



Above, left to right: inlaid wood features on the hatch; Freek, the writer and Jan on board *Bluebird*; winch and light fittings; at the Dutch Classic Yacht Regatta; fixtures



18 year RESTORATION

Two brothers found a 1910 Camper & Nicholson 7-Metre yacht in 1987 and set about restoring her. It took longer than expected

WORDS RON VALENT

A remarkable convoy crosses the Nieuwe Meer, a lake on the outskirts of Amsterdam. It is the small tug *Kenau* owned by a sea scout group from Haarlem with the deckless wreck of an old wooden yacht tied alongside. Water spouts from several hoses projecting from the 30-odd-foot yacht. On the port side a section of its hull stretching to below the waterline is actually missing and is replaced by a taut tarpaulin to which some planks have been precariously attached. Two young men working with pumps and buckets are desperately trying to stem the flow of water from small waves that wash effortlessly over the top of the makeshift plug. Undoubtedly there is a story to tell here.

This incident took place on Saturday, 29 August 1987. The two young men were 23-year-old Freek and Jan Kraak, 25, from Haarlem, the Netherlands. The two brothers had been sailing and working on the fleet of the St Joseph scouting group for years and frequently also sailed on yachts owned by their friends. Shortly before this adventurous journey they had decided it was time to buy their own boat. After some searching they saw an advert offering a yacht in Amsterdam that fitted their taste and budget. After a couple of visits the deal was struck and on 1 August that year, and for 5,500 Dutch guilders (about £1,500) they became the proud owners of a beautiful International 7-Metre from 1910.

The word beautiful referred more to the ship's lines than her condition as the former owner had been stranded halfway between what was supposed to have been a restoration and the demolition phase where the cabin top, deck, almost all her deckbeams, her interior and engine had been removed. The pictures they got with the sale were, however, of a beautiful yacht under sail and with these images in their minds they made the first of many schedules. A couple of months' hard winter work, launch her in May and participate in the first races of the Dutch Classic Yacht Association in June! That was the plan but in the end 18 winters were to pass before the by-now-middle-aged men finally set sail with their *Bluebird*. Eighteen long years in which the passion, patience and attention to detail of Jan and Freek ensured that *Bluebird* became a unique and extraordinary yacht.

SUNK AND RAISED

Following the purchase, the brothers prepared for the trip to their Haarlem home. On Saturday, 8 August she was launched and towed to a berth where, said the shipyard boss, it was so shallow she could sit on her keel while she took up. But on arrival the next morning all they saw of their new yacht were the mooring lines rising from the water! Three weeks later and after countless adventures and disasters they managed to raise *Bluebird* which was solidly stuck in the mud. In one of these attempts a crane tore off a whole section of the port side of the hull. It was already an epic in the making.

Schedule No 2 called for three years of work and launching by mid-1990. At the time Freek worked with naval architect Jaap Kramer and during the winter of 1987/88 he drew the lines plan and detailed drawings with meticulously-worked-out construction details to be implemented over years. From day 1, despite the inexperience of Jan and Freek with a project of this size,

their approach was professional and precise. The only things really missing were proper facilities and the resources that would normally be associated with a project of this size. Their workshop was a muddy patch of grass in the corner of a boatyard on the banks of the Spaarne River with an inexpensive plastic tent built over the boat and old pallets as floor against the mud, which sometimes froze solid. An old drum stoked with logs or discarded parts of the boat was the heating system. Over the years, as successive tents were blown to pieces in winter storms the material improved until towards the end heavy, former tarps from train carriages were used. After work, tools were locked in a large steel box pushed through the hole in the hull every evening.

WORK BEGINS

The first thing done was to ensure that the floppy, broken hull was coached back into what they believed to be the right shape. Years later when they got to compare her with other surviving 7-Metres from the same period they found that their gut-feeling system of push-it-up-a-bit there and jack-the-hull-outwards-a-bit there had restored *Bluebird* back to within fractions of her original shape. Heavy plywood supports on the outside of the hull and temporarily attached cross beams inside ensured that she was fixed in the required shape. A first batch of oak was of such poor quality that it began to rot before it was even sawn and fitted and was used as stove fuel. A second batch of far more expensive iroko and oak was of better quality and the project got going in earnest.

