



# Learning curves

Whether you have always wanted to build a wooden boat or just want to learn some practical skills, Lowestoft's International Boatbuilding Training College could offer what you need, says **Camilla Herrmann**



*Below, the college's new owner Mike Tupper (right) discusses work with a student*

You don't often see an educational establishment where every single person on the site – students, teaching and support staff – is not just happy to be there, but really committed to what they are doing. Lowestoft's International Boatbuilding Training College is such a place.

This year IBTC celebrated 40 years of teaching boatbuilding and joinery, using traditional skills, in the Suffolk port which could be politely described as "the archetypal end-of-the-line town". In that time it has suffered a few ups and downs, culminating in July 2015 with

a new owner and a new approach. But the college's commitment to teaching traditional skills has kept its reputation high, despite its unprepossessing location, squeezed in the boatyard area between Oulton Broad and the commercial port.

The jewel in the crown of the college's offering is the 47-week boatbuilding course, which takes students from complete beginners who may never have touched woodworking tools before, to competent professionals who can walk straight into a boatbuilding job. A recent student graduated on a Tuesday



and on the following Monday flew out to Palma, Mallorca, with his wife, to begin a new boatyard-based career.

Running alongside the boatbuilding course is a 47-week joinery and furniture course and a 24-week course in building your own boat. At the core of all three of

## The instructor

Ian Cook worked as a joiner in East Anglian boatyards for many years and has huge experience both as a



boatbuilder and a teacher. He teaches the 12-week woodworking and joinery course which is the foundation of the longer courses, and takes pride in teaching the hand skills which he regards as the building blocks for any good tradesman.

"We start with a very basic thing – making a wooden mallet. Then we progress to making a teak grating, something which is used everywhere on all boats," says Ian.

Next on the curriculum is making a wooden oar from a plank of wood. Ian shows us how a simple pattern, which marks a square section of wood in the formula 7:10:7, allows you to move from a square section to an octagonal one, and from octagonal to round. "Students make a plane which is rounded two ways to shape

the blade of the paddle." The same principles are used to shape all the spars of a wooden boat.

As college owner and former student Mike Tupper says, "Doing all this without power tools is challenging and tiring – even for me, and I was a trained carpenter. There's a constant push for perfection, nearly good enough is not acceptable. But there's a point where you realise 'I can make anything!' Practicality means you don't really make everything from scratch – but you know that you could."



Photos: Guy Brown



Left, a few of the college's smaller boats, using a variety of construction methods

these is the 12-week woodworking and joinery skills course, which uses hand tools and traditional skills only. By the end of this short course, students have each produced their own mallet, oil stone box, spirit level, bollow plane, oar, grating and hardwood tool chest to take away with them... if they can bear to leave after just 12 weeks. Many go on to join the longer courses. And the college is very flexible, so many students take a break for a few weeks or months and return, or take the course as a series of modules spread out over an extended period.

The range of students at the college is vast. Yes, there are local school leavers aiming to shorten an apprenticeship in boatbuilding or cabinet-making – the target audience when the college was founded in 1975. But there are also many students who have reached a turning point in their lives, some perhaps having a mid-life crisis, and some who have retired and finally have the chance to learn the woodworking skills they always wanted. And they come not just from all over the UK, but all over the world, with

graduates hailing from Australia, the USA and Norway among many other locations.

Class sizes are small with no more than 12 in each intake, four times a year, and only 50 or so students altogether. The college believes that anyone who is motivated (and can find the fee – although bursaries are available) can complete the courses, so you don't have to show aptitude. Tolerance and patience from the instructors is very high and owner Mike Tupper believes that students receive more hours of personal tuition in a year at IBTC than in three years at university. The college occasionally accepts students with very troubled backgrounds, or with learning difficulties, and the staff provide not just the patient teaching but the pastoral care to ensure that these youngsters don't just cope well with the course but emerge with a bright future.

One of the college's key assets is more than 20 wooden boats on site for students to work on, ranging in size from dinghies to 52-footers. A commercial workshop carries out restoration for owners who want a speedier job, but a number of boat owners and trusts are willing to invest in a dilapidated vessel and allow students to work on it over many months or years. Shoddy work is never permitted, so the end result will be a high-class restoration, but patience is required!

The college also takes on new builds – a

## The student



Above, one of Terry's photographic works – see it, and others, bigger and better at [terrytaylor.co.uk](http://terrytaylor.co.uk). Below, Terry studies the new frames



Terry is about to complete the boatbuilding course. He has worked as a fine art photographer, taking multiple images of a location and turning them into one finely detailed large-scale image. A few years ago he crewed a yacht across the Atlantic but found it "boring and scary". That didn't stop him wanting to get more involved with boats, however. He found out about IBTC, sold his flat in London and moved to Lowestoft for the duration.

