

The Building of Joy

Julian Robertson has spent many evenings last year building a Derwent Skiff, the design by Alan Witt that won the Australian Wooden Boat Show design competition. Here Julian describes the journey so far.

Usually I do take a little time to consider before making a commitment to a couple of hundred hours of work, but not this time. As soon as I saw the Derwent Skiff 'Prototype' at the Australian Wooden Boat Festival in 2006, I was hooked. It was so elegant. I knew it would be a delight to row, and rowing is something I have always enjoyed since my student days of competitive rowing. Of course people ask practical questions, such as why would I want a boat 5.4m (18ft) long just for one person, where am I going to keep it, is there a place for an outboard, a sail. They just don't understand!!

I soon had a set of plans, all 7 sheets, with a bronze identification plate designed by the sculptor Stephen Walker. I also had quite a few photos of the first Derwent Skiff and the demonstration of the building of a skiff by Mark Singleton at the Wooden Boat Festival. What I didn't have, because it wasn't ready, was the building instructions. However, I have been lucky enough to have the designer, Alan Witt, live nearby, and he has been most generous with his time and advice.

And if I had been a bit more patient I could also have a complete boat kit cut out to extreme levels of computer controlled accuracy, which is what Alan supplies to customers nowadays. Instead I bought a decent jig-saw, a few sheets of ply, and cut out all fifteen bulkheads, using a magnifying glass to make sure I was cutting along the lines! Painstaking work, but it did give me some sort of perverse satisfaction to know that it was all my own work! Misplaced satisfaction, you could say, because of course these bulkheads won't even be in the final boat – they just make up the form on which the boat is built!



I wanted my boat to be a celebration of the wonderful Tasmanian timbers that are part of our heritage, so I purchased a piece of Huon Pine for the transom, and chiselled out the boat's name – Joy. I drove all the way to Queenstown and bought a beautiful piece of King Billy, 5.4 metres long, from Bernie Bradshaw of Tasmanian Special Timbers, and had it cut up for the keel plate, the gunwales, and the riggers. The lapstrakes are 6mm marine ply, and for

minimum weight I abandoned Tasmania and purchased Gaboon, a really light weight ply. I then had fun scarfing two and a half sheets together. This was before Alan had shown me a really neat way to scarf each lapstrake, actually on the form, rather than the complete sheet.



I am certainly learning a few skills as the boat comes together, and I started with a fairly domestic level of ability. I have built little Bolger designs before, as a project with students, but the Skiff is a step up in woodworking skills. I have learned to transfer the design from paper to wood, to scarf timber, to cut and fit lapstrakes, to laminate timber (for the stem and the outriggers) and I'm going to try spray painting the hull. There are a few little misfits, but nothing a generous dose of epoxy hasn't fixed.

I do believe that some kind of creative activity is good for healthy living, and I am finding that making this boat is very satisfying. But I can't wait to get on the water, and make a few journeys. I'll go up river initially, but I also want to row down the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, and I shall be interested to see how the boat handles the waves. Alan has modified the design to include buoyancy tanks for and aft, and I'm putting them in.



I've treated myself to a foam padded seat and new slides from Rowfit, but I am looking for a pair of oars. I would love to find a pair of beautiful spruce rowing oars, but I wouldn't mind a second hand carbon fibre pair of sculling oars.

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