



NIC COMPTON

# *Will Stirling* IN NELSON'S WAKE

by Nic Compton

**I**t was while driving his Mobylette over the Alps to Turkey in 2004 that Will Stirling designed his first yacht. By day, the then-25-year-old adventurer drove the 50cc moped from village to village, occasionally pausing to admire the scenery and sample local delicacies, while every evening he pulled out a pile of books from his rucksack and dove into a world of righting moments, buttocks, diagonals, and offsets. He was particularly drawn to the 19th-century revenue cutters and yachts based on them, such as the 1819 cutter PEARL built by former Essex smuggler John Philip Sainty.

By the end of the three-month trip, he had designed his own 37' smuggling boat, based not on the lines of any one craft but on the amalgamation of the many boats he had studied. The result was ALERT, a clinker-built, two-masted lugger with a distinctly period look about her, with her upright stem and lute stern. Underwater,

the influences are even more apparent, with her fine prominent bow, and hull filling out quickly to produce broad shoulders and wide beam amidships, before flattening out in a long run aft.

It's not surprising that Will was attracted to the type. His great-great-great-great-grandfather (or "very great grandfather," as Will puts it) was Admiral Sir Robert Barlow, a British naval officer who saw valiant service during the American and French revolutionary wars. Barlow has the distinction of having made the first capture of an armed ship from the French Republic, a privateer called LE PATRIOTE, which he seized on January 2, 1793, just a month before France officially declared war on Britain. Before that, he commanded revenue cutters off the coast of Cornwall, where he captured "several fine vessels laden with contraband goods, one of which was a new cutter of one hundred and fifty tons."

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**Above—For the past decade, designer-builder Will Stirling has dedicated himself to building traditional British vessels of uncompromising quality. He's also made several challenging expeditions under sail.**

Sailing, then, and in particular the romantic but little-known world of revenue cutters and smugglers, are in Will's blood. So too is a certain spirit of derring-do—or at least a complete inability to think that anything isn't possible, providing you throw your all at it. You might call it the "Eton effect," Eton being the expensive private school where Will studied along with the likes of Prince William, Boris Johnson, and Bear Grylls, to name but a few Old Etonians. It might also be the effect of being related, if only by marriage, to Britain's greatest naval commander, Horatio Nelson, for Robert Barlow's daughter Hilaire married Nelson's older brother William.

Not that you'd know it. In person, Will is affable and self-deprecating to a fault, and even his unbounded enthusiasm for whatever project he's currently working on is tempered by a genuine consideration for others. This man of steel with a soft center is a classic British formula that has produced some of the country's greatest explorers—the likes of Scott and Shackleton—and it comes as no surprise to find that Will has traveled to the Arctic not once, but five times.

Even when he's not off on some daring expeditions to the frozen north, Will is dreaming up other challenges, such as building a 14' dinghy and sailing across the English Channel for the fun of it (or, as he puts it, because "contrast sharpens one's appreciation of circumstance"). Or sailing the same dinghy around the Eddystone Lighthouse, 12 miles off Plymouth, to raise money for Water Aid (the stunt raised £820). Or

building a replica of Charles Darwin's BEAGLE to sail through the Straits of Magellan (this last one is still just a dream).

