

CRUISING DINGHY CONVERSIONS

Sailing dinghy designs developed for cruising rather than racing are a relatively new part of the sailing scene, partly fostered by the advent of 'Raids' using centreboard boats (although the competitive aspect of some Raids has seen the emergence of specialist performance-oriented designs). In the UK there is an active Cruising Dinghy Association. Martin's and Deb's 'Hop the Wag' is an example of a fine purpose-designed cruising dinghy. The designs of Australian expatriate Iain Outhred and New Zealander John Welsford are influenced by traditional dinghy and fishing boat designs but use modern ply/epoxy construction methods.

However just as in the past, racing yachts that were past their competitive glory days were sometimes converted into cruising craft, racing dinghies past their racing use-by-date can also be converted into satisfactory cruising dinghies, possibly at a fraction of the cost of a purpose designed cruising dinghy. A Tasmanian example is the converted Sharpie of Mick Hubbard that participated in the mini-raid held in February this year. In NSW, I have undertaken three dinghy conversion projects, whose outcome was interesting boats, even if they were/are hybrid craft.

The first project was a 12 foot skiff, smaller cousin of the famous Sydney harbour 18 foot skiffs. It was an early fibreglass model from the 1960s or 70s. It cost \$350 with its trailer and came with the original number 3 rig. It was of round bilge hull form and had seductively pretty lines. Since I was then a full-time postgraduate student I did the conversion in stages, and spent time in between sailing it on Lake Macquarie, near Newcastle where I was studying, and elsewhere. The initial change was merely to replace the large overlapping headsail with a jib from a Heron.

Even with the reduced sail area the boat was tender; the combination of weight aloft from the tall mast, and slack bilged hull form made it challenging to sail, especially in gusty conditions. Also, the limited buoyancy that earlier skiffs insisted was good for the sailing soul, meant that the boat couldn't be self-rescued if a capsize occurred. Eventually however the skiff, which I named 'Pippi', was transformed into quite a good little cruising boat. I fitted side seats, which added to the buoyancy, and changed the rig, firstly to a lug rig with freestanding timber mast, then subsequently to a gaff rig. The lower centre of effort and weight of the traditional rigs dramatically improved stability. My most memorable cruise in the skiff was on Moreton Bay: I crossed the Bay to The Little Ship Club at Dunwich, then sailed north to Amity Point and explored the nearby channels between the sandbanks that rise out of the water at low tide. On the return crossing to Brisbane, I raced ahead of a dramatic thunderstorm that brought screaming winds and belted me with hailstones as I landed the boat at Cleveland Point.

The second conversion was of a 14 foot beach catamaran, an ex-hire craft whose broken hulls a friend gave me. On the hulls I created raised decks, with storage compartments underneath, constructed nice looking Oregon cross-beams, and made a mast from an old roller blind from a tip shop. The rig was converted to gunter after re-cutting the sail – this rig works well on a cruising dinghy as it is easy to set up the short mast, while the mainsail can be lowered quickly if a squall threatened. The catamaran proved to be an excellent small cruiser. On a winter cruise on Moreton Bay, 'Flying Fish' scorched under full control before a savage south-easterly into the safe sheltered anchorage at the One Mile, then a day later slugged for 10 nm against a strong headwind and into steep waves, despite having no centreboards, before finding peace dried out on a sandy beach on North Stradbroke Island, opposite Canaipa Point.

While 'Flying Fish' was a great single-handed cruiser, the narrow waterplanes of the catamaran configuration, limiting the type's load-carrying capacity, would have made her struggle to carry two people plus all their gear. Even with only me, together with water, food and camping gear, the lee hull dug well in on occasion. By comparison, when 'Pippi' was loaded with camping gear the extra weight dampened her flightiness, improving the handling. Sadly, Pippi and Flying Fish were both lost in the same storm, albeit when both were on dry land (although it wasn't very dry at the time), when a large tree fell over and demolished them.

Their replacement, my third dinghy conversion, was an old Finn, the class that Paul Elvstrom won three of his four Olympic gold medals in. Built in Australian red cedar (sadly too patched to be restored to a varnish finish) I bought it on an ebay auction for \$355; it's possible, I like to think, that she was one of the fleet built for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. The larger size and weight of the Finn give her more stability than the skiff, and there is room behind the swing centreboard to sleep aboard. (I have found that some cruising areas have surprising few places suitable for a campsite.)

Again I added more buoyancy, with a compartment forward, and again converted the rig to gaff. The considerable round in the sail's luff, because the original mast was unstayed, was suited to being recut to form a high peaked gaff sail. The foot was also recut so the boom now angles up, and two sets of reef points were added. Rowlocks were also installed, and with a foldable stool placed aft of the centrecase, and the rudder held amidships, she can be efficiently rowed. I did a cruise in company down the Clarence River last year, and 'Huckleberry' proved to be a comfortable, fast and able cruising dinghy. Admittedly I had to sometimes hike out while the skipper of the Welsford 'Navigator' yawl was sitting contentedly inboard, but there was the compensation that we always left them well astern (and 'Huckleberry', even counting money spent on conversion, cost less than 10% of the cost to build the Navigator).