

DIVIDE



and CONQUER...

...the notoriously difficult small boat market, that is. Ian Thomson of Nestaway Boats has proved that 2 into 1 will go, discovers Alice Driscoll.

With photographs by Peter Chesworth

The phrase 'necessity is the mother of invention' springs to mind when talking to Nestaway founder Ian Thomson. A former marketing manager who was living the dream sailing a 31' (9.5m) yacht around the Caribbean, he realised that life could be better. His bugbear? Not the secluded bays, sunshine or sandy beaches but his tender. As Ian says: "When you're on a yacht, your tender is like your car. You rely on it to get you to shore and back, to pick up provisions, to explore, to visit other boats and carry passengers." And after a few problems with tenders being swamped, outboards being stolen and the on-going hassle of having to inflate and deflate the tender for stowage, Ian decided that there surely had to be a better solution.

With plenty of time on his hands, he researched the concept of a solid boat which could be split into two sections. This would enable both parts to nest together on deck, take up as small amount of space as possible and yet be ready instantly for action, as well as providing a reliable and stable boat to row, sail or motor. Oh and it would also look nicer than a 'flop bot' inflatable.

Ian's research found that his was not a new idea, but there didn't seem to be anyone producing this type of sectional boat commercially. Back in the UK, Ian adapted a number of hulls into sectional boats but none of them looked good enough to buy. So while the idea of Nestaway Boats had been created, it was still a long way from fruition. Ian needed a boat that was custom-designed and built as a sectional hull but he was neither a naval architect nor a boatbuilder.

The solution was to be found at the Boat Building Academy in Lyme Regis. Established in 1997, the BBA offers a variety of practical courses but their flagship is a 38-week residential Boat Building, Maintenance and Support course. This enables students to qualify in all areas from basic woodworking skills, through to designing, lofting, building and fitting out, as well as spar making, finishing and legislative requirements such as RCD compliance.

One of the key features of the course is that students can design and build their own boat, and so when Ian signed up, he already had in mind the concept for an 8'2" (2.5m) pram dinghy which would store in a 4'8" (1.4m) length.

On the course, Ian not only gained the practical and technical skills he needed to become a qualified boatbuilder, but he also completed the first Nestaway, which was made from cold-moulded khaya mahogany veneer, with sapele hog, thwarts and gunwales. From his experience with other small dinghies, the pram had a simple unstayed mast making it quick and easy to rig.

The concept was good but...

With his marketing expertise, Ian launched the Nestaway Pram at the 2008 Southampton Boat Show where it received plenty of good publicity, critical reviews and buyer interest. But there wasn't a rush of sales. Post-launch research seemed





kgfkhjhg kjhgkjhg jkhgkjh gjkhg kjhgkjhg kjhgkjh

to indicate that the concept was good but the all-wood construction was wrong for the marketplace. While beautiful, it was too expensive and required too much maintenance for a tender.

Over the next few months, Ian and fellow course graduate Chris Humpage made a plug for a GRP hull and sub-contracted the glasswork to specialist companies. The woodwork element is handled by two companies run by BBA alumni, Lyme Wood Marine and PL Boatworks, both of which are based nearby on a single site at Symondsburry.

The new GRP Pram hit the spot with buyers. The two sections nest together; upturned it's compact and nearly flat, ideal for stowage on a yacht and it can also be easily stored in a shed, garage, garden, even in a top floor flat. But soon Ian was being plagued by buyers who liked the concept but wanted to know if the Pram would fit into the back of a car.

So by September 2009, Ian was not only showing the new teak-trimmed GRP Pram but also the prototype of his new three-section 14' (4.3m) Trio. The design was narrower, enabling it to slot into the back of an average estate car but to create stability the boat needed to be longer. Using input from Selway Fisher Design, Ian had a cedar strip plug built at

the BBA by another student, Ray Holmes.

Now with a creditable fleet to the Nestaway name, Ian has continued to rely on his marketing skills to build the company's reputation and create worldwide sales through a combination of an effective and informative website and attendance at the 2010 London Boat Show. The hard work paid off and in 2010 over 60 Nestaway boats were sold. Ian's biggest problem now was building them fast enough. Through the website, boats have gone as far afield as Malaysia and the USA. Many buyers have been yacht owners wanting Nestaways as tenders but others have been owners of camper vans and caravans and those who just like to mess about in boats.