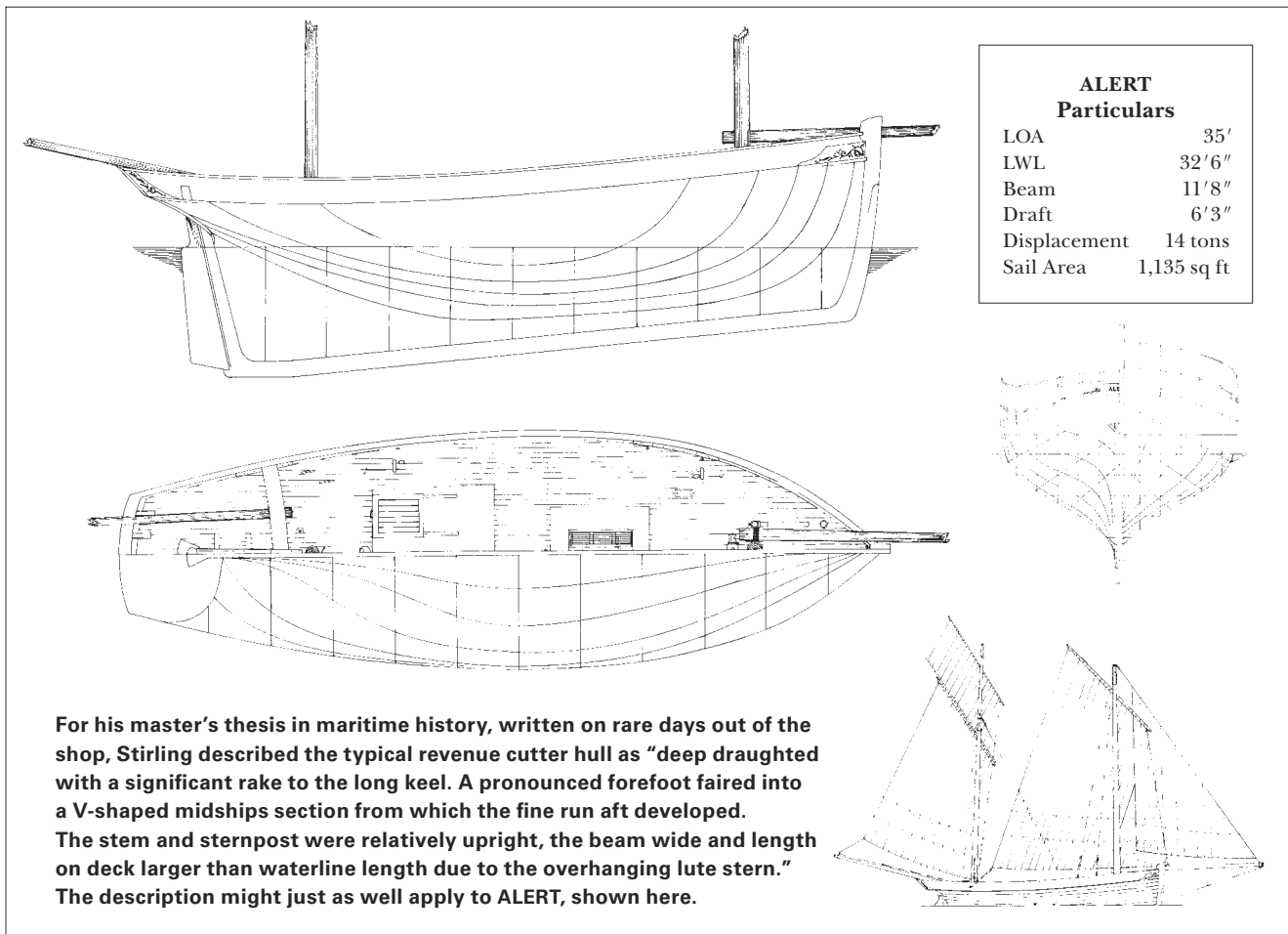
In between adventures, he's found time to build one of the most elegant yachts to appear on the classic yacht circuit in recent years: the 43' cutter INTEGRITY, inspired by the plank-on-edge designs of the Victorian era. She seems to have spilled from his hands fully formed, for her lines display a vessel with a long and distinguished sailing pedigree as if she were built by a shipyard of great standing, rather than being the second major creation of a lone shipwright working in a drafty barn in an obscure part of Devon, with a little help from his friends.

So where did this precocious vision come from? And who is this man who seems determined to create such uncompromising objects of beauty? Surprisingly, given their nautical lineage, Will's immediate family weren't sailors. A week's holiday on the Broads on Britain's East Coast at a young age seems to have struck a chord in Will, however, and after quitting his languages studies at Edinburgh University ("I felt too much 'on track'"), he applied for a course at the International Boatbuilding Training College (IBTC) in Lowestoft. His explanation for taking such an unconventional (i.e., un-Etonian) route is straightforward: "I wanted to be outdoors and to be making something, and I wanted to be able to travel and work. Boatbuilding seemed to offer all those things."

