



David Glenn

Two very different yachts are featured this month, one a throwback to the pilot cutter days of the early 1900s, the other a modern cruising tourer from one of the most talented designers around, Greg Elliott, master of speed and simplicity.

At first glance it would be difficult to identify a common denominator between these two yachts, which measure either side of 50ft. In fact, they aim to perform similar tasks – comfortable cruising with good sailing qualities. It would appear that both have achieved their goals, even though they look completely different and originate from opposite ends of the planet.

What they do share is a philosophy based on extensive experience, an understanding of how boats should sail and the requirements to perform the special task of carrying crew in a comfortable manner.

The difference, of course, is that the designs originate from eras 100 years apart. In both instances, however, performance was the fundamental requirement. In the pilot cutter's case the nippy gaffers raced to reach shipping in the Western Approaches of the UK and had to thump into the ferocious seas kicked up in the Bristol Channel.

In the case of the Tourer, Greg Elliott wouldn't be seen dead designing a yacht that didn't sail quickly, very quickly, and he is well aware of what the Tasman Sea can serve up to the unwary.

Which leaves us with style and a thought-provoking question: how far has style advanced in 100 years? It's for you, the reader, to judge ...

All photos: David Glenn



COCKWELL'S 45FT PILOT CUTTER

POLLY AGATHA *True to her pilot cutter pedigree*

This new pilot cutter is a sheer delight to sail and deceptively fast to boot, as David Glenn recently discovered in the Solent



Bristol Channel Pilot Cutters of 100 years ago had to be fast and easy to handle, but today's yachtsman might look at their gaff rigs, long booms and decks bereft of winches and wonder how a modern version of the same design could emulate those virtues. With surprising ease, is the answer.

Polly Agatha is a yacht that shares almost exactly the same lines as *Peggy*, an original pilot cutter launched by Rowles of Pill in the Bristol Channel 104 years ago and still in commission. It has also benefited from the experience of her builder, Dave Cockwell, whose instinctive sailing skills and extensive knowledge of the gaff cutter have helped produce a gem.

Dave Cockwell started his boatbuilding career as a youngster in Bristol Docks, occupying the famous Underfall Yard (in which a replica of the acclaimed pilot cutter *Mischief* was recently completed). He then moved further west to Penryn, near Falmouth, from where his company now operate.

Building a boat with character

Although he was busy with commercial work, which was mainly made up of ferries, Cockwell was keen to start building a yacht for himself. It was because he knew *Peggy* intimately and had sailed her and appreciated how she handled that he chose her lines as a starting point.

With the arrival of his four children in quick succession, he and his wife Jo had to do some deft juggling to keep the business running, but run it did and slowly the



Main picture: barely any weather helm as *Polly Agatha* sails close-hauled. Above and left: a neat finish from her builders, Cockwells



Clockwise, from top left: hoisting the gaff main soon warms you up; roller furling gear cast in India; neatly installed autopilot ram; Kim Hartley (left) and builder Dave Cockwell; shipping the bowsprit prior to berthing



irresistible form of *Polly Agatha* took shape in Penryn, her larch planking on oak frames depicting the unmistakable lines of the Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter.

There was just one problem—Cockwell had to sell her. The good news was that they weren't long in finding a buyer and two new pilot cutters are now on order, both larger than *Polly Agatha*—at 48ft and 55ft.

Character yacht

On a sun-blessed day in the Solent recently, I had the chance to sail *Polly Agatha*. She is now owned by Kim Hartley, a successful magazine publisher who believes there are plenty of people out there keen to try their hand at a bit of traditional gaff-rigged sailing aboard a yacht that possesses far more character than the ubiquitous 'plastic fantastic'.

Hartley has decided to set up a charter company, Bowsprit Sailing (www.polly-agatha.com), which promises to get clients

'closer to nature' and if it's timber you're after, there is certainly no shortage aboard this yacht.

What first struck me about *Polly Agatha*, apart from the colour of her topsides which, Dave Cockwell claimed, was a mix of what happened to be left in the yard at the time, was the lightness of her gear, from her Nobel Spars Douglas fir mast to her sheet tackles and even her mainsheet arrangement.

A gaff-rigged yacht may sometimes give the impression of being over-built, but the highly refined pilot cutter of the last and previous centuries were anything but heavyweights.

Their internal ballast and virtually monoque construction made them relatively light. They were also easily driven and their gaff rig had a low centre of effort, which made them more manageable.

The new pilot cutter weighs in at a respectable 22 tons and, in terms of construction, is close to

the original with internal ballast.

A very willing crew hauled on *Polly Agatha's* peak and throat halyards, which quickly removed the effects of the morning chill. Within moments, the Wykeham-Martin furling gear (the original design is more than 100 years old) was used to set the high-cut jib and in short order the hanked-on, deck-brushing staysail was set.

Dave Cockwell made it clear that the key to sailing a pilot cutter well was to "sail her to the staysail" and once that was trimmed properly for the course, everything else would fall in around it. It did.

Auxiliary concession

A concession is that *Polly Agatha* is fitted with an auxiliary engine, a 75hp Caterpillar, which drives a fixed, three-bladed prop. Under sail, the free-turning prop transferred a steady vibration through the oak tiller, but it was something you soon got used to as you coaxed the

yacht to acceptable upwind speeds of more than seven knots. A feathering prop is on its way.

