

GrandDESIGNS

When New Zealander John Welsford designs small open boats capable of considerable voyages in open water he frequently finds inspiration in the old sailing workboats of the UK's south coast. Pilgrim is his latest design.

When setting out to design a new boat, I take a close look at what it is I am trying to achieve, and then look hard at historical precedents. In this instance, I took the worst case for my own use of this boat, which is a 70 mile (113km) haul against a prevailing strong headwind in completely open waters and with mountainous cliffs to leeward. There are reefs all along this coast, strong tidal currents and nothing to windward to slow the swells.

I had in mind a journey of a little over 300 miles (483km), starting from my new home port, visiting all the places and haunts where I began my cruising career over 40 years ago and finishing in the legendary Bay of Islands. It's a big trip in a small boat, three weeks minimum, a lot of it in very exposed seas; places a very long way between sheltered refuges.

I've designed her to take two airbeds, to have huge watertight lockers, enough ballast to carry a big powerful rig and to right her if knocked down. I wanted her to have enough buoyancy to keep her up and bailable if swamped just in case.

Under the boom tent there will be a roomy cabin when at anchor, lots of space for bed, cooler and lounging about with a book. She'll be a real home away from home.

This will be a 'pilgrimage' of sorts, hence the boat name, a pilgrimage that will involve about 500 hours on board, so comfort, seaworthiness and easy handling are all important.

Important too is the 'afterwards' in that I'll be sailing with the family and with friends, daysailing in the wide variety that being able to tow at highway speeds make accessible.

I looked around the world for an environment where there was a long history of small craft of a style that would suit and chose the south coast of England where the strong winds of the North Atlantic pile into the shallow entrance of the English Channel with fast tidal currents running the other way. There are cliffs and a huge reef called The Shambles which will give you an idea what conditions can be like there.

The fisheries in this area have been using small sailing and rowing boats since well before Columbus and there is a line of constant evolution from before Viking times. Some distinctive boat types were produced until the late 1800s just before the advent of the internal combustion engine.

Some time ago I analysed drawings of an 1860s Fal River Oyster Boat, a 25' (7.6m) 'working boat' used for oyster dredging, long line fishing and crab potting under sail. Speed was a factor in this fishery as much of it was in tidal waters and the first boat home got the best prices. Seaworthiness was also important as the crab pots were set in among the reefs and rocks on a desperately dangerous lee shore and these boats had to be able to fish in all but the worst of conditions;

this area has among the highest proportion of gale force winds in any longshore fishery.

This has generated extraordinarily seaworthy boats, with comfortable motion and easy handling. They are good load carriers, make wonderful cruisers and are fast enough to embarrass many modern yachts.

I took the statistical information from the drawings of the old girl and have endeavoured to produce hulls with similar 'numbers'. The first one was my Houdini design and it was with real interest that I sailed her the first time to see if I had succeeded in reproducing the good characteristics of the original in a boat about half the length.

I was right, it worked and with allowances for scale effect I have been refining that method ever since. So Pilgrim is closely related, numerically rather than visually, to the late 1800 fishing boats of the English South Coast but I have had that ancestry in mind when I drew the shape and style of this little boat. The 'Family' now includes Houdini, Swaggie and Sundowne, and Pilgrim is the latest of the type. All of these boats are intended to go voyaging: Houdini further than most 13' (4m) craft; Swaggie trans Atlantic and Sundowner Cape Horn or Winter North Atlantic.

Pilgrim's practical limits are longshore cruising but in places where an open boat would not normally be used. It's not so long ago in historical terms that Cook and Vancouver surveyed large areas of the Pacific Northwest, and Cook, of course, is prominent in the history of New Zealand and Australia. Very little of this exploration was done in the motherhips; it was accomplished by the junior officers and a crew in a small boat. Typically, the ship's boats on these expeditions were 18'-19' (5.5m-5.8m) long, smaller than people think and they went out for days or weeks on end to chart the unexplored coast.

It's hard to get a crew of four or five to go along with my wont to wear a blue serge uniform and threaten to keelhaul or flog the idle swabs, so I plan on singlehanded or two-handed expeditions and it is with this style of adventuring in mind that I drew Pilgrim.

CONTACTS

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Plans for Pilgrim – 13 large format sheets plus written building guide – are available at E165 /£145 from:
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