MADE IN HONG KONG

The Grand Banks 32 Freya was built in a world that no longer exists, and restored in Brighton.

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The Americans have a tradition of designing transportation vessels that combine a casually robust style with high utility and, above all, long production lines, to the point where many go on to become global icons. Just think of the Model T Ford, B52 bomber and Harley Davidson motorcycle. The list includes seemingly half the world’s man-made objects of the last century or so, in every field of endeavour from space exploration to art, where Andy Warhol toyed with the idea of art as commodity.

It’s the same on the water: no nation has created so many craft with such distinctive silhouettes, including the mahogany runabout, famously copied in Italy by Riva and, of course, the trawler yacht: we are talking of course, of Grand Banks, instantly recognisable, and lusted after by anyone who wants to go places slowly, economically and in comfort. And even the smallest in the range, the ship-like 32-footer, has proper liveaboard potential: it’s the perfect ‘bug-out’ boat.

Derek Stubley found Freya in Brighton Marina, being used as a liveaboard, settling in for her last voyage to a new life as a boxy houseboat... or dereliction. He made a bid of £9,000 to the owner, a man living in Yarmouth, Isle of Wight, who had received an offer twice that from a buyer who wanted to strip out the strong, 2in-thick mahogany hull and rebuild her as a houseboat. But feeling ran deep, and he chose Derek to be the next owner, on the promise that Derek would put the ‘grand’ back into her and revert her to original.

That process began two years ago, in a metal boatshed in Britain’s first and largest marina at Brighton on the East Sussex coast, not a place you associate with the classic boat movement, but it’s a place that is mellowing, and growing a bit of character as it gently ages into its surroundings, with a community of bohemian liveaboards, and Brighton just a walk away along the esplanade.

When we visited in 2016, the scale of work was clear to the eye. There was not

Above: the inside helm is mostly original but the Rototherm cabin thermometer and Ford badge are owner’s touches. Below: builder’s plate showing that Freya is the 112th CB32 built, just four years after production began. She was launched in 1969.

much wrong with Freya’s hull, but on a boat like a GB32, the hull is the least of it. There is a truism about buying tired wooden boats that revolves around the supremacy of “a sound hull.” The reverse is frequently true; it’s everything else on a boat that takes the time and money to renovate, and of nothing is this truer than a Grand Banks motoryacht, with its massive superstructure and full interior. This must be the biggest 32-footer there is, and it’s obvious to see, stepping aboard, how even the baby of the range might make a good liveaboard for one or two people.

**BUDGET RESTORATION**

Derek’s challenge was to restore the boat on a budget, using freelancers and friends, while project-managing the restoration himself. His current job (buildings surveyor specialising in demolition) and his time in the Navy, must have given him some grounding in practical matters but the project was daunting, probably overwhelming, at times. The main challenges were rot from freshwater ingress that ran through much of the superstructure and into the bilges, destroying everything in its path. The problem was not the quality of the original build, by American Marine in Hong Kong, but what Derek calls a “DIY-quality refit” by a previous owner. The main problem with that refit was the use of mild steel screws that had rusted out, letting the fresh water in. Apart from the hull “everything was shot” remembers Derek. There were mushrooms growing under the deck and the wardrobe was coated with an inch of the stuff. The port side upperworks were “like Weetabix” and the rear deck had sagged down five degrees, thanks to the leaky water tanks rotting out the supporting timbers, a common problem on old wooden Grand Banks, remedied by a new bulkhead.

Derek started work afloat and soon realised Freya would need hauling out and partially rebuilding on land. Planning it alone took six months, but it was clearly time well spent, as the restoration, once started, only lasted a year
and three months. As well as managing the project, Derek acted as “dogsbody,” while running his surveying firm. It meant 80-90 hour weeks and a few moments of doubt.

“The hardest decision” Derek says with no hesitation “was to keep going. I was chasing payments due to me to keep on top of the bills.” Carpenters Pat Martin and Tim were working six day weeks at one point, and various friends did what they could, among them Kevin Martin, who took on the awful job of painting the large, under-sole engine compartment, but died before his time, just before the boat’s re-launch in September 2017. The compound-curved canopy that now sits over the rear deck was one of the biggest jobs, taking three weeks to build in a custom jig. It’s a common aftermarket addition on Grand Banks boats, and a sensible one for someone spending a lot of time aboard in British weather. The boat’s new timber is mostly American white oak, balal, marine plywood and century-old reclaimed mahogany from the staircase of a hotel. The mast, which is designed with a steady sail in mind – although few Grand Banks owners use one – was built anew from the template of the rotten original.

The engine parts and stainless steel exhaust system were refurbished or rebuilt to original by of Mike from West Marine, a principal agent of Freya’s renaissance. The engine is the original six-pot, 120bhp Ford Lehman diesel running through a Borg-Warner Velvet Drive gearbox. The Lehman is known for its reliability, and runs as well now as it did 49 years ago. The restoration of Freya has been the biggest refurb project at Brighton Marina for years, and the marina staff rallied around with enthusiasm, help, tea and chatter, a real concern for the boat that made Derek feel at home. In the end, the restoration cost a very reasonable £65,000 – half the boat’s current value.

