Described as a floating Fabergé egg, this generous restoration was completed with high latitude cruising in mind.
Is this the best restoration of a boat that has been called the best of her class? Vertue No111, *Tom Thumb*, an all-teak cabin cruiser, was built in 1962. Now she’s been fitted with a new deck, rig, interior and cockpit and is ready to be shipped to places of interest, for some adventure cruising.

We have come to Plymouth, to the vaulted home of Stirling & Son at No1 Covered Slip, built 250 years ago to build Royal Navy warships – and the oldest Royal Dockyard slipway of its kind in the world.

It is a large space – 173ft (53m) long with a high Dutch-barn-style roof supported by two lines of wooden buttressed pillars. The roof came later, in 1814, and you can see how the prevailing wind – the slip faces southwest – has tilted it back somewhat. You can also see “footholds” – notches cut into the pillars, where yard workers would climb into the roof for maintenance, high above the granite block floor.

The slip was derelict for 60 years; though it is one of Plymouth’s great seamarks – you can see its great gaping...
entrance from miles out to sea. But for the last two years this is now home to a few boats, as Will Stirling and his team of 14 or so craftsmen moved in – Will’s own Integrity is here, along with Mirelle – both were due to slip as Mirelle’s refit nears completion. There is also the main project – a 72ft (22m) Silvers motor yacht, here for serious restoration. So after decades of neglect, this heritage slip, which had begun launching ships of the Georgian Royal Navy, is now back in service, as a heritage site – serving heritage vessels.

Impressively it can take vessels up to 200 tons with its reconditioned ex-RNLI winch, which had done years of service at the Lizard, and which Will found in a field in the South Hams.

And its most recent relaunch before our visit was Tom Thumb. She was built in 1962, by J Kimber and DC Blake of Bridgewater, to the exacting specifications of Lloyds 100A1, and kept in class since then.

She was described by one gushing broker as a floating Fabergé egg. She has teak planks on a teak backbone with Canadian rock elm frames. As Will says: “No one would build a boat like this, out of materials like that, these days.”

So he has set out to improve her further, with materials that will prolong her longevity, over a six-month refit. Outwardly she still looks like a Vertue, albeit one in concours condition, with a fair hull and that deep gleam on her brightwork that says: “Yard kept”.

This of course extends to a lot of stuff you don’t see. For instance the team replaced all the ironwork, like her iron dumps along the centreline, with bronze. She has new bronze keelbolts holding her lead ballast keel in place. Her lodging knees, hanging knees and floors were all replaced with copper. It’s an approach that requires someone to be quite relaxed about using his chequebook, but it also describes an overall attention to detail that is building strength and longevity into the boat. And therein lies peace of mind… especially if you are going to take her into places, like the Straits of Magellan, where you are both going to be tested.
Inwardly *Tom Thumb* is in another league. Will and his team – she had two craftsmen working on her most of the time – replaced her whole interior with tongue and groove oak, now painted an eggshell white, with teak trim.

The space inside a Vertue is not large, though Laurent Giles managed to make it look as though it belonged to a yacht five feet longer, even all those years ago in the 1930s. But Will has achieved a Tardis effect in this one, so that when you sit on one of her bench bunks, tilted back that couple of degrees to keep you nicely against the hull while at anchor, you look around and feel quite positively posh. The finish is exemplary.

Will has redesigned the interior so that the forward cabin, behind its signature Giles-arched door below the mast step, now houses just the Baby Blake head and storage space. In the saloon the port bunk extends under an open locker forward, which houses a Faversham stove. The stove pipe is kinked so that it emerges into the forward cabin as well, providing a drying heat there before exiting through the deck. The starboard bench is not long enough for most adults, but Will has made a quarter berth to starboard, extending under the cockpit seating.

Opposite this the Taylors stove and sink (of beaten copper) provide a functional galley. The chart table is a folding saloon table bolted into the cabin sole. Everywhere you look the workmanship is deceptively plain, almost Quaker-plain in the way it creates a calm space, but it’s beautifully designed and expertly finished and it’s the sort of cabin you can imagine reading in, by the light of the Danish fishing trawler oil lamp, or wan daylight through her raised coachroof windows as wind and rain buffet her in some secluded Scottish anchorage.