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**Stirling's first large, independent new-boat build was the 1885 smuggling lugger ALERT, whose design he began in 2004 while on an overland journey through the Alps to Turkey.**





| ALERT<br>Particulars |             |
|----------------------|-------------|
| LOA                  | 35'         |
| LWL                  | 32'6"       |
| Beam                 | 11'8"       |
| Draft                | 6'3"        |
| Displacement         | 14 tons     |
| Sail Area            | 1,135 sq ft |

**For his master's thesis in maritime history, written on rare days out of the shop, Stirling described the typical revenue cutter hull as "deep draughted with a significant rake to the long keel. A pronounced forefoot faired into a V-shaped midships section from which the fine run aft developed. The stem and sternpost were relatively upright, the beam wide and length on deck larger than waterline length due to the overhanging lute stern." The description might just as well apply to ALERT, shown here.**

It was while at the IBTC that Will bought the 19' cutter MARY DAWN, which he proceeded to fix up and live aboard for the duration of his time there. Despite his inexperience and the fact the boat had no engine, at the end of his studies Will and a friend embarked on a circumnavigation of the North Sea over the course of two summers, visiting Holland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden (where the boat was laid up for the winter), Norway, and the Orkney and Shetland Islands. There, his friend Stephan had to leave, and Will sailed alone the length of the British Isles from Cape Wrath to Cornwall. Again, his explanation for undertaking such an ambitious voyage with so little experience is disconcertingly simple: "It never occurred to me that I couldn't do it."

It was only after he'd reached Hayle on the western tip of Cornwall that the enormity of what he'd done seemed to dawn on him and, after being spooked by lurid tales of shipwrecks at Land's End, he was persuaded to truck the boat to Gweek, on the other side of the peninsula. It would almost certainly have been quicker to sail those last few miles, yet something prevented him from making a passage that in all likelihood would have been utterly straightforward compared to his adventures in the North Sea. It was as if the weight of history—either the memory of all the brave souls lost in those waters, or perhaps the thought of finally crossing tracks with his revered "very great grandfather"—was

too great and caused him to lose his nerve before the final hurdle.

In between sailing expeditions, Will managed to wangle a job with Luke Powell of Working Sail, the legendary master of traditional wooden boat building (see WB No. 163). Over the past 20 years, Luke has developed an unparalleled reputation as a craftsman, building pilot cutter-inspired craft adapted for comfortable cruising. It's a winning combination that has earned him a devoted following. Will readily acknowledges the influence of Luke's designs, in particular the 46' AGNES, based on the lines of an 1841 pilot cutter from the Isles of Scilly, which was built while he was at the yard.

The influence may run deeper still for, like Will, Luke has a fearless approach to boatbuilding learned from apprenticing on the mighty Thames barges, where steaming 4"-thick planks and carving lumps of timber into gargantuan frames are all in a day's work. Before that, he spent some of his childhood in Greece and observed the local boatbuilders putting together fishing caiques on the foreshore, using a few rudimentary "molds" and fitting planks by eye. It was the kind of ad hoc, intuitive approach to building that had all but been lost in the U.K. and which Luke almost singlehandedly revived, inspiring a generation of young boatbuilders along the way. It was certainly a formative time for Will, who thrived on the combination of creative freedom

WILL STIRLING





To build ALERT, Stirling worked 15 hours per day, six days a week, for a year and a half. Here he is boring the cutter's shaftlog.

and technical rigor such an approach demands.

After working with Luke for two years, it was inevitable that Will would attempt to build a boat on his own. First, however, he had a few more adventures to squeeze in. In June 2004, he attempted to cross France in a canoe using a derelict network of canals issuing from Brest. When the canals proved to be unusable, he swapped the canoe for a Mobyette and continued to Turkey. It was during the second half of this adventure that he designed ALERT. Back in England, he bought a vintage fire engine on eBay for £560 and promptly crashed it on the M6 when a truck hit him from behind, sending him through the window and breaking his left arm in several places. It took him six months of physical therapy to recover. Unfazed, he went out and bought another vintage fire truck on eBay for exactly the same price, and proceeded to live in it.

They say you make your own luck, and certainly Will has worked incredibly hard to achieve whatever he has set out to do. No doubt his natural charm helped secure free space at the Morwellham Quay heritage site, on the upper reaches of the Tamar River in Devon, from which to launch an independent boatbuilding career. But he also had the luck to have inherited £50,000 (about \$76,000) some years before, which he had squirreled away and all but forgotten. Most young men in their mid-twenties would no doubt have used such a resource as a deposit on a house, but Will spent the money on wood, lead, sails, and an engine for his new boat.

