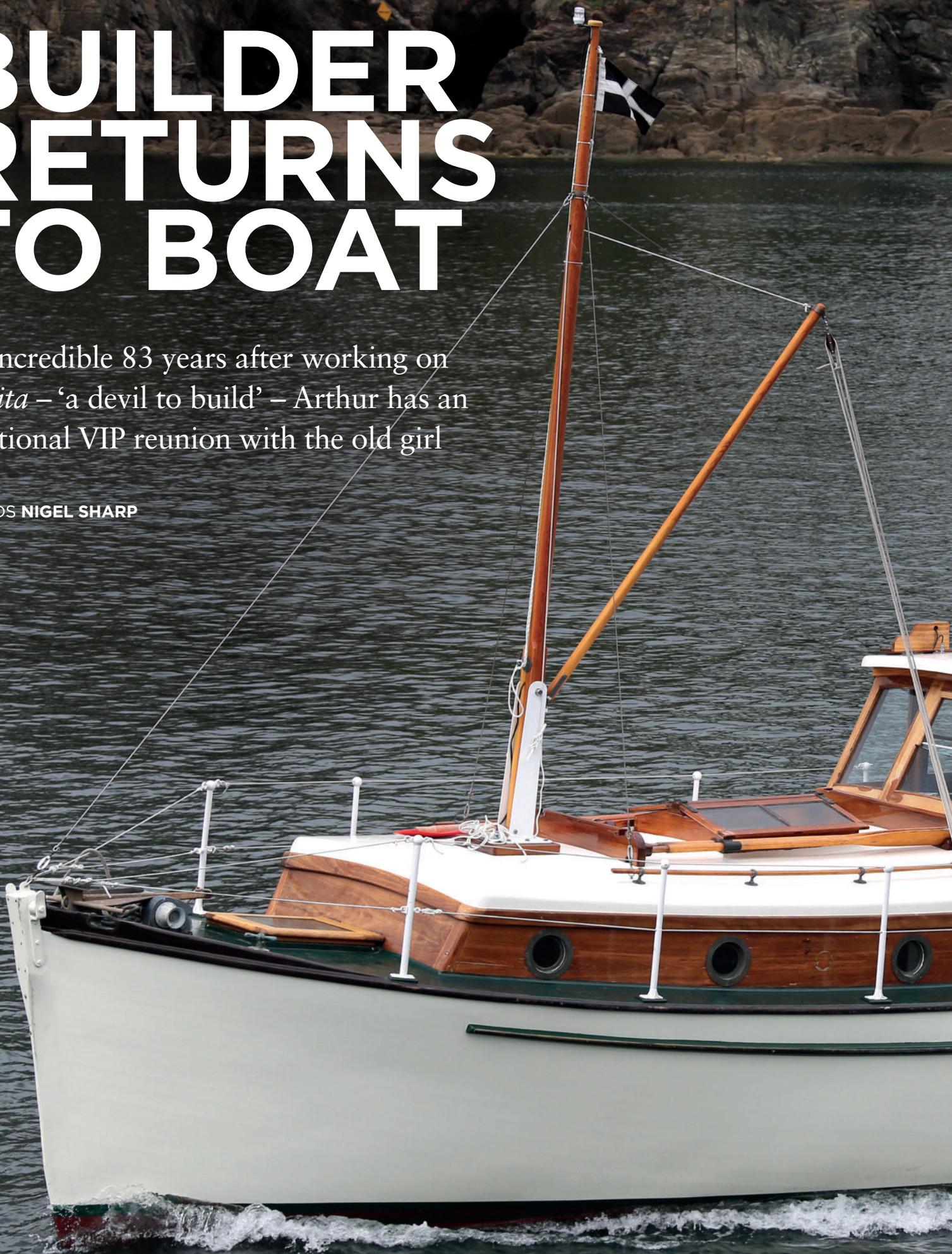


# BUILDER RETURNS TO BOAT

An incredible 83 years after working on *Merita* – ‘a devil to build’ – Arthur has an emotional VIP reunion with the old girl

WORDS NIGEL SHARP





Above: Arthur Frazier enjoys a glass of champagne on board the boat he helped to build 83 years earlier



As my own memory gets less dependable, I am increasingly impressed by those among my seniors who don't seem to have the same problem. So a couple of years ago, when I interviewed the then-97-year-old Arthur Frazier – the sole survivor of the Mevagissey boatbuilding family – I was full of admiration when he was able to instantly recall the difficulty of steaming planks around the stern of a boat he helped to build when he was an apprentice.

