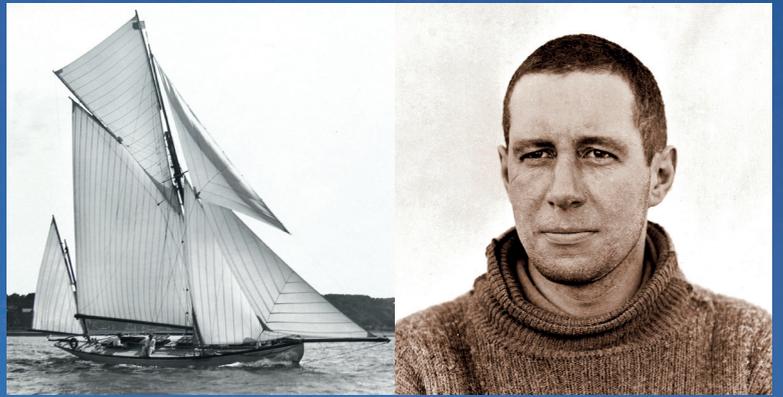




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1901 YAWL

BEKEN OF COWES



# Captain Oates' Saunterer returns to help heroes

After decades of alterations and 15 years ashore, resstoration of Oates' Sibbick yawl needed a lot of work on a very tight budget. *Steffan Meyric Hughes* met the couple who made it happen. Photos by *Andrew Carter*

**Y**ou can get spoilt as a yachting journalist. I mean, see one million-dollar rebuild and you've seen them all – new bronze winches, Egyptian cotton-looking sails and interiors that range from the authentic to the bland comfort of the soft furnishings floor of a department store. It's a good thing that yachts continue to attract owners with the means to carry out rebuilds that will fortify them against the arrows of the future – but it's sometimes at the cost of patina – and character.

*Saunterer* is different. The flush deck, twin gullwing skylights and long counter stern are enough to stop a jaded yacht journalist in his tracks. And restraint in her restoration means that she's kept the patina of age and looks like what she is: a 111-year-old boat, brought back to life with sympathy and a determination to reuse original materials.

From 1908 until his death in 1912, she was owned by Captain Lawrence Oates of the ill-fated Scott Antarctic expedition of 1911, the Oates of the



legendary last words, “I’m just going outside and may be some time.” It’s hard to think of any name so inexorably connected to a catchphrase but of course it was actions that defined him when, wounded, he left his companions in the expedition tent besieged by high winds and – 40°C weather, to die alone, in the hope that they would reach safety without his slowing them down.

Her role this summer, cruising the South Coast in support for a services’ Antarctic expedition and the Help for Heroes charity, seems an appropriate reflection of her distinguished past ownership.

**Below:** The anchor windlass was found in Ashley Butler’s shed



### THE DISCOVERY

In early 2009, it was a different story. Boatbuilder Guy Savage and his (now) wife Chloe had finished a spell in the Mediterranean aboard their Buchanan-designed 36ft (11m) Yeoman-class sloop when they saw a yawl for sale, built 1900, and in terrible condition, beside a shed in Helensburgh, Scotland. She’d been in it for 14 years and outside it for the last year, breathing the cold, damp Scottish air again. “Rain was hitting the deck and continuing straight through into the boat inside,” Guy recalls.

Her designer, Charles Sibbick, was best known for his late 19th-century Rater yachts, a loose design envelope that counted only length and sail area and produced one of the most dynamic racing fleets ever seen. They were also beautiful, with long overhangs, high rigs and low freeboards. When Rater racing died,

Sibbick turned his attention to cruising yachts and it’s tempting, and perhaps not too fanciful, to see the flightiness of a Rater in *Saunterer*.

The owner wanted £75,000, on the strength of the Oates connection. Guy and Chloe had learned about this paragon of tough English altruism at school, where he was held up as a hero: the stiff upper lip had a name, and that name was Oates. “They don’t teach kids about Oates any more,” Guy and Chloe have found, after checking with various teenagers. If they did, he would perhaps be described as a vainglorious icon of machismo, elitism and empire, the stoutness of his heroism and the gentler quality of his selflessness derided against the current cultural backdrop of self worth.

Eventually, they paid £45,000 for *Saunterer*. After bringing the boat to Dart Haven, on Devon’s River Dart, she was put straight into the water on a trot mooring.

“There wasn’t much wrong with the hull and she had to go straight in as we couldn’t afford to keep her on land,” says Guy. The first job was to waterproof her, covering the deck with damp-course material – “the cheapest way to keep a boat dry,” in Guy’s book.

Then they moved in to live aboard and ripped the doghouse off. “It was a *lot* worse than camping!” Chloe relates. “Paint flaking off in your hair every night. Dodgy gas pipes – cooker was right next to the boat. Makes you do the job faster though.”



Inauthentic doghouse removed, they could trace the original outline of where the forward part of the cockpit coaming and the aft part of the housing for the aft gullwing skylight would have been. Without plans or lines to go by, it was a valuable part of solving the puzzle, along with black-and-white photos from the 1920s and 30s. The aft skylight was the same size as the forward one, which still bears the initials of the craftsman who built it at Sibbick's yard in Cowes, so local cabinet-maker Tom Evans was able to replicate it.

### RETAINED AND REUSED

They had to rebuild the interior completely, and did so retaining original material *in situ* where possible and, where not, making it into new structures. "I wanted to keep it original, but without being too precious about it," said Guy. So the galley worktop, deeply routed for drainage channels, was fashioned from the old bunk bases – and the doors were made of the old mahogany bulkheads that once divided the saloon. Cupboards are rattan-fronted to let the inside of the hull breathe more easily. "They also let us know when it's damp, because they go loose and baggy," added Guy.

The original decks, in yellow pine and hardly worn over the years, were raked out along every seam and retained. Below, Guy points out the beamshelf vents, cut in a diamond pattern, a Sibbick trademark – as, evidently, was build quality, with every plank on the hull



**Above:** *Saunterer* off Dartmouth on a windy April day.  
**Left:** Chloe and Guy Savage  
**Below:** An image from *Saunterer's* photo album

and the semi-swept deck full-length. It's not just the planks and deck that remain original though: the frames, keel and teak cabin sole are all from 1900 too, as is some of the cabin coaming and nearly all the interior.

At every step, Guy and Chloe had to keep a close eye on the budget. Replacements for some of the prismatic deck lights lost since 1900 were taken from the refit of the Boston-built fishing gaffer *Spirit of Britannia*, as were the bronze jib winches. These were later replaced by Lewmar self-tailers, after bitter complaints from a crew member. "We sanded off the chrome to get at the bronze underneath. Saves you a small fortune off buying new.



“She turns heads like no other yacht I’ve owned ”



**Above:** All the wood inside is from the original boat's interior - if sometimes re-shaped for a different purpose

They cost £650 on eBay rather than £1,800 for new bronze ones,” said Chloe. They’re perhaps the most modern things on *Saunterer*, unless you count the VHF. There’s no radar, GPS, AIS or even an echo sounder – just charts, compass, years of experience and a dash of optimism.

The solