

## 'A Faultless Australian'

Fremantle, Australia may be down-under, however as our writer found out, their wooden boat restoration projects are certainly not down-and-out. He describes a project to dream of.

To be able to ask a shipwright to restore a badly deteriorated 35-year-old boat to "perfect and absolutely faultless condition" without compromise and with little thought of the money or time it would take, would be every enthusiast's dream, and probably a nightmare for the shipwright.

Portsmouth born Mark Payne however, had brought the skills he learned as an apprentice in the boatyards of Northshore Yacht-yards of Itchenor, Wittering, (in the UK), to Fremantle in Western Australia. He was up to the task when approached by vintage car and motorcycle restorer / collector, 'Tom Smith', to restore his latest project, the former Fisheries Department patrol vessel, 'Vlaming'.

The story goes that 'Tom' was at Rottnest Island off the West Australian coast when a storm broke, preventing all the boats from leaving - all except 'Vlaming'. It was while watching the classic wooden vessel valiantly pounding it's way into the sea towards Fremantle, that he decided that someday he would buy that boat.

His chance came some years later in 1994 while he was on a business trip to the USA. Word came that she was on the market for the sum of \$35 000. On the phone, there and then, without ever having stepped foot in her, 'Tom' purchased the boat he had seen in the storm all those years before.

To say he was a wealthy eccentric would not only be an understatement but may also make my lawyer unhappy, so I won't. I have never met him, my contact with him was through an intermediary who insisted that 'Tom's' real name not be mentioned (why am I not surprised?). So I just call him 'Tom Smith'. Mark tells of the young millionaire owner often arriving in his Rolls Royce, parking it outside the shed, and, after turning it's CD player on loudly, donning overalls for a hard days work alongside 'the boys'.

"He was dedicated to perfection," Mark said, "We soon found that to him 'almost, close, and nearly,' were just not good enough. Perfect, exact, it always had to be - FAULTLESS".

The place in which she was laid up and rebuilt, as with so much else, was original. The shed Mark chose at Pier 21 on the bank of the Swan River, in North Fremantle, was the site of the original shed that she was built in by the Back Brothers, after they won the £10,979 contract back in April 1962. The yard was then known as Rocky Bay Shipways.

The total cost of her original construction, including engines, fittings, furniture, radio and dinghy back then was £15,000. (A far cry from the \$315 000+ Tom spent on her).

When her plans were originally drawn up, the West Australian maritime surveyors disagreed with the required hull specifications as laid down by the Maritime Service of New South Wales (Eastern Australia) and they extensively strengthened the vessel to cope with Western Australian 'Indian Ocean' conditions. Another change required from the 'eastern states' standard, was a move away from the use of the popular Karri timber externally on a vessel. In Western Australian waters this was susceptible to Toredoworms and so she was built extensively of first grade Jarrah, with Oregon used above the waterline. All knees, breast hooks etc were in White Gum with the internal ribs specified to larger proportions.

The 40 foot 'Vlaming' originally saw service in the 60's as a fisheries patrol vessel, covering a stretch of coast from Bunbury in the south, to the far northern Bernier and Dorre Islands off Carnarvon, a 600 mile stretch of coast. The regular 48-hour trip from Fremantle to Carnarvon was only punctuated by a fuel stop in Geraldton, before passing the treacherous Zuytdorp cliffs along the barren exposed North-West 'coast-of-no-anchorage' as some call it. In the later years she was seconded to other roles, including sea rescue, salvage and as a support vessel for scientific and naturalist investigation work.

She was almost lost once during a gale while rescuing another boat at Dorre Island. The towropes became entangled in her props and both vessels were driven rapidly onto the treacherous shore. Her skipper at the time, now-retired Captain, Geoff "Ted" Faulkner tells a tale that leaves you gripping the chair, hearing the surf pounding and feeling the salt spray in your face. A tale ending in the quick and dangerous action by divers who managed to free the propellers beneath the heaving vessel, saving them both.

Her next assignment was as a private charter vessel in the whale watching Exmouth Gulf area, off the northwest of Australia, followed by a return to Fremantle where she drifted from owner to owner, becoming a well-known sight off Rottnest Island.

Then Tom saw her as she departed into the storm.

