



GARDNER PICKERING

Iain Oughtred at 81

A fertile mind and a growing design catalog

by Nic Compton

It's strange how our lives so often run in circles. The last time I interviewed Iain Oughtred—back in 2008, when I visited him at his home in Scotland in preparation for the biography I was writing about him—he was fussing about one of his new designs, the 30' Haiku, his interpretation of the famous Commodore Ralph Munroe sharpie EGRET. The new boat had just been launched, and he was concerned that the builder hadn't exactly followed his design, making it heavier and more yachty than its lightweight, simple forebears. At that point, Iain was living alone in a small cottage on the Isle of Skye in Scotland. He had no computer, and thus drew all of his designs on a drawing board, with a photocopier to help.

When I ring him 12 years later, much has changed, but much hasn't. He now has a computer, but is still struggling to come to terms with that technology, so we eventually give up trying to talk via Skype or Zoom and

settle for the good old-fashioned telephone. My call is prompted by the launching of LUELY, only the second Haiku ever built, this time closely following his plans (Barnaby Scott's LUELY, featured on the preceding pages). While he acknowledges that the original Haiku turned out just fine, he is obviously excited to see how this lighter (though also fairly yachty) version of the design performs. For, despite what anyone else might think about traditional wooden boats, Iain is concerned with performance. Not for nothing did he win the Gwen 12 National Championship in his native Australia in 1964, and not for nothing do his designs regularly win the Caledonian Raid in his adopted country of Scotland.

Regular readers of *WoodenBoat* can't fail to have noticed Iain's enormous contribution to epoxy-plywood boat construction, starting (appropriately enough) with his Acorn design, described by Maynard Bray as a

Above—The boat that launched a movement. Iain Oughtred stands beside the original St. Ayles Skiff, CHRIS O'KANNAIRD, at the 2019 Skiffie Worlds. CHRIS O'KANNAIRD was built by the kit manufacturer Alec Jordan and launched on Halloween 2009; since then, more than 350 boats have been built to the design.



MIKHAIL MARKOV

The 22'7" Kotik is a stretched version of Iain's Wee Seal design. The prototype was built in Holland and fitted out by owner Mikhail Markov in Finland. "The little draft of my boat is a huge advantage—we can always find good places to overnight, both in marinas and 'wild,'" says Markov. At least six more Kotiks have been built since Markov's WHITE FANG.

"sweet-lined, slippery little jewel" in the January/February 1984 issue (WB No. 56). Since then, Iain has designed a comprehensive range of beautiful epoxy-plywood boats, mostly aimed at amateur builders though also produced commercially by professional yards. His back catalogue now numbers 118 designs, ranging from the 6'9" Feather pram to the 22' double-ended pocket cruiser Grey Seal. The others are dories (for example, Amberjack), canoes (MacGregor), rowing-sailing dinghies (Tammie Norrie), and "a very successful line of Norwegian faerings (Arctic Tern and Caledonian Yawl, which are his two best-selling kits at Hewes & Co. in Blue Hill, Maine). The 30' Haiku is his largest available design to date.

The biggest news since I last interviewed Iain is his development of the St. Ayles Skiff. The idea was the brainchild of the kit manufacturer Alec Jordan of Jordan Boats of Somerset, England, in conjunction with the Scottish Fisheries Museum at Anstruther near Edinburgh. The idea was to revive the rowing regattas that had been organized by miners on the east coast of Scotland in the 1950s, which were often rowed in boats they had built from timber salvaged from the mines. Iain was commissioned to design a boat based on a model of a Fair Isle Skiff that was on display in the museum, but with more beam and more depth to increase stability and make it suitable for beginners.

What happened next was beyond anyone's wildest expectations.

"It took off like wildfire," says Iain. "As more people

saw the boats, more got inspired. There were so many people involved in some of the community groups they decided to build a second boat, which meant they could race against each other. It was a steep learning curve for them, as many people had never rowed before, and the thwart spacing is quite close so if your timing is a little off you end up banging into each other."