**AT SEA**

It was a mad September day as Freya bucked over the steep chop past the forbidding marina caissons, the motion exaggerated by the pendulum effect on the high flybridge helm, where I sat with Derek and Mike from West Marine. At sea, she settled into her groove and trucked. It was one of her first sea trials, in readiness her first proper trip to Yarmouth to show the last owner what became of his tired boat. The Ford purred smoothly, not that you hear it up here. Seagulls gathered around and we ran along the coast, the white cliffs of the South Downs rising to port. Steering Freya takes just two fingers on the wheel: nothing happens fast and the long keel keeps her tracking, but she still has her 1960s electro-mechanical autopilot in the deckhouse below. It’s easy to imagine steaming for miles with the choice of indoor or outdoor helm for all weathers, a teak swim platform and that 1,000-mile range. Below, she’s just as homely and spacious. Where possible, Derek has left things as they are to preserve patina, a light bubbling on the chrome here and there and the teak sole gently worn; she’s one of the more original GBs out there, inside and out. Derek plans to use Freya as his floating, roaming home when he retires. Or as Freya’s compatriot, country rocker Alan Jackson, once put it: “If the phone’s for me, you can tell them I just sailed away.”

*Main picture: motoring out of Brighton Marina on a bumpy autumn day. Above, left to right: outside helm; original teak parquet sole; double cabin; original door handle; characteristic Grand Banks scrollwork in the wooden guard rail; bronze lifting rail gate Bottom, left to right: saloon and cockpit/rear deck; on the hard showing hull form; owner Derek Stubley*
American Marine: the greatest builder of all?

Hong Kong in 1956: the time and date alone brim with overtones of colonial glamour and the port, then under British rule, was a hive of immigration and manufacturing. One man, the American Robert J Newton, was running a soft drinks bottling plant and decided, in 1956, to start building boats in the factory’s outdoor yard. You might be excused for assuming it would turn out to be a glorified hobby for a man with an established business in the late summer of his life - he was in his late 50s after all - but you'd be wrong. At first, the fledgeling yard concentrated on custom builds; yachts and motorboats built to designs by the greatest designers of the day, like Olin Stephens and Ray Hunt. But in 1962, one design would turn American Marine, as the yard became known, into probably the biggest production builder of wooden boats, by mass, that the world has ever seen. The design, from Kenneth Smith, was for a 36ft (11m) semi-displacement motor yacht powered by a single diesel, with the appearance of a fishing trawler. These had a similar appeal to the ‘MFV (motor fishing vessel) yachts’ that had captured England’s imagination a generation earlier, but in a much bigger way.

That first boat, Spray, was launched in 1963 and caused an avalanche of demand. To respond to it, American Marine moved to new premises in Junk Bay, still in Hong Kong, abandoned the custom builds, and concentrated solely on building their range of motor cruisers – the Grand Banks trawler yachts. Official production started in 1965, and American Marine launched a new wooden trawler yacht every other day for eight years straight - totalling around 1,400 boats. In 1973, they switched to GRP and from over the next 35 years, built another 2,600. The GB32 was one of the most popular, with 831 built in total. The GB36 sold 1,124 and the GB42, most popular of all, sold 1,560 boats. An aerial photo of the time shows twelve large, metal waterside sheds, and in those sheds, an army of skilled Asian shipwrights worked with adze, handsaw, hand-drill and hammer to build an armada of yachts the likes of which had never been seen before and never will again. Hulls were in mahogany, and most of the rest of the boats were in Burma teak.

The 32, according to the marketing literature of the day, was designed as a “1,000-mile range, dependable diesel cruiser designed specifically for comfortable cruising with five aboard. Her generous beam, hard chine, 3ft 6in (1.1m) draught and 17,000lb (7.7-tonne) displacement create a degree of stability and performance unmatched in any other boat of her size.” The brochure goes on to talk about the outside spaces, like 88sqft (8.2sqm) in the cockpit, same again on the flying bridgedeck, and the broad side decks. The GB32 is unfathomably large for a yacht of her length, thanks to the broad hull that carries its beam along most of it length and the towering superstructure that, as well as the outside space, gives a very good saloon with galley and inside helm, and a double cabin and heads in the forward, lower part of the boat. Economy and comfort are good (5-6 litres of diesel per hour at a cruising speed of 6 knots) as is, by all accounts, rough-weather capability. The compromise, for the Grand Banks, was the displacement single-figure speed (Freya will hit 9 knots, which is more than hull speed), but speed was clearly irrelevant to the purpose of a Grand Banks, and it seems the world agreed with hearts and chequebooks. The trawler yacht is now a recognisable type, built to this day by Grand Banks (ex-American Marine and under new ownership), not to mention a host of other pretenders to the throne.