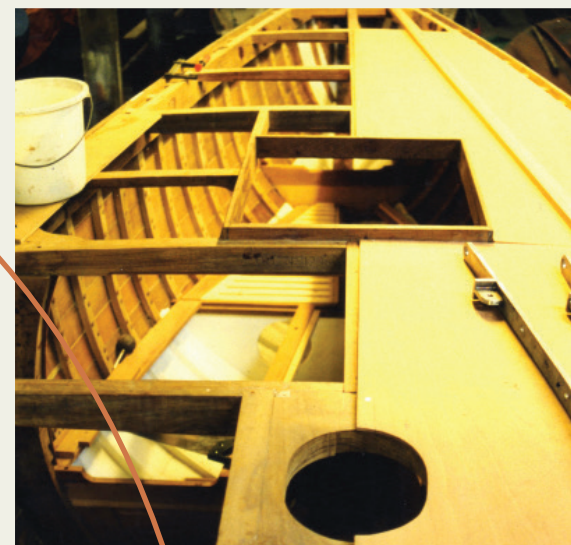
The oak was for new frames that would be steamed and fastened in the traditional manner with thousands of copper rivets. Although initially meant only for extra frames where bulkheads would later be attached and in the area around the mast, in the end practically every frame in the yacht was replaced. The hull was originally mahogany but as this was too expensive they decided on iroko where planks were replaced. The transom was completely rotten and made new while the original horn timber was deemed acceptable but reinforced by glueing and bolting a 5cm-thick iroko plank on top of it.

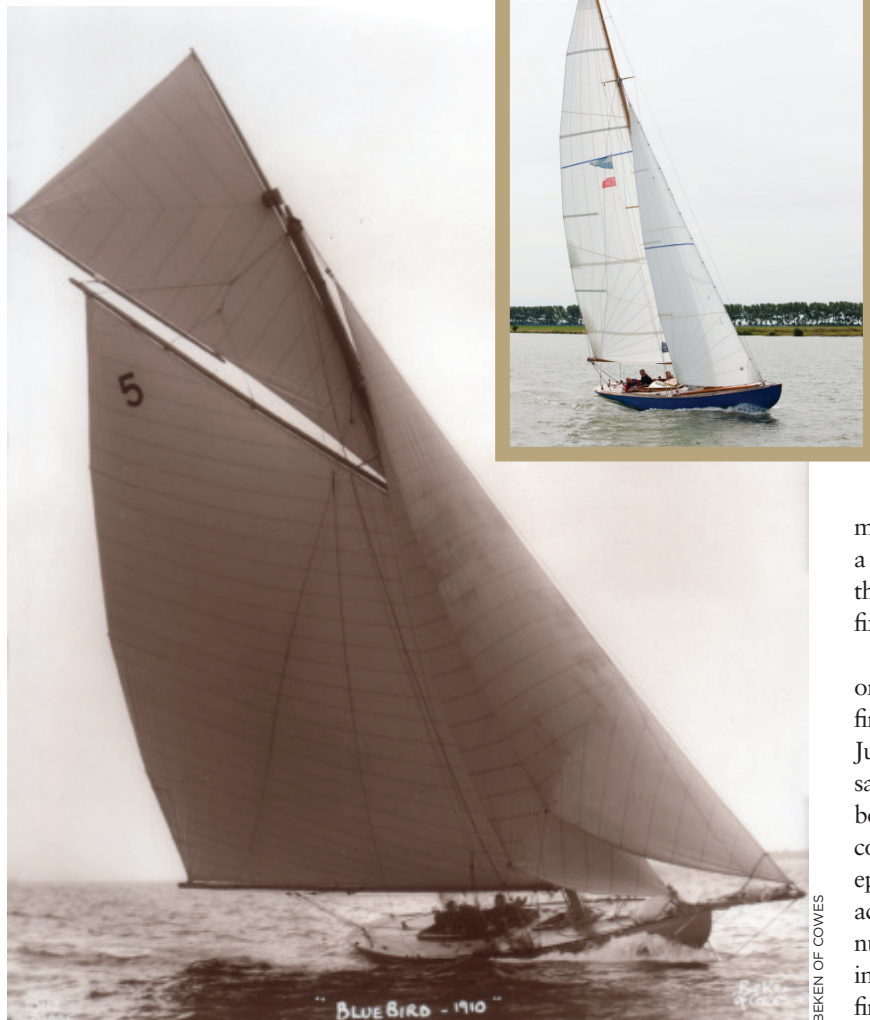
Bluebird has had a bermudan rig for most of her life and so Jan and Freek decided to stay with that and not the striking – but more complex and expensive – gaff rig from 1910. Expecting a lot more backstay tension than the original structure was calculated for, they decided on the extra strength in the stern area.

The winter of 1988/89 passed with the steaming of new frames and scarthing on an extension of the beamsheaf to fix the part of the hull that was broken off. The steam box was an eight-metre-long section of a city heating pipe that they got from a friend. The warmth of the gas burner kept them warm and working during their second winter ashore.