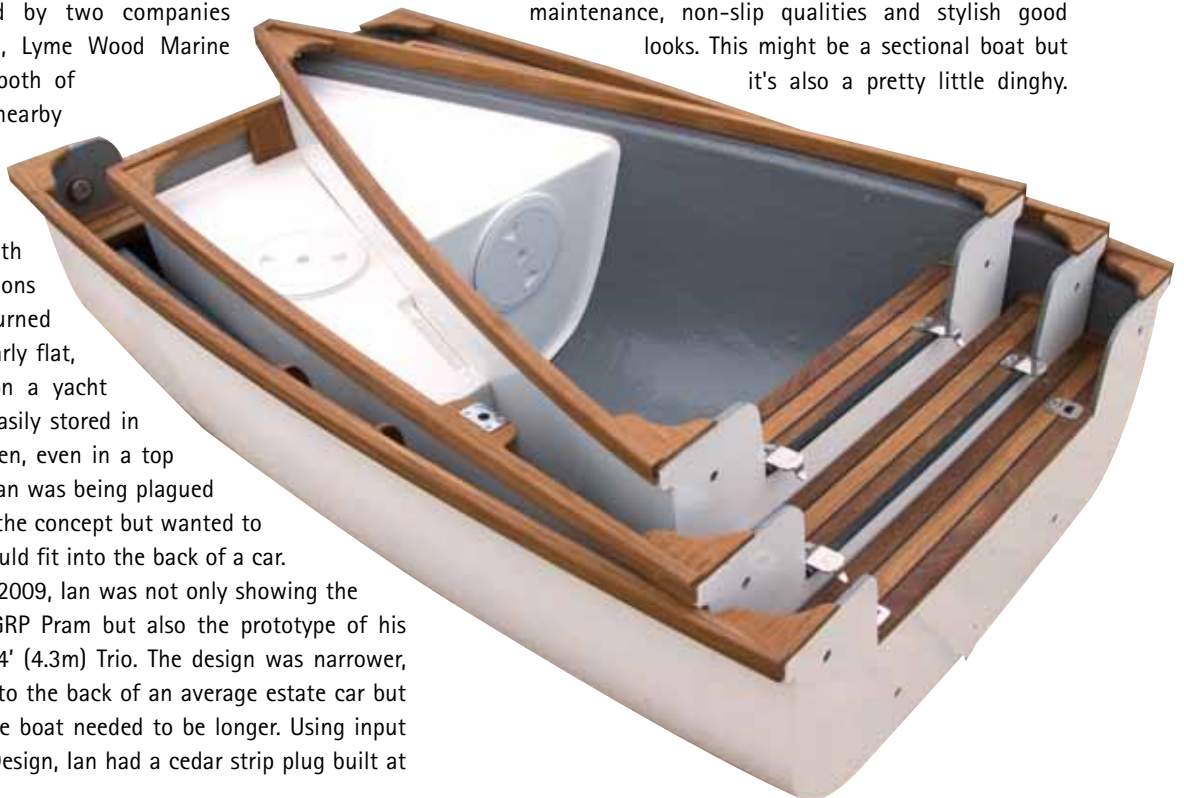
Stylish good looks

And talking of people messing about in boats, this brings us neatly to what feels like one of the coldest days in living memory and we're standing in front of the Boat Building Academy at Lyme Regis, admiring Ian's clever Nestaway carrying arrangement on the back of his own camper van. In fact, it's just a standard bike rack with a solid base which makes an ideal platform for the Nestaway, and inside the van, the three section Trio is packed neatly away – amazing.

A quick trip around the inside of the Academy gives us a welcome break from the biting wind, a chance to chat to some of the students and admire the work in progress. But we're here to try out the boats and as the tide slowly rolls in, we unpack Ian's latest Nestaway design, a 9' (2.7m) simulated clinker dinghy.

The GRP hull is really impressive, finished in cream, with a neat dark blue trim. With both sections fully watertight, the two parts slot together using a custom-designed hook and chromed bronze screws – also custom-made – which hold the bulkheads together. Even with frozen hands, it's amazingly quick and easy to assemble the boats.

The teak trim has been chosen especially for its ease of maintenance, non-slip qualities and stylish good looks. This might be a sectional boat but it's also a pretty little dinghy.





gjhghkljh lkjhlkjh

The mast is a lightweight pine, which features a clever pin and socket arrangement on the base to slot onto the hull. The sail downhaul is used to hold the mast in place and the tan sail contrasts nicely with the cream hull. Within a couple of minutes, we have a fully rigged sailing dinghy on the shore.