Although described on Will's website as a "replica of an 1835 smuggling lugger," ALERT was really simply the best boat Will could design, drawing on all the lines he had studied as well as his experience working on Luke's boats. A trip to Douarnenez on the Looe lugger GUIDE ME persuaded him that lug rig was the way to

go, and lapstrake construction was not only traditional for smuggling boats, providing greater strength for less weight, but would also set the boat apart from the influx of new pilot cutters that was appearing at the time. At 37', ALERT was the biggest boat Will could manage on his own, and he admits that even then he was at the limit of his abilities.

What Will lacked in experience, he more than made up for in energy, and for 18 months he worked 15 hours a day, six days a week, to get the job done. His workplace was a rudimentary shed with open sides, which let in the rain and snow during the winter. He initially lived in the fire engine parked nearby before eventually moving into a cottage on the other side of the river. When the tide was out, he simply dragged his dinghy across the mud to get to work. "I didn't have a phone or Internet," he remembers, "So when I came off the main road down into Morwellham, it really was like entering another world. I was completely focused on my work, and became lost in that, emerging only occasionally for a bath or a meal with the neighbors."

The day he wasn't working on ALERT, Will spent studying for an MA in Maritime History at Exeter University. The logical topic for his dissertation would have been the West Country smuggling luggers of the type he was building, but as he had already discovered, the clandestine nature of smuggling meant there was very little material available about these vessels. Instead, he chose a subject close to his heart: the revenue cutters of 1770 to 1850—encompassing, of course, the period his very great grandfather commanded these very craft off the coast of Cornwall. In truth, revenue cutters and smuggling boats were probably very similar in design,



ALERT's lapstrake planking is traditional for the smuggling cutter type, and it sets the boat apart from several other recently built British cutters, which were planked carvel-fashion.



**ALERT's interior is well executed and not fussy, with white-painted tongue-and-groove bulkheads accented by varnished-oak trim.**

as each side had exactly the same priority: to create the fastest possible boat for those waters, and indeed the boats were often built by the same builders.

One of the drawbacks of working in a quasi-19th-century boatyard was that it lacked a crane or Travelift. Instead, Will fitted some wheels onto a pair of drying-out legs, which he bolted to either side of the boat and then pushed, pulled, and dragged the boat over scaffolding poles to the slipway. ALERT was launched into the Tamar River in February 2007, although it would be a few more months before she tasted the open sea. In the meantime, she was moored a few feet away from the 1909 ketch GARLANDSTONE, one of the main attractions at Morwellham, while Will completed the interior.

Looking at the two boats lying side-by-side, it would have been hard to determine which was the older. This was partly because ALERT was built to a budget, so there was no splurging on 21st-century bling: The deck seams were caulked with cotton and payed with tar, and



STIRLING & SON (THIS SPREAD)

all the fittings were crafted out of steel and then galvanized. One of the live exhibits at Morwellham Quay was a replica 1860 forge where, in between talking to parties of schoolchildren, blacksmith Richard Hingley kindly heated, hammered, and honed most of the new boat's fittings.

Below decks, the fitout is workmanlike rather than fancy, with white-painted tongue-and-groove bulkheads contrasting with the varnished oak trim. That

**With a makeshift system of scaffolding, legs, and wheels, Stirling dragged ALERT's completed hull to a slipway for launching.**



**ALERT's first voyage was to Iceland—a venture that Stirling hoped would stimulate interest in the new boat. As luck would have it, a man local to the boat's home happened upon the lugger, was smitten, and bought it.**

