

Blue Flag



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Rijnstroom IV

Rob Lowe tells the story of Rijnstroom IV since he and his wife Elaine purchased her in 2006

This is the story of Rijnstroom IV since my wife and I purchased her from Mr & Mrs Tucker in 2006.

Elaine and I met on the Isle of Wight. I was attending the UKSA in Cowes, retraining to become a Yachtmaster Ocean having spent most of my working life in the construction industry as a carpenter. I knew I wanted to work in the yachting / boating world but at this stage was not sure where I would fit in. In October 2004 I was already 51 and would be pushing 52 by the time I finished the course, and the UKSA careers officer was doing her best to politely tell me I was too old!

When I completed my studies in June 2005 with 3 Yachtmaster certificates to my

name, I contacted a company based in the Caribbean called Tradewinds, whom I had come across during one of my training passages earlier in the year. They specialised in luxury yacht charters using catamarans, and employed qualified couples as crew. I asked Elaine if she was interested in being my First Mate if I was able to get a job as Captain with Tradewinds.

Although she grew up on an island, the only boat she had ever been on was the ferry but to my complete surprise she said yes! She was divorced with grown up children and looking for something new in her life having spent most of her adult years working in the care industry. Having spent the last 15 years looking after one

elderly lady until she recently died, she was driving a cab when I met her, so she jumped at the chance to do something completely different, and begin an adventure that would take the two of us all over the world sailing luxury catamarans.

The company were interested in us, even if they did think we were a little long in the tooth for such a job, but did not have a vacancy at that stage, so we decided to have a look around to see if we might be able to buy our own boat and try doing our own thing. We decided that holiday letting might be a good venture and started to look around for a suitable vessel.

One evening we were with an estate agent who had taken us to view a boat that was moored on the River Medina in Newport, but the thing was a wreck and we were looking for something much better. On the opposite bank, laid up at the Odessa Boat Yard was a Dutch barge called Rijnstroom IV, whom the agent believed was for sale but thought it was not officially on the market. So we thanked him for his time, drove round to the boat yard, and went and knocked on the door.

Mr & Mrs Tucker were glad to show us around, and tell us all about her. They had owned her for 14 years, and had been using her as a private dwelling firstly on the



River Hamble, and later on the Medina. They had done much of the conversion work themselves, which had been started by previous owners after she had been imported into the UK from Holland in 1974 as an empty hull.



They told us of the history, as had been passed to them when they bought her, and gave us some of the original paperwork that had been with the barge since she was first built in Rotterdam in 1922 to be used as a bulk carrier on the rivers and waterways of Europe. Constructed from iron and steel, she is 29.5m long, 5.48m wide, and weighed 140 tons.

The most interesting part of the history passed to us is that she was commandeered by the German Navy in 1942, and used

accounts, the navy needed as many carrier vessels as they could get hold of, so she was given a new engine by the German Navy, and pressed back into service. The power unit chosen for this task was one of Manchester's finest Gardner diesel omnibus engines, along with an array of German equipment, some of which still carries the Kriegsmarine insignia, which was the standard Nazi German Navy emblem from 1935 to 1945.

Despite our efforts we have never been able to find any supporting documentation or photographs, but the fact that the emblem is embossed into the ends of the fuel tanks, and Gardner did not supply engines to the Dutch in 1922 when she was built, seems to us to give the story some credence.

The irony of a vessel powered by a British engine built in Manchester, being used to carry munitions for the Luftwaffe to drop onto British towns and cities, including Manchester, must have given all involved quite a laugh!

After we completed the purchase, we moved Rijnstroom to Island Harbour, just a little further up the River Medina, and began the conversion work needed to be able to give her a new lease of life as a specialist holiday destination. By January 2007 with much work done and much still more to do, we were offered the crew position with Tradewinds that we really wanted, so we arranged for some friends



for the transportation of munitions on the River Rhine. She had apparently been decommissioned by the Dutch Captain at the start of the war, and hidden away. All her running gear had been removed in an attempt to render her useless, but by all

that needed a place to live to move in and take care of her until we could get back.

