



River Boat Queen

If you're looking for a traditional boat to use on the Thames – or remind you of it – sooner or later you'll meet Gillian Nahum of Henley Sales & Charter, writes Kathy Mansfield.

With photographs by the author



Gillian Nahum is a true entrepreneur, as anyone who knows her can attest. She's full of ideas, has the drive to carry them out, a flair for marketing, a no-nonsense business sense and a genuine interest in people. Perhaps it's in the genes; she comes from an entrepreneurial background. Her grandmother came from Syria via Lavorno on the Italian coast, her grandfather from Libya. The family were formerly merchants, later diplomats. Her grandfather moved to Britain and started a substantial textile business in Manchester, where eventually Gillian was born. She remembers her grandparents as full of energy and achievements. And somehow in Gillian's family tree on the other side of her family there was that derring-do Elizabethan pirate, Jack Hawkins...

Gillian cycled along the Manchester canals while growing up and did once think that when she finished reading languages at university she might work on yachts. Life didn't work out that way: with a Masters in Educational Psychology, she found herself married with two small children and living in Geneva, teaching and translating in a Swiss bank. When the marriage broke up she moved to Weybridge and thought about working in the City until she realised the unsociable hours would not suit a mother with young children.



Facing page: *Between slipper launches in winter storage, Gillian test-drives the new Brompton electric folding bicycle.*

Above: *Since the early 90s, Gillian has sold many of the Frolic range of GRP river launches, designed originally for the Steam & Electric Launch Company by Andrew Wolstenholme – who also took this photograph.*

Below: *Gillian's first venture in skippered charter on the Thames began with the elegant saloon launch Lady Florence.*

She worked three jobs for a while: part-time translator, waitress and intriguingly, part-time for Neptune Yachts. This was the late 1980s, when interest in classic boats was only just starting to roll and the interest in updated classics just beginning "The owner, Peter Rhodes-Dimmer, lived in a houseboat on the Thames just down from the old Victorian boathouse which was our office, a great place to work," Gillian remembers. "Peter had the idea of building replica river boats and I came up with the term 'contemporary classics' to describe them. I had no training in marketing but learned on the job." Presciently London Innovations asked if they could install an electric motor in one of Neptune's Tulip launches.

At the Greenwich Wooden Boat Show – precursor to the

Beale Park Boat Show – Rupert Latham of the Steam & Electric Launch Co saw their Sapphire launch: Gillian has just recently sold one, an early modern classic. Rupert talked about his desire to start growing his business and exporting; he offered Gillian a job.

Now she was marketing in earnest, travelling and looking for agencies. The moulds of the Frolic, designed by Andrew Wolstenholme as a core design for the Steam & Electric Launch Company, are now owned by Landamores in Norfolk. "Electric boating is very realistic these days and is doing very well in Norfolk, with good support from the Broads Authority, local government and local boat businesses. Electric boating is doing well in Windermere too: day boats are now either





Above: Slippers and saloon launches in HSC's large Thames-side indoor storage for winter recuperation and reburishment.

Facing page top: Refurbisher in chief is Ellie Hillier: "She can revarnish a boat until it looks like a burnished chestnut".

Facing page below: Signs of changing times; rivercraft lend themselves to electric propulsion. Left: Another Wolstenholme: the versatile GRP Mayfly 16 is back in production. Right: HSC imports a wide range of modern rivercraft from European builders.

electric or powered by oars. We're not seeing that level of support yet on the Thames, where there's still some resistance to electric propulsion. Hopefully that will change. It's so much better for the environment."

'A boat on a river'

Gillian has been working in the Thames area now for 30 years, initially for Steam & Electric Launch Co. and then with her own business. This was based originally along the river in Hambleden but after moving to Henley-on-Thames some years ago, she changed the name of the business to Henley Sales & Charter. The company specialises in the charter and brokerage of traditional river boats, working in partnership with various independent boatbuilders on the Thames and in many other parts of the country. "Thinking back on it," Gillian said, "It's the people who make this job so great. And I'll go the extra mile for a beautiful traditional boat."