There is a touch of weather helm, which can be trimmed out almost completely, given time, and you really need to shove the tiller down hard to put her through the wind. But I found this a most satisfying sailing yacht and ridiculous thoughts of heading west for longer seas and open ocean began to take hold... you felt you could cover many miles in comfort aboard her.

Roomy with a view

Another appealing aspect of *Polly Agatha* is that there are no stanchions or guardwires, not because Kim Hartley is keen to undertake MOB drills, but because the yacht's substantial bulwarks provide a great sense of security on the flush, teak-laid deck.

In effect, this makes the deck one big seating area and you can be as comfortable perched up on the bulkwark forward by the

mast as you would be tucked into the cockpit by the tiller. With eight of us on deck, we never felt short of safe space.

Skylights, companionways and the cockpit coaming are all made from iroko, while blocks are in traditional ash and running rigging in lookalike hemp, called Navy Flex. Deadeyes are in elm and standing rigging is all galvanised steel wire and neatly finished and served where required. The bowsprit can be shipped and stowed aft to reduce marina dues and make her more handy.

Impressive speed

We were in pretty flat water for most of the day and, as *Polly Agatha* leant into a breeze that rarely topped 15 knots true, she sailed along impressively upwind. Off the wind the speed occasionally moved into double figures and with the topsail set she looked a real treat.

In these airs you could gybe the big gaff main with the mainsheet at its extremity without being afraid of damaging the solid mainsheet horse, which is fitted with shock absorbers for the traveller, or to the gooseneck. This is standard practice on gaffers like this.

I was amazed to hear from Dave Cockwell that in the old days pilot cutter skippers used the ability of the rig to be gybed like this to haul their dinghies aboard. They would attach the painter to the boom and use the combined weight of the main and boom to lift the boat aboard as they swung across the yacht.

In the Solent and Southampton Water, decks remained dry all day and Dave Cockwell confirmed that, even in the rough stuff, she is a remarkably dry yacht.

He'd had *Polly Agatha* in a Force 8 off Falmouth with a well-reefed main and a scrap of headsail, but she still made well to weather and remained dry. The main is roller-reefed around



Dimensions

LOA	45ft 0in	13.72m
LWL	40ft 0in	12.19m
Beam	13ft 6in	4.11m
Draught	7ft 6in	2.29m
Displacement	22 tonnes	
www.cockwells.co.uk		

the boom using bronze furling gear which, we were intrigued to hear, was cast by a specialist company in India.

Home comforts

Down below the yacht is a far cry from the original, but there is a cosiness and solidity about her which smack of tradition. She can sleep ten, but I wouldn't want to be around for breakfast with a full complement aboard.

Somehow Dave Cockwell has managed to design in a comfortable double aft cabin, which is just forward of the

cockpit under what would be the bridgedeck. Kim Hartley's wife insisted on this and topped the berth off with a sprung mattress.

In the saloon, two sofas can be pressed into service and the traditional outboard pilot berths – the most comfortable berths aboard, of course – also make for excellent sleeping accommodation.

Then there are a further four berths in the forecabin, which is tight, to say the least.

Solid English oak has been used extensively in the accommodation and there are

several very neat touches, including excellent stowage for glasses in the saloon table and the positioning of useful bosunry kit in bespoke stowages behind the companionway.

All mod cons

At first glance *Polly Agatha* is nothing short of a traditional pilot cutter. On closer inspection, however, there's a lot of modern kit aboard, some of which doesn't sit too happily in the traditional surroundings. I wasn't too keen on the digital read-out for the fuel tank sensors that is set into



Above: light and comfy double aft cabin.
Left: cosy saloon with settees that can be used for sleeping.
Below left: topmast detail with radar on the spreader.
Below: good stowage for important items



the teak deck, for instance, useful though it must be.

Hidden away in a locker in the saloon is a Max Power fuel cell, which Kim Hartley says performs very well, and low-power LED lighting is fitted throughout the yacht.

The purists would, no doubt, express horror at the presence of a bow thruster, but it has to be said it came in very handy as we extricated ourselves from the berth at Universal Shipyard on the Hamble.

There's a good-sized chart table and a galley fitted with

a diesel cooker – there's no petrol or gas aboard the yacht.

Conclusion

Polly Agatha might be a throwback to a bygone era, but she's a good sailing yacht, with immense character. She's strongly built and would make a great cruising home.

A new build would cost around £350,000 ex VAT. In my opinion this is extraordinarily good value for money. Don't miss this yacht at the Southampton Boat Show in September, Berth 383.



KNEE-DEEP IN OFFSHORE HERITAGE

THE HELLY WELLY IS A DESIGN REVOLUTION IN THE OFFSHORE SAILING WORLD. FOR ANY SAILOR FACING THE OPEN SEAS, THIS IS THE NEW STANDARD AND WHAT SAILING BOOTS WILL HAVE TO LIVE UP TO FROM NOW ON. IT'S A MUST FOR ADVENTUROUS OFFSHORE SAILORS.