



Testament

To contemplate building a large wooden boat in an island community where just about everything except labour has to be imported would, perhaps, seem more than a little ambitious. Yet this is exactly the task which Alfred Hicks set himself on the Isles of Scilly, that small isolated community which, on the charts, appears as the ball to Cornwall's boot. Despite the odds appearing to be stacked against the project ever reaching the water, there was one factor that tipped the balance the other way, just a little: for Alfred success would represent the fulfilment of a lifelong dream.

Alfred Hicks was born and brought up in a family whose name is synonymous with the boatmen of Scilly and throughout his life he has admired the French Crabbers which used to visit the Islands during the summer months. These sturdy vessels would anchor off Hugh Town or occasionally venture alongside one of the quays seeking shelter from the weather or rest for their crews during the lengthy trips away from home. Their shape, construction and power was temptation itself and at an early age, Alfred Hicks decided that one day he would have one for himself.

The children of small isolated communities are often restricted in their choice of employment and, by necessity, many have to leave home to find jobs in the towns or cities of the mainland. So it was with the Hicks family: Alfred's elder brother found work at home and followed in their father's footsteps as an Island boatman carrying stores and the 'Relief out to the Bishop and Round Island lighthouses and, during the summer months, running tripper boats. Alfred, too, spent several years in the family business as a boy but finally left for the mainland to serve his time with R A Listers in Gloucestershire where he became an engineer.

The call of the South West was too strong for him to stay 'up-country' and after six years he returned to the Islands to work the pleasure boats. Before long he was back on the mainland but this time only as far away as the fishing port of Newlyn where he worked repairing and maintaining the fleet. Then came an offer that no Islander could refuse: the chance to return home to work as the engineer in the Islands power station. He held the position for twenty years until they ran a power cable from the mainland.

Fortunately the station closure was not without warning and Alfred was able to look around and make plans. The



Martin Tregoning and Peter Chesworth flew to St Mary's to meet the builders who have created a new traditional French Crabber with a Scillonian name: Pettifox.

Facing page: At 36' (11m), Pettifox may be smaller than many French Crabbers but designer François Vicier has created a truly representative example of the type.

Left: The deck layout is simple, substantial and seamanlike and the sides of the coachroof provide out-of-the-way storage for the beaching legs.



to a Dream

call of the sea proved too great and those twenty years spent watching his father, brother and the rest of the Island boatmen had allowed him to see an opening, if the right boat could be built – he could offer sailing trips for summer visitors. The question as to what to build was quickly answered when Alfred remembered the French Crabbers and was then introduced by two Breton friends to the designer François Vicier who had created the popular little Aber (see *The Boatman* No 7).

On an island which depends on boats for its very livelihood, it seems strange that owners have to carry out just about every bit of repair or major maintenance on the beach because there is no proper boatyard. So, how, where and with whom to start such a major building project? The simple answers were to build his own shed and work with Peter Martin, a boatbuilder who had arrived on the Islands just 12 months before.

Peter was born in Falmouth where, following a boatbuilding training at the Falmouth Marine School, he gained experience at Mylor Dock Yard and Falmouth Boat Construction. He was also part of the team which built the *Falmouth Packet* (now *Lady Beaverbrook*) and some of the other 72' Ocean Youth Club ketches (22m).

During his free time, Peter sailed in Falmouth Sunbeams and Working Boats as well as rowing for the Truro Gig Club. In 1987 he moved to Scilly and almost immediately started work fitting a new stem into one of the inter-island cargo launches and he hasn't stopped work since.

Alfred and Peter found a site near the beach and erected the shed in which they would spend the greater part of the next two years. The first task was for Peter to loft out the plans while Alfred ordered the first consignments of wood: oak for the frames and larch for the planking, both from Barchards in Hull. Alfred and Peter wanted the planking to be in continuous lengths with no butt ends and so, for a hull 36' in length, they ordered 45' lengths which would only just fit into the shed (11 and 13.75m).

The fastenings were mainly galvanised although the keel bolts were to be stainless. The fittings were iron, made up by Alfred and sent to the mainland to be galvanised. There was virtually nothing that did not have to be imported: even the three tons of ballast, 1.5 of internal lead ballast and 1.5 tons of cast iron keel, had to be brought in from the mainland. Indeed so high was the cost of carriage in relation to overall costs that Alfred and Peter went to great lengths to explore any and all options.

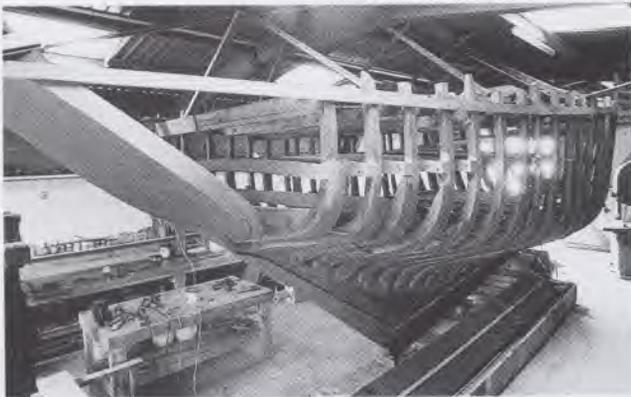


Above: Pettifox's snug rig and powerful hull reflect both her heritage from the French Atlantic coast and her homewaters around the windswept Isles of Scilly. Facing pages: Stages in the construction of a traditional working boat hull. Almost every component from timber and fastenings to sails and fittings was ferried from the British mainland. All black and white photographs by Frank Gibson.

