

LIFE AQUATIC

The lives and loves of a timeless 1950s Silver motor yacht, rediscovered, rebuilt and reinvented for the modern age

Words & pictures Nigel Sharp



The newly restored Life Aquatic, back on the waves

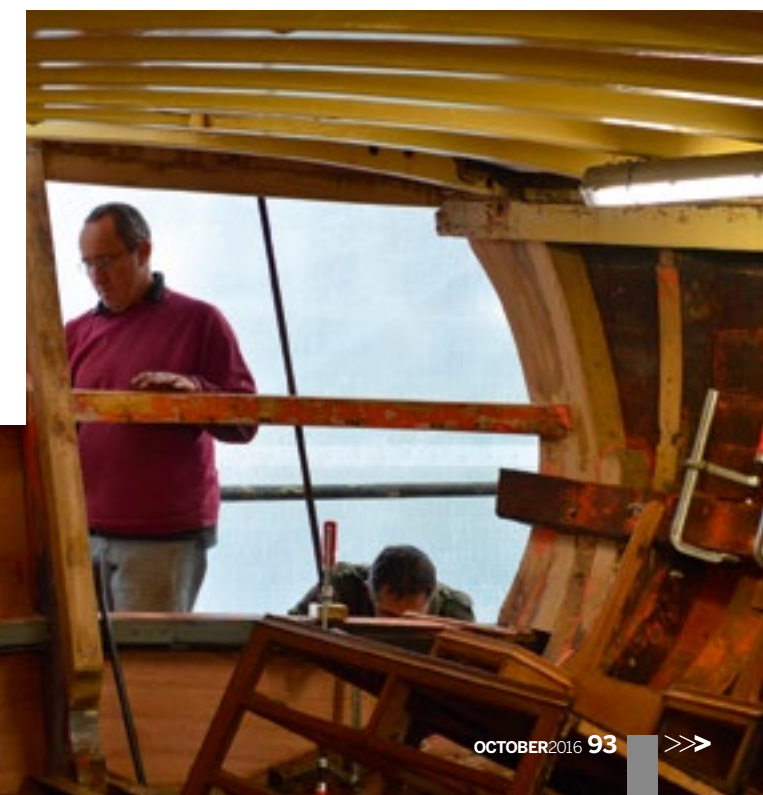
Thelma VI was built by Silvers at Rosneath on the Clyde in 1952 and following a recent extraordinarily thorough restoration by Stirling & Son in Plymouth, has now been renamed *Life Aquatic*. Her new lady owner had previously chartered sailing boats and had owned three other larger motor yachts but had no intention of buying another until, that is, she came across *Thelma* in May 2014. “I first saw her on a grey day in Cowes and I completely fell in love with her,” she told me. Having previously enjoyed holidays in the Greek islands where she noticed the particular way in which many people enjoyed their boats, she felt that *Thelma* might be just the boat for her. “I could imagine my family, my children and grandchildren and friends having a lovely time aboard her in that part of the world, and also in the south of France and on the Italian coast,” she said, “using her as a really lovely day boat with all her deck space, nothing formal, and we could also sleep on board if we wanted to. I’ve been down the route of buying a new boat and losing half its value the moment it left the boatyard and I felt I wanted to get involved in a restoration process. I didn’t really realise how much would be involved though!” she added with a laugh.

Thelma was a one-off larger version of Silver’s Ormidale class and was, in common with all Silver motor yachts, designed by company proprietor and managing director John Bain. Built for E Lynton Vicars, the launching ceremony was conducted by Mrs Bain on July 10 1952. At that time, she was triple-screw: the main power came

from two Gleniffer 72hp diesels but she had a Morris Commodore 47hp petrol engine too, apparently to allow easier steering at slow speeds with its propeller immediately ahead of the single rudder.

In 1954, *Thelma* was sold to Sir Robert W Smith – who soon had the central engine removed – and she then remained with the Smith family for the next ten years. When they sold her, she spent a few years based in the Mediterranean – in Cannes in the ownership of JE Bullough and then Malta with H Strachey-Hawdon and AS Denniff – before returning to the UK when Eric Norbury bought her in 1971. Two years later, her engines were replaced with two Gardner 150hp diesels – not new ones; they were 1962 vintage and one had been a bus engine – and, probably at the same time, her solid teak superstructure was replaced in plywood.