The first St. Ayles Skiff (pronounced St. Isles) was launched in October 2009, and by the time the first regatta was held at Anstruther a year later, there were ten boats. It was then that the class governing body, the Scottish Coastal Rowing Association (scottishcoastalrowing.org), was formed "to encourage boat building and rowing and racing of coastal rowing boats around the Scottish coastline."

Since then, the idea has exploded, with more than 70 community groups having been set up in Scotland and 250 kits sold in the U.K. alone. More than 100 kits have been sold overseas, including 39 in the United States, 40 in Australia and New Zealand, 21 in the Netherlands, and others in Canada, France, Ireland, and South Africa.

And the boat's popularity shows no sign of waning. Some 55 clubs and 2,700 rowers attended the Skiffie Worlds at Stranraer in southwest Scotland in 2019, including teams from the United States, Australia, South Africa, Canada, and mainland Europe. The event was watched by 30,000 spectators—even Princess Anne was persuaded to come along to see what all the fuss was about—and is thought to have been worth up



STEVE GOURLAY

A line of St. Ayles Skiffs start a race during the 2013 Skiffie Worlds in Ullapool, on Scotland's northwest coast. Stunning scenery, beautiful boats, and a spirit of inclusiveness...it's little wonder this is Iain's most successful design to date.

to £4 million (about \$5.2 million) to the local economy. Not bad for a bunch of wooden rowing boats.

"One of the major attractions of the class is that all kinds of people can learn to row," says Iain. "Many women have got involved, either as part of a crew or whole crews. At Stranraer, there were many types of races, for under 18s, over 60s—at least one rower was over 80—and three separate women's classes."

The St. Ayles Skiff was soon followed by the Wemyss Skiff, which is a scaled-down version designed to be rowed as a single or a double. Apart from the desirability of having a smaller boat for people to row when there wasn't room on a St. Ayles Skiff, the point of the new boat seems to have been to channel the manpower and enthusiasm for building boats that the movement has created. Community groups in Scotland not only loved rowing wooden boats, it turned out, but they loved building them, too.

Eventually, the so-called Picnic Class was created. It is open to all boats measuring 16'5" (5m) and under, with fixed seats and no outriggers. The class is thus limited to the use of oarlocks or tholepins mounted on the gunwales. The rules also stipulated that the profile of the sheer should be concave (or "like a smile" according to one SCRA report) and convex when viewed from above. The idea was to suggest traditionally shaped boats

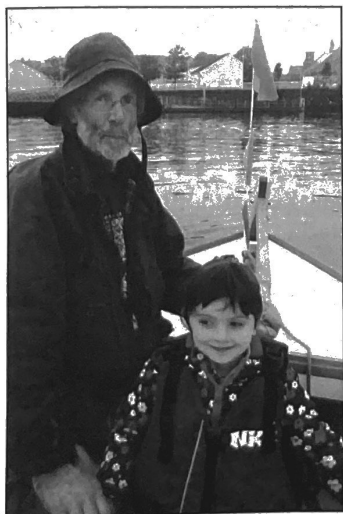
rather than more box-shaped modern racing rowboats. According to the class rules, "The boat shall be capable of carrying a passenger and picnic basket when being rowed without said passenger getting wet or feeling undignified."

But it hasn't been all about the St. Ayles Skiff. In 2008, Iain received a commission for a "stretched Wee Seal." This might seem strange when the 18' Wee Seal was itself a smaller version of the 22'2" Grey Seal. But amateur builder Mikhail Markov, who had previously built three of Iain's designs, preferred the simplicity of the Wee Seal's construction, and Iain duly obliged, producing a whole new set of lines to create the 22'7" Kotik (the Russian word for seal). The end result might look remarkably similar to the Grey Seal, but the displacement figure says it all: at 1,800 lbs, the Kotik is half the weight of the original design.