His current project, pictured, involves repairs to a small boat with broken hog (the board on top of the keel). Students are building frames to keep the hull in shape when it is inverted during repairs.

Terry says "I still haven't got a clue what to do next..." but completion of the course has given him a number of options. The internationally recognised IBTC Diploma in boatbuilding, and City and Guilds 2463 [marine engineering] Level 3, can open many doors.



Continued on page 58



## The short course – basic electrics & plumbing

Having unexpectedly taken over the maintenance of our 27-year-old Westerly, I often feel out of my depth just understanding the set-up. It's hard to grasp how or why items have been connected together, or even what they

are, especially when you're peering through a tiny and inconvenient inspection hatch.

With a two-day course in marine electrics and plumbing I didn't expect to become a professional, or even take on all my own repairs, but I did hope to gain a better understanding. And that's what I did.

The course benefits not just from the knowledge of instructor Dave Sales but also numerous parts and tools to look at – frequently resulting in "aha!" moments as I

recognised a bit of kit from *Kalessin* and finally understood what it was for. We were also able to inspect work in progress on a couple of boats currently in build, a great way to see all the components in use.

The course forms a module in the 47-week boatbuilding course and was also attended by two boat maintenance technicians from the Met's Marine Policing Unit, who look after the Thames river craft. IBTC's short courses are popular with a wide variety of professional organisations.

I was concerned that the content might be way above my head, but knowledge from using systems on our own boat stood me in good stead. The electrical theory took me back to O-level physics, but also highlighted facts I should already have known: a 12-volt system won't give you much of a shock, but simple arithmetic means that fewer volts result in more amps, and the higher current brings a higher risk of fire. So much to think about... **CFH**



recently completed commission was an accurate replica of the James Caird, the 22ft lifeboat used by Shackleton to take his men 800 miles across the Southern Ocean from Elephant Island to South Georgia. The replica copied all the adaptations made to strengthen the lifeboat for the open-sea voyage, including raised sides and a mast lashed inside, and even the ugly joins where carpenter Harry McNish added timber in 1916.

Despite its global reputation and highly-considered teaching staff, the college teetered on the brink of crisis earlier this year. The focus of the owners was on IBTC Portsmouth, a venture started in 2012, where they are developing Boathouse 4 in the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard as a heritage skills training centre, due to open in 2015. Investment on the South coast meant less attention to the ageing buildings and facilities in Lowestoft, and less development of new ideas.

Mike Tupper is a trained carpenter and former Royal Navy navigator, who had visited IBTC Lowestoft on a whim while he was on holiday, fell in love with the place, and signed up for the 47-week

boatbuilding course. Early in 2015 he returned to IBTC after several months of illness and was adding a plank to the Maxwell Cutter, a 23-foot US-designed gaff cutter, owned by the college for students to build. "The instructor told me 'This will be the last plank added to this boat for a while,'" recalls Mike. He asked why, and was told there was no money for further work. Mike offered to buy the boat from the college, but couldn't get the guarantees he wanted. He then asked to look at the books, realised just how tight things were, and after a discussion with his wife, offered to buy the whole college from the previous owners.

Mike and his wife Lyn took over as new owners in July and have already put in substantial investment and have plans for development. This winter should see the start of a building project to modernise the maze of sheds and workshops which make up the heart of the college. Mike says, "Of course we want to maintain and enhance the core 47-week boatbuilding course. But we also want to appeal to everyday sailors and enthusiasts, so we are developing a number of shorter courses in marine joinery and boat maintenance."

Many of these form part of the longer courses but are open to any participant – they include marine plumbing and electrics (two days), GRP work (four and a half days) and caulking (two days). Others, such as the RYA Diesel course, are specifically intended to allow wider use of the college's facilities.

Mike is exploring creative options like buying in his own timber. The hardwood used for most of the boatbuilding ranges from expensive to prohibitive in cost,

with teak used mainly for decks. The main woods currently in use are oak, Siberian larch and iroko, and Mike has started a timber store in the crowded yard, buying in some khaya, African mahogany. He hopes to take on more water frontage soon (the college backs on to tidal Lake Lothing which leads to Oulton Broad).

So if you have always wanted to build a wooden boat, or just want to spend a few days learning a skill like routing, lofting or rigging, IBTC may be the place for you. The college is open all year round and welcomes visitors. Find out more on its website at [www.ibtc.co.uk](http://www.ibtc.co.uk).

## Foreman Ted

Ted is a border terrier belonging to instructor David Sales and can be seen around the college on pretty much any day the college is open. He's frequently featured in the IBTC Facebook and Twitter feeds. The fact that Ted is treated as a key member of staff tells you a lot about the welcoming, informal nature of the college.



If you know of a boating business with a story to tell, let us know and we'll feature it in *Cruising*.



James Caird: An exact replica of Shackleton's lifeboat was completed this summer