

STAYING BUOYANT

Thames broker Gillian Nahum has a talent for bringing boats and buyers – and sellers – together. *Martin Smith* watched her at work. *Photographs by Ray Little*



Gillian Nahum started Hambleton Sales and Charter in 1992 when she moved into Hambleton Mill Marina on the Thames

near Henley, with her then boyfriend, Peter Jones. For a time, the business grew nicely out of the work that Peter was already doing at the marina combined with Gillian's experience in seeking out just the right craft for her clients and for getting buyer and seller to come to terms. She also took on the chartering of the *Lady Florence*, the 1926, 40ft (12.2m) river cruiser Peter had restored. Large parties could be thrown on *Lady Flo*, and Gillian and her two daughters provided the catering.

The break-up of the relationship between Gillian and Peter a couple of years ago explains why Hambleton's office address has now moved away from the marina and was the reason for the firm's fresh impetus as well as a slightly different focus over the last few years.

Today, the business side of the operation is run out of Gillian's flat in Henley, while the sales and charter side has spread far and wide. When the change in her circumstances came about, Gillian saw the loss of a fixed base for the brokerage business as a

potential problem. The marina provided a great focus for customers, as well as having the facilities to perform many of the tasks that the business required.

But as things turned out, the lack of a fixed base and a change in her outlook has meant that Gillian's new business can now come from anywhere and, as she puts it, she now has "less of a tendency to sit back and wait for customers to arrive". If she ever did.

Since the restructuring, Gillian has certainly been putting in the miles, pounding the Thames towpaths, and further afield too, keeping tabs on potential boats for sale and meeting new customers. She managed the purchase of *Islay*, then in Italy, for Adam Toop (see Restoration of the Year, p22, and last month's CB). Noticeboards strategically placed along the towpath and around Henley broadcast boats for sale and Hambleton's services – and on top of that she simply gets out there to meet people.

As well as the core brokerage business, Gillian has added new-boat sales, a winter storage facility, a few Thames moorings

and a streamlined version of the catering and entertainments business, which she now operates in conjunction with up to a dozen other Thames

boat owners. Hambleton's own charter 'fleet', to which its name alludes, now amounts to just a single clinker dayboat named *Rose O'Dea*, which can be taken for a day for the sum of £250. *Rose*, a charming diesel-powered, canopied vessel from 1904, is probably at present the only self-drive classic launch for hire on the Thames.

New-build boats

Hambleton's current range of new boats consists of a 21ft 6in (6.6m) GRP clinker hull, known as the *Venturer*, and a smaller clinker GRP dayboat, the 17ft 5in (5.3m) *Roamer*, both built for her by Norfolk builder Martham Boats, plus the 14ft (4.3m) *Otter*, built by John and Nancy Caschere, also in Norfolk. The Cascheres are also building a new 25ft (7.6m) Andrew Wolstenholme-design, as yet un-named, which will be available with or without a day cabin. As with other boats in the range, power can come from diesel or electric, with interiors fashioned to suit individual need and budget.

“Less of a tendency to sit back and wait for customers to arrive”



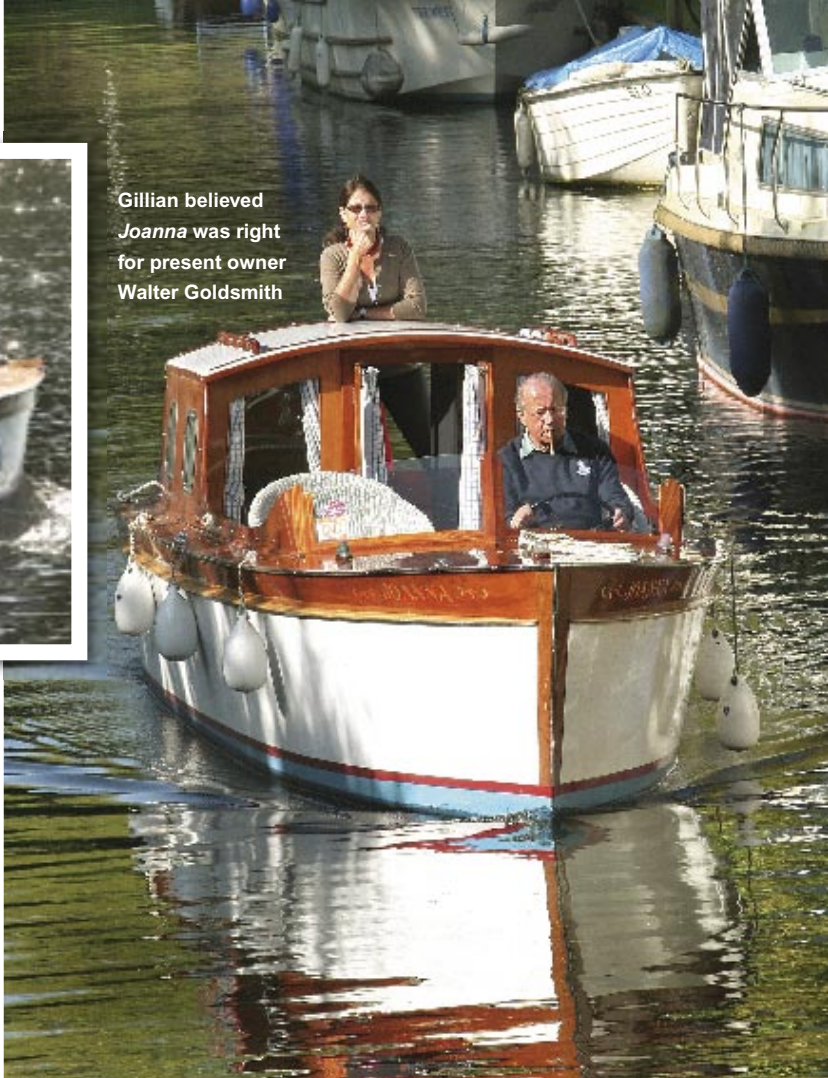
Gillian in the driving seat; right, with Martin in her office, and, opposite page, aboard Rose O’Dea



Joanna, the last Andrews Day Cruiser, restored by Rupert Latham



Gillian believed Joanna was right for present owner Walter Goldsmith



One of Hambleton's build-to-order Venturer class

As we met up with Gillian at the Bourne End Marina on Spade Oak Reach, early one October morning, preparations were under way for the defining part of the sale of *Njord*, a 1959 Osborne Kestrel, already up in slings ready for the coming surveyor. Her current owner, physicist Vere Smyth, was jilling about the docks awaiting the arrival of the man with the clipboard and hammer, as well as the prospective owner. Vere undertook the refurbishment of *Njord* himself while completing a boat-building course at IBTC, Lowestoft, and living aboard her.

Survey time is a nervy part of any sale, no matter how well you know your own work, but Vere showed no signs of anxiety as he confidently admitted that *Njord* hadn't required any work to her double-diagonal planked hull. I maliciously waited to hear if the tap-tapping of John Tough's – of Toughs of Teddington, the former boatyard owning family – wooden screw-driver handle went dull as a soggy patch of planking was encountered.

By the time we were ready to leave, the woodpecker noises were still reverberating solidly up and down the gravel towpath, while conversation was still relaxed between buyer, seller, surveyor and broker.

Managing the relationships, not to mention the expectations, between the parties involved in a classic boat sale is an

important part of the broker's trade, and Gillian seems to have this skill off to a tee. Her easy manner and matter-of-fact air hint at the avoidance of conflict; she cites a number of boats that have passed through her hands for repeat sales over the years as testament to strings of contented parties.

The bane of her life, though, she says, are engines: "They cause more trouble than anything else, because people often expect them to be like modern car engines and not 50-year-old period pieces." But, thankfully, she's against the seemingly ever-increasing and misguided school that promotes junking serviceable original engines and fitting modern diesels in an otherwise authentic boat.

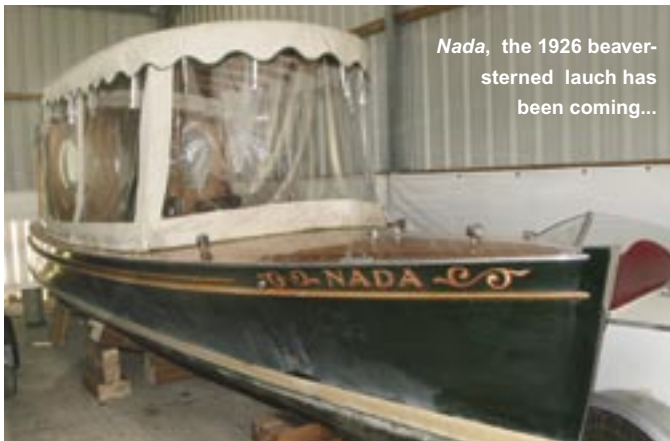
Restoration

As part of the preparation for our interview I had asked to be given access to a 'typical' owner. We met Walter Goldsmith at the moorings of the highly exclusive Phyllis Court riverside club, where to the distant sounds of croquet mallets and tennis racquets Walter showed us the 70th-birthday present that he had acquired for himself with Gillian's help. *Joanna*, now beautifully restored by Rupert Latham, was the last Andrews Day Cruiser to be built by the famous Bourne End firm in 1965 and was first owned by Air Chief Marshall Sir Richard Peirse, who ran Bomber Command

from 1940 to 1942. Walter took us for a trip on the river, and between puffs on his large cigar the as-yet-unretired company chairman warmly described the work that Rupert Latham had carried out on *Joanna* to get her to the best condition of her life.

Rupert has been a long-term associate of Gillian's ever since he employed her in the then Steam and Electric Launch Company, at Ludham on the Broads in the late 80s. He is now doing fine restoration work, as well as providing electric motors and conversions. One of his restorations, *Seven Springs*, a former Thames Conservancy launch by Salters, will feature on the Classic Boat stand at the London Boat Show.