It was the new owners' initial requirement that the hull be absolutely sound, as only on a solid foundation could his new masterpiece be created. The hulls should have no rot, wet or dry, the boat had to be totally stripped out and then, inch by inch, nail by screw by plank, inspected and rebuilt. Thanks to the Western Australian surveyors specifications, what Mark found under the paint was still almost perfect.

All the old paint was burnt off the hull and all timbers taken right back. Not surprisingly, and a testament to the stout specifications of her scantlings when built, there was only one plank to port and one to starboard that needed replacement. The sheer strakes were removed, rebuilt and replaced. To these was fitted a jarrah rubbing strake with a brass 'D'-section to protect it. All fastenings and copper roves were tightened and where necessary, replaced. She was then totally re-corked in oakum and cotton. The traditional red leading, a rare commodity in these environmentally 'aware' days followed.

Silicon Bronze screws are used throughout her construction and all copper nails are twisted - as original.

The engine room was in need of a major overhaul and was totally stripped. Originally called in to look over the 2:1 Borg-Warner gearboxes, which he stripped and reconditioned, veteran marine engineer Wayne Hayley found the 35-year-old engines in 'a sorry state' and took them away for some major TLC. Fortunately, being all cast iron, the Detroit's had little of the electrolytic problems associated with the complex mix of alloys and metal types we see in modern engines. The pair of 90HP engines had liners and piston rings replaced, the replacement rings being cast iron ex-tractor rings, as the original GM spring-steel rings caused cylinder glazing. Being 2-strokes the exhaust valves needed replacement as did the blowers and all the electrics.

The rusty old cast iron water traps (baffles / mufflers or whatever you choose to call them) were removed from the exhaust system and the 'usual' bits of wire holding everything together were all replaced with custom made stainless brackets.

A thorough search through the foundry in Fremantle revealed the original 1962 casting for the exhaust baffle box (after substantial argument this is what I now call them). This was pulled out of retirement and used to cast 2 new 3/4-inch bronze baffle boxes for the diesel engines that Wayne returned in better than new condition, 'ready for another 35 years'.

As with everything else they had to be exactly original, or at the very least, better than new.

All stainless brightwork was custom made in 316 stainless, not merely finished but to be faultless it all had to be highly polished. Then all mountings were routed in, flush with the wood they were fitted to. If you say it quickly this may all sound less than the mammoth task it really was. "Why not make things easy on yourself and...." I began to ask Mark, only to be cut short. "It would not be perfect then ...would it?" was the answer.

Mark hand selected each and every piece of teak used, \$40 000 worth of 1/4 sawn dead straight grain, knot free timber, all measured and below 6% moisture

It is possible to board the vessel amidships on both sides. There the shaped teak rails are hinged and fitted with custom detailed stainless, moulded to the exact shape of the timber with even teflon inserts for the clips to snugly slide into.

Having taken around 400 hours to complete, the decks are incredible and a masterpiece unto themselves. Laid of 3/4 inch teak on a base of 5/8 marine ply, every scarf is on a deckbeam and again, only silicon bronze screws are used. Not only are the planks totally double-checked, but each side is perfectly mirror imaged, port and starboard. Every fuel filler, butt scarf etc is identical, port and starboard. When it all met at the stern Mark says it was 2mm out, personally I could not see it, but who am I to argue.

Of course, the hatches in the aft deck had to have their grain exactly matching the surrounding deck perfectly. Not only does the same wood grain follow up to, over and continue after the hatch, it is even mirrored perfectly. The hatch sits exactly on the vessel's centreline and each piece of timber to port matches it's opposite piece to starboard, not only in size and shape but right down to the way the grain curves, it's texture and shading. As perfect a mirror as nature would allow.

All external varnishing was done in Goldspar and floors in Awlgrip 2-pack. The interior roof beams were made of Western Red Cedar and cambered perfectly to its original lines.

Although barely 2m long and only holding aloft the required lights and a tiny flag, the mast was fashioned in the same manner as it would have been, had it been needed to carry a full set of canvas. Mark had to build a hollow section, laminated, a work of art, again with all the grains following and mirrored, including on knees and the spreaders. While discussing the mast I had it pointed out to me that even the lights were cast to fit on custom base plates.

Walking around the deck Mark points out each item and meticulously describes how it came to be, how it was carefully considered, the options discussed between he and Tom, and then, how he actually went about the work.

