



# Following in Nelson's wake

A boat builder in Devon is using time-honoured techniques – and the slipway from which a Trafalgar ship of the line was launched – to build traditional yachts, as **Charles Nodder** observes

**S**MALL boatyards do not usually signal a tea break by blowing a hunting horn, but Stirling & Son is no ordinary boatyard. Its founder, owner, manager and principal shipwright is Will Stirling, formerly a whipper-in to the Tanatside, who tried following his father into hunting but “could never remember the names of the hounds”. He took himself off to boat-building college instead and now, in his mid-thirties, runs a wooden boat business of growing renown.

Unconventional he may be, but Stirling is a traditionalist through and through. Everything from the wood he uses to the workmanship he deploys is the best. Boat designs are from the head, not the computer, bronze fittings are cast to original patterns and fixtures,

such as a galley sink of hand-beaten copper, are sourced from as far away as Mexico.

“A traditional boat should be built and used in time-honoured ways,” Stirling believes. It’s a maxim that extends to his own adventuring under sail, which started when, aged 21, he cruised to Norway and back in a 1938 engineless cutter just 19ft long. Other voyages followed, taking Stirling north of the Arctic Circle – again in wooden yachts, but as crew this time – to gain experience. Meanwhile, an MA in Maritime History and a spell working at Luke Powell’s yard in Cornwall, building replica pilot cutters, added contextual and practical elements to what Stirling was learning first hand under sail.

In 2007, he took the plunge and built his first boat. Living in a vintage fire engine beside

**Above: Stirling & Son's *Integrity*, a replica of a gentleman's cutter, circa 1880**

the Morwhellam Quay Museum in the West-country, he designed and constructed *Alert*, a replica of an 1835 smuggling lugger. The day after her maiden voyage round Plymouth breakwater, he was off north again, bound for Iceland with an all-male crew. They lost a yard and sail overboard in heavy weather off Cape Wrath and were nearly dragged ashore having taken shelter in gloomy Loch Eriboll. But better fortune awaited in Shetland, where Sara James accepted Stirling’s proposal of marriage. The weather improved and on passage to Faeroe it was so calm, “that one could have shaved looking in the sea, with barely a ripple to distort the reflection”. ➤

A fast sail on to the snow-covered peaks of Iceland and a brisk return to Plymouth confirmed *Alert's* sailing ability and build quality. She sold well, proving that Stirling – and perhaps his son (who was born after the couple's return and was soon to feature in the name of the business) – could have a commercial future in boatbuilding. Suitably encouraged, Stirling invested the proceeds of that first sale in wood for a future project.

Taxpayers bought Stirling's next vessel, a 26ft yawl commissioned by the Royal Navy to complete the complement of ships boats attendant on *HMS Victory*. The Navy had been impressed by his meticulous research on the lugger and commissioned the yawl just before the age of austerity halted the construction even of aircraft carriers. She is an elegant craft, built to a 1797 design held at Greenwich.

This rediscovery of past knowledge is a recurring theme in Stirling's work. *The Field's* sometime yachting editor, Dixon Kemp, who founded the Yacht Racing Association, influenced the America's Cup and wrote many a treatise on yacht design in the 1870s, has been a particular influence. His "self-stowing fid", for example, a device enabling a topmast to be taken down in bad weather without the crew

having to climb aloft, will not have featured on many boats constructed in the past 140 years but is present on Stirling & Son's latest build, a replica gentleman's yacht of circa 1879.

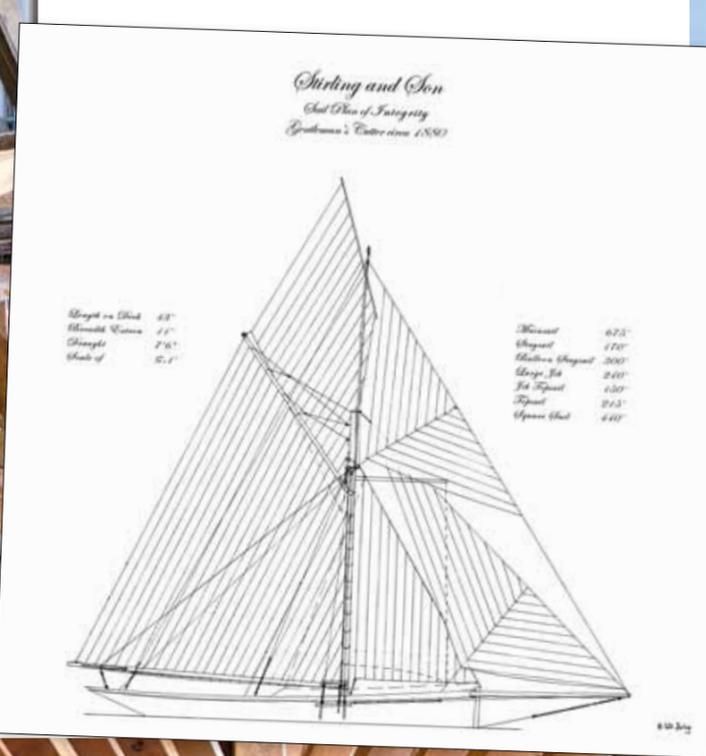
As commissions are inevitably irregular, particularly for those specialising in exceptional craft, small boatyards often lurch from famine to feast. Smoothing out the financial waves is crucial to success and Stirling has found two ways to do this. The first is to take on shipwrights to work alongside him only when he needs them. "I work hard and I expect hard graft from others, too. A good attitude is as important as the skills but I am lucky to have a small, experienced team of up to five who can come and go with the jobs."