The modern mind tends to think it needs a lot of space to be comfy in a yacht cabin, whereas designers like Giles knew the opposite to be the case. The space between the bunks allows you to sit with your feet resting on the teak trim of the opposite bunk – you can wedge yourself quite comfortably like that while gale-size waves take hold of the hull and give you a bouncy ride on the bosom of the ocean. In a wider cabin you’d be slipping off them.

Likewise with cooking; you can wedge yourself into the arrangement here, between the fridge locker to starboard and the galley, which gives you better control of the fat pan of bacon and eggs. More space and you’d have to use a restraining belt, or lurch around like an astronaut on a space station, but speeded up…

But this space is just for two, according to the brief, and the result is something that feels quite luxurious. The tongue-and-grooved oak seatbacks, set against Tom Thumb’s Canadian rock elm frames, are tilted just right for your back. There’s good sitting headroom here and standing headroom under the raised coachroof – Giles’ later nod to necessity, having designed the early 1930s Vertues with trunk coachroofs extending aft, and no standing headroom below.

You emerge from this cabin, somewhat reluctantly at first, over the bridge deck into the cockpit, which has also been redesigned. This now has a slightly raised sole so that drainage is efficient through the drain holes aft. “The problem with most cockpits is that rainwater pools in places and that introduces the chance of rot,” Will said. “So this cockpit sole is actually a glassfibre tray with a moulded gully around the edges that collects water and allows it to run out of the drainage holes. I got this idea from Alasdair Flint (Arthur Beale chandlery et al), who has taken his Vertue *Sumara of Weymouth* to the Arctic.”

It’s interesting that Will needs to point this out, because I was looking at the cockpit sole and thinking what a fine and well-fitted bit of teak-grating it had. I love the idea and peace of mind this arrangement must give. And I think the design is a brilliant concept, to be adopted by restorers of boats like this. After all, your main task as a restorer of a wooden boat is to try to eliminate the amount of rainwater (with its payload
of rot spores brought down from on high) that can enter the below decks space.

“When we brought Tom Thumb here we kept her afloat for a while and purposely went out beyond the breakwater into some heavy weather to see how things worked,” Will says. “And we found that to be a very worthwhile experience. When a boat is being pressed like that you can appreciate what is right about her deck layout, how the leads work and so on. But you can also find out what is not working well and work out how to change it.”

So for instance Tom Thumb has extra stays, running back stays with Highfield levers, which can be set up quite quickly for serious weather conditions, though ordinarily she does not need them.

The refit included a new deck, with deck beams, with a swept teak deck Sikaflexed over a plywood sub-deck. Another detail here: “We replaced the iron chainplates, which used to emerge through the deck, with bronze straps which are now bolted on to the outside of the hull,” Will explained. “These are now through-bolted to bronze straps extending down the inside of the hull, which spreads the load and also means there is no movement through the deck which could cause a leak there.”

The engine control panel is inside the cabin on a little bulkhead below the bridgedeck, along with the few electrics that have been allowed in this refit (VHF, nav lights, steaming, heater and depth). In the cockpit the Kobelt morse control is easy to hand and guns the reconditioned Volvo diesel.

For CB to photograph her, Will took Tom Thumb out for a sail around and just outside Plymouth Sound and from the start he was demonstrating her balance and seakindliness by leaving the helm and going forward on deck to attend to something. “She’s absolutely brilliant to sail,” he avows. “The helm is finger light and she handles very easily. We are used to Integrity, which is 62ft (19m), and you realise with a boat like this how much easier they are to handle – you can do a lot with muscle, which you just can’t do on a bigger boat. And that gives you more leeway to go to a whole lot of different places – because you can just grab the sail and pull it down, or push yourself off. And we’ve already been out in some bad weather… we just sat in the cockpit in drysuits and felt bulletproof.”

The concept for this restoration was for the boat to be taken on adventure cruises. And the first of these is already under way. Will has just put her as deck cargo to go to the Baltic. The idea is to cruise areas like the Aaland Islands, leaving her for the winter, and then next year to cruise further north, far into the Gulf of Bothnia, and the Arctic circle, both in Swedish and Finnish waters.

“These will be training cruises,” Will says. “We want to shake the boat down, and get used to her before shipping her to the Straits of Magellan in two years’ time.”

Having spent five seasons sailing in the Arctic, including aboard the 1909 pilot cutter Dolphin, Will is under no illusions about the weather conditions in that area at the southern tip of South America, where the continent pushes its toe Cape Horn out into the roaring forties. But he is confident that Tom Thumb is the right boat to do it.