“She was a beautiful design but a devil to build,” he said, while also recalling the names of many of the other men who helped to build her. It was in 1936 that W Frazier & Son built *Merita*, of pitch pine on oak, for retired naval officer BS Prewett. She is entered in the first Lloyd’s Register of Yachts, in 1939, which shows Prewett as her designer, while in subsequent issues the design is attributed to her builders. “No original drawings have survived,” said current owner Neil Christie, “but I think it is likely that Prewett took a conceptual design to the yard, who then said, ‘OK, but this is how we are going to build it’. The canoe stern was probably his idea, as Fraziers had only ever built transom boats.” She had a Bergius four-cylinder paraffin engine and, at that time, a large open cockpit at the stern. A year after she was built, Fraziers produced another boat with an identical hull but slightly different superstructure and internal layout, – *Merita II*.

Prewett kept *Merita* in St Just Creek just off the Carrick Roads near Falmouth, and Arthur can remember exactly where her mooring was for the couple of years before he sold her. Little is known about her subsequent owners but, thanks to her Blue Book and Lloyd’s Register, their names are all known: KJ Holman; John E Hackett; IHG Brawley; ER Brooks; GA Corke (a yacht broker near Falmouth who perhaps bought her to sell on); Arthur W Coates; RJ Newton and GV Andrews; RJ Newton by himself (his ownership totalled 22 years); Maureen Lilian Roke and John Fredrick Purvis; and Miles Reitherman. Throughout Lloyd’s Register (published up until 1980) her Port of Registry was shown as Falmouth, but that isn’t necessarily where she was kept; from 1961 her Home Port was entered as Poole.

At some point, probably in the 1960s, a wheelhouse was fitted along with a coachroof behind to form an aft cabin. She had various changes of engines, including an



Clockwise from top left: Neil at his new outside steering position; Arthur at the helm; Neil supervising his children Nicholas and Sophia working on the boat

Ailsa Craig 40HP diesel from 1961, a Perkins 68HP diesel from 1968, then an additional Wortham Blake 36HP diesel as an auxiliary ‘wing’ engine from 1974.

Neil Christie first became aware of her in December 1995, when she was one of six boats advertised for sale by Toughs Shipyards Ltd in *Boats and Planes For Sale* magazine. At that time Neil, his wife and their two young children, Nicholas and Sophia, had recently been on a canal holiday in the Midlands. “We thoroughly enjoyed it and decided to get a boat of our own to use on the Thames,” he said.

*Merita* was lying at Toughs in Teddington at the time. Miles Reitherman took her to Maldon, where Neil went to see her, and she was then taken back to Toughs for a handover, where Neil bought her in May 1996. “We were under no illusions as to what she was and what we were going to have to do,” he said. “It seemed like a decent enough challenge.”

For a couple of years, the Christies kept *Merita* at Penton Hook, from where they enjoyed modest cruises on the Thames. *Merita* came with a grubby paint-stained rubber dinghy they “affectionally called Bob because it bobbed around”, in which Sophia first learnt to row – an interesting prelude to a subsequent successful junior and National rowing career.

But Neil was all too aware that *Merita* needed some work, but the question was when and by whom? “Then I was introduced to a couple of so-called boatbuilders who said that they could sort it all out over a winter and summer,” he told me. “So *Merita* went on to a hardstanding at Shepperton and they proceeded to dismember everything and anything that could be dismembered and then promptly disappeared never to be seen again.”

Not surprisingly, for a while Neil lost heart and *Merita* remained untouched at Shepperton. Then, a couple of years later, he got in touch with Chertsey boatbuilder Michael Dennett and between them they came up with a plan to properly restore *Merita*.