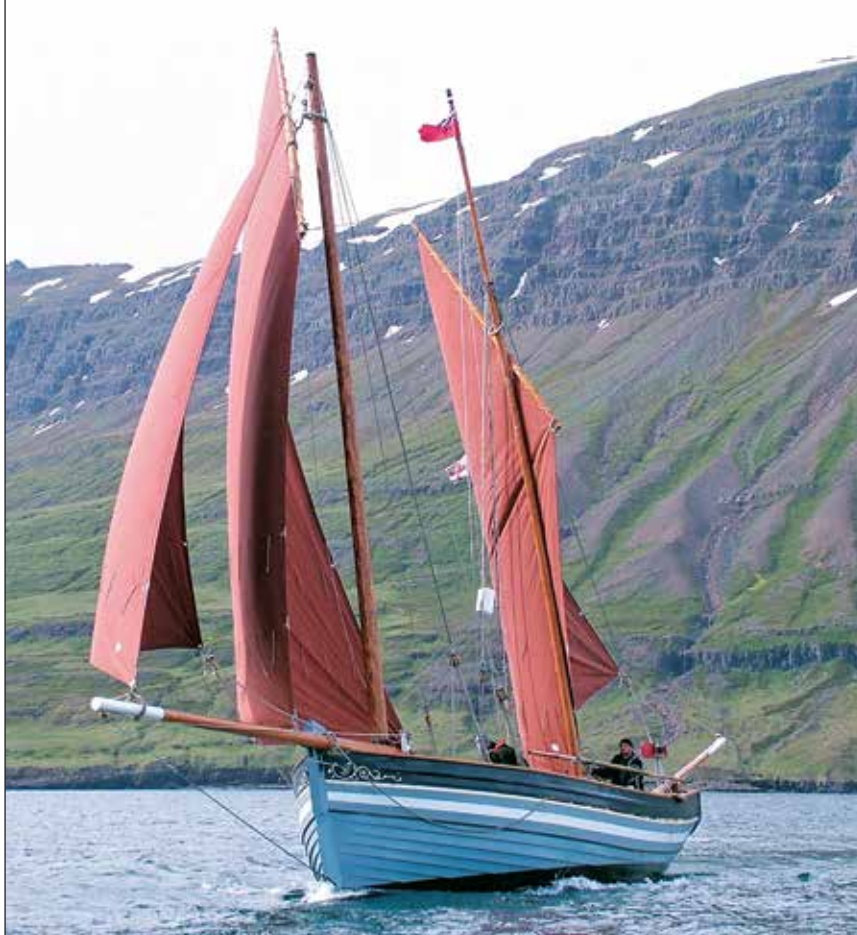
said, Will wasn't above carving the occasional decorative motif into the deckbeams, and for the saloon his effort even stretched to a set of brass fiddles.

On May 14, ALERT made her maiden voyage around Plymouth breakwater, and the following day Will and his crew anchored off Cawsand, 2 miles south of Plymouth, to await better weather for the boat's first cruise. Once again, the weight of history must have hung heavy on Will's shoulders, for Cawsand was once a notorious smuggling village—indeed, in 1804 it was estimated that 17,000 casks of booze were landed by smugglers in one year alone. The town was also said to have been visited by Will's distant relative, Lord Nelson, who may or may not have supped at the Blue Anchor Inn (now the Blue Monkey guest house) sometime in 1801.

**W**ill's plan was to take his brand-new and untested boat not on a gentle amble to the West Country, as any normal person would have done, but on a testing journey of more than 2,500 miles to Iceland and back, visiting the islands of Shetland, Orkney, and Faeroe along the way. It could have been worse: His original plan had been to sail the boat to Spitsbergen, 500 miles north of Norway, and only the imminent arrival of his first child forced him to abandon that plan in favor of a mere trip to Iceland. The idea was to get the boat noticed, to stimulate her sale, although ironically the buyer, when he eventually emerged, was a local man who became smitten with ALERT while paddling by in his canoe.

Meanwhile, back in Morwellham, there was a sudden injection of cash after the local council took over the site, and Will soon found himself heading a team of five people restoring the old docks and railways, as well as patching up the old GARLANDSTONE. Then in January 2008 he received a commission from the Ministry of Defence for a 27' ship's yawl to be displayed alongside the Royal Navy's flagship HMS VICTORY—the ship once commanded, of course, by Will's very great grandfather's daughter's husband's brother, Lord Horatio Nelson. Will's past, it seems, is never very far away.

Things were no less busy at home. Alfred Nelson Barlow Stirling (otherwise known as Alf—the son in the business's name, "Stirling & Son") was born on August 31, 2007, and Will and Sara were married a few months later. At the end of the year, Will delivered a thesis entitled



"What Factors Influenced the Design of Revenue Cutters between 1770 and 1850?" to Exeter University, and was awarded his MA the following summer.

