

Build Romilly from a kit



Previously in *Water Craft*... We've described how you can buy this quintessential modern lugger fully finished in GRP or build her from scratch using epoxy strip-planking. Now, as Steve Graham explains, there's a third way. With photographs by the author.

Anyone with a basic mechanical aptitude can build a boat, even a large one. This is not to denigrate the true artisan but to acknowledge that, no matter how complex, boatbuilding is in essence a series of smaller, simpler tasks which on completion create the whole. For the amateur, the real difficulty is finding the time, energy, and money required for such a project. Building from scratch is most demanding; assembling a kit is more likely to produce a successful divorce-free result!

At this year's Boats on Show, the Bridgend Boat Co was displaying the Nigel Irens designed 22' (6.7m) Romilly. Romilly has a pedigree that separates her from the average day-sailer. But what particularly interested me about this Romilly was that her owner, Simon Carpenter, bought her as a kit and completed her at home. I talked to Richard Checkley, MD of Bridgend, to find out more.

Nigel Irens is best known for designing ultra-fast multihulls: his *Apricot* won the Round Britain race in '85

and her class in the Round Europe. And in *Enza*, Sir Robin Knox Johnston and Sir Peter Blake sprinted around the world in 74 days to win the Jules Verne Trophy.

When designing a boat for himself, he produced the more traditional 29' 6" (9m) Roxane, a yawl with a free-standing lug rig. The design criteria was that she should sail well, have shallow draught, be comfortable at sea and of course, attractive. Roxane's blend of performance and seaworthiness delivered on all counts. "Fast and exciting, yet well behaved," enthused Judy Brickhill after sailing her for *Water Craft* in its now-extinct first issue. "A modern classic," added the editor. But Roxane's size and quality comes at a price that puts her out of reach of most sailors.

Recognising this, Nigel Irens then designed a smaller, more affordable sister to Roxane. The design brief was largely developed with Bill Stanton, who wanted to sail in and around Salcombe in Devon. Salcombe has a narrow estuary, surrounded by high ground. Tides can flow at

around 3 knots and conditions can be gusty and unpredictable. The new boat needed to be weatherly and able to carry her way through stays. A scale model of her appeared at the London Boat Show in 1995 and later that year, Bill Stanton received the first Romilly.

Romilly is a difficult boat to pigeonhole; 'family day-sailer' doesn't do her justice. Like Roxane, Romilly combines modern with traditional: a GRP hull with foam sandwich cuddy, yet based on a Shetland Island fishing boat; unstayed carbon-fibre/epoxy masts carrying a lug rig. She also shares some of her bigger sister's sailing characteristics. A narrow waterline, much more beam on deck and generous ballast ratio combine to deliver a progressively stable hull, easily driven in light airs and sure footed in a gust. Alice Driscoll sail-tested Romilly (W15) and found her "a very comfortable, laid-back boat" with "amazing performance".

The prototype Roxane and Romilly hulls were strip-plank epoxy. Moulds were made and GRP hulls sold from Dartington Boatworks, a company set up by Nigel Irens to promote, build and sell the two boats. The boats were a success; the company was not. It closed. Customers are – I speak from experience – like buses. They rarely arrive at convenient times, one after another but intermittently and in groups. Regardless of

the investment and energy put into the company – there was plenty of both – it could not be sustained by only two boats, even ones as good as Roxane and Romilly.

Enquiries came from far and wide to buy the moulds and the rights to build and sell the boats. Nigel Irens knew what was required: an established yard with several strings already to its bow, big enough to take on Roxane and

Romilly and not be over-dependent on them. In 1997, a deal was struck with the Bridgend Boat Co in Plymouth.

Assembling a kit is more likely to produce a successful divorce-free result.

The Bridgend Boat Co began life 16 years ago in a building little bigger than a garage at Newton Ferrers, alongside the River Yealm in Devon. Back then, the company – Richard – offered local repair and maintenance work and new builds in wood in the form of the shapely 11' (3.3m) Brock dinghy. His first step up the ladder to expansion was 4-5 years later when Cornish Crabbers approached him to fit out the GRP hulls of their 30' (9m) Pilots. The work force grew to 2, then 3 when his partner Julie Hammond joined to take on the office work. Through word of mouth the business continued to grow, as did the workforce and premises in line with the size and number of craft worked on.