Jan and Freek learned the profession and the tricks of a ship restorer as they went along. During the day and evenings they worked on the boat while at night they read books to work out if what they had done a few hours earlier was correct. For instance after the red-hot, steamed frames in the stern where the bend was rather extreme kept on breaking, they cut them in half for most of their length to reduce the mass of the wood that had to bend. A week later they would remove the clamps and

Facing page, top: over the years since 1987, the painstaking work of Jan and Freek Kraak has borne fruit. First *Bluebird's* floppy and damaged hull was coaxed, often by eye, into shape. New oak frames were steamed and fastened with copper rivets. Iroko was the replacement for whole planks and perfect varnished surfaces completed the classic look



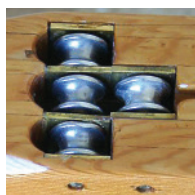


glue the halves back together. It worked perfectly and saved a lot of oak. Initially riveting was done by hand but when they realised that there were still several thousand to go, they bought a second-hand compressor. This also made them immensely popular with the neighbours next to the yard as working on the boat was mainly done when the weather was fine with their neighbours just on the other side of the fence in their gardens. For this reason, the frames were only partially riveted, then finished at a later stage in the shed.

In March 1990 they started with the systematic replacing of the planking. At first they thought that a large portion of the hull could be saved, but when they kept on pulling new rivets straight through the old mahogany planking they realised they would have to do a lot more. Ultimately about 70 per cent of the hull was replaced and a plan, number 3, was drawn up.

By August 1991, the broken section of the hull was replaced but work slowed as Freek was busy with his studies. Jan continued worked on making a complete new stem from a massive piece of oak, finally mounted in June 1993. A year later, the deck beams were in place, and the main bulkhead. *Bluebird* was starting to look like a yacht once more, Jan and Freek felt the hull was now strong enough to be moved and the keel bolts were sawn through and the hull lifted off the lead keel. Using an ingenious system of beams, steel drums and a forklift the hull was turned over and pushed into the nearby shed of the boatyard. So finally, in October 1994, they could work in the relative luxury of a shed.

Above: Jan and Freek were tantalised by original photographs of their new acquisition from the start, which inspired their restoration (inset)



SAND, FILL, SLEEP... REPEAT

At an early stage the brothers had decided *Bluebird's* hull would be epoxy sheathed. Despite the substantial restoration they found themselves doing, they stuck by this decision. Given the quality of their work one can now safely say that the epoxy was constructively unnecessary. Without it *Bluebird* would be as strong, if not stronger, than the day she slipped down the ways at the famous Camper & Nicholson shipyard in Southampton all those years ago.

In the summer of 1996 all seams were routed open so they could be filled with epoxy and pine slats. But first Jan and Freek considered giving the boat a little more sheer by jacking her up in the middle. Arguably this would have made her prettier, but a real Metre-class yacht has little or no sheer and therefore, faithful to the original design, they decided to fix *Bluebird* forever in this shape.

There followed a time of endless sanding and filling in order to get the hull perfectly smooth, after which the first layer of epoxy could be applied. Freek wrote: "18 July, 1996. Belt sander No 2 is bought, as well as a lot of sanding belts; new engine for the old belt sander also bought." By alternating blue and white epoxy filler they could clearly see where, after sanding again, additional epoxy had to be applied. On 18 December 1996 an action list and a new schedule was drawn up. In plan number 4 you can read: "For 1996 and 1997, work inside the shed; winter 97-98 move outside again for finishing and launch in spring 1998." Healthy optimism!

SHARING THE LOAD

Freek studied architectural design at an art school and from 1985 worked for seven years as assistant to Jaap Kramer but in reality as a draftsman making line drawings and interiors. He made dozens of detailed drawings of every component that was to be restored or created new. In particular, the drawings of the deck and mast fittings that Freek designed then ordered in Taiwan, are a visual feast.

Jan is an ICT professional but maybe missed his calling as a boatbuilder as looking at his work you would be forgiven for thinking that an accomplished shipwright had been engaged there. In the early years Jan was mainly responsible for the construction work while Freek, busy with work and his studies, would help when an extra hand was needed. Later, when Jan was occupied with his business career and a family with four children, Freek took on more and more of the physical work such as the finishing of the cabin, cockpit and deck.

In October 1997 *Bluebird* was rolled out of the shed and turned over again. Back in the shed she was reunited with her lead keel and the cockpit and cabin began to take shape. Jan and Freek had become masters in the preparation of various components at home in their living room or even the bedroom and in the case of the mast, the long hallway in the former hospital where Freek lives. Freek always made detailed drawings first, sometimes followed by a scale model and then a plywood 1:1 mock up! So the interior and cockpit evolved and changed over years. In the same fashion



Above: much of the interior, including bunks, cupboards, hatches, even the cabin sole, was made by the brothers at home and fitted later

cupboards, bunks, cabin sole, hatches, doors and anything else made at home would get at least seven coats of varnish before ending up on board.

