

IT'S ALL IN THE KIT  
MAIDEN VOYAGE DELIGHT



**PROUD MOMENT:** Whisper on her launch day – it was to be a maiden voyage that covered some 110 unforgettable miles

# It's no secret this should have sails!

There are times in life when you just can't wait. And having at last built the boat of their dreams from a kit imported from Australia, **Max and Elaine Campbell** weren't going to let the fact that they still had to work on the rigging stop them taking to the water. In fact they rather let their enthusiasm get the better of them during a 110-mile maiden voyage under power!





**HOW SHE WILL LOOK:** The Secret yacht with her full suit of sails and looking much more elegant!



**STEADY PROGRESS:** Whisper makes her merry maiden way under the bridge at St Ives

**T**his was a maiden voyage, not a day trip, and to prove it here we were, at the end of a long day's travelling, sheltered from the rain, a meal of fried pork chops, couscous and broad beans

behind us, listening to Radio 4 in the candlelit cabin of our own boat, with the backgammon board laid out ready for a game.

I'd spent nights on other people's boats, but never before on a boat of my own. As a 16 year old, I'd wanted a camping dinghy, when I was trading up from the Mirror dinghy I'd sailed for the previous four years, but I'd given in to my mother's scorn. "That's an old man's boat," she'd said, and I'd ended up with a two man trapezing dinghy that I could hardly ever find a competent enough crew for.

The year after I acquired the fast dinghy, I met Elaine, a non-sailor, and a succession of courses, jobs, addresses and children had come and, mostly, gone, and the only boat in our life was our big open canoe. We loved exploring new stretches of water, but we couldn't cruise it properly, and we certainly couldn't sleep on it.

I felt that by actually building a boat, Elaine and I would both have the maximum of confidence in it. Building our own also gave us a choice of designs, and a new boat at the cost of a bargain basement second hand one.

We bought study plans for half a dozen designs before I fell in love with the 27ft, two-berth Secret, one of five in a range of kit boats designed by the Australian company Scruddie Marine, which we now import for our company Whisper Boats.

On closer examination, we couldn't find any fatal flaw in what she offered. She was small and light enough to launch and recover easily, she had a fixed keel full of lead to keep her upright, she had a big enough cabin for a couple of experienced campers, and she looked great.

We hadn't considered a kit before, but Elaine liked the idea, and I really came to appreciate it in the following months.

The building is a separate story (indeed one covered in issue 27 of *Anglia Afloat*), but let's just say that on that first evening's cruising, moments of pride in nice varnished roof beams alternated with moments of self criticism for missing the underneath of a shelf. On balance we were pretty pleased with our boat, and ourselves.

Whisper, as we had named her, wasn't yet a sailing boat, because we were still working on the rig, but we had launched her a few days previously to check the trim and get the engine working. She'd floated off her trailer on the slipway at Jones Boatyard on the Ouse at St Ives, settling a little low at the stern and high at the bow, compared with the painted waterline, but we put that down to the outboard on the back, and the lack of a rig.

The four little fenders that had seemed to



**CHAMPAGNE MOMENT:** No respecter of launch days, the weather ensured a warming cup of tea was more than welcome as the rain came down.

suit the boat when I was standing in the chandlers had shrunk, and the river seemed to be full of big dirty objects made of far harder material than two pot polyurethane or the underlying wood – notably chipped concrete and rusty steel.

In our plastic canoe, with its tough rubber-covered aluminium gunwale, we'd sneered at cruisers trailing a festoon of fenders. Now we could see the point. We still seemed to be the smallest boat on the river, but Whisper carried her way a good deal more than a canoe, and even though considered very light for her size, at 650Kg, she was far too heavy to stop within an arm's length as we reached a pontoon.

We'd been through too much, too, to achieve the moderate level of finish that contact with big nasty things would do nothing to improve.

I inflicted the first damage myself at the launch. We should have bitten the bullet and bought a full bottle of champagne, rather than a tough little half bottle. It may have burst with the first crack on the stem, rather than the third of the increasingly firm blows which each left a subtle indentation on the metal keelband, though there would have been more glass to pick up.

That day we just went up and down between the two locks a few times while we got the motor running well, and we brewed a pot of tea on the new stove after nosing into some bankside vegetation. We even managed to get two of our three post-teenage offspring along, cramming Alex and Lewis into the cabin with us when a shower came along, just to test the accommodation!