The hull for first Kotik was professionally built by Bert van Baar in Holland and finished by Mikhail in Finland, close to the border with Russia. That boat, WHITE FANG, was launched in 2015 and took part in the Finnish Raid soon after. Other Kotiks followed in Austria, Holland, and Poland, and in 2015 one was built at the Boatbuilding Academy in Lyme Regis, England.

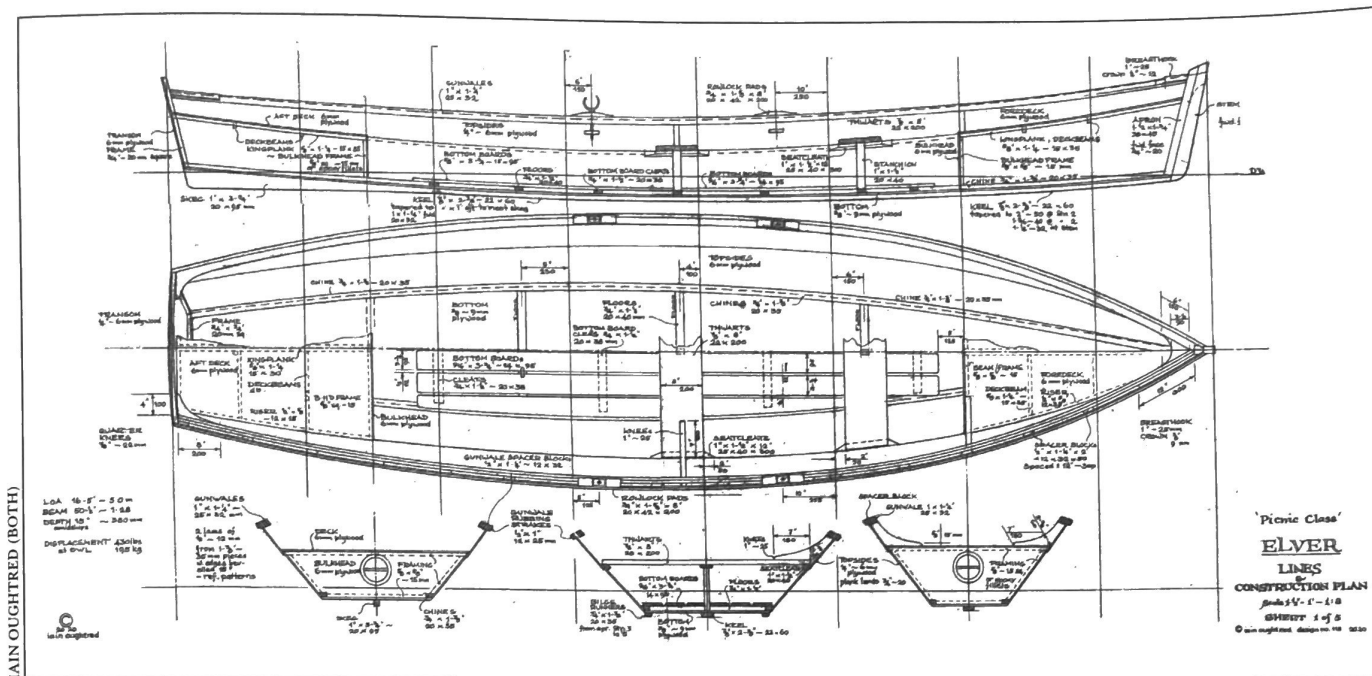
"It confirms a belief I've had for a while," says Iain, "that most of these boats are better if they're a little bit longer."

At the other end of the size spectrum, Iain's collection of "traditional dinghies," which currently ranges from the 7'2" Auklet to the 16' Penny Fee, received an addition with the 9'6" Sea Hen. Like her other feathered sisters, the boat's upright stems and burdensome hull make it an ideal tender or knockabout dinghy, and the prototype was duly built by a Hungarian amateur, Laszlo Sztojka, for his 11-year-old son and launched in March 2013. That was followed in September 2020 by a request for a cradle boat, based on the Sea Hen design but scaled down by 50 percent—though you won't find that one mentioned in the Iain Oughtred design catalog.