It was when fitting out the 38 ton gaff rigged cutter *Annabel J* that the company really showed its mettle. Based on the Bristol Channel Pilot cutters, she arrived as a 55'



Facing page: Andrew Rathbone has a boat barn – literally. **Above:** Simon Carpenter's Romilly flies the – Bridgend – flag at Boats on Show. **Below:** Components of the Romilly kit ready for despatch at the Bridgend Boat Company.





The photographs this page highlight what some amateurs might feel to be the "difficult bits" – fitting the rudder, cutting holes for the portlights, cockpit trim, etc – but Bridgend is happy to customise the kit to get you past any such potential stumbling blocks you may be worrying about and thus ensure speedier completion.



(16.7m) LOD steel hull. The task was to fit out the entire boat – from the teak deck and mahogany interior to the sophisticated navigation systems and fully equipped galley – in 6 months! They pulled it off; an achievement which earned them a reputation for craftsmanship and professionalism. Today, Bridgend Boat Co is based in Plymouth with a workforce of 15 operating from an ex-seaplane hanger with 25,000 sq.feet (2,322 s.m) of undercover space, plus slips and water frontage. Roxane and Romilly have a good home.

Richard looked at how the boats were sold. Of the 13 Roxanes built, only one was supplied fully finished and ready to sail. Romilly, however, was always sold as a finished boat. The finishing work consists mostly of sanding, filling, painting and varnishing. Unskilled work that at yard rates is nonetheless expensive. Work that could be undertaken by the owner. His conclusion was to offer Romilly as a kit.

How much of a kit depends on the customer's experience and abilities. Typically though, if it is an integral constructional detail or deemed necessary to comply with RCD category C, the yard will complete it. The centreplate system, for example, is structurally important and leaves a hole in the hull if not fitted, so the yard takes care of that. The rudder-tiller assembly is also fitted and working but left bare. Buoyancy areas are sealed and finished. Scuppers are cut through the bulwarks. The bilge-pump is fitted and working. Mast

support cones are set up at the correct angles, glassed in and finished. Cockpit coamings with winch pads are pressed up and fitted but left bare. The capping rail and rubbing strakes are also fitted but left as bare teak.

Various wood items – cockpit and cabin floorboards, washboards, bunk-lids etc – are supplied ready cut but need a final check for fit, trim and finish. As do smaller pieces such as handrails, boom crutch, archboard and teak scissors. All items, right down to the screws, are numbered and labelled, and where relevant, their positions marked on deck. Masts, bumkin, sails and rigging – labelled and numbered accordingly – are also supplied.

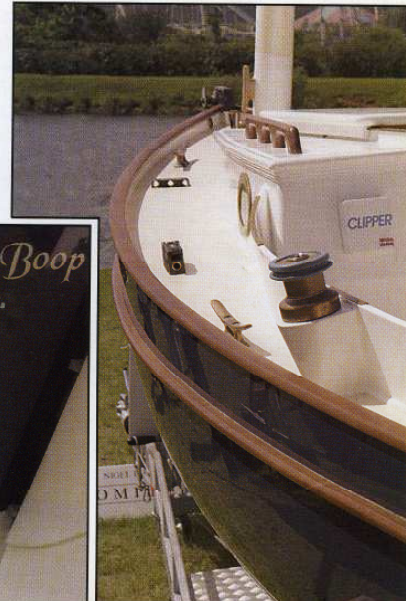
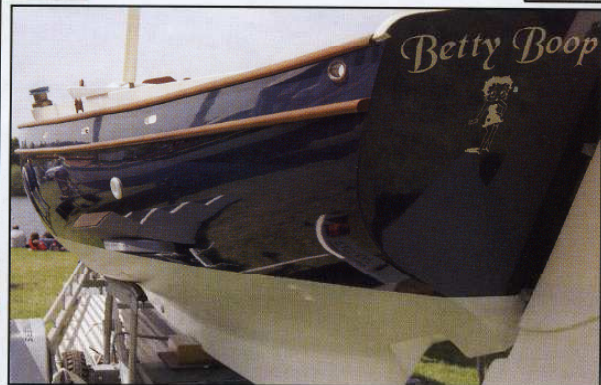
The full parts list is extensive. To help pull everything together, a set of drawings and instructions for completion are included. Pretty much everything from rigging notes to paint type, quantities and suggested colour schemes are covered.