Work begins on the 72ft Silver motoryacht at Stirling & Son’s covered slipway in Plymouth





Many of the original wheelhouse fittings were cleaned up and refitted



The rudder stock, propellers and shafts were all renewed



All galvanised steel-strap floors were also renewed



The first lick of paint goes on the hull



A utile beam shelf and deck beams were fitted, then a plyboard sub-deck was laid over them



She has a cruising speed of 8 knots and a maximum of 10 – impressive for a 60-tonne boat with a pair of 150hp engines



Upholstery by Sanders Sails of Lymington

Norbury still owned her in 1980 but for the next 13 years, her history is largely unknown – not least because Lloyds Register ceased publication – but it is thought that she did some charter work for the BBC and may have appeared in the TV programme *Howards' Way*.

In December 1993, Gary Newnham bought her. "She was chained to a pontoon in East Cowes looking rather sad," he told me. "She had been repossessed by a finance company and was cheap, and I decided to buy her with a view to selling her on, but it was to be over 20 years before I did so. She became a member of the family."

Gary kept *Thelma* in Cowes, and the way in which he used her seems to have been split neatly between the two decades of his ownership: for the first ten years for family cruises, mostly to the West Country and Channel Islands; and then latterly she became "almost the floating clubhouse" for the British Classic Yacht Club. "At regattas we would have people sleeping on board and we would take people out to watch the racing," he

said. This provided Gary with a reason to prolong his ownership, but he was always conscious that she needed a lot of work which he couldn't afford, so eventually he put her on the market.

When the current owner first saw *Thelma*, she was for sale through Sandeman Yacht Company. Barney Sandeman then arranged for the boat to be slipped at Stirling & Son's slipway in Plymouth – built in 1763 and thought to be the oldest covered slipway in the world – where she arrived in June 2014; and for Jim McIlraith, a surveyor with extensive experience of Silver yachts, to carry out a pre-purchase survey. By the time the new owner had agreed a deal with Gary, she had also been having serious talks with Will Stirling and it was soon agreed that his yard would carry out the necessary work, that Jim would continue to keep an eye on her at regular intervals, and that Barney would act as the owner's project manager. Initially the project was referred to as a



The restoration took less than two years to complete

'refurbishment', but it wasn't long before it became clear that it would be a great deal more than that. There was known to be some rot in the covering boards and surrounding areas and while this was being further investigated, more rot was found in the beam shelf. Soon after that, it was decided to remove the whole of the deck, take the boat back to a bare hull and then start to replace some of its component parts.

The teak stem and oak keelson were left intact but below it, the 9in square oak false keel and the ballast keel were renewed. Almost half the planking was replaced although this was not possible in like-for-like timber of reliable quality and at a reasonable price, so Oregon pine was used instead of pitch pine on the bottom, and West African utile instead of Honduras mahogany on the topsides.

About half of the steamed oak ribs were replaced, repairs were carried out locally to the sawn oak frames and all were refastened, with copper rivets and bronze screws respectively. All the galvanised steel-strap floors were renewed and five extra ones were added in the engine room where they now span the shaft logs and engine beds, and about half of the timber floors were renewed. A new utile beam shelf and deck beams were fitted and then a plywood sub-deck

was laid over them in two half-inch layers with staggered butt joints for extra strength.

The superstructure was in too poor a state to be saved so this was rebuilt in the 1973 style. The original windows were reused, although this created difficulties in accurately aligning the edges and angles – originally the windows would have been patterned after the superstructure was built.

After two traditional skylights, two hatches and a seat/storage locker were fitted, a half-inch-thick semi-swept teak deck – considered to be more attractive than the original straight-laid deck – was then laid with snapes into the king plank and covering boards.

As much as possible, original deck fittings – or at least those which were on the boat when she arrived in Plymouth – have been refurbished and reused. These include the windlass, the searchlight, the Kent Clearview screens, the engine room ventilation cowls, the cap rail hinges and locks, the flagstaff socket, fairleads, and stanchions. The latter are cast iron and several of them needed weld repairs before being re-galvanised and painted. The original Silver-style steel mooring cleats were used as patterns to cast new bronze ones which were then polished and chrome plated.

The original straight-laid deck was replaced by semi-swept teak planking



Some original parts of the interior have been saved, including drawer carcasses, the galley sink and taps



Original chairs have been refurbished



Attention to detail is flawless, as seen in the heads' handmade Normandy tiles



The interior joinery is all in oak, in a style very similar to the original, stained with Van Dyck walnut crystals and coated with six coats of varnish. The grain has deliberately not been filled, "as we didn't want a perfect, almost plastic, finish," said Will.

