

Story of the month: November 2008
By Alex Jerrim

Henry II's story

"Henry II's Story" is a bit of a yarn from owner Alex Jerrim, and begins up the Gordon River where he and good friend Bruce Harris who himself owns *Huon Seal* were out for a bit of adventure.

For six hours we motor-sailed into a steep chop and a 15 knot head wind. Finally, after an 0730 start, we were beating into the Gordon River. Strahan had long gone from view and Sarah Island passed to starboard. The wind momentarily shifted just enough for us to set the topsail. That small amount of extra sail added little to windward performance but much to the emotional experience. Tourists returning from their Gordon Cruise framed us in their viewfinders as we reached our hull speed of 4 knots. This experience exceeded the legal limit for life's feel good moments!



I recall Tom Cunliffe once describing a gaffer without a topsail as like a beautiful lady's smile missing the teeth. The tourists would have known what he meant without understanding what he was saying. If they didn't, may they never head south of Queensland again.

Soon the wind died, the sun set, and dusk gave way to moon beams that beckoned us towards the Franklin. We pushed against a moderate current and managed about one knot over land. At 2000 hours we moored at Sir John Falls, erected the boom tent, and opened a bottle of red. Soon the smell of smoked salmon risotto oozed from our snug abode and the last big decision for the day had to be made—should we add fresh coriander and capers to the risotto?



Daybreak on the Gordon River seen from a 14' Huon Pine dinghy evokes a humbling sense of privilege. But for a sign advising us to stay clear of aircraft that may be landing on the Gordon, we could have been lost in another age.

It was mid September but the sun warmed the air enough to dry Bruce's sleeping bag. At 0200 we learned that the new method I had devised for storing the 25 l water container was flawed!

With the warming air came a mostly steady 5 – 8 knot wind. Do we goosewing downstream back to Macquarie Harbour or continue onto the Franklin? Worried about a weather change and the scary thought of tackling serious wind in the harbour, we erred on the side of caution.

Unlike the Channel, our home waters, there's little warning of squalls on the Gordon. We soon learned that five to ten seconds was the norm. So it was that Bruce heard me yell 'kill the pig'. But it was too late, the bow dipped, we swung rapidly to port and over the boom shot. Little point in calling 'jibe ho' as by now Bruce was bum-down, feet-up, stuck between the thwart and the foredeck and somewhat tangled in the belaying pins. Our boat's stability compensated for my poor seamanship. A second planned jibe had us back on course.

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This great little vessel had been a part of my life for seven years now. In 2001 a tipoff had led me to it. The decaying hull was lying in a Taroona paddock. A sad sight, it looked forlorn and was destined to become a kid's play gym. Others may have called it a rotten old boat but I saw its inner beauty and was captivated by its then champagne glass transom, full bilges, and sensual curved strakes. I was drawn closer. 'We should take the current as it serves or lose our ventures', I thought. Or was it, 'gorgeous bum, I'm in love, I've got to have it.'?

It doesn't matter how many wooden boat renovation sagas you've read about, lust and optimism blind one to reality. Whisperings of 'it's not that bad' echo in the back of your mind. 'A few broken ribs but they're easy to replace. Most of the strakes look OK. Ditch the cray well, replace the deck, and build a new centrecase. Maybe a month's work. A new rig and she's back in the water.'

Within the week money had exchanged hands, the boat had slid onto a trailer and she'd made her way to our home at Cygnet. 'By Christmas she'll be in the water', I told myself. Two years later she was still languishing next to the carport.

So it was that I phoned Ned. I didn't know it at the time but my life had intersected with more than just a friendly, bearded bloke who appeared to know a lot about fixing old boats. Ned was about to add a richness to my life's tapestry that I could never have planned.



In Ned's shed the pages of the wooden boat restoration story turned. Chapter one: we'll remove the paint from the garboards and take a closer look. Hmm... not too good, looks like the keel will need replacing. At least most of the planking still looks OK. Chapter two: What did I say about the planking? Chapter three: she really would benefit from all new ribs. Chapter four, five, six... We've come this far, wouldn't a Huon pine-laid deck top the rebuild off?

Four original strakes on each side now remain, half the bow stem and at least three quarters of that much-admired transom. So why is it that I still sense the boat is 50 odd years old? I could have asked Ned to build me a new boat. But I didn't and I wouldn't. Is it that by replacing one piece of the boat at a time you sustain a form that was first crafted by eye and then slightly enriched by time? No original lofting table or half model here.

Originally I had considered rebuilding the boat myself. Sure, it would have floated and I could have hidden my many inevitable mistakes. However, the conduit to the past that was Ned never would have connected me to that inextricable sense of the past. That's the thing about Ned—he's part surgeon, part artist, part theologian, and part conduit. He's a good muso too.

Day boats offer a unique sailing experience and connectedness with the environment. They demand—at least in Tasmanian waters—a constant sense of vigilance. We sail the boat only in sheltered waters but where that description comes from I do not know. When the horizon disappears as you fall into a trough and a 35 knot wall of white spray hits you as the world reappears, 'sheltered' is not the term that springs to mind. All this when 10 minutes earlier it was a drifter. Someone once asked me if I ever used the reefing points in the stays'l. Did Bill Tillman sail Bristol Channel pilot cutters?



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I've often felt encouraged by Ned's words when the wind picks up. Good honest boat, he said. Lots of integrity, good hull shape, very reliable, true workboat—descriptors oft repeated in the boatshed and reassuring when confronting one of those squalls that fits the category 'mariners are reminded that winds may be twice those given'. Consequently, when it came to naming 'the boat' the decision was obvious. In 1955 I was given two gifts: life, and my dad whose name is Henry. My dad was never a workboat—worker yes—but he was the epitome of honesty, integrity and reliability. So it was that Henry II got his name.



Now four years since his reincarnation Henry II has many nautical miles under his bilges. He's a day boat, technically speaking, but used to much longer adventures (as my sailing companion and I like to call our sojourns). Henry II is really a three to five day boat. We've sailed the navigable parts of the Tamar River, Gordon River, Huon River, and Lune River. We've explored the entire west coast of Bruny, sailed from Cygnet to Nubeena and return, and explored most of Norfolk Bay. On all these trips we've lived aboard for several nights.

For a boat that's less than 14' he's comfortable. He's set up for camp-cruising. 7' x 2 ½' of floor space either side of the centreline to lay the air mattress and spread the sleeping bag, gas stove, storage for five days of camping, ice box and wine rack (joking), fuel for eight hours of motoring, and a boom tent that provides stand up bent-over headroom.

You may be wondering what we were doing pig hunting on the Gordon River. I actually yelled 'kill the peak!' You can minimise sail area in an instant by pulling a slip knot that holds the belayed peak halyard. Bruce misheard me. The command has now stuck!



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