Over the centuries the islanders have become renowned for their ability to make use of anything that is washed up on the beach and the same attitude survives to this day. Alfred had already ordered the wood for the frames and planking but, just as it was being delivered, work was beginning on extending the Island airport. The contractors were importing large quantities of Jarrah, an oily, Australian hardwood that has similar qualities to teak and which was to be used for a temporary roadway across the soft ground. As soon as the boatbuilders realised the wood's properties, Alfred negotiated to buy a number of good baulks after the airport's needs had ended.

One of the project's early acquisitions had been a large band saw and this was now used to turn the heavy baulks of Jarrah into the main deck and coach roof planking, plus the bulkheads and cabin sole down below.

Work progressed steadily and, once the frames were in place, the planking moved ahead quite quickly. In the end there are only one or two planks which are not in continuous lengths. The completion of the hull's construction was the forerunner to a long, hard day's work while the boat was dragged from the shed and down to the beach on rollers so that work could begin on stepping the mast and setting up the rigging.



Pettifox

*Designed by François Vivier,
built by Alfred Hicks and Peter Martin*

LOA	36'0" (10.97m)
Bowsprit	12' (3.66m)
Beam	12'6" (3.81m)
Draught	6'0" (1.83m)
Displacement	12 tons



All rigging and sail details had been included in Francois Vivier's original plans and had been sent to T S Rigging of Maldon and to Penrose Sailmakers of Falmouth.

It had taken just two years for everything to come together and before long the final coats of paint had dried and *Pettifox* took to the water for the first time. The bright red and white of her paintwork are, in fact, the colours that the Hicks family have traditionally painted all their boats but they also reflect the traditional colour scheme of a Camaret Crabber on which *Pettifox* is based. Her name, too, would suggest a French influence but is actually the local name for a small fish, the Five Bearded Rocklin, which is common to the islands.

Pettifox's rig follows the original French style and it is her four-sided topsail that really stands out and I was delighted that, the day Peter and I visited, the wind conditions were just perfect for flying this very particular sail. However, as always seems to be the case when I go on a job with Peter, the weather decided to be unpredictable. When we boarded the helicopter at Penzance, the sun was shining, (as it had done for the past week), but when we touched down on St Mary's the clouds were gathering and, I'm sorry to report, it even rained.

But, nothing daunted we went out into St Mary's Harbour to join the crew.

Like all craft with a working pedigree preparing *Pettifox* for sea and setting sail is really an effortless task. Two of us hauled on the peak and throat halyards while the third tended to the mainsheet. Setting the topsail took a little longer as its slightly askew shape is unfamiliar to a West Country sailor but, once it was set and the jib and the staysail had been set up with their sheets bent on, it was a simple task to slip the mooring and head out into the waters of Crow Sound.

Alfred has made few compromises to modern fashion and consequently *Pettifox* must be sailed standing up – I expected some heavy work. The wind was a light 10 - 15 knots so the tiller lines which were coiled on either bulwark were not needed. To the contrary, the massive tiller belied the minimal weight that was needed to steer the boat, first through the moorings and then with her sails set full in open water.

As one would expect from a craft whose ancestors have worked Channel waters in all weathers, this is a vessel which treats her crew kindly. No quick crashing

tacks on board *Pettifox*, just put the tiller down while one of the crew walks along the lee side to release the headsail sheets and by the time he's back aft, the bow has passed through the wind and it's time to haul the sheets in on the other side.

We sailed across Crow Sound and the southern portion of Tresco Flats before turning west towards the open Atlantic between Bryher and the deserted island of Samson. Here, amidst the multitude of scattered rocky outcrops, *Pettifox* was close to her element, passing the floats and dan buoys which marked the strings of crab pots set by the local island fishermen.

On deck this is a typical crabber with plenty of space down either side of the coach roof and, like her former sisters, she has little by way of creature comforts for those on watch. The standard of workmanship throughout is very high indeed with great care and attention to detail obvious throughout.

At the time of my visit, the cabin was still far from complete as Alfred and Peter had decided to take their time and ensure that the layout was right and met all their requirements. The lack of completion was not a problem though: *Pettifox* is primarily intended for daysailing around the

islands and not for long periods at sea in all weathers.

Anyone planning a similar project of their own or considering approaching Alfred has plenty of scope to change the present almost-open-plan accommodation to provide cabins forward and large quarter berths plus a very spacious saloon and galley. Navigation and watch keeping is done from a doghouse on deck which would afford plenty of shelter.

Now that Alfred has his crabber and is taking some very fortunate visitors round the beautiful islands that are his home, I would have thought that he would be content. Not so: both he and Peter feel they are ready to pass on all that they have learned by building more of these sturdy wooden boats for other people. They now estimate that it would take only 12 months from laying the keel to sailing away. Costings would of course depend upon the stage of completion and the type of fit-out. Whether or not they do build another one, *Pettifox* is fine testament to a lifelong Islander's dream.

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