13m)

Bowsprit 14ft 8in (4.48m)

Displ 32 tonnes

Air draught 65ft 8in (20m)

Sails:

Main 789sqft (72.7m)

Topsail 216sqft (19.9m)

Stay foresail 338sqft (31.2m)

Jib 314sqft (28.9m)

Total working rig 1,647sqft (151.8m)

In addition:

Jib topsail 295sqft (27.2m)

Racing foresail 1,184sqft (109.1m)

Squaresail 468sqft (43.1m)

most stressful part.” Even so, the race proved to be a successful one for David and the crew: at the prize-giving they were awarded the trophy for the newcomer that had contributed most to the event. Since then *Eleanor Mary* has clocked up thousands more miles, cruising to Norway, the Azores and beyond.

As I sit helming at *Eleanor Mary*'s wheel I consider what it would be like to be her owner and skipper, and the feelings that I had on stepping aboard are not diminished by the view ahead of me: this is a big boat. Her essentially flush decks, pierced only by some central, opening hatches, stretch forward and laterally in a daunting expanse of boat, more than affirming her dimensions – and then there's the 14ft (4.3m) bowsprit out front to worry about. I can see now why David requests that while he's manoeuvring the boat on and off her hammerhead pontoon mooring at East Coves into the busy River Medina, everyone not directly involved in the procedure stands out of eye-line, on the centreline. The communication between him and Rupert, his son and the boat's mate, has to be clear and

decisive to avoid any embarrassment or damage. Once into the clearer water of the Solent the size and sheer physical bulk become less obvious and, I would imagine, after a few days of passage making, or hove-to in a storm, the bulk would become a positive comfort. David talks of being holed up a few times during the 30,000 miles that *Eleanor Mary* has sailed in the 10 years since she was built, the most notable being a 36-hour spell spent below during a particularly severe gale while returning from Norway.

So, it would seem that she has inherited the legendary sea-kindliness of the breed – but what of the equally important short-handed characteristics? These seem to have translated too, as both David and Rupert have cruised her for long periods with just two or three people on board.

Ideally though, with a mind to comfort as well as safety, David feels that a crew of four is a good minimum to work around for day and weekend sailing, while six – arranged into three watches lasting three

hours each, with six hours off, meaning that no-one gets stuck with a perpetual graveyard shift – is his preferred compliment for passage-making.

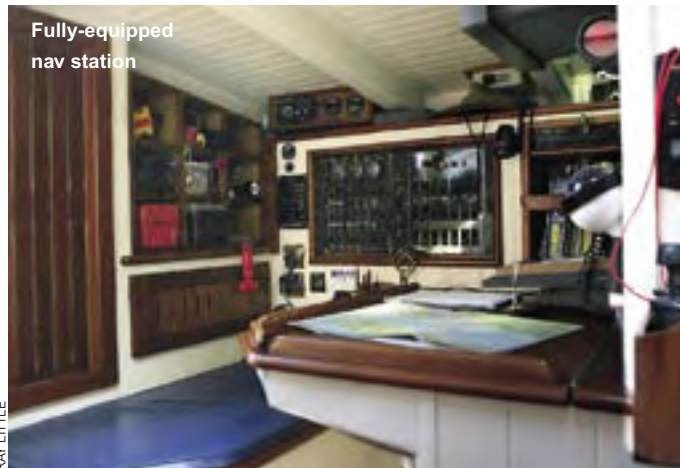
With his huge experience of the boat, David has nothing but praise for her, even though he is now seeking to sell her on with an asking price of £398,500 through brokers Berthon International, and he leads visitors around the vessel on the obligatory familiarisation tour with a subdued, but obvious, pride.

He's sailed all but 4,000 of those 30,000 miles, so he's in a great position to comment on how the project has worked out, and he leaves you in no doubt that he's happy with what he's achieved. Of the work carried out in Nova Scotia he says, “We have a lot of respect for the guys at Covey Island

– the standard of wood working and the interior fit-out are stunning.” He singles out for special merit Kevin Waumbach, the craftsman who did a lot of the interior work and constructed *Eleanor Mary*'s beautifully fine, lug-rigged tender, *Ellie*

*“The tall ships
race proved to be
the making of her”*

PILOT CUTTER ELEANOR MARY



Fully-equipped nav station

RAY LITTLE



Eleanor Mary (right) racing Marguerite T

CHRIS RAWDON

May. “Kevin did a wonderful job on *Ellie May*, she’s almost identical to the tenders used by the Maine coasting schooners from 150 years ago. In all he used 15 different types of wood in her – she’s great to sail.”

As might be expected of a one-off vessel of this complexity, there have been some alterations since *Eleanor Mary* left the yard.

Her navigational electronics have all been up-graded, and above decks there have been changes too. Her original hollow Douglas fir mast showed signs of cracking while racing in the Solent in 1999 and, on inspection, David found a similar problem with the bowsprit. It’s a testament to the seriousness with which he takes his role as captain and owner of a sail-training ship that even though he was advised that the spars could be repaired – the boom showed no signs of failure – he replaced all three of *Eleanor Mary*’s wooden spars with heavier specification Columbian pine from Spencer

Thetis Wharf in Cowes after less than two seasons’ use. He also intends to replace her gaff, which is made from heavily-reinforced carbon fibre, with a spruce spar as it has a tendency to chafe the rigging and sails.

As we continue to ghost along in the Solent in a bizarrely balmy April scorcher of a day, with David’s family and friends

“desperately wants to own a ‘real’ pilot cutter”

reclining on the ample decks and the wind slatting the sails, I wondered about the huge effort that has gone in to bring this

boat into being – not to mention the cost, which totalled around £700,000 to get her to the standards that David required – and how many lives she has already altered on those Tall Ships passages and other sail-training cruises. I wonder if there’s another David Darbyshire out there now, working up the career ladder to build up his boat kitty, someone who’s life has been changed by being afloat on *Eleanor Mary*. That’s what David wants. He also desperately

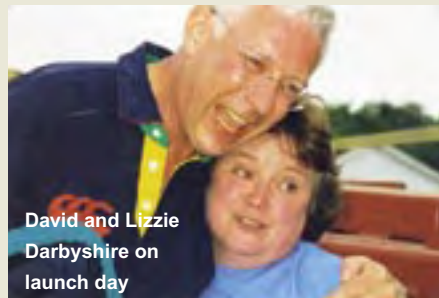
wants to claim to own a ‘real’ pilot cutter – and he’s got very close to fulfilling those original criteria of Ed Burnett’s.

During their summer cruise of Nova Scotia in 1998, it came to David’s attention that the *Queen Elizabeth II* would be arriving and she would be needing a pilot – as an added bonus one of her passengers would be Peter Stuckey, a respected author of works on pilot cutters.

The Nova Scotian Pilot Service gave *Eleanor Mary* and *Marguerite T* permission to race each other to meet the *QEII* with a pilot on board and dispatch him to the ship. *Marguerite T* won the race, and her pilot was disembarked using *Eleanor Mary*’s tender. The pilot service had to step in for the final boarding of the *QEII*, but David still describes it as, “One of the greatest days, ever.” So, does this make *Eleanor Mary* a ‘real’ pilot cutter, an ‘updated’ pilot cutter, or a ‘pilot cutter-type’? Hopefully, no one cares; there’s far more to her than that.



THE BUILD AND LAUNCH IN PICTURES



David and Lizzie Darbyshire on launch day

COVEY ISLAND BOATWORKS