His second ruse is the regular building of quality dinghies – rowing boats as well as sailing craft that sell well and keep the yard ticking over. Some are bought as tenders for classic yachts but more are destined inland, to grace the lakes and lochs of discerning landowners or for leisurely afternoons on the upper Thames. Combining aesthetics with function, they are among the best of their kind and at £575 a foot (excl VAT) for a rowing boat or £925 a foot for a sailing dinghy, compare well on price with similar bespoke craft.

The dinghies are thoroughly seaworthy, too. They often take Stirling to places others seldom reach. He and Sara recently sailed a small one out to land on the Eddystone Rocks off Plymouth and he has also crossed the widest part of the English Channel in a 14-footer. While showing me a part-finished 15ft version in the yard, he explained it was to have a longer foredeck than the others and more built-in buoyancy.

"I am going to be sailing this one to visit all the offshore lighthouses round the UK to raise money for Water Aid in Africa. She's built of mahogany on teak and several suppliers have kindly donated materials and fittings. If the lighthouse trips go well, I am planning to ship her to Alaska to cross the Bering Straits and perhaps also down to Tierra del Fuego to explore the Beagle Channel."

We wandered on from the dinghy to look at *Integrity*, the 23-ton gentleman's cutter that has won Stirling three awards, including the coveted *Classic Boat* prize for the best vessel over 40ft. Her sweeping lines embody Victorian elegance, while every fitting is an immaculate marriage of form and function. The teak decks are sealed with pitch in the traditional way and her mast and spars gleam with innumerable coats of varnish. Down below a gorgeous waft of mature oak comes from the handsome panelled interior, complemented by leather upholstery and more bronze and brass. It is like being in a miniature London club.



Will and Sara Stirling on *Integrity*. The boat under sail (above). Other pictures: construction of *Integrity* from plans to the finishing touches



Above: *Alert*, a replica smuggling lugger. Below: a rowing dinghy



“ I am going to be sailing this one to visit all the offshore lighthouses in the UK ”



*Integrity* was built last year on spec, using wood that was bought from the proceeds of Stirling's first sale. To create such a craft without a buyer in mind perhaps shows a degree of economic rashness but her quality should see her find a new owner soon. Her price tag of £297,500 is actually cheap for a new-build wooden yacht of this size and she sails well, too. Challenged to a race at Cowes last summer by a cutter-owning member of the Royal Yacht Squadron, Stirling and a scratch crew brought her home to victory, despite having sailed her only twice before and never in a race.

The beauty of *Integrity*, the dinghies and the other old yachts undergoing repair in the yard is undoubtedly complemented by their extraordinary surroundings. Stirling & Son recently relocated from inland Devon to "Number 1 Covered Slipway" at the southern end of Plymouth Dockyard. As the name implies, it is the oldest covered slip in Plymouth, indeed in the world, and was in continuous use by the Royal Navy from the laying down of its granite floor in 1763 right through to the Eighties. Recently sold to



**Top: *Integrity* and *Alert* at Number 1 Covered Slipway, Plymouth Dockyard. Above: *HMS Foudroyant* being launched in 1798**

Princess Yachts, which makes multi-million pound luxury motor cruisers in the floating dock next door, it is Grade I listed and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. English Heritage is pleased to see it put to a traditional use once more and the staff there and at Princess Yachts have been enthusiastic.

Cathedral-like in size and height, the slipway has a striking flared roof of wood and

zinc, under which a man o'war could lie with her mainmasts rigged. Some of Nelson's ships were built here, including his one-time flagship *HMS Foudroyant*. She subsequently fought at Trafalgar but was launched from this very yard in 1798 by one Eliza Barlow, wife of an admiral. That has relevance because Barlow's daughter subsequently married Nelson's brother, William, and the use of Nelson as a middle name has passed down through the Barlow family line ever since.

Thus it was that Emma Barlow, in 1979, named her first-born son William Nelson Stirling and, in him, the hero's name has now come back to the very dock with which it was once so strongly associated. Stirling's son, who is now five years old – the "son" of the yard's title – is in turn called Alfred Nelson Barlow Stirling and, I am told, already enjoys his sailing. So, perhaps, he is destined one day to take over the new boatyard. The business certainly has the quality of permanence to make that possible.

For further details, call Stirling & Son on 01822 614259 or visit [www.stirlingandson.co.uk](http://www.stirlingandson.co.uk).