The starting point was not much more than a bare empty hull (with side decks and forward cabin coamings) – but one that was in good condition and just needed recaulking so that she could be relaunched, floated up river to Chertsey and taken ashore again at the company’s yard. The forward cabin coamings were extended upwards by about 4in (10cm) to give more headroom, the

**MERITA**

LENGTH  
37ft 2in  
(11.3m)

BEAM  
10ft 11in  
(3.3m)

DRAUGHT  
5ft 6in (1.7m)

BUILT  
1936

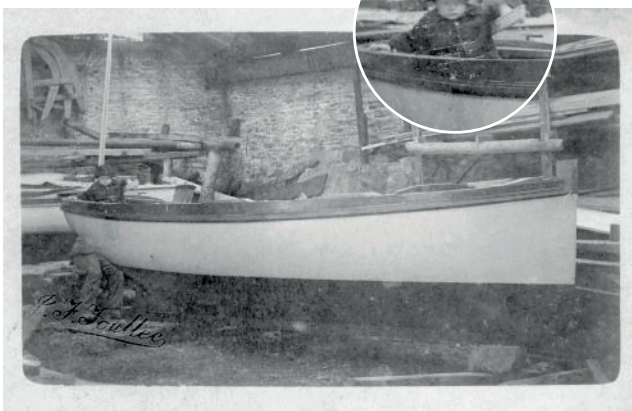
DISP  
30,030lb  
(13.6 tonnes)

The saloon with the galley in the starboard aft corner

Bottom: Neil at the inside steering position



## Mevagissey family boatbuilding: the Frazier Yard



From top: William Frazier (father) in the boat and Arthur Frazier (son) standing beside boat; the toddler is thought to be Arthur Frazier; boatyard workers

"He shall not commit fornication nor contract Matrimony within the said term... he shall not play Cards or Dice Tables or any other unlawful Games... he shall not haunt Taverns or Playhouses." The rules of a devout religious sect? No – part of the terms of William (Billy) Frazier's indentures when he became apprenticed to Mevagissey boatbuilder William Lelean in 1870.

There had been a boatbuilding yard adjacent to Mevagissey's east wharf since the middle of the 18th century. Thomas Shephard built fast vessels (favoured by smugglers) until his death in 1812, after which the Lelean family produced schooners, smacks and fishing boats. Just 10 years after Billy Frazier began his apprenticeship, he and brother John bought the yard following William Lelean's retirement. In 1900, Billy's son (another William – 'Willy') joined them.

By then, another boatbuilding family firm (lifeboat specialists the Roberts) had set up shop next door. When Henry Roberts Sr died just before the First World War, his son Henry Jr moved to another site in Mevagissey (taking on young Percy Mitchell as his apprentice) and the Fraziers took over the whole of the east wharf site.

In 1934, Billy Frazier – still at the yard at 78 – died after a young girl ran into him on her push bike. Her father, a Frazier employee who had been working with Billy that morning, soon left Mevagissey, prompting Willy to start his 14-year-old son Arthur at the yard. Arthur, now 99 and with a razor-sharp memory, recalls building "many, many boats" in the late 1930s, among them *Merita*. He also has vivid memories of Big Class sailing in Fowey Regatta at the time, and the course they sailed "right under the land at Mevagissey". "We'd caught up with our work and father said, 'You boys go up in the fields and watch'. I've never seen anything like it since."

When the Second World War broke out, Arthur went to work in nearby Par Docks. Soon his father, with several of his men, began to work there as well and was in charge of the minesweeper build programme, returning to his own yard to build 65ft (19.8m) MFVs for the Admiralty. After a fairly short time in Par, Arthur was called up. "I couldn't understand that and mother always said that was wrong as boatbuilding was supposed to be a reserved occupation." He served for over five years on aircraft carrier HMS *Victorious*, finally making it home in the summer of 1946.

He took over the family firm, which built "about 45" boats after the war, including "lots of 25ft (7.6m) fishing boats – we always had two on the stocks" – and a 65ft passenger vessel, the firm's biggest post-war boat.

Willy Frazier died in 1966, and in 1967 Arthur was approached by a group looking for museum premises in Mevagissey. Arthur and his wife agreed to donate a building from the 1740s "in honour of my grandfather".

