

Bill Bailiff's 17ft Lune Whammel, *Frieda*, by David Hall (and the part it plays in Blackwell Sailing)

If you are an experienced sailor or safety boat operator and available to help Blackwell Sailing as a volunteer, mostly enabling adults and children with learning disabilities to sail Whammel boats, please phone 01539 445333.

(Frank Dearden already helps out – our DCA North West Group rally host.)

I was looking for a good working boat, literally. I needed a boat for work and just as fishing boats were once chosen to be both fit for the purpose and of a design that had evolved to suit local conditions, so our boat had to be easy to sail and uncomplicated. My work was to introduce sailing on Windermere for local people with learning disabilities. The project had got underway with an old GP14, which was fine for giving people a taster of the activity but clearly had limitations from the start. The boat we needed had to be able to carry at least six people, be stable enough not to

frighten them off the activity, simple enough so no-one got in a muddle – a boat in which things happen fairly slowly yet as good as a dinghy for landing on a beach for a picnic. Some of our sailors would find the climbing out and paddling ashore more of a challenge than the actual sailing.

A conversation with Bill Bailiff convinced me that this was it. He explained that she would also have an unstayed mast which would be ideal for mooring the boat in the wet dock boathouse. We could request her to be built with no foredeck (more space for the

picnic, extra clothing, or even an extra person). The boat was priced very reasonably and would be built locally, just down the road at Morecambe. In 1994 the cost of the boat was about one-third of what we would have paid for a Drascombe Longboat. Bill told me that his wife worked at a Special School so he had some idea of what we wanted. The crew would be people with severe learning disabilities, some of whom would also have other disabilities including some with little or no speech, and some with little or no understanding of verbal instruction. Through repetition, through praise and encouragement,



through attending regularly some of the crew would learn to sail the boat as a team and (though I did not know it then) still be sailing the boat 15 years later.

Bill invited us to come and see the boat when it was half-built and took a lot of trouble to explain how it was constructed and what it would look like when finished. After that we took our minibus full of potential crew members to Sunderland Point where my colleague, Myra, introduced us all to her sister Cynthia and her husband's brother Tom who had an old wooden whammel boat in the early stages of renovation. Out on the mud at low tide were a few well-maintained wooden Whammel boats still used for fishing. This was what I believe to be the birth place of the Whammel boat. We all went for a walk around the point before driving back to the day centre in Kendal.

The boat on completion was the simplest 17ft sailing boat I had ever seen. Hardly any fittings(!) so certainly none that were unnecessary. No standing rigging, a bowsprit that just slots on, an easy to step mast held up with a wedge, no shackles (maybe one), no spring clips or fancy fastenings. The jib attaches to the bowsprit with a simple loop of cord and is then hoisted on a hook. The mainsheet horse is just a rope across the stern and when the rudder is removed there is a sculling notch. Although she was a simple boat there were many good subtle features: the main halyard is thicker than the jib halyard and the rudder so easy to hook on because the lower pintle is longer. I told myself that if this boat sailed well it would confirm the view that most modern sailing boats are over-fussy, over-engineered and cluttered up with too many extra bits!

Then we took her sailing from Blackwell Boathouse. She sailed better with a few people on board and when I once tried sailing her on my own under just a reefed main I had trouble tacking. Not enough weight in the bow, I concluded. Once we had got the feel for the standing lug rig and the slow tacking ('leave the jib alone till it backs') which gives everyone plenty of time, she sailed well. Even in light airs and with as many as seven people on board she kept moving. Windward performance and the leeway experienced do not compare so well with a modern boat, but for introducing people with severe learning disabilities to sailing and doing it as a team this was/is probably the best boat for the job.

After 15 years this boat is the charity's most popular and most used boat. She still has her original spars, rudder, tiller, sails and bowsprit – so no complaints about the build quality. She is, however, a good old working boat with no bright work or shiny bits. Everything is functional, simple and very few things can ever break or wear out.

For many years, before we had the number of volunteers that we have today, I sailed *Frieda* every week (April – October) at least once a week and

often twice. I doubt many have sailed one of Bill's Whammel boats as often or as much as I have and I still sail the boat more than I do my own boat, but then it does have a very different function. With volunteer support the charity has looked after *Frieda*, over recent years especially, by cleaning and painting everything when necessary. A couple of years ago we had to replace the floorboards. This was a very easy job involving a sheet of ply and a jig saw. About ten years ago we were advised to increase the buoyancy and make fixed ballast (to replace the sandbags!), but really, over the years we have just had to do maintenance rather than mending jobs.