One out of three...

But my attention is turned to the Trio. On the shore, she's an elegant looking boat; again, teak trim gives her a quality look. The GRP mould includes slots for the thwarts which simply Velcro in place and there are built-in buoyancy tanks in the forward and aft sections. The rowlocks are fitted aft but if you want to do some serious rowing, there are optional outriggers to suit longer oars.

The transom has an outboard mounting pad and Ian uses a lightweight electric Torqeedo outboard motor. I've never used an electric engine before and I'm keen to try one out.

Off we go and the Torqeedo is great: it's really quiet and I love being able to see at a glance the power consumption and the changes in available distance depending on the speed we travel. But living up to my reputation of 'if it can go wrong it will', I snag the propeller around a semi-submerged buoy and we come to a pretty quick halt.

Well, the test of a good boat and crew is how well it stands up to a crisis, so Ian and I put this to the test. I initially try to





bljhghg jhjgh



clear the propeller but it's really snarled up with a discarded length of fishing line. So we do the two crew boat shuffle and I am impressed with the Trio's stability as we swap places and Ian attempts to untangle the Torqeedo. He then demonstrates how easy it is to dismantle the engine and we end up with the component parts in our laps while we try fruitlessly to remove the fishing line. It's a good opportunity for me to appreciate that the battery is mounted on top like a fuel tank but there are no wires or smelly fuel to worry about.

At this point we realise why you should always carry a knife on a boat but – it's a good job Ian is such an inventive chap – we manage to cut through the line using his house key. The line is cleared but, concerned about causing any further damage to the propeller, we use the oars and test out the Trio's



rowing ability to get back to shore before the light fades.

After this disaster, I'm a little concerned about the havoc I can create let loose in a sailing dinghy in the quaint Lyme Regis harbour. But I'm supposed to be qualified to do this, so I step tentatively into the dinghy and set off.

For a 9-footer, she's surprisingly stable. The most comfortable way to sail her is to sit on the sole boards and use the nicely designed aft quarter as a back rest. It's easy to forget that she's a sectional boat and in fact, thinking about it now, I can't recall the midships joint getting in the way at all.

The daggerboard is very deep and bearing in mind the underwater hazards already experienced, I am nervous about using the elastic control line to hold it down, preferring to simply stick my foot over the top of the board to keel it in place. The lug sail is well balanced and easily controllable. The rig is designed so that she can sail without the boom if need be, useful if you're sending novices or youngsters out. As Ian says, it's not a race boat but it certainly fits the 'messaging about in boats' criteria in a stable and stylish way.

Back on shore after a very pleasant sail, we chat about the future as we pack the boats away – I continue to be impressed by the way the sectional boats fit so neatly together. Every single aspect of the hulls reflect the quality and care put into the design and build.

Looking to the future, Ian's planning larger Nestaway boats with 16' (4.9m) and 18' (5.5m) designs in mind, using materials

such as carbon fibre which will ensure the sections still remain light enough to carry. The best thing is that with Ian's careful handle on design and the potential resources he has in the new boatbuilders qualifying from facilities such as the Boat Building Academy, it would seem there's a healthy looking future for this young company. The boat test over, we're joined by Ian's wife Andrea and their baby son Jasper, already billed as the future MD. It's lovely to see a family firm in the making.

CONTACTS

Nestaway Boats Ltd, The Wheel House, Frogmore,
Devon TQ7 2NU Tel: +44 (0)7768 600595
www.nestawayboats.com

NESTAWAY SPECIFICATIONS

Nestaway Pram

Assembled: 8'2" x 4'3" (2.5 x 1.3m)
Nested: 4'8" x 4'3" (1.4 x 1.3m)
Weight approx: 70-110 lbs (32-50 kg)
depending on materials
Prices from £1295

Simulated Clinker Dinghy

Assembled: 9' x 4'3" (2.7 x 1.3m)
Nested: 4'10" x 4'3" (1.5 x 1.3m)
Weight approx: 110 lbs (50 kg)
Prices: basic rowing boat from £1850; as tested with sailing
rig, teak decks and extras approx £3,500

Trio

Assembled: 14' x 3'6" (4.3 x 1.07m)
Nested: 5'4" x 3'6" (1.6 x 1.07m)
Weight: 97-143 lbs (44-65 kg) depending on materials;
price from £2495
plus Torqeedo 503 electric outboard at £1149