JUDIE FERGUSON

In 2014, Iain acquired a new family, including a surrogate granddaughter, Faith. Here, they are attending the launch of the West Coast Skiff (see page 37).



Iain's latest design, the 16'5" Elver, which was conceived for the emerging Picnic Class (see page 38). The flat-bottomed skiff is a stretched version of Iain's 15' Pike design, with a more upright stem to increase the waterline length.

An interesting trend is that, increasingly, these boats are being built traditionally, out of solid wood, rather than plywood and epoxy.

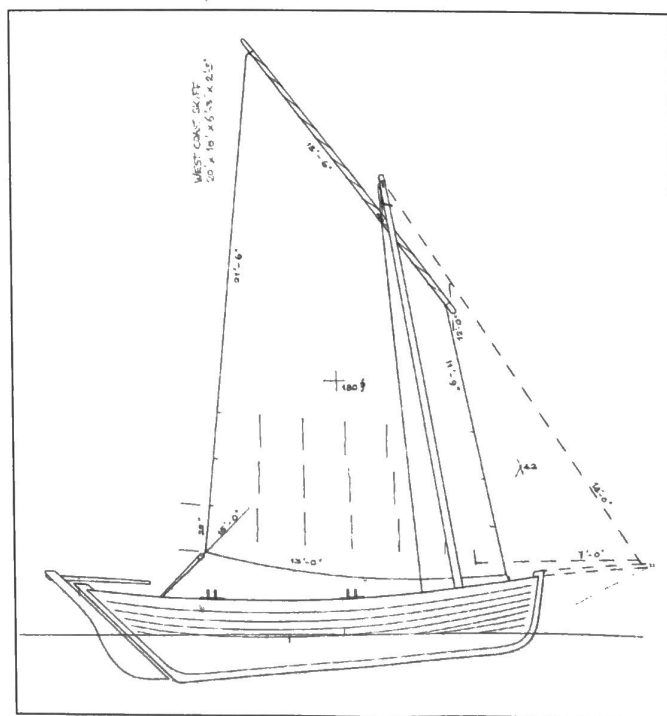
Between new designs and old designs revisited, Iain has been active for a just-turned-octogenarian. When I spoke to him in October 2020, a few weeks after his 81st birthday, he was working on plans for a nesting tender for a new 50' cruising ketch designed by Nigel Irens. Someone else wanted a 15' version of his faering design, Elfyn, to build in solid wood. And he was putting the finishing touches to a new design for the Picnic Class, the 16'5" Elver. That's his design No. 118, and he describes it as "a kind of straight-stem light dory-skiff."

His next commission was for an 18' 4" faering to be built in the traditional Norwegian style and, even though he must have designed half a dozen similar boats, his excitement for the project was palpable. "I can't wait to get into this one!" he emailed me a few days after the interview. "Maybe it's hardly economical as a one-off, with all the necessary fine detail drawing, but that's irrelevant; it's such a beautiful idea it has to be done."

