

Inland Waterways News

Metamorphosis

Terry & Jean Frew
The Dolphin

This year another cruiser was launched on the Erne, but its story was very different from all the rest. The new boat, called **The Dolphin**, started out life as an offshore 50-man lifeboat before it finally metamorphosed into a comfortable four-berth cabin-cruiser.

I first saw a dozen or so very unusual vessels sitting on a dock at H&W shipyard. They looked so ugly I paid little attention to them, even though I was looking for a boat-building project. Some years later I heard from a friend that these boats had somehow migrated to a field near the village of Moneyrea, just outside Belfast. I had to go and have a closer look. My first impression was right — they are ugly — but now I could see some potential, as they were bigger than I thought.

These self-righting lifeboats were designed to hold fifty people and equipped to survive not just Atlantic gales but also fire. The superstructure had a gantry with water sprinklers and, instead of windows, there were heavy shutters which, when closed, hermetically sealed the boat. In this survival mode the engine would be started and a huge water pump engaged to operate the sprinkler system. Compressed air was stored in large cylinders for the survivors and the diesel engine.

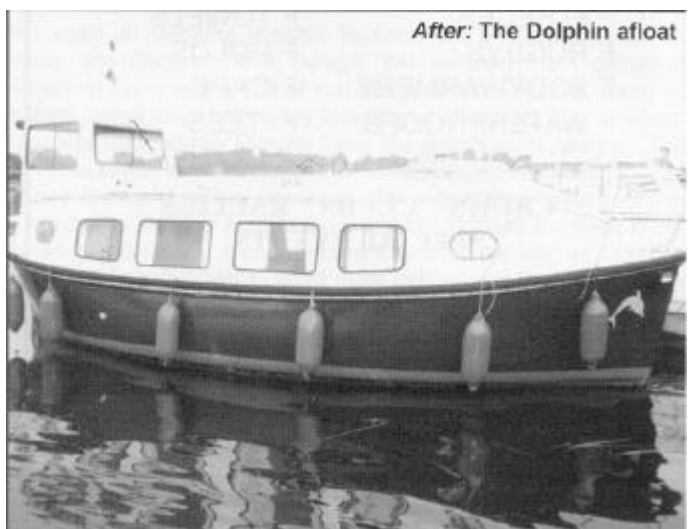
When these boats were first designed, it was thought prudent to provide sufficient equipment and food to last maybe a week, because rescue might not come as quickly as it would nowadays. So, when I first clambered through one of the hatches, I couldn't believe how cluttered it was, and it took some time before I was able to take all the measurements and study the layout to enable me to visualise its conversion into a cabin cruiser. A friend had just bought one, so I decided to take the plunge and hoped my wife Jean would not be too embarrassed to crew with me when it was finished.

Fortunately the owner of the field told me I could keep it there until the conversion was completed — and even provided me



Before: work in progress

Before: Work in progress



After: The Dolphin afloat

After: The Dolphin afloat

with electricity. The field would go on to resemble a subsidiary of H&W as various boats made their change from caterpillar to butterfly (or frog).

After completing a plan to provide the accommodation I required, the cutting began. This was a Herculean task and involved removing the air cylinders and all the fibreglass seating not required.

This work was done using an angle grinder and jigsaw, and the rubbish was discarded through the very large hatches. When the gutting-out process was completed, I decided to keep the boat weatherproof by not cutting out for the wheelhouse, but only making a slit in the top, to enable me to get sheets of plywood on board to construct the bulkheads, galley and bunks. This process was very satisfying as things happened quickly, and I was able to see the large forecabin with double bunk take shape.

Even the saloon, galley and toilet/shower area surprised me with their size, and this encouraged me to go on and tackle the windows, which were very important to give the boat a decent appearance. I decided to remove the shutters and cut the fibreglass to take fixed glass panes installed in rubber, like a car windscreen. This took some considerable time but, when it was completed, I realised the boat would turn out quite well.

The next major task involved removing the water sprinkler gantry and all the unwanted fittings on the decks, but leaving the hatches, which are characteristic of lifeboats. When all the stripping was finished and the holes filled, I had to tackle the wheelhouse. I took some profile pictures and drew shapes until I got the lines I wanted, and most of all something I could build. Construction was easier than I thought, using windows from an old Transit van and a windscreen from an ambulance.

The main construction work was finished early this year and the next few months would see the installation of a plumbing system with immersion heater, mains and low-voltage electrics and finally a bow-thruster. Meanwhile Jean was organising curtains, carpets and upholstery, whilst I was installing hydraulic steering and putting glow plugs into the ancient (but unused) Saab engine.

The transformation was really surprising, but until the bright orange colour of the hull and superstructure was obliterated we wouldn't really know how it was going to look. Many colour schemes were considered — we even thought of painting black spots on it and calling it **Ladybird** — but we decided to be unconventional and paint it blue and white!

We were delighted with the result and couldn't wait to arrange for a crane to lift it on to a low loader and take it down to Carrybridge, where it would be launched from Tom Leonard's yard.

The maiden voyage up to The Moorings was very eventful: the boat kept going round in circles and even the bow-thruster had no effect. I had forgotten that the self-righting lifeboat needed several tons of water ballast to keep it down in the water. It was now behaving like a cork as I had sealed up the water ballast tanks. Something drastic had to be done, like putting a ton and a half of steel ballast in her.

Once that was done, she handled perfectly in the water, and we are now the proud owners of a very unusual craft that makes for comfortable cruising and we are looking forward to many trips on the beautiful Shannon and Erne waterways.