The museum opened in 1968, as the part of the yard next to it was sold to John Moor, who'd served his apprenticeship under Percy Mitchell and whose son Peter still builds boats there. The Frazier family's boatbuilding century ended in 1980 when Arthur retired. Flats have since been built on the remainder of the site.

deck beams were renewed in iroko and then covered with mahogany tongue and groove planks overlaid with plywood, which was, in turn, sheathed in glass and epoxy. As the non-original wheelhouse and aft cabin coachroof had been removed in Shepperton ("It had been pretty shoddily made," said Neil), they were similarly rebuilt, while the original traditional skylight was refitted on the forward coachroof.

All of the boat's engineering, plumbing and electrical systems were totally renewed to include a Sole Mini 74 diesel – a naturally aspirated slow revving four-cylinder



Above: The compass rose, mounted on the aft bulkhead of the wheelhouse

70HP engine based on a Mitsubishi unit; a Paguro 4kVA generator, which allows the boat to have an electric induction hob, microwave, toaster and kettle ("I definitely didn't want gas on the boat," said Neil); new stainless-steel fuel and water tanks; a Mikuni 4kW diesel-fired warm-air heating system ("It works perfectly and it gets remarkably toasty in the wheelhouse and stern cabin, but tails off a bit in the bow"); and Raymarine instrumentation and a Cetrek autopilot. A great deal of this work was carried out by Paul Ladyman of Sutton Marine Services but Neil helped him with a great deal of it. "I think anyone who owns a boat should



have some understanding of where things are and how they work so if something fails there is a good chance of fixing it," he said "Helping to install it all will hopefully stand me in good stead."

Neil employed interior designer Eddie Meyers to produce a new interior design. "He was fantastic," Neil told me. "I sat with him for many hours plotting proportions and how big this should be and how big that should be, and he did a great job." The layout now consists of, from the bow: a forepeak with twin berths convertible to a double; a saloon with comfortable seating each side and a galley in the starboard aft corner; a heads compartment in the opposite corner; a wheelhouse with the steering position to port, a raised bench seat aft and to starboard, and sliding doors to each side deck; and an aft cabin with a queen size double bed.

On the outside of the boat the only significant change to the post-1960s arrangement is the addition of an external steering position. "That was something I always wanted," said Neil. "It is a perfect place to be in sunny weather."

All this work took place over a period of 15 years. This may seem like an extraordinary length of time to some people, but it was largely determined by the "periods of lots of work and lots of money, and periods of no work and no money" typical of any freelancer (in Neil's case as a "roving creative director in multi media"), as well as other domestic demands such as house moves and renovations. But in the intervening period, Neil and his family did get the chance to own and use other boats, including a 1960s ex-police launch called *Jack Frost*. "She

Above: Various stages of the deck rebuild and the relaunch at Michael Dennett Boat Builders - Neil was delighted with the work they did

was a lovely boat," he said, "Although the steering position was too far forward and away from the main cockpit in the stern, so I was always missing out on getting my glass refilled or the dips. So one of my criteria for *Merita* was that the wheel should be nearer where the entertainment was."

*Merita* was eventually relaunched in February 2017. It wasn't for another two years, however, some time after the final interior fit-out was completed, that Neil got her into salt water once more. He wasted no time in taking her along the south coast, where she had spent so much of her life, and to Mevagissey. Once there he welcomed on board Arthur Frazier who, 83 years after struggling with those stern planks, relished the opportunity to take the wheel and motor around St Austell Bay. Local newspaper the *St Austell Voice* described Arthur as "amazingly sprightly" and the occasion as "a Champagne celebration and an emotional VIP reunion".

Neil and *Merita's* next port of call was Fowey, where I met up with them and where, the evening before, Neil had received "one of the biggest compliments" about his boat. "The water taxi driver told me that he had heard more nice comments about *Merita* than any boat that had been in the harbour for a long time," he told me.

He then took *Merita* to Falmouth in time for the Classics weekend, where he met someone who recognised the boat's lines and said that he had seen *Merita II* on the Fal about 10 years previously. Neil has made great efforts to try to track down this sistership, but with no luck so far, although he thinks she might be based somewhere on the south coast. "It would be fantastic to find her," he said. 🌐