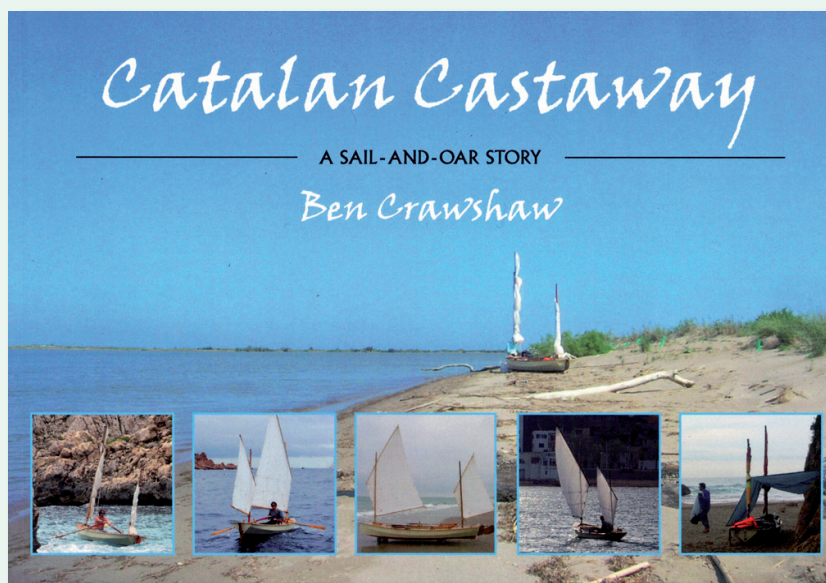


Book Review



Catalan Castaway

A Sail-and-Oar Story

by Ben Crawshaw

ISBN 978-1-907206-14-6

Reduced from £15 to £10
Publ. lodestarbooks.com
UK: £10 Europe: £11
Outside Europe: £13
145 x 210 mm, 224 pages, many
colour photos, maps, drawings,
softbound, laminated cover.

Reviewers: Paul Constantine & Keith Muscott

Paul:

I HAVE TO SAY that I was blown away by this book's production. Colour on every page and an unusual horizontal format which has an immediate practical purpose, as on opening it we see a dozen full-page photographs of the boat's launching even before we have read the first words. It comes close to the effect of looking at a flick-book. The vibrant font used for titling conveys youth and novelty and it is certainly the first book that I have read that is blog-based.

Blogging tends towards blandness as it is a diary format and it is not reasonable to expect exciting action on every day. However, this is extracted from a successful blog with a good following and although the initial pace is relatively gentle, there is interest enough as the story unfolds.

Ben, with no previous building

experience, builds the first 15ft 4ins Light Trow, *Onawind Blue*, from free online plans drawn by Gavin Atkin.

He sails it from an open beach on the Costa Brava and learns from experience. His love of his boat, the sea and solitude is dripping from every page.

It helps to find a map of the stretch of coast concerned, because many compass directions are given for the run of wind or waves or sailing directions that are tricky to understand without knowing the geography. The coast runs NE to SW from the French border down past Barcelona, to just south of Valencia and out to Ibiza. There are sketch maps later in the book to cover the major journey.

As with successful blogging, the book depends greatly on striking photographs. All are without captions except one mentioned in

the text, so the reader has to work it out from what s/he's reading.

Ben likes his food and there are quite a few pictures of his meals. He also always gives the Latin name for each fish he mentions. These idiosyncrasies help to fill out our image of Ben who is not always easy to identify in the pictures (a tip is to look for his blue tee shirt in the opening launch sequence). Ben is a thoughtful and humorous companion, very logical, interested in all aspects of traditional boats, fishing, the local people and their society. He has a clear command of their language and he is accepted not as a foreigner, but 'as a man of the sea, just like them'.

He is brave to follow this style of sailing in a place where he alone is pursuing it; he is brave to undertake some of his lengthy journeys in a craft not intended for such use and at times he rides his luck. He has appreciated and learnt from the exploits of Frank Dye, but there are few dinghy cruisers more deserving of recognition than Ben. He has followed directly in Frank's pioneering footsteps in his own way, in his own unusual location. For adventurous, young, aspiring castaways everywhere, there is inspiration here. *PC*

Keith:

It would be wrong to jump to conclusions about Ben: he is no beach bum whiling away his time on Spanish beaches with a dilettante interest in boats. Evidence of his practical skills and his love of a seafaring challenge is everywhere: he has that classic blend of the romantic view with an intense curiosity for solving practical problems – and an eye for a boat – that places him in the company of the historic seafarers he loves. The blog this book is based on was called *The Invisible Workshop*, because he built his boat in a communal space that backed on to his house, and developed the habit of taking his tools and small workpieces with him

in his van, so car parks could become his workshop while he waited for his children. No dabbler, then.

Gavin Atkin based his Light Trow on the traditional Fleet Trow, whose lines are tucked away on a page of Commander Eric McKee's *Working Boats of Britain*. Gavin still insists that the concept is 'just a small, narrow, flat-bottomed boat, not intended for rough water and strong winds', and when he builds his own, he says, he will 'sail it cautiously on sheltered waters'.

Ben is about as discouraged from serious voyaging by this pigeon-holing as Robert Manry was by the spec of the little wooden Old Town Whitecap sailboat *Tinkerbelle*. As you will see when you read the book.

Catalan Castaway suddenly becomes a very serious testament to one man's life when we are shocked to learn that his future plans were shelved when his life 'took a few

unexpected turns' – with the onset of serious illness. '*Onawind Blue* has seen less sailing over the past few years while I've been tangled up in life's rich tapestry, tussling with a giant octopus and generally trying to keep my head above water.'