How does all this work in practice? And how long is it likely to take? Simon Carpenter finished *Betty Boop* to a very high standard in 3 months, working weekends and the occasional evening. "Straightforward; not a challenge at all," he says. But Simon is a joiner by trade, has fitted out his previous boat, a 28' (8.5m) GRP Spray and will be fitting out his next, a 38' (11.6m) Ted Brewer steel cutter, in the not too distant future. What did bother Simon – and the other amateur builders I spoke to – was working with 2-pack paint. "Excellent for longevity," he says





Stages of completion. Left: Robert Dawson preparing to fit the cockpit well on Riant (photograph: Robert Dawson). Right & below: Simon Carpenter's Betty Boop on display at Boats on Show. Bottom: Before and after fitting out Romilly's simple cabin – most of the work here is more time-consuming than technical or difficult.

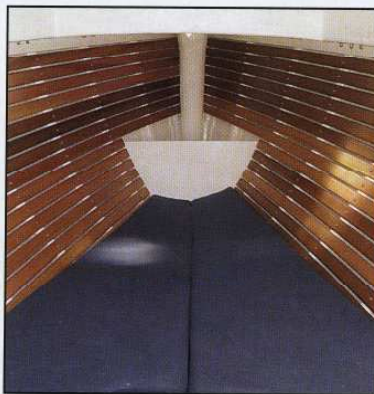


"But fussy and complicated to use". Paint manufacturers please note.

Robert Dawson completed *Riant* about 2 years ago and is very happy with the result and his decision to finish her at home. "It's not just about the savings you make, you end up knowing the boat so much better. So when the paint gets dinged, you don't sweat," he says. "You just make a mental note to fix it before she goes back in the water – you know that simple things like that are easily fixed".

What took the longest? "A large part of the work is making good. Though she looks very traditional, she is actually highly technical. Her upperworks consist of several components, which leaves a lot of seams that need taking back or filling and sanding. You need several reels of Duck tape to protect areas close to where you are sanding". Robert spent 6 months – mostly weekends with 2 full weeks at the end – completing *Riant*. He plans to take her sailing off the West Coast of Scotland.

Andrew Rathbone was half way through his project when I found him on an organic farm in Devon with *Barmy Owl* in a huge barn. It was idyllic – good shelter with lots of space amidst beautiful countryside – but Andrew was sanding some of the seams Robert mentioned so he wasn't feeling especially fortunate right then. To give the project a head start, Andrew asked the yard to cut the cabin portlights and bumkin hole in the transom and to fit the teak trim to the edges of the cockpits



seat. Others have asked the yard to complete these tasks. I can see why: the holes can be cut with a jigsaw – a metal cutting blade will prevent the GRP splintering – but cutting accurately with a jigsaw requires practice. And fitting the teak trim, though not especially difficult, is quite fiddly. The wood, supplied pre-shaped, sits on a lip moulded into the edge of the seat where it is carefully aligned and clamped onto epoxy. Once set, the remaining gap is filled with more epoxy or a sealant.

Andrew runs a busy landscape architecture business and works on his *Romilly* whenever he can. "It is taking longer than I thought; she is quite a commitment," he says. We discussed standards of finish. "How fussy are you? It's your boat, you know what the yard can do – what will you accept from yourself? The danger is that you will be too fussy." His own standards, I could see, are high. "As soon as she's in the water I will love it and it will all seem worthwhile," he concluded. His plans are to take *Barmy Owl* to Norway to explore the fjords.

Amateurs work at different paces; they have different skills, different standards. I would estimate you would need around 4-6 weeks of continuous work or 4-6 months of weekends to complete *Romilly*. She would make a fine winter project. All the builders I spoke to have finished or are close to finishing their boats. Inevitably, most found that it took longer than they predicted. Some adding that in retrospect, they would have asked the yard to do a little more.