You might well ask what this has got to do with dinghy cruising? Well perhaps not so much, though I notice a few DCA members have the Whammel boat and this one has certainly proved to be a solid, versatile and reliable boat that stands the test of time. Oh yes, and I did spend a night on her once. No cover needed because it was a very still, summer night and I was surprised to experience no dew in the morning. Our boat only has one thwart across the cockpit which can be lifted off so this leaves a vast amount of space – double bed potential?

By 2001 our small charity was ready to expand and we raised enough funding for a second Whammel boat. Bill, sadly, had died soon after *Frieda* was completed so it was Adrian, who had by then taken over Character Boats and was to build our new one. A different boat altogether really, as it turned out.

The Adrian Denye Version, Joanna

Ah well, we had problems from the start really because we wanted a sister for *Frieda*. Adrian said it couldn't be done because he had made all these 'improvements'!

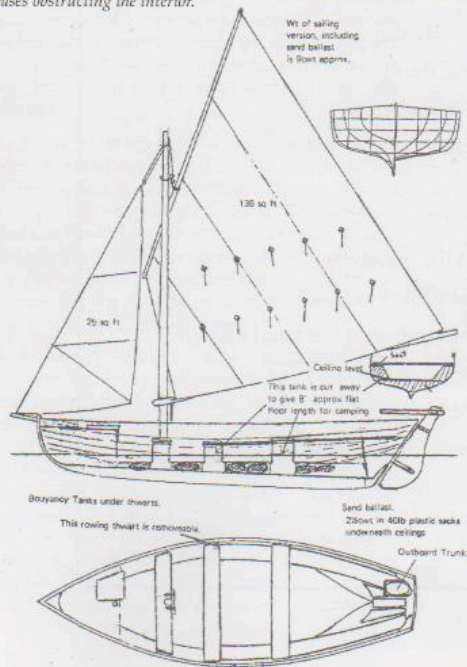
Now I know that the European Craft Directive was used to justify some of the changes, but I listed about 20 points in my letter to Adrian, a year after we had it delivered, and I reckon only about four of them had anything to do with that. Gone were the subtle touches, the simplicity, the sculling notch, the finer details of rudder pintles and halyard thicknesses etc. Sadly, the build quality and some of the design features also fell short of the mark. We have broken two tillers since 2002 and a quick glance at the 'improved' design will make it clear why. The weakest point takes all the strain.

The question I like to ask is: if you change the hull, sail plan, spars, all the fittings and methods of attaching things to each other, is it still a Whammel boat? The result of all these changes is a heavier, deeper (by 4ins) and more complicated boat which usually sails much slower than *Frieda*. Some of the changes have perhaps made the boat easier to trail and sail and easier to put a cover on (the new boom is much shorter) but if the end product is a much



Bill Bailiff's 17ft Lune Whammel Boat (Mk. I)

GRP hull with hardwood trim & throats, ply ceilings & timber spars. The centre rowing thwart is removable to give an unobstructed flat area for sleeping. Boom tents can be supplied for this boat and the whole range of Character Boats lend itself to camping as there are no centreboard cases obstructing the interior.



heavier boat that does not sail as well, I'm afraid my view is that life has become more difficult.

However, I must be careful here to give a more balanced view because some of our volunteers prefer *Joanna* and find her more user-friendly. The tiller clears the engine and is at a fixed height, whereas *Frieda*'s has to be lifted over the engine when tacking to port. The mainsheet sometimes gets caught on the rudder when gibing *Frieda* but this does not happen with *Adrian*'s boat with its metal mainsheet horse. The outboard well is better positioned so that the rudder will not hit the propeller. *Joanna* is preferred by some precisely because she is heavier, deeper and more stable. People with learning disabilities or visual impairment often feel safer in *Joanna* and if the wind really picks up to about a F4 she can keep going when *Frieda* is more likely to lose control and we have to lower her sails.

Can I really be objective about this when, perhaps, I grew so accustomed to *Frieda* that no other boat would really be good enough? To what extent did I just learn the skills required to sail and teach successfully in *Frieda* rather than notice her shortcomings or the need to make any adaptations? What is the answer to the meaning of life, the universe and everything that floats?

Did I just fall in love? DH