Ben talks frankly about his cancer, and one of the last photographs shows him as a gaunt figure leaning contemplatively on the oars of *Onawind Blue*, the battered trilby covering his hair loss making him look like a well-worn blues musician. The way his friends gather round him in support is a fitting end to this unique book.

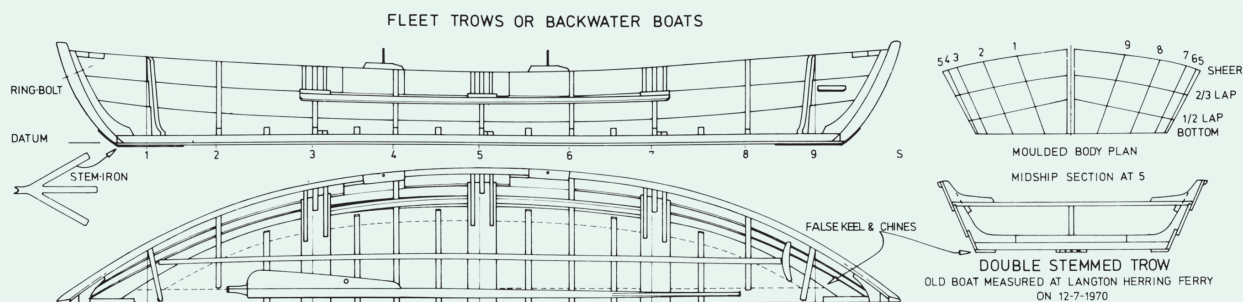
Full marks to Richard Wynne of Lodestar Books, who persuaded Ben to let him shape his popular blog into a book. The quality is as high as we have come to expect from Lodestar, and it is not in such a strange format as all that: it is as wide as the magazine you are

holding and half as tall.

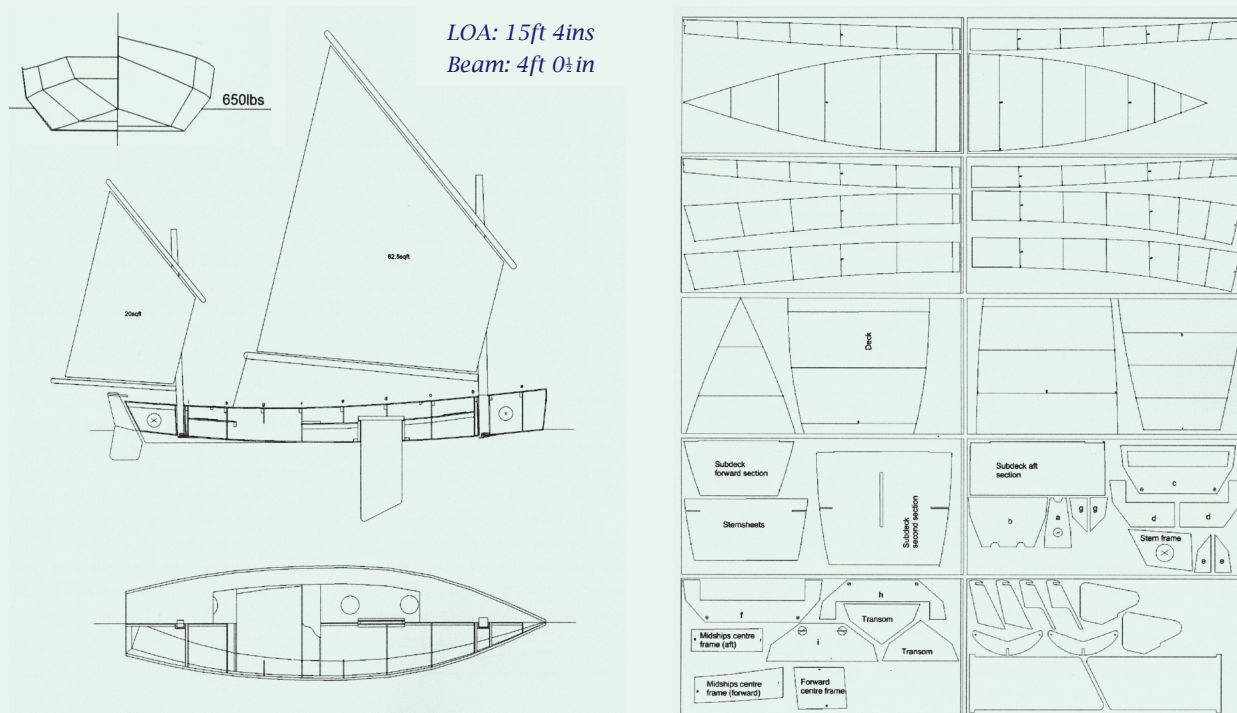
Recently I asked Richard how Ben was doing, and I hope he will forgive me for quoting his answer:

'Ben Crawshaw's health is up and down. He did make it to London early last year, when we met at his brother's house not far from where I live. I think that DCA readers might find his adventures and photographs inspiring, and he is a decent writer with it.'

I think so too. And I am sure the book will find its place in the sailing canon eventually, where this young man's love of life and his enthusiasm for recording his ideas, his experiences and his practical achievements will always mark him out as a true individual – whether they be photographs of his beautifully presented meals or well-crafted boat parts, or written records of wonderful days spent at sea. **KM**



(Above) Drawings from Eric McKee's *Working Boats of Britain*, which head a page of detailed offsets and structural drawings. McKee spent a lot of time and effort recording these vessels. (Below) Atkin's LIGHT TROW



(Above left) Gavin Atkin's LIGHT TROW. (Above right) Cut-outs for ten sheets of plywood.