The long-dreamed-of trip north followed, not on Will's own boat, as originally planned, but on Roger Capps's much-traveled 1909 Bristol Channel pilot cutter DOLPHIN. After a practice trip to the Lofoten Islands in 2008, the following year they made it to the northernmost tip of Svalbard to Nelsonoya, which is famed as the place where, in 1773, a precocious teenaged Horatio Nelson was almost killed by a polar bear. He and other members of the Phipps expedition were trapped by pack ice while looking for a northeast passage between Russia and the Arctic, and Will's expedition suffered a similar fate. After several close encounters with pack ice, DOLPHIN retraced her steps and was laid up south of the Arctic Circle, before resuming the planned circumnavigation of Svalbard the following year. Meanwhile, Will's long-suffering wife gave birth to Grace Hilaire (in honor of Will's very great grandmother) in November 2009.

Despite these distractions, Will remained focused on his chosen path. No sooner was the money from the sale of ALERT in the bank than he went out and bought the wood for his next project. Once again, he looked back to the designs of the past for inspiration, this time settling on the yachts of the late 19th century—particularly the era's plank-on-edge cutters with enormous rigs and huge amounts of lead ballast.

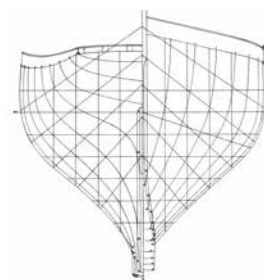
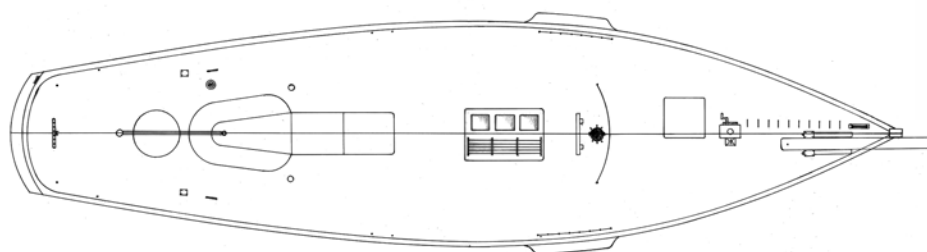
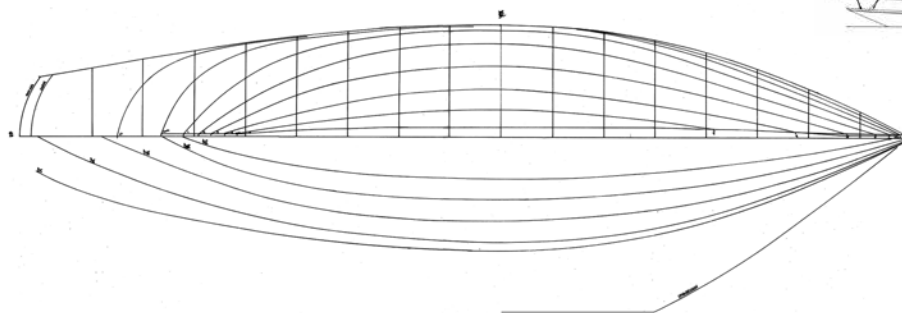
"The design of INTEGRITY was inspired by well-known boats such as Nicholson's MARIGOLD, Beavor-Webb's PARTRIDGE, Watson's VANDUARA, and Dixon Kemp's ZORAIDA. The straight-stemmed cutters of this era are particularly graceful," he says. "But whereas with ALERT



**INTEGRITY**  
Particulars

|              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
| LOA          | 43'         |
| LWL          | 37'         |
| Beam         | 11'         |
| Draft        | 7'6"        |
| Displacement | 15 tons     |
| Sail area    | 1,500 sq ft |

The shape of Stirling's next large build after **ALERT** was based on the straight-stemmed gentlemen's yachts of the 1880s. The resulting boat, **INTEGRITY**, is based on no particular historical antecedent, but is rather Stirling's unique interpretation of the type.



I was trying duplicating an exact historic type, I had a bit more leeway this time. Designers were always trying out different things on yachts. So with the shape of the cockpit, for instance, I could play around and see what worked best, without being tied to a specific historic shape."