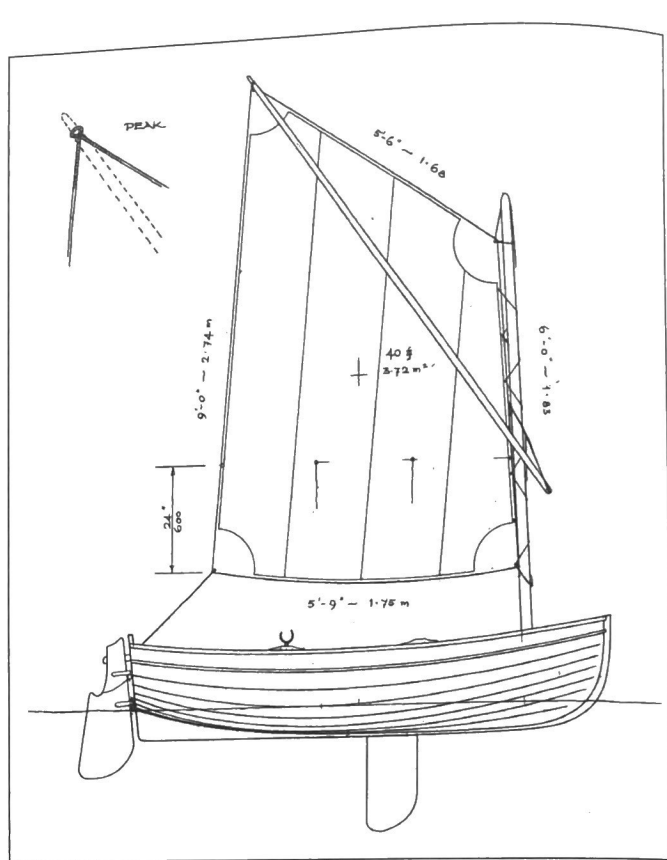
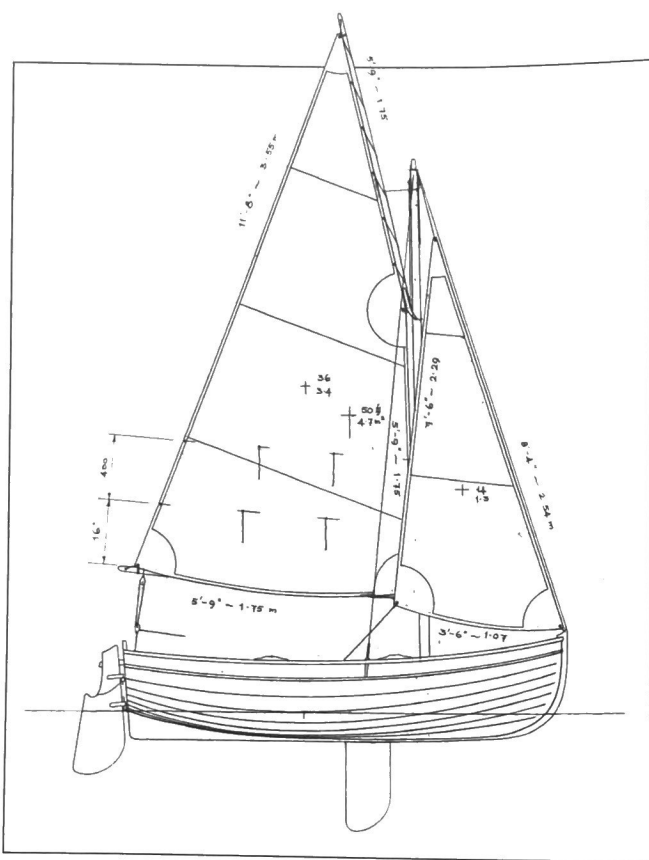
But perhaps the biggest change since I last interviewed Iain is in his personal circumstances. When I visited him in Scotland in 2008, he was living alone in near-isolation, leading an almost ascetic way of life, seemingly alone with his boats and his drawings, apart

from forays to a monthly folk club and the occasional storytelling festival. This time, when I speak to him on the phone, there is a constant clatter and the sound of a small child in the background. Six years ago, his friend Judie moved in with him, along with her teen-aged daughter and regular visits from the grandchildren. Iain has become a surrogate grandfather and has developed a strong bond with the youngest, Faith, whom he has known since she was two.

