WITHIN REASON, DO WHAT YOU WANT.

By Nige Dale.

Have you ever looked at manmade object and asked yourself, “how did they make that?” Can you look at a piece of cutlery, a plate, anything that is in or around your home and say “I know how they made that.” The “how did they make that?” question is one that has been ever present throughout my life, sometimes answered with reading and visiting museums, and sometimes answered by accident whilst looking for the answer to something else. As a species we have come a long way in the uses of technology from the early days of Fire and Flint. In modern society the skills of making fires and flint tools are no longer needed as mediums of survival, but our knowledge of how to use fire and other raw materials supplied from the ground have expanded and has given us the commodities and technologies we use today.

All of what we use today started from someone somewhere working out how it could be done, and often when making something new for functional or leisure use we look to historic data for reference, so what we make is in some way is an evolutional step forwards. Boats from all ages are/ were built by craftsmen, for their own use, or for people who bought that boat for their own requirements. Historically craftsmen couldn’t read or write and learnt their trade by experience, in later years’ documentation seems to be limited to the requirements of accountancy, bureaucracy and the occasional sheer plan. Either way the need to write down how you make the boat and the whys’ and wherefores of usage was, or is, rarely done. It is almost as if this information is the private business of the builder and of the user, and I concede in most cases it probably is, but unlike the fields of science where documentation is a must, people with traditional, (always been there) trades rarely consider that there maybe someone in the future who would like to learn from their knowledge. Trying to find relevant information can be difficult but occasionally you fall upon small snippets of information that will let you put the jigsaw puzzle of data together to form a greater picture.

Research into any subject can be frustrating, or exciting, or both, for example; when I was trying to increase my own knowledge of coracles, I reviewed a few sources for further information. One source was a book, “The Coracle” by J. Geraint Jenkins, and is a good book of the subject and introduces the reader to the variety of coracles that were available to the author when he wrote the book. However, without the authors’ research and the supportive captions of the photographs within the book, and the views of recognisable local structures in the back ground of these photographs, you would be very unlikely to note the differences between the coracles of the Teifi, Towi, Taf and the Usk. Another complication is that in some of the photographs of coracles from the same river, had their own individual

minor differences added into the mix, which leads on to other questions of whether these differences were by design, necessity, or a craftsman signature.

Digressing into a historical muse;

Ug came out of his cave, and dragged away a fallen tree to clear the area in front of his cave, on the insistence of his female companion. Pulling the fallen tree away from the cave, Ug decided to throw it into the river*[1]. The throwing part was a little beyond his capability so by hauling it backwards, he dragged the tree into the river. Ug found himself separated from the front of his cave and his female companion by the tree he had just dragged into the river. In an attempt to re-join his companion, and the warmth of the cave, Ug started to climb over the tree in an attempt to return to the cave. In climbing onto the tree, Ug upset the centre of balance causing the tree to become dislodged from the bank and start to drift off down stream. An awareness came to Ug that he was moving, and that awareness moved his thoughts away from the cave and its warmth, to the feeling of freedom and adventure that started to wash over him, (probably some of the river water as well) and the realisation that he was moving without walking.

A little downstream from the cave of Ug, lived his neighbour, a chap called Al, who stood on the river bank and watched him float past on his tree. Al was of the competitive type and not wanting to be out done by Ug, thought he could try this as well. Just beyond the front of his cave he found a very large piece of wood, and dragged and heaved it into the river. When Al finally sat on his very large piece of wood, nothing happened for a few moments because the flow of the river needed to take effect, then the log moved, and Al started his drift down river after his neighbour Ug, and so maritime transport started its evolution.

The vessels of Ug and Al, are the same in general category, ie a large piece of wood, but they are different in as much as they are at differing points of manufacture, and or evolution, where the tree is still recognisable as a tree, and the very large piece of wood is a section of a tree. Boats of a common industry or usage are most likely to be of a similar design or style particularly when found within a geographical area and therefore boats need to be considered in the styles of, or the types of, rather than in a category.

Visit any harbour industrial or leisure orientated and you will see that every boat is different, even mass produced modern vessels will have their own individual nuance. Confirmed in my belief that nothing is set in stone (apart from fossils, and that is another subject altogether), plans need to evolve, otherwise the joy of invention can be missed. I will openly say that all the things we have today, will have been dreamed of, or built in the past, and only the technology to achieve those dreams or plans that have changed. Those

changes in technology have ignited the sparks of innovation, and fired intrigue to accommodate this expanding circle of knowledge. Nearly every adjective when used with reference to design or evolution has a “is new or modified” bent to the description. Personally, I have shortened the length of a model boat to fit into a car. Whilst keeping all other dimensions proportionate. Reduced the sail plan area to offer a greater flexibility of sailing and operational control. I have introduced a fin keel and ballast bulb onto a sailing boat that would have never had one on the prototype of that vessel.

What has been mentioned here has been done in real life situations where the needs of adjustment and alteration have arisen. Boats have been lengthened and shortened, sail plans changed to suit the owner or the needs of the boat, and false keels fitted to aide stability, refurbished to undertake another maritime trade, converted for leisure use, and the list goes on and is potentially endless. The inevitable result of these adjustments and alterations done over time is the point where the original subject has been altered sufficiently to be superseded in this quasi evolutional process by its successor. The Boatyards and Shipyards of today still do what they always have done, they build boats, they repair boats, and they alter some of the original facets of that boat to suit the current requirements of that vessel and its user.

If you are making a museum replica of a prototype, then strict observance to detail is essential, but if you are making a model to sail as an example (which is something I prefer to do) then there is a bit of flexibility available if you need it. In a conversation with a tradesman working at a boat yard near Whitby about obtaining plans for the building of a model Coble, stated that; “there were no real plans as such and all Cobles were built to the requirements of the customer”, this gave me a confidence to make alterations to the model I was building to accommodate what I needed to achieve, and what I was capable of doing. In answer to those who would point out that a facet of your model was not correct for the style, I will offer some words from a book, “Sailing into the Past” a book about replicas built of historic ships from around the world, and words by the Traditional Master Shipwright, Mr. Niinuma Tomenoshin of Japan, who oversaw the building of historic replicas of wooden Japanese trading ships, he says; each ship is a culmination of his past experience, and whilst historians debated whether his (Niinumas) ships were authentic and scoured documents and manuscripts for proof, Niinuma regarded his own experience as just another link in a chain of craftsmen. Niinuma says that while a professor may discover some evidence during his research they are just pinpoints from the vast historical darkness. Nothing is therefore right and by extension, nothing is wrong when building a model boat or prototype of a style, which effectively enables you to do what you want. (Within reason.)

*1 The disposal of rubbish into a convenient watercourse is not a modern phenomenon, in AD 97 in the office of Water Commissioner for the City of Rome, Sextus Julius Frontinius imposed heavy fines on those who were caught throwing rubbish into any watercourse of Rome.