Despite such apparent leeway, the design was so meticulously researched that one gets the feeling that every component was thoroughly investigated before Will even lifted pencil to paper. Take the rig, for instance. That topsail yard might look the same as **PARTRIDGE**'s topsail yard to you and me, but Will is quick to point out that the angle between the yard and topmast changed around 1880–85, so that the spar on boats built before then (**VANDUARA**) were less steeply set than on boats built afterwards, such as **PARTRIDGE**. **INTEGRITY**'s rig, he assures me, is the older plan.

Or consider the deck. Most builders choose either straight-laid decks, which run parallel to the centerline, or swept decks, which follow the curve of the hull. Looking closely at **PARTRIDGE**, however, Will noticed that her deck planks do both: they start off parallel to the boat's centerline and then gradually taper at their ends until the outer courses follow the curve of the hull. This means that, unlike the other two methods,

most of the deck planks run in a single, tapered line all the way from stem to stern. It's also a logistical nightmare for the builder tasked with figuring it all out, as no two planks are the same. "It's a Victorian aesthetic that has little regard for labor," Will says. "Working out the maths is a complete nightmare."

Will was uncompromising in his choice of building materials. **INTEGRITY** is traditionally built from larch planking on sawn oak frames, spaced 15" apart, with alternating bronze and oak floors, all fastened with copper and bronze. The decks are of solid Columbian pine, and the deck furniture is opepe with oak trim. Likewise, the hull seams were all caulked with cotton and puttied, and the deck seams payed with Jeffery's No. 2 marine glue. Will assured me there is absolutely no plywood in her whatsoever and, in fact, he seemed slightly outraged at the question.

He designed and had made patterns for most of the new boat's bronze deck hardware, including cleats, pad-eyes, and fairleads (the latter identical to those on **PARTRIDGE**). He even made the mainsheet buffer from scratch, casting the nuts and bolts and the oversize shackles, and spacing them with giant rubber washers. The anchor winch was assembled using elements of an old one combined with parts Will had specially cast or



**INTEGRITY** in frame, with ballast attached. To cast the ballast, a 17'-long female mold was built in steel and a fire lit under it so the lead could be melted and set in a single piece. The keel itself is 12" wide, tapering to 6" at both ends; the resulting wide faying surface minimizes torque. About half of the ballast is in the bilges, to produce a kind motion at sea.

a judgment about what worked and what didn't, and improve the bits that didn't."

Classic-yacht aficionados will pick up on a seemingly cheeky detail carved into the yacht's stern: Below her name, where yachts such as **PARTRIDGE** have their year of launching, Will has carved the figure 1879, even

fabricated himself to produce a two-gear mechanism, with a low gear for breaking out the anchor and a high gear for hauling in the chain.

The final effect looks remarkably like the 49' **PARTRIDGE**, with her low sheer and rather austere stem. Yet the figures tell another story, for despite being 6' shorter than **PARTRIDGE**, **INTEGRITY** has 6" more beam than **PARTRIDGE**'s 10'6". **INTEGRITY** also has relatively more freeboard for her size, a more rounded forefoot, slightly more sheer, and a wider stern. The result is a pleasing compromise that looks every bit like a Victorian gentleman's yacht but is initially stiffer and less likely to act like a submarine in a seaway. The early plank-on-edge designs were notoriously tender and wet.

"It's great looking back," Will says of the designs that inspired him, "because you can pick and choose. You can look back at different aspects of design and make


though the yacht was launched in 2012. To many this might seem as if he is trying to pass off his Victorian-inspired design as a genuinely old boat, but he brushes this notion aside, saying: "I did it to prevent confusion. Someone who doesn't know about the history of yacht design might look at the boat and not understand why it looks the way it does. The date is meant to indicate the era the design is based on. It wasn't meant to hoodwink people into thinking she was built then."

Launched in June 2012, **INTEGRITY** was officially christened by Will's mother, Elizabeth Barlow. Once again, the event was heavy with symbolism as, 214 years earlier, Elizabeth's great-great-grandmother Eliza Barlow had performed the same service on the **HMS FOU DROYANT**. That 80-gun warship went on to have an illustrious career—including serving for two years as Nelson's flagship.

**INTEGRITY**'s hull, at first glance, is quite reminiscent of the 1885-built, J. Beavor-Webb-designed cutter **PARTRIDGE**. But **INTEGRITY** is 6" shorter while also being 6" wider—as well as having a more rounded stem and greater freeboard.