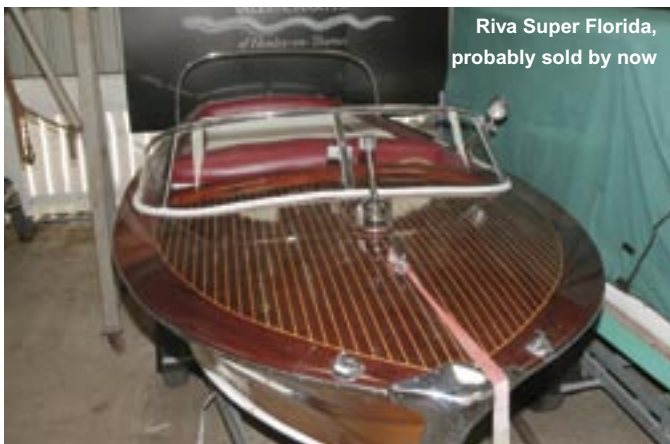
At first, Walter had wanted to move on from the big modern GRP river cruisers he and his wife had previously owned to a slipper launch, but to Gillian's mind the lack of overall space and creature comforts was not going to work for the couple. She persuaded Walter to consider the 25ft (7.6m), cabined day cruiser, and Walter admits she was right, though it required a few modifications. A Phillips auction catalogue from 1991 shows *Starlight* – as she was called when built – with her original configuration of long aft cabin, and maybe it's that tastes are changing, but she seems more attractive with the shortened version that Walter had instated. The longer open cockpit that this allows embraces four Lloyd



Nada, the 1926 beaver-sterned launch has been coming...



Baby of the fleet: *Kuburuku* ...and going through Hambleton's books over the years



Riva Super Florida, probably sold by now



The Aladdin's cave at Beale Park

Loom chairs with ease and the cabin is still capacious enough to contain toilet facilities, a sink and two padded benches. In a further modification, *Joanna's* BMC Vedette four-cylinder petrol engine was replaced with an electric motor and batteries. The fit-out, in pale ginger mahogany throughout, by Latham, is rich, elegant and of a high and lustrous quality, the cost of which I just know that Walter – who is in “property and banking: all the good things” – is not going to tell me.

As Walter puts the boat covers on and prepares to toddle over the lawns to his lunch, we head down to the pub for a bowl of pasta. Gillian rattles off the names of many of the boats that she has sold along this stretch of river over the years, and the characters that inhabit the Thames river-bank world in which she exists.

Reference library

From the river we head to Gillian's office at the back of her top-floor flat on the hill overlooking Henley in order to pore over the drawings for the new Wolstenholme launch, and look through the small but delightfully ancient library that Gillian uses for research. It's good to see a full set of *Classic Boat* magazines alongside the glossy Riva books that Gillian picked up when visiting the Italian factory recently and the Phillips auction catalogues dating

Gillian's top ten tips for selling boats

- 1 Service the engine and keep the invoice prior to putting the boat on the market.
- 2 Ensure that the BSS certificate has at least one year left to run (it may take this long for the boat to sell).
- 3 Ensure fire extinguishers are in date.
- 4 Refresh the antifouling and waterline.
- 5 Prepare a dossier with historic notes and maintenance records.
- 6 If applicable, include a serviced trailer or offer as an option.
- 7 Remove all personal possessions from the boat and keep the boat clean and tidy through the selling process.
- 8 Be honest with buyers about any work that you believe is required.
- 9 Ask for advice on pricing and check similar boats on the web.
- 10 Use a broker. We can help with difficult customers, have third party indemnity insurance and produce a paper trail.

back many years. These, containing boats sold repeatedly over the years, start me thinking about how, in this Thames-side community, it is the boats that remain a constant. People may come and go but, on the whole, these boats remain and they are as much a part of the river as the huge chestnut trees and weeping willows.

After tea and cake, we head off again, this time to the boat store, located in farm buildings on the Beale Park estate – the Beale Park Boat Show has always been a high point on the Hambleton calendar – and as the vinyl curtains draw back a turbulent world of wooden boat history is revealed. The 15 or so boats inside are of mixed vintage, size and condition. There's a Riva Super Florida, awaiting survey; *Nada*, a gentleman's beaver-sterned launch from around 1926 – Gillian's sold her twice already; an unusual Simmonds aluminium sports boat; Dunkirk Little Ship *Lady Isabelle* – her owner has bought five boats through Gillian; *Old Jolly*, once owned by Gillian's ex-husband, plus many more launches, cruisers and dinghies.

I begin to wonder about how the current financial climate will affect the lives of the people I've met today: all part of a Thames continuum that is going to change as it has done many times before, but won't stop. The people may prosper or fall on hard times. But the boats are lucky; being inanimate they will simply await the river of time to bring them a new owner. Fortunately for them, Gillian will be around to facilitate the introduction.

Hambleton Sales & Charter
www.hscboats.co.uk
 Tel: +44(0)1491 578870 Mob: 07813 917730