

Sailing a Smacks Dinghy

— Richard Crockatt



Sailing up Hamford Water in the Walton Backwaters

IN THE FIVE SEASONS I have owned my lug-rigged smacks dinghy *Bluebelle*, she has proved to be a joy to sail and worth every penny of the modest price I paid for her. She's not unlike a Tideway in dimensions but has a pronounced sheer and a lovely transom. As a Tideway owner for 20 years I thought I'd never let her go but the smacks boat won me over by her looks and her performance. In my experience it takes several seasons with a new boat to work out the best arrangements for the rig, stowage and the like, and *Bluebelle* has been no exception. I now have her more or less in the shape I want, though I don't rule out future tweaks. What would our sailing lives be without that constant itch to fiddle and improve?



Bluebelle is an older smacks boat built by the late Ron Hall, probably in the 1970s. She has a GRP hull, the mould having come from a clinker dinghy made by Alf Last of Maldon in Essex. She's 12ft 3ins long, 5ft in the beam and sets about 80 square feet of sail on a hefty unstayed mast. She has a steel centreplate with the slot sealed by a varnished wood capping, and the rudder blade is also of steel. She has a wooden rail round the inside of the hull for attaching sail ties, spare rope, fenders and the like. The mast and spars are of wood and most of the running rigging is three-strand hemp-style rope. All in all she has a work boat feel and that's what they originally were — tenders to Essex fishing smacks.

I bought her in 2019 from the legendary barge skipper and traditional sailmaker James Lawrence of Brightlingsea. One of the benefits of purchasing this boat was getting to know him and being able to talk extensively with him about boats, rigs and sailing. Sadly he died last year, but his two autobiographical books — one on his life as a barge skipper and the other about his sailmaking career — keep his memory very much alive. Both are published by Chaffcutter books.

As measured on a public weighbridge *Bluebelle* is roughly twice the weight of the boats now produced by Brian Kennell from the same mould as Ron Hall's. *Bluebelle* was built in the days when no one was quite sure how thick the fibreglass needed to be. Perhaps for that reason she looks and feels (to me at least) like a little ship rather than a dinghy. However, there is plenty of Brian Kennell's excellent work in my boat since over the last couple of years he has replaced the bow and stern buoyancy chambers and undertaken various other modifications which have made her feel almost like a new boat.

She has an unusual internal arrangement, having no central thwart or side benches, which creates plenty of space in the centre of the boat. The U-shaped seat just forward of the stern buoyancy chamber allows the helmsman to slide effortlessly over from one side to the other when tacking or gybing. It is also lower than standard dinghy seats, which are generally fixed at the height of the top of the centre-plate case. The big advantage of the lower seat is that it keeps the boom where it should be — above your head. Unfortunately, many lug sailers have masts that are too short, making it hard to keep the boom at a safe height, the length of the mast being dictated by the presumed need to fit inside the boat for towing. It doesn't bother me if the mast sticks out beyond the transom when trailing since I don't trail the boat with the cover on. My mast is about

(Left) View of the inside

6 inches longer than the boat which keeps the boom at a good height but if your seats are at the standard height, the mast should ideally be about a foot longer than the boat.

One feature of the boat is its buoyant stern quarters, featuring a nicely tucked up transom, which means that good fore and aft trim is easily maintained however far aft you sit. My set-up is designed for single-handing but I have occasionally had crew (well, only three times). All said they had a good time, though each was predisposed to be nice. One was my 6 year-old granddaughter, another was my brother, and the third a hardy Breton-born friend who knows his way around a boat. For rowing I sit on a slightly raised platform on the centreplate case capping with a cushion on it. There is a large rowlock fitted to the transom, offset to starboard, for sculling — a useful skill on the Broads in narrow dykes and rivers if you don't carry an engine.



View from behind

For me the weight of the boat is no problem; in fact it's an advantage on the water since it creates a stable platform for these ageing bones and ensures that she stands up well to her canvas in a blow. The weight doesn't seem to have any negative effect on her speed through the water. On the other hand, for launching and retrieving with a combi trailer/launching trolley (which is what she came with) she is very heavy, considerably weightier than a Wayfarer. Hence the decision early on to swap the combi system for a road trailer with lots of rollers and a winch. I can launch her by hand from most slipways, simply chocking her securely at the water's edge and launching her life-boat style. The wheels are never immersed. In fact, however, for much of the time I have kept her on a mooring, the first couple of seasons



Bluebell on her trailer

in Morston Creek in Blakeney Harbour and latterly at Whispering Reeds on Hickling Broad. From my base there I've trailed her a few times to the north Norfolk and Essex coasts.

She has a balance lug rig which is rather differently arranged than on the standard Brian Kennell boats. Besides the sheet, which is led to the centre of the boom, there is a downhaul (or tack-line as Jim Lawrence insisted it should be called) for tensioning the luff, a topping lift, and also a line, variously called a 'leader', 'parrel line', 'upper brail' or 'choker', which ensures that the yard remains against the mast even when reefed. This line is fixed to the yard close to the halyard attachment, is led round the mast, back to a loop on the yard, and down to the foredeck and, like the downhaul, led back to the helming position.



Rigging the choker

There is much discussion among devotees of the rig about how best to keep the yard up to the mast — a simple ring of parrel beads, a mast traveller, or the Dixon Kemp method (updated by Michael Storer) of

combining the halyard and choker? I have tried them all. It would be tedious to go into detail here. Suffice it to say that the method I have ended up with, though sounding complex and fiddly, is both effective and easily adjustable. Some people do without a choker altogether, possibly because they don't reef very often. If you do need to reef, some sort of similar arrangement

but is nevertheless always busy. If you want to savour a bit of old maritime Essex, go and see Steve Hall.

As for her sailing qualities, *Bluebelle* has proved to be handy and quite fast, especially downwind, and easily rowed. Morston Creek and some places in the Broads test your patience and your skills but I've only occasionally had to use the oars to get her out of trouble. Like all lug-rigged boats she needs coaxing to windward. If you pinch her she'll complain. On the other hand, I've rarely had a problem putting her about. Perhaps because of her weight she carries her way nicely once she has momentum. On a reach in a good breeze the centreplate fairly hums with satisfaction and her low freeboard lends a sensation of speed which is perhaps illusory (4.5 knots or at best 5 is probably her hull speed) but nonetheless exhilarating.

Downwind if the need arises you can sail by the lee further than you would want to with other rigs, though it can be nerve-wracking. On a fast run in Blakeney Harbour when I should have reefed but simply wasn't able to, the bow wave rose close to gunwale height and I shifted my weight further and further aft to stop the bow digging in.

Running between lines of moored boats there was little opportunity to gybe, and thankfully I didn't have to. She tracked straight and steady. In such moments you have to trust your ship and *Bluebelle* amply repaid my trust. This is a boat you want to take out sailing again and again. **RD**



Looking forward at double-reefed sail

is necessary; otherwise the yard falls away from the mast, making it difficult to go to windward and leaving the yard swinging around. With the method I use I can comfortably go to windward with two reefs in.

Speaking of reefs, the first change I made after buying the boat was to have a second reef added to the tan James Lawrence sail which came with the boat. This was made of clipper canvas and while a beautiful sail is rather heavy. I have since had a cream sail made, also with two lines of reefs, by Steve Hall of North Sea Sails in Tollesbury, Essex. Steve was an apprentice of Jim Lawrence and his skills and experience make him possibly the premier traditional sailmaker in the country. He's an inveterate traditionalist who has neither internet nor a mobile phone

Sailing downwind

