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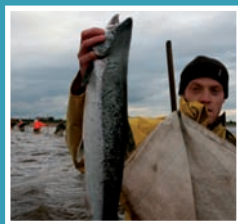
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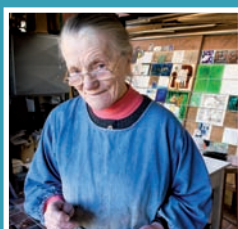
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**PROFILE: STEVE BERESFORD**



Steve Beresford with the 14ft National Redwing, a traditional clinker boat which he has built in his workshop near Cockermouth

# BUILDING ON TRADITION

Steve Beresford left manufacturing to start his own business making wooden boats. **Mary Ingham** visits his workshop near Cockermouth to hear how the mechanical engineer embarked on a new career crafting craft

Photography by Phil Rigby

In a light-filled building which once housed prisoners of war at Moota, near Cockermouth, boat builder Steve Beresford is preparing two craft for the RYA Volvo Dinghy Show in London's Alexandra Palace in March.

There's a pleasant scent of varnish and the curves and finely planed surfaces of the upturned hulls are graceful and tactile, demanding to be stroked.

The 14ft National Redwing and 12ft Tideway are both traditional clinker boats, their hulls built with overlapping planks of wood in a technique used successfully by the Vikings and developed centuries earlier.

Steve, 44, a chartered mechanical engineer with more than 20 years' experience in manufacturing, started his Good Wood Boat Company 18 months ago after graduating with distinction from the International Boatbuilding Training College in Lowestoft. Qualified in clinker and carvel construction (in carvel, the planks abut rather than overlap), he builds wooden boats to commission and also does restorations and repairs. He runs the business with his wife Christine and they live in Cockermouth with their children Matthew, 14, Daniel, 11 and Katie, 8.

Steve finished building his first boat, the Redwing, last July and it raced in its class championships in the Isles of Scilly the following month. When I meet him he is fine-tuning and varnishing the Redwing and finishing off the Tideway, which has not yet had its first outing.

Dinghy owners are understandably loyal to their class, Redwing aficionados valuing the relative speed and lightness of the dinghy and its durability and Tideway enthusiasts



A block plane used by Steve

appreciating the boat's classic 'Swallows and Amazons' design. But the boats are proving a big draw to non-sailors too.

"Even when people are not interested in boats, most can appreciate the beauty of wooden boats," says Steve. "They are something else – their shape and history, everything works so well together."

The Tideway class has now licensed Steve exclusively as their builder of wooden boats. He has started work on a second Tideway and hopes that in a few years' time he will have a stand at Alexandra Palace bringing

four or five traditional classes to the modern sailor.

He says he has chosen boats which are hard to build to start out with – the Redwing is notoriously difficult because it has a rockered hull. "This is partly so I can demonstrate what I am able to do. They also look beautiful in the water and have an eye-catching design and they're undisputed classics."

The Redwing was designed by the famous Uffa Fox for Looe Sailing Club in 1938 and Steve's is the first to be built in wood for 10 years.

His Tideway is the first to be built in wood for seven years and, before he received the commission, members of the class examined his work on the Redwing. Subsequently, to Steve's delight, a member who'd been apprenticed in the Sixties to LH Walker of Leigh-on-Sea, which designed the Tideway in 1954, came up to help him.

Working closely with the class concerned, it takes Steve six months to build a dinghy from drawings to show-finish, though subsequent builds will be faster if the templating has already been done.

In the case of the Tideway the process began with the class association commissioning a naval architect and providing Steve with a lines plan. For the Redwing, the original Uffa Fox lines plan and construction drawings were available. Alternatively, Steve could measure a best in class boat and draw the lines plan himself.

Once he has a lines plan, Steve produces lofting – a full-sized drawing of the boat on a board on the floor – and creates MDF

templates which he builds the boat around. Some of the templates are set up on a jig and the planks bent around them.

The Tideway's backbone, keel and stem are made in oak and the planking and wooden components used to fit out the shell are made from mahogany. The fittings such as the oar crutches are in corrosion-resistant silicon bronze. The copper rivets, which hold together the planks and the timbers giving strength across the boat, are all hand-fastened – more than 1,800 were used on the Redwing, says Steve.