While she was ready to go we thought we may as well spend a few days of Elaine's holiday on her, so we bought two much bigger fenders and a telescopic boathook with a big rubber end. We also had to get licenced, which meant a Boat Safety Scheme





**HILGAY CALLING:** It didn't matter how far Whisper travelled up the Wissey, the rain just kept coming – that 'wet' locker was certainly a good idea!

inspection, and thus two fire extinguishers, and a fire blanket were added, because we have a fixed stove.

We launched at the same slipway and headed downstream. The first lock is only yards from the marina entrance, and it must have been on the landing stage there that I put the fourth, and less subtle, indentation in the stem, that I can now see in the rear view mirror of my car whenever the boat is on its trailer. We should have bought a bow fender – we were both surprised that a telescopic boathook could take so long to extend, and that revving in reverse has almost no effect except to cause the motor to hit the back of the outboard well.

Since then, of course, we've developed our technique. We approach very slowly, into the stream of course and parallel to the quay, because the long keel gives full steering ability using the tiller as long as there's any movement at all. We drop the aft line round a bollard or shore cleat first, and as the boat stops under control of the line, she comes side-to, up against our carefully positioned fender, allowing someone to step ashore with the bow line.

By that first evening we had already been on the tidal Ouse through Brownhill Staunch and then on to the Old West at Hermitage Lock to arrive just downstream of Ely – easily passing the point we could have reached in a day's return trip in the canoe. We enjoyed being able to stand up and move around, even making a pot of tea rather than depending on flasks.

Engine noise and smell were the biggest downside, and we'd still prefer an electric Torqeedo motor with some big batteries. The other downside we discovered the next morning, when we used a full roll of kitchen towel to dry the condensation off the interior surfaces (we're working on the ventilation!) and the rain off the seats, which we've subsequently drilled drain holes in.

Off again, we headed to Denver and then up the Wissey. Entering this river, whose delightful upper stretches we had previously

explored by canoe, it feels as though you've gone through a gate from Fenland into Breckland.

The woods and irregular fields either side of the rush and reed framed meandering river, which opens up near the sugar beet factory at Wissington to form a series of lovely tree-bordered lakes. The clear water was full of fish, easily watched as they swam in their size-matched cohorts over bright green underwater foliage.

The drizzle turned into proper driving rain as we turned back on to the wide, very straight Ouse and we pointed Whisper's nose into the force 4-5 that was putting up little white horses. It kept it up until we moored near Littleport for the second night.

They reckon the Norwegians came up with that truism: "There's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing." At 55 years old, I still haven't found the appropriate jacket for a full day in substantial rain, and I certainly didn't have the appropriate footwear.

At least we have plenty of lockers in the cockpit, one designated a "wet" one. We shall, eventually, have a cockpit tent, but we haven't even decided on the design yet. We intended to make a tarpaulin-material alternative to the ply washboard, so we can hold it at an angle away from the cabin to allow airflow whilst deflecting the rain.

On our third and last day, we didn't want to head straight home, so we went down the Cam, through Reach Lode Lock, and revisited Wicken Lode.

Every inland boater should try Wicken Lode, but please go slowly and quietly. You creep down an incredibly narrow lode, looking down on the fields to the South. Even we, with our sailing boat keel, were so close to the densely moss-covered banks, and travelling so slowly, that we could have stepped on to them from the boat at almost any time without effort.

We saw two grass snakes crossing the water, and caught a glimpse of a harrier.

Getting back to the main river, we realised we'd have to get a move on to reach Hermitage Lock before the keeper went off duty at 8pm and we weren't sure whether the slipway, or even the trailer park, would be locked if we arrived really late.

In the event, all went well, including recovery on to the trailer, which proved that the first time wasn't a fluke. I have helped other people launch and recover similar boats, and have taken part in major struggles in three feet of water.

With our trailer, the full length "bunks" – lengths of 6in x 4in timber covered in needlecord carpet, automatically centred and straightened the boat, so that the keel was in the middle of the rollers when we wound the trailer out with the winch. I haven't yet got wet above my knees with this boat.

We'd covered 110 unforgettable miles in this maiden voyage, and were ready for a more challenging trip – the Thames through London, under the bridges and down through the Tidal Barrier and back. You can read how we got on in the next edition.



**SUCCESS:** Whisper safely back on the trailer – a process that (so far!) has proved remarkably trustworthy