



# 7 STAGES OF BUILDING A PILOT CUTTER

## Stage 7 Sea trials

Lance Whitehead's *Merlin of Falmouth* is launched and rigged. Time to find out how she sails. By Nigel Sharp

After *Merlin's* mast was stepped, much had to be done to get her ready for sailing. The bottom ends of the standing rigging were made off, the other spars put in place, the running rigging reeved, the bobstay and sprit stays connected, the mast boot fitted, and the mainsail bent on and laced to the comb along the top face of the boom and to the gaff.

Initial engine trials were carried out and temperature, oil pressure and boat speed readings were noted at various revolutions per minute. With the boat in the water and the mast wiring connected, Greenham Regis were now able to come down from their

Lymington office to commission all the instrumentation and navigational equipment that they had supplied.

One morning in early December when all this work had been completed, *Merlin of Falmouth* was very nearly ready for sailing trials. To give a bit more time for any finishing touches, Dave Cockwell motored her down the Penryn River (before the tide went out) to Falmouth Visitors' Yacht Haven and moored up alongside an outside pontoon. By early afternoon, all was ready.

Dave decided to take the boat off the berth under sail and without using the engine - not necessarily the usual thing to



do with a brand new boat but the conditions were ideally suited: a gentle wind just off the pontoon-side bow, no tide and no other boats around to get in the way.

So the mainsail was hoisted, showing the sail number F14, chosen by owner Lance Whitehead - F for Falmouth, the place of her build, plus the sail number of his very first dinghy (a Fairey Duckling) which also happens to be the date of his birthday. The two headsails followed and the jib was backed to take the bow away from the pontoon as she set sail.

*Merlin* ghosted slowly away from the berth with her crew of six of the Cockwells' employees who had contributed most to her build, and sailed past Falmouth Docks and out into the Carrick Roads. They found no more than 10 knots of wind, but it was a good start and Dave was pleased with the boat's light-wind performance. However, there was still much to test and prove in stronger conditions.

### Stronger winds

The next day, *Merlin* went out again. The weather was very different from the previous day's sail, with a fresh southwest breeze in the morning and a forecast of Force 6 to 7 in the afternoon. *Merlin* left the berth at 11am (under power this time!) and motored out into clear water off the docks to hoist the sails. The mainsail went up first and then the staysail. Just then a gust came through and it was decided there might be too much for the jib as well at such an early stage of the boat's trials programme.

During the subsequent sail she was found not surprisingly to be rather unbalanced with this combination. The decision to use just one headsail was wise but it would have been far better had it been the jib. *Merlin* sailed around in the Carrick Roads for a short time before returning to Falmouth just as the rain and stronger wind arrived.



**“Dave decided to take her off the berth under sail”**

**Left: *Merlin* tries out her topsail for the first time**



Whilst all the trials helped to iron out the teething problems that might be expected, the next three sails (which took place during Cockwells' holiday shutdown between Christmas and New Year) were also able to serve other purposes, thanks to Lance's kind permission.

On Boxing Day, *Merlin* used her topsail for the first time during a fun race hosted by Flushing Sailing Club. She performed admirably and, despite Dave's policy of staying out of trouble, finished in front of a variety of large cruising boats and small racing boats, and was only beaten by a twin-trapeze performance dinghy. It was a very welcome opportunity to show the boat off to some of the local sailing community.

Dave then had two further sails on which he invited selected potential clients, one in very light winds, the other in quite a blow.

During the light weather sail, one of the guests, having received a call from home with unwelcome news, needed to get ashore urgently. *Merlin* was south of St Anthony Lighthouse at the time but came back into the Carrick Roads and arranged to meet up with the *Duchess of Cornwall*, the St Mawes-Falmouth passenger ferry built by Cockwells in 2008, to take the guest ashore.

### Minor problems

Happily for Cockwells, there were no major problems during these various trials, but there were inevitably a number of small ones and these were easily rectified. A traditional gaff cutter rig is a lot more complex than a bermudan sloop - two halyards for the mainsail, for instance, the peak and jib halyards both double-ended with a hardener on one end, two topping lifts for the main boom, two sets of running backstays and many more additional lines and tackles which can all give potential problems with tangles and unfair leads which have to be resolved. The mainsail

roller reefing proved not to work properly, but this was easily solved by filing the locking pin and applying some grease.

There is a greater significance to trials on a custom-built boat than on a production one. Just one example is that all plumbing runs are unique and therefore need to be tested at angles of heel on both tacks.


### Owner's first sail

It was a while before Lance was able to find the time in his own busy work schedule to have his first sail on his new boat but, when the day came, the weather could hardly have been more perfect. When *Merlin* left the pontoon at Cockwells' yard on the Penryn River, soon after 8am to catch the tide, the sun was shining and the wind strength seemed to be around the Force 3 to 4 that was forecast.

The sails were hoisted in the Carrick Roads, and then *Merlin* sailed south, past the lighthouse, into the open waters of the English Channel. Lance took the helm for most of the day, and his pleasure at sailing his new boat for the first time was there for all to see. He commented on the pleasant motion of the boat and on how easily she hove to - an essential quality in any cruising boat. For a while the boat steered herself perfectly well with no hand on the tiller!

A couple of weeks later, Cockwells formally handed *Merlin* over to Lance. She was now ready for her delivery trip to the Solent.

*Merlin* set off on a Sunday morning with Lance, his son Miles, his lifelong friend Richard, Dave Cockwell and myself as crew. Throughout the trip there was a cold Force 4 to 6 wind from the north with a frequent unwelcome hint of east in it. Initially we thought we might stop at Dartmouth for the night - however, while the boat was behaving beautifully, three cases of mal de mer and the cold breeze were taking their toll on the crew which prompted us to check if the tides would be suitable to go into Salcombe. They were and we did!

The next morning we left Salcombe and sailed to Yarmouth where we picked up a mooring soon after midnight. After some very welcome sleep we motored the remaining few miles to the Hamble River and *Merlin's* new home at Universal Marina. 

The cost of a Cockwells' 48ft (14.6m) Pilot Cutter, built to the same standard as *Merlin of Falmouth*, would be in the region of £500,000 depending on specification. Cockwells Modern & Classic Boatbuilding, Mylor Creek Boatyard, Cornwall TR11 5NS Tel: +44 (0)1326 377366 [www.cockwells.co.uk](http://www.cockwells.co.uk)



**Left: *Merlin's* easy motion impresses her new owner**