"It's a process which has worked for hundreds of years and which relies on a high degree of craftsmanship. One of the things I enjoy about clinker boats is that the planks overlap but come in flush forward and aft – at the stem and the transom."

Steve buys wood from a number of suppliers and has a Forest Stewardship Council certification recognising his commitment to sustainable and ethical sources; he thinks he's the first boat builder in the UK to gain this certification which depends on rigorous procedures and inspections.

The wood grain has to run in the right direction for each component so part of the boat builder's skill is to select the most suitable log in the first place then select the best boards for the different parts. "The plank has to be durable in water and have the right mechanical properties," says Steve. "It has to be able to be bent with steam, be strong enough for a particular component and look right."

"Both these boats are raced so what's finally produced has to be a fair boat, consistent with the racing rules, so that everyone is competing on an even footing. Consistency is really important which is why I'm in this market. What appeals to me is the blend of engineering – developing the boat from drawings – and the hand-skills and craftsmanship."

In the big-scale engineering projects he was previously involved in, it was very rare to have a finger in every pie. Now, says Steve, it's all up to him; Christine, who does the administration; and a number of friends who help out because they love the way the boats look and share the Beresfords' respect for traditional skills and sustainability.

Steve was brought up at Cottingham, near Hull. His father, a teacher, was hopeless at practical tasks, says Steve. "I was the family DIY man and I loved making things. It was Lego and Airfix at first and later I rebuilt motorbikes and restored classic cars."

He gained a mechanical engineering

degree at the University of Bradford on a sandwich course during which he worked in a lead smelting plant in Australia and in a Sheffield steel works. He took a year out to work for a church missionary society which flew Cessnas in East Africa, maintaining all their vehicles except the aircraft and learning to improvise.

After he and Christine married, Steve worked as a professional engineer in the food and chemical industries. The couple moved to Cumbria when Steve gained a job at Albright & Wilson's Marchon plant at Whitehaven. After Rhodia had taken over Albright & Wilson in 1999, he travelled all over Europe on manufacturing improvement projects then in 2002, tiring of the travel, he moved to Sellafield to do similar work.

"I'd always talked about doing something more craft-based mid-career," says Steve, who still does a small amount of professional work in industry. He'd also always enjoyed

outdoor activities such as walking, fell running, and open canoeing and he subsequently learned to sail on Derwentwater after Christine suggested they take a course to celebrate a wedding anniversary.

When he visited Windermere Steamboat Museum, he was so impressed with the exquisite craftsmanship

and geometry that he started researching traditional boats, found out about the Lowestoft course in traditional wooden boat building, left his full-time job at Sellafield and enrolled.

The course, at a working boat yard rather than a conventional college, included three months' joinery practice to become skilled enough to work on boats then a year learning all the skills from clinker planking to teak deck laying on everything from canoes to ocean-going racing yachts.

West Cumbria Development Agency has been very supportive and provided start-up and equipment grants. Steve uses a wide range of planes, chisels, saws, and spokeshaves, some designed specifically for boat building such as a bollow plane – used for hollowing the inside face of a hull plank. Steve made his own bollow plane out of beechwood as boat builders had done for centuries before him.

"It's been a hard slog," says Steve. "It's very much a niche market – all about getting to know your customer so they trust what you do. But it gives me a real sense of purpose and pride when someone says: 'Oh, what a beautiful boat'."

■ *Good Wood Boat Company, Moota Business Park, Moota, Cockermouth CA13 0QE. Tel: 01900 821236 or see [www.goodwoodboat.co.uk](http://www.goodwoodboat.co.uk).*

## 'What appeals to me is the blend of engineering – developing the boat from drawings – and the hand-skills and craftsmanship'



The Redwing competed in its class championships in the Isles of Scilly last year





Steve works on the bow of a 12ft Tideway, with the National Redwing in the background.  
Below: the Good Wood Boat Co workshop at Moota. The building once housed prisoners of war