In the spring of 2000 the coach roof with its sliding hatch was finished, bunks being installed in the forepeak and – practice makes perfect – a detailed schedule number 5 is made, giving a launch date of June 2002.

During a trip to Stockholm in the winter of 2001 I visited a boatyard where I chanced upon a motley collection of old masts languishing under a thick layer of snow. Behind two massive poles that had once belonged to two 10-Metre-class yachts I noticed a long, slim one that was grey and worn on the topside but when I turned it over it was beautifully varnished Sitka spruce! It had been hanging there for 20 years and once belonged to a 6-Metre. I remembered how Freek had said that they couldn't afford a new mast and that finishing the boat would have to wait till they found funds for that.

I thought that a 3rd Rule 6-Metre mast would be big enough for a 1st Rule 7-Metre and called Freek. I offered to bring it back in a truck with a boat I had bought to restore. Freek was thrilled, the price was right and with an inch to spare when hung obliquely next to my boat in an empty flower truck returning to the Netherlands it was a smooth and affordable delivery to Haarlem. After sanding, scarthing on an extension at both ends to replace a dodgy bit and also to extend it to exactly the maximum length the Class Rules for 7-Metres allow and dozens of layers of varnish, the mast was as new.

To understand why Jan and Freek spent another five years finishing *Bluebird*, take a closer look at the boat itself. For instance: each screw is capped with a plug that was cut from the same piece of wood and therefore fits perfectly in colour and grain. The deck prisms are not simply screwed onto the deck but are bordered by an intricately cut, varnished mahogany inlay which sets them off beautifully against the laid teak deck. A small antique-looking cabinet with tiny doors fitted with facet cut glass was tailor-made by Freek. Inside, the dials and instruments off the electrical switchboard are mounted on a hand-cut bronze plate. Freek spent weeks just drawing and making this little jewel. Perfectly fitting moulds were first made of the diesel and water tanks

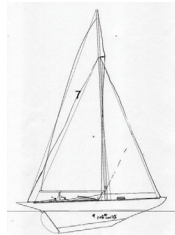
after which they were recreated in wood epoxy. Five sheets of drawings show the details of the engine mounting. A wooden mock-up was made which was then taken to a blacksmith and copied in steel. Freek made a model of the deck in autoCAD which shows the length, width and curvature of every single piece of teak fitted.

On Sunday, 19 June 2005 *Bluebird* was finally ready to be launched. On a sunny day, watched by friends and family, she emerged slowly from between the green doors of the shed and moved down the ways into the Spaarne River. Her striking blue hull and perfect varnish shone in the bright sunlight. "A goosebump moment I will never forget," both brothers now recall. Jan was relaxed. Freek was quite nervous as he had done all the calculations and where the brightly painted waterline ended up, inches below or way above it, was his responsibility. To his relief she floated slightly above her lines and once mast and sailing gear were on board, she settled perfectly.

After spending the summer of 2005 as a motorboat as the mast wasn't completely finished, in May 2006 *Bluebird* was finally rigged and the sails arrived. Late in the afternoon on 3 June, Jan and Freek set sail for the first time on a lake near Haarlem. "There was only a 6 or 7 knot breeze but she moved so effortlessly through the water we just couldn't stop grinning," Jan still remembers clearly. A week later they were in Volendam where the VKSJ, the Dutch Classic Yacht Association, was to celebrate its 25th anniversary and where *Bluebird* was entered in a race for the first time in many years.

I was on board as guest helmsman and itching to test her potential but Jan and Freek, understandably after 18 years of work, had difficulty mixing in the heat of the battle and started quite conservatively, minutes behind the rest. They even kept their ensign up to indicate that they were not actually racing. Most yachts in the fleet immediately hoisted a spinnaker but despite this *Bluebird* kept up and slowly sailed forward through the field. In the end we came in fourth with *Caribee*, a famous ocean racer designed by Philip Rhodes, the 5.5-Metre *Ballerina* sailed by a former world champion in that class and the Tumlaen *Svalan* just ahead of us.

All are tried and proven racers but *Bluebird* has now placed her calling card and a glimpse of her potential. 🌐



BLUEBIRD

BUILT
1910

DESIGNER
**Charles E
Nicholson**

LOA
**34ft 5in
(10.5m)**

LWL
**24ft 11in
(7.6m)**

BEAM
**7ft 2in
(2.2m)**

DRAUGHT
**5ft 3in
(1.6m)**

SAIL AREA
**581sq ft
(54m²)**