After that we came home for "holidays" and continued to work on her, eventually setting up a business for holiday letting. In spring of 2010 the Island Harbour



Company went bust, and the liquidators refused to renew our mooring licence, and we were forced to relocate to Bembridge Harbour on the east of the island. This



turned out to be a blessing in disguise as we had a much better location, and still has a stunning vista. With the barge now converted to a 5 cabin, 2 bathroom set up, we decided to try our hand at B&B letting, and this was an instant success.

We continued to work with Tradewinds, crewing luxury catamarans in Antigua, British Virgin Isles, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Greece, Egypt, Belize and Tenerife, whilst taking whatever time we could manage to keep up the work on Rijnstroom, adding an extra bathroom and converting the forepeak cabin into an owners/managers accommodation. We eventually dropped the holiday letting and concentrated just on the B&B; we had great managers whom we met in the Caribbean and the business was doing really well. We got great reviews and lots of repeat business; people just loved the place because it was so different. At peak times we could have let each of the cabins 3 times over and this led to return guests booking months in advance in order to make sure they got a cabin when they wanted it.

In 2012 after attempting to retire from Tradewinds, we were persuaded to switch from crewing to base management and agreed to give it one more year before deciding what to do next. By the summer of



Refurbished cabin and the original style - to the right



New galley and how it was - to the right



Looking good and popular as a B&B

2013 it was time to sell Rijnstroom and stick with our new home in St Vincent but before we could do that I knew that I would have to do two things: re-paint the barge externally and purchase a permanent mooring plot. I came back to the UK in March 2014 for a



month and began the process. By March of 2015, with the plot purchase complete and a buyer waiting in the wings, I took 3 months leave of absence to complete the renovation and decoration of the exterior, move her to her new plot in the same harbour and close



the sale.

We had agreed to sell the barge and the business to a new owner, who for now only wanted to rent our mooring plot as she was interested in exploring mooring options on the Thames. The deal was effectively done until disaster struck! My wife and I were visiting her brother on the island when we got a call to say the barge was on fire.

You'll have to wait until next time to find out what happened

The enormous task of refurbishing Rijnstroom has been completed at Solent Refit in Hythe, Hampshire. .

Rijnstroom IV

Rob Lowe continues the story

It was Thursday the 19th of May, my wife had only just arrived back from St Vincent and we were fully booked for the upcoming bank holiday weekend. By the time we got back to the barge, the fire brigade had put out the fire and were damping down, but the damage was done and it was about to turn our lives upside down.

The fire destroyed two thirds of the barge internally, and the wheelhouse externally. With it went our home, our retirement fund, our business and all our possessions except what we were wearing andour buyer! Our insurance was good but not good enough, and as not all of the barge had been damaged - the hull was still in one piece and the bow accommodation section had been

saved by the fire door - we were never going to get a payout that came anywhere near what we were about to sell it for. So we were faced with a stark choice, take a huge hit and walk away or get the best settlement we could and rebuild her....again!

No prizes for guessing which option we settled for and on the 19th of June 2015, having demolished what remained of the wheelhouse and stripped out the fire gutted interior of the Captain's cabin, the Galley and the Saloon, Rijnstroom IV was towed to the Solent Refit shipyard at Hythe on Southampton water, hauled out of the water and placed into one of the huge sheds for me to begin the task of rebuilding my boat.

She was relaunched on the 22nd January

2016, with the exterior rebuild complete, and is now moored at the shipyard's main wharf where I am currently rebuilding the interior.

So far, the only work I have not done myself is the welding and steel fabrication, and the mechanical work required on the engine, steering and running gear. It's been a 12 to 15 hours per day, 7 days per week labour of love to get her to where she is now, and I still have some way to go, but at least there is light at the end of the tunnel. According to the surveyor's estimate, she has doubled in value since last May! So far she has a completely new wheelhouse, a new livery, new decking, doors, handrails and windows, paintwork on the hull...

The entire hull was aqua-blasted to remove all existing paint and hull coatings, right back to bare iron and then painstakingly reapplied using specialist sealers and primers and topped off with polyurethane gloss enamel - 7 coats in all that took me 190 hours to complete. The aqua-blasting also highlighted the degraded hull below the waterline, which despite being completely dry before the fire, was now riddled with small rust holes, missing rivets and previous attempts at minor repairs that had completely rotted away. Structural rot to iron and steel work around the rudder





stem caused the surveyor to wonder how she had made the journey over to Hythe without incident.