A few of the original parts of the interior have been saved, including the flag stowage locker in the wheelhouse, the mirror in the owner's cabin, locker door knobs, drawer carcasses, several chairs, the galley sink and a number of taps. The interior was finished off with Tibetan carpets, Normandy handmade tiles in the heads, and upholstery by Sanders Sails of Lymington.

The Gardner engines were sent back to Gardner Marine in Kent to be taken back to 'zero hours' and were then reinstalled in a newly laid-out engine room to allow easier access. A new Onan 27KVA generator replaced a Fischer Panda set, a new Side-Power bow thruster was fitted, and the Vosper Maxi fin stabilisers (which had probably been fitted at the same time as the Gardner engines were originally installed) were completely overhauled. Stainless steel fuel tanks with a total capacity of 2,000 litres replaced the original galvanised ones and will provide a cruising range of 800 miles at 1250RPM with a 10% reserve. The rudder stock, propellers and shafts were also renewed. The engineering work was carried out by Joshua Preston Marine and Heavy Engineers, and the plumbing and electrical work by AllBoat Services, both based in Plymouth.

The boat's new name was chosen by the owner's daughter, a fan of the Wes Anderson film of the same name. "I think you're mad to buy the boat," she told her mother, "but if you are going to go ahead with it, you have to call her *Life Aquatic*!"

And so it was that, after an astonishing amount of work had been carried out in less than two years, *Life Aquatic* was relaunched on the May 23 2016. During sea trials, she demonstrated a cruising speed of 8 knots and a maximum of 10 which Jim McIlraith thinks is impressive for a 60-tonne boat with 300hp of propulsion. "She slips along nicely with a wee frothy bow wave and a beautiful run-off under that wine glass stern," he said. Barely a month after the launch, Will himself delivered *Life Aquatic* down to the Mediterranean and amongst his crew was Nick Ruiz who took over as the owner's captain on their arrival.

The owner is extremely complimentary about all the key players in *Life Aquatic's* restoration including Barney ("he has been incredible all the way through, really holding my hand which I needed as I'm not an expert"), Ed ("dear Ed"), and India ("a genius"), but most of all, Will. "I am so lucky to have spent two years working with someone of his talent, and it has been extraordinary to see him bring on his apprentices

which wasn't something I really thought about when I bought the boat. It's been such a privilege." And those key players also had kind words to say about the owner. "The work really escalated but luckily, she was prepared to go down that road," said Jim, "and she has really saved a classic." "As soon as she saw the boat, she had a vision to do something different," said Barney. "It takes some nerve and staying power, and of course money, to see a boat taken apart and then put back together like that. She probably didn't intend to do it on the

scale and she could have cut corners, but she is a perfectionist and she wanted a boat of extreme quality. Plus, she has managed to keep the spirit of the boat."

Most of all, the owner is understandably very enthusiastic about *Life Aquatic*. "There is an elegance about her and she is very alluring without being 'show-offy,'" she said. "She has a very special place in my heart, partly because of everyone who has worked on her. And she just makes me smile." **LMBY**

The interior design was contracted to India Mahdavi, the Paris-based architect and interior designer who has worked on residential projects for the owner; and Dubois Naval Architects were also taken on to 'marinise' India's work and to convert it into a CAD format that Will could use. Much of the Dubois work was carried out by Adam Scott-Mackie but Ed Dubois' enthusiastic personal involvement proved to be particularly poignant as this was one of his last projects before his sad and untimely death. Fourteen different general arrangement drawings were produced before the final details were agreed. "It was a question of refining everything," said Adam.

But at the insistence of both India and the owner, the final interior layout is not dissimilar to the original. Forward of the wheelhouse there is an upper saloon, dining room, galley and twin crew cabins with ensuite heads; and aft there is an offset passageway with two double cabins to port, a single cabin and heads/shower to starboard and owner's cabin aft. The latter has an ensuite heads containing the original bath which Will describes as "a four-man lift around which the boat had to be built and rebuilt".

The new *Life Aquatic* is a boat of rare quality that still retains its original spirit



The interior joinery is all in oak, stained with Van Dyck walnut crystals and coated with six coats of varnish

