



# Australian Wooden Boat Festival

6–9 February 2009 Hobart Tasmania

Story of the month: April 2008

by Terry O'Connor

## The raising of “L’Hirondelle”

When I purchased ‘L’Hirondelle’ in late 2000 I knew there would be a few challenges ahead; after nearly 60 years afloat she was a bit tired all round but I thought – and still do – that she was the ideal vessel for my style of pleasure boating.

A 31 ft motor launch, ‘L’Hirondelle’ draws about 2 ft 6 inches and is reasonably beamy at about 9 ft 6 inches; she handles all conditions in the Channel and coastal waters comfortably and is ideal for groups of up to six for overnight trips.

For seven years I toiled away to tidy up the old girl - patching up spots of rot in the cabin sides, replacing the formica galley bench-top with thick laminated Tassie Oak; swapping the old carpet and the underlying chipboard (!) for solid hardwood flooring; building a nice timber dining table to seat at least six, installing a lovely new engine and gearbox when the old Fordson Major gave up the ghost, and so on. And of course there was the never-ending list of maintenance tasks large and small that goes with every old wooden boat. None of that stopped me from actually doing what you are meant to do with boats – take them out and have a good time, the highlight of which is always the Wooden Boat Festival.

The fact that I seemed to be always doing some sort of work on ‘L’Hirondelle’ didn’t seem a burden: after all, I do tend to spend just about every week-end on her and you need some excuse to justify that sort of indulgence. My main alibi was that she leaks like a sieve and I can’t have her sinking – must stand guard at every possible opportunity, and all that.

All that came to an abrupt end on 18th November 2007.

On Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> November a mate and I had set off for a night away on his fishing boat but an hour or so out we discovered problems with her fuel pump and had to be towed home to Kettering. Always the improviser, I suggested we transfer our gear to ‘L’Hirondelle’ and carry on regardless. We did so and in due course reached Partridge Island, where we encountered a cray fisherman who is known to us but shall remain nameless.

We rafted up off Butlers Beach and enjoyed a few hours of socialising aboard ‘L’Hirondelle’ before being invited to join the cray boat (let’s call her the ‘May Flower’) while they pulled their pots; we would be put back aboard ‘L’Hirondelle’ when the night’s work was done.

Well, one thing led to another and the next thing I knew it was Sunday morning and we were still around the outside of Bruny; apparently my mate and I had fallen asleep and 'May Flower's skipper had asserted his authority by deciding to stay out rather than deliver us back. After enduring/enjoying the morning pot-haul, we finally got back to 'L'Hirondelle' about lunchtime to discover that a fairly stiff northerly was dancing her around and I thought it best to move her to more sedate waters.

That was a really stupid decision in retrospect; she was managing quite well without my assistance and the wind died down a couple of hours later. No need for panic.

In attempting to bring the stern of the (canoe-sterned & 20 ton) 'May Flower' up to the side of my (hard chined and 5 ton) love interest – in a 2 to 3 ft slop - there was a bit of a bump. Shortly it was realised that 'May Flower' had a particularly effective steel plate protecting her rudder, and it was perfectly placed to slice through the chine of 'L'Hirondelle', get hooked underneath and then rip through the outer bottom plank on the way up.

Disbelief, dismay, despair followed in quick succession as we watched 'L'Hirondelle' settle in 12 feet of water, stern down and bow up. I assumed the bow would soon give in to the anchor chain and laws of gravity, and my beautiful boat would be smashed to pieces in a day or so.

Never one to concede, I asked Steve Reid of Marcon to attempt a salvage and we set off on Thursday 22 November to raise 'L'Hirondelle'. Incredibly she was in the same position as I had seen her four days previously – bum down and head up, as though trying to keep her nostrils above the water line. Divers were sent down and reported that no "serious" hull damage seemed to have been inflicted – just a couple of planks each with a half-inch crack along about five feet. Despite bouncing off the bottom for four days the stern was still intact, it seemed.



I was pretty impressed to watch guys going under with hammers, nails, tarpaulin, and scraps of plywood; they patched the damage, ran slings under 'L'Hirondelle', and then craned



her to the waterline. There followed several hours of drama as the crane reached its maximum lift just short of the critical height to allow high pressure pumps to evacuate water quicker than it was coming in.

For a while I was certain that Steve would decide to drag my boat out to deeper water and sink her properly, but he and his crew persevered and somehow managed to get it all happening; a few more dives to stop up the odd gap, and 'L'Hirondelle' was floating enough to be towed to Kettering! (In fact, with the acknowledged assistance of 'Marcon Sea Hauler', I think 'L'Hirondelle' achieved a PB – I'm sure she cracked 8 knots on the way back).

On the way home I took the opportunity to clamber aboard, ostensibly to salvage a bottle of scotch – mission accomplished! – but really because I just had to survey the damage.

What an almighty mess ....the previously immovable object of the galley had met an irresistible force and was spread all over the place. Most of it was piled over the engine, it being exposed to the world because the engine box was elsewhere. Cans of paint and food were scattered everywhere, many having left rust-coloured circles on the cabin ceilings. Clothing, bedding, mattresses etc were in a predictably putrid state and fishing line was tangled everywhere.

After we got safely up on the slip a few days later, I came to the conclusion that nothing inside the boat was salvageable except the motor. Many tip-trips later, 'L'Hirondelle' was reduced to a bare hull, other than the engine – which was resurrected after much painstaking effort by my good friend Ray "Diesel Doctor" Flakemore - and by the time she was returned to her berth just two weeks after the sinking, she was riding a good four inches higher in the water.



Naturally, every sensible old sea dog in the Kettering vicinity declared that it was a waste of time – the boat was too old, too weak, too damaged: just get over it and buy another one. Guess what? There is no way that a 60 year old classic is going to the tip, and there is no doubt that she will be proudly in attendance at the 2009 Wooden Boat Festival and many more to come.

There is just the slight challenge of completing a total re-fit in the next twelve months but I am certain that will be achieved; so far the engine has been resurrected and the floors (including sub-framing) rebuilt. I will surely be enjoying Easter on the water, though possibly lacking some of the creature comforts – but what do you need beside a roof and a bed?

In fact the only loss that I don't seem able to replace is my first Wooden Boat Festival flag; if anyone out there has a 2001 flag that is surplus to requirements please contact me.

While I'm about it, it occurs to me that I didn't properly understand the importance of preserving a piece of maritime history until it was almost too late. Every year or so I encounter someone who used to own 'L'Hirondelle' or knows someone who did and, while I have always been keen to have a chat, I have never been organised enough to get details to allow her history to be reconstructed.

I would be very grateful if anyone who has had even a glancing acquaintance with this lovely boat could get in touch with me in whichever way is most convenient:

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**We would love to hear from you!**

To contribute stories or make any suggestions for the newsletter please get in touch with Lois Ryan by email: [media@australianwoodenboatfestival.com.au](mailto:media@australianwoodenboatfestival.com.au)

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