The keel cooling system for the Gardner engine had also completely rotted away, meaning it would have been impossible to run on its own power without a complete rebuild. A combination of rust, hull coatings and caked on mud had kept Rijnstroom afloat and dry, but it was now time for a new solution.

After consultation with Solent Refit's engineering director and my marine surveyor, it was decided that a complete new hull would be fabricated and welded into place after cutting out and away the worst of the rotted iron and steel structure. The rudder stem and keel cooling systems



would be rebuilt, and strengthening sections welded into place to protect some of the plate joints where rivets had completely rotted away.

The finished result is a fully welded steel hull, right up to the original rhumb line

(which these days sits well above the water line, as she is not carrying anywhere near the weight she used to). The hull below the rhumb line was painted with the same specialist sealer and primer used on the upper hull and finished in bitumen paint.

Whilst Rijnstroom was out of the water, she was supported on 3 huge railway sleds, designed to support her huge bulk. Large wooden blocks between the sleds and the hull gave us a working space of about a metre. The welders and fabricators spent most of their working time on trolleys, on their backs, covered with fire blankets and protective gear to access the sections of steel that were manhandled into place and then hydraulically jacked up and shaped to match the existing hull. This work took 3 months to complete, including the repositioning of the blocks to complete the task.

Once welding was complete, it was down to me to get the new paint finish done. Once again, working in less than a metre of space, climbing over railway sleds, wearing full body and face protection, I was applying highly toxic, skin burning specialist paints, often working with nothing more than an artist's fitch to reach awkward places behind the new keel pipes and an angled head brush and mini roller to apply 5 coats of hull protection, including 2 layers of bitumen.

The word around the shipyard was that all old hulls always leak when they first go back into the water, but I was determined this was not going to happen to Rijnstroom, so my preparation and application was measured, precise and by the book. I was more than happy to collect on all the bets I had taken when she was relaunched without a single drop of water entering the hull! The surveyor commented in her

report that Rijnstroom had undergone the most thorough, extensive and complete refurbishment both since she was built and that she had seen in her career as a marine surveyor.

I think that means she is good to go for at least the next 94 years!

I have rebuilt the Captain's cabin with just some plumbing and decorating still to do, and have added an upstairs lounge with its own balcony at the stern - a level of sophistication that was previously lacking! This was made possible by the removal of the old mechanical steering system with chains and prop shafts which buckled beyond use during the fire (and which had prevented the rear deck from being used for anything meaningful before), and the conversion to an hydraulic steering system.

The forward accommodation cabins and main bathroom were undamaged by the fire, but wrecked by mucky firemen searching for anyone that might have been trapped on board as the fire raged through the main exit, so these have also had a full



refurb. Rijnstroom does have an intact and fully accessibly forward fire escape, but the firemen didn't know that - and they didn't know the barge was empty either - so they did their job and did it well. Eventually they decided everything had cooled to a level that wouldn't allow the fire to reignite, so they packed their gear and left us to stare in disbelief at what was left of our home and business.

I have never been personally involved in a fire before, but my Yachtmaster training





Superb height in the wheelhouse



Great outdoor space on the deck with access directly into the wheelhouse



All finished and ready to go back in the water

included fire fighting at the fire research centre in Gravesend, so I was well aware of exactly what a fire can do, especially on a vessel where the structure tends to keep the heat concentrated, but the shock during the fire, and assessing the damage after has



really made me paranoid about effective fire prevention and fire escape methods. It's not something I would wish on anybody!

The main saloon and galley are still to be rebuilt, but I am aiming to be ready to sail her back to Bembridge under her own



steam in early July, making it almost exactly a year since she departed a charred wreck.

It is still our plan to sell up, so someone new will get the benefit of all my hard work - but it will be worth it to see this small part of ours, Bembridge's and the UK's recent history fully restored and being put to good use.

She is a grand old lady at 94 and is now in better shape than ever. I will be sad to see her go, but that's life.

Rijnstroom is moored at Bembridge on the Isle of Wight, UK and is for sale with Philip Weeks at Hodes Rhodes Dixon.