"Things are a bit chaotic here now," he tells me, "and things are piled up on my photocopier." But surely, I



Iain designed the 22' West Coast Skiff for the GalGael trust in Glasgow. The organization was founded by the late Colin Macleod and runs boatbuilding courses to help the disadvantaged and promote community regeneration. The West Coast Skiff was inspired by the traditional Loch Fyne Skiffs (see WB No. 218), which were used to fish herring on the west coast of Scotland in the mid-1800s.



IAN OUGHTRED (BOTH)

Above, left—The 9' 6" Sea Hen is a recent addition to Iain's range of traditional dinghies. It is bigger than the Auk and smaller than the Puffin. There are numerous rig options, including the gunter. **Above, right**—There is also a sprit rig for the Sea Hen. This rig has the advantage of lowering the center of effort, which improves stability.

ask, nothing gets piled up on his precious drawing board? "Well, yes, occasionally," he replies with a chuckle. "Besides, I hardly have any time for drawing now with the infinite struggle to catch up with all the emails."

Not only that but, whereas 12 years ago he led a hand-to-mouth existence, living on porridge and vegetable stew, the increase in sales of his plans and kits (not least thanks to the St. Ayles Skiff) has given him some financial stability. But he still complains he hasn't got enough money to buy the wood for his next building project. And neither can he find a dependable apprentice to work with him to build a boat. But then some things never change.

Iain still doesn't have his own website, other than www.oughtredboats.com, which boatbuilder Rob Ayliffe

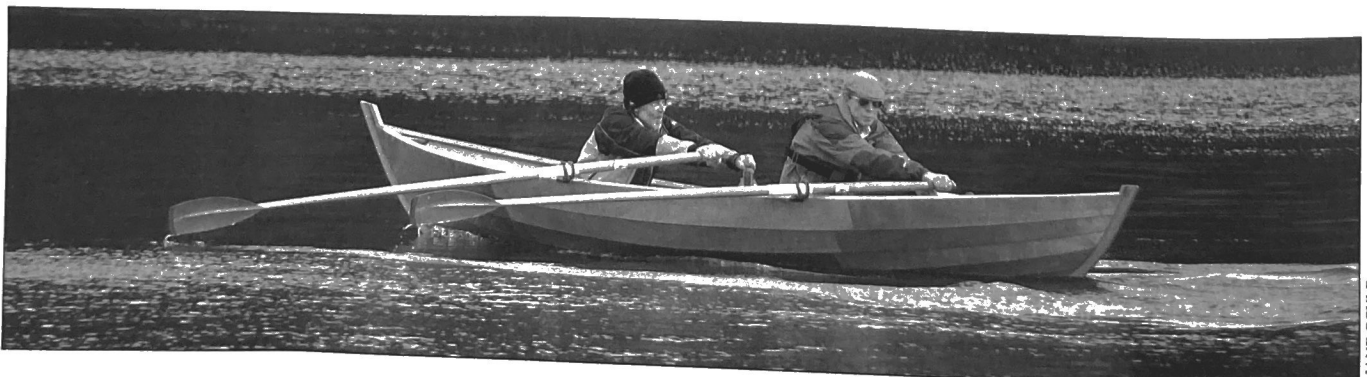
runs on his behalf from Mount Barker, Australia. However, he hopes to launch one soon, after he finds time to write the text. When I ask him how people locate his designs, he replies without missing a beat, "Well, I'm quite famous, you know."

It's a throwaway line, meant as a joke more than anything, but I'm happy to hear him say it. For a man who demands so little from life and who is normally painfully modest about his achievements, it's a welcome acknowledgment that on some level he is aware of his place in the world.



Nic Compton's biography, Iain Oughtred: A Life in Wooden Boats, is available from The WoodenBoat Store (www.woodenboatstore.com).

The Wemyss Skiff was created as a one- or two-person alternative to the much larger St. Ayles Skiff. It now races alongside other boats in the Picnic Class created by the Scottish Coastal Rowing Association in 2015. The photo shows Iain (left) and Alec Jordan rowing the prototype in Ullapool.



JANE COYLE