Gillian's love of traditional boats grew with part ownership of the lovely gentleman's launch *Lady Florence*, which added the 'charter' to the company name. Today, she offers on skippered charter a handsome variety of gentlemen's launches, motor yachts and others mainly privately owned. One modern classic launch which caught my eye is *Dragonfly*, a 31' (9.5m) Frolic which seats twelve people. Thanks to an enquiry by the William Morris Society, this summer *Dragonfly* will be making a 5 day cruise from William Morris' former London house at Hammersmith to his former country home in Kelmscott, with overnight stays in hotels along the way and visits to these famous riverside houses.

Gillian also has a tempting list of traditional river craft for sale, all listed on the brokerage section of her website where there is a steady turnover of boats. These days her customer list includes an American movie star and an Italian prince. When I was visiting, a slipper launch was about to be shipped to California. Seven boats have gone to Jordan.

For a time Gillian took over the classic boat auction after Bonham's abandoned it, using the Beale Park Boat Show as a venue where the boats could be seen both on and off the water. However, she decided that people did not have an appetite for buying boats at auctions and that realistically it's not a good idea to buy a boat without a proper survey first. As any entrepreneur knows, some ideas float and some do not; the auction business is dropped for now, as well as the yacht clothing shop which suffered from the UK's general malaise in retail. However Gillian now has the largest indoor boat storage facilities in the Thames valley and last year stored over 50 boats under cover, also offering valeting and basic maintenance; "Ellie Hillier, a young but very competent graduate from the Boat Building Academy in Lyme Regis, can revarnish a boat until it looks like a burnished chestnut!"

Coming along quietly

The electric side of the business was growing steadily and not only with traditional-looking boats. So Gillian launched E-Boatique at the London Boat Show in 2018. As with the HSC parent company, E-Boatique offers boat sales, brokerage, storage and maintenance. Gillian's partner Steve is an electrical engineer who works on a variety of electric propulsion systems

and Gillian is agent for a number of boatbuilders in France, the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland.

In the last year, she has sold six PTS 26 motor launches with their generous cockpits and overnight accommodation for two, elegantly designed in the Swedish Pettersen style and meticulously built by Statement Marine in the Netherlands. There's the POA 36, a Frolic 36 styled as a counter stern gentleman's launch with handsome mahogany trim and the Andrew Wolstenholme designed Mayfly 16, also with mahogany trim. On a smaller scale are the Derby 4.9, a clever take on the lines of a Riva; the Most, a 19'5" (5.9m) launch seating 11; the 17' (5.2m) French built Scoop; and the 12'6" (3.8m) 5-seater Ace.

Pure Boating is a separate company within E-Boatique which offers self-drive charter boats along the Thames, where many of these smaller electric launches can be seen and tried – see W130. The boat hire based at The Boathouse pub in Wallingford is growing strongly, with plenty of advance bookings and it's a great way to spend a day on the river.

I went to visit Gillian's two large repurposed agricultural buildings, one at Beale Park near Pangbourne and another for electric boats in South Stoke, not far away. At Beale, there are three large farm buildings which make a spacious and convenient storage area for boats able to be trailed there or arrive on the Thames to pontoons at the Beale Park lake next to a slip to be trailed from there. Within the storage complex are a machine and tool workshop, a well-lit varnishing shop and an office. Adrian Desmond was busy with the arrival of a launch about to be shipped to the States and boatbuilder Ellie had recently finished refurbishing and varnishing a gem of a Brookes slipper launch which glowed in the sunshine; "I've been using a linseed-based Italian varnish called Brava which gives a really good finish." A supremely elegant Riva Junior, just a few boats away in the shed, will be restored and used as a marketing vehicle to launch a new type of Martini this summer. The staff of six, including Gail Lewis over at the Henley office, will probably grow as the boating season revs up



and a number of boats were waiting to be worked into shape for the summer.

The latest excitement as I arrived was the new addition to extend the scope of a boating trip – the brand new electric folding Brompton bike! Developed with the racing car company Williams as part of a £2 million project, the electric motor and battery is housed in a briefcase-shaped container which fits over the handlebars and even incorporates a USB phone charger. The bike can be used on its own as well. We had to try it out; it was a very tempting piece of kit, though at £2.5k will doubtless remain a dream for some of us.

Gillian is now the agent for the electric Brompton to the boating industry. The Nahum empire is growing apace!

Contacts

www.hscboats.co.uk

www.e-boatique.co.uk