**INTEGRITY's** sails were built by North Sea Sails in Maldon, Essex, England. There's much handwork in them, including hand-stitched boltropes. The standing rigging is built of galvanized steel wire (see "In Search of a 100-Year Rig," page 84) spliced by TS Rigging, also of Maldon; running rigging is three-strand matte polyester from English Braid. The Danish-made ash blocks were finished using a protocol espoused by author-sailor Claud Worth: They were stripped of their original finish, and then soaked in linseed oil for three weeks, hung up to dry for three months, and then revarnished.



All of INTEGRITY's hardware, including this mainsheet horse, was cast by Major Castings in Fowey, which also welded the copper stemband that appears on the facing page.

Three weeks after INTEGRITY was launched, Will sailed her up to Cowes for the annual British Classic Yacht Club regatta. Although he had no intention of racing, Wednesday is Challenge Day and INTEGRITY was duly challenged by two other comparable yachts: THALIA, a 45' Victorian gaff cutter; and AEOLUS, a 42' original plank-on-edge gaff cutter from California. It was a dramatic day, with thunder and lightning exploding all around and hail gathering on the deck. At one point there was so much rain the crews couldn't see the next mark. Despite the atrocious conditions and only having a borrowed crew, INTEGRITY won convincingly on only her fourth outing ever. A few weeks later, she picked up the Best Boat Trophy and was named People's Choice at the Plymouth Classics. It was a good beginning for the plucky West Country upstart.

The launch of INTEGRITY signaled a coming of age for Will. Whereas ALERT might have been dismissed as a one-off from an aspiring young man with a bottomless pool of energy, with this latest craft he has upped the game and produced an elegant yacht that would be the pride of any boatyard. For Will has achieved a rare thing in INTEGRITY: He has managed to design a yacht imbued with period character without becoming a slave to historical detail. INTEGRITY's sheer is as sweet and clean as any yacht designed during that era, and yet the whole boat has its own distinct 21st-century personality. It's an astonishing achievement for only his second major build, and one that bodes well for the future.

With INTEGRITY safely tucked up in a marina in Plymouth, Will went back to his usual bread-and-butter work


Belowdecks, INTEGRITY's accommodations are executed in oak paneling, with buttoned leather settees in the saloon. The pilot berths on either side of the saloon are paneled in, reducing the apparent width of the cabin. Delicately curved leaf supports under the saloon table marry in perfectly with the curve on the sides of the legs. To avoid a shiny varnished finish, Stirling stained the oak using Van Dyke crystals, a traditional recipe made from crushed walnut husks, which is mixed with water before use. After staining, the wood was sealed with beeswax to produce a soft finish.



of building clinker dinghies at £575 (about \$875) per foot (not including taxes). Most recently, he was asked to build a set of four dinghies—fully functioning, apart from having no transom and no thwarts—to be used, upended, as drinking cubicles in a pub. He's also dreaming about his next new build, and once again it's likely to be a historically specific replica from the end of the 19th century—though this time he's thinking about a clipper bow and something “super-elegant.”

Meanwhile, he has finally leased a proper boatyard. Not any boatyard, but the slipway where HMS FOU-DROYANT was built and christened by Will's very great grandmother back in 1798. Built in 1763, it's thought to be the oldest operational slipway in the world and is listed as an Ancient Monument, which means the structure cannot be altered. The slipway currently forms part of the Princess Yachts site, and the terms of the lease specify that it can be used only for the repair and construction of wooden boats, which suits Will just fine.

“It's incredible,” Will says, “to think I'll be walking on the very stones where Eliza Barlow trod. What better place could there be for building historic replicas?”

The weight of history is there again, but as usual Will seems to relish it. He has one foot in the past and one in the present, and thrives on the rich blend of old and new, past and present. What's more, he's young and has broad shoulders. I suspect Elizabeth Barlow is going to be considerably busier than her illustrious forebear christening vessels. 

*Nic Compton is a freelance writer and photographer based in Brighton, England. He has written about boats and the sea for 20 years and has published nine nautical books, including a biography of the designer Iain Oughtred. He currently sails a 25' strip-planked Cheverton Caravel built in Cowes in 1961.*