The main saloon is a thesaurus' delight with words such as grandeur, luxurious, refined and sumptuous all coming easily to mind. Truly multi-talented, Mark usually does all his own upholstery, however the soft pleated leather seats were sewn by the artisans whose needles create the elite 'Chesterfield' range of furniture. When Mark said that the seat I was sitting on had cost \$7000, I rapidly decided that maybe I'd sit outside. The style of the pleats, which were individually packed and stuffed, is again in the exact style of Tom's Rolls-Royce, and their soft pastel lime-green colour complements the warm glow of the solid timber burl veneer panels of American oak. The story behind the oak is just another in what could easily have become an afternoon of stories.

It was originally imported for another boat but when the craftsman who imported it saw the magnificence of the 'Vlaming' project, he wanted to see the wood in 'Vlaming' and offered it to Tom.

The owner wanted the instrument consol to match the dash of his Rolls Royce Silver Shadow 2 and so it was made of English Elm while the instruments and switches selected to match came from the Murphy collection. These were the only ones available with the large black numbers on plain white background. All switches too are of the push-pull type as they are in the Rolls-Royce.

The sliding side doors move like on silk, actually sitting on roller ball cars mounted to a mainsheet track, carefully concealed behind the stainless framework which surrounds the door. The barrel bolts were custom made, as were the collets which Mark said he guarantees will never rattle or stick.

For'ard the windows are custom made armor plated glass while the side and aft doors feature an etched blue Marlin, custom designed purely for the boat.

The portholes were not only cast in bronze with chrome plated bezels, but, in fitting with the aesthetics of the cabin top forward, each porthole becomes smaller than the previous as they near the bow.

The hawses are chrome plated copper with solid teak hand-cut dove tailed dorado boxes. The construction method followed through to the hatch covers that are likewise hand cut dove-tailed with mitre tops. This was a legacy of an apprenticeship which Mark says taught him to be precise. "If your measurement was even just slightly out," Mark says, "the dove tails would slide in nicely but the mitre could have a gap, or the dove tails could even be loose. (In confidence he said he doesn't do this by hand anymore, "there are tools that can do it better now") Each little box took a full day to make.

The Bollards were custom designed to suit the boat and were one-off creations. Mark designed and made the model-plug of wood, shaping and changing it, until not only was it perfectly practical, but it also looked right when viewed from all angles, on and off the boat. Four of these were then cast in bronze and chrome plated.

Stepping out onto the aft deck, 'cockpit' covered in a white bimini, we can look up and see that even the lashing, which passes through the brass ringlets and around the stainless supports has been tied in the 'traditional' manner.

The finishing touches even, were not just 'touches'. As Mark neared the end of 20 months of 60 hour weeks, the perfect timber had to be found for the bowsprit. It was eventually found and hewn from a 50-year-old Jarrah mineshaft shore found 900 km inland in the outback-mining city of Kalgoorlie.

And the costs were now mounting, so Mark and the owner made a trade, a mooring was swapped for a toilet seat cover. Mark got an old mooring in the Swan river close to Fremantle, as barter he made a teak toilet seat and cover. Again as with everything else, the grain on both seat and cover was matching and faultless. Mark says Tom reckons he got a raw deal, I don't know about that, but then I haven't tried the seat out yet.

Of course, sometimes a line has to be drawn between looking original and being original. An electric loo was hidden below the matched teak seat, one of a few small modernisations that were necessary and an improvement on the original. The other was the use of halogen bulbs inside the imported light fittings, which were selected and purchased directly from Italy. The bulbs use less power and give a softer light that suits the interior. A larger 80 amp alternator to keep the 4 x 300 amp hour batteries charged is supplemented while berthed by a trickle charge, supplied by an unobtrusive flush mounted solar panel in the roof.

After all this was finished, as so often happens in the real world, the owner found that he was just not able to find the time to use the boat. He never got that opportunity to take his boat out into the storm. He was never able to leave all the other boats behind at Rottnest Island and beat his way back to the mainland.

So he offered the boat to the one person he knew would do the best job of looking after her.

Mark Payne.

Mark purchased the boat and soon it made the trip back to Rottnest.

Three years later, Alan McLaren, who had many times watched the Vlaming cruise by, purchased the boat and the McLaren family some 21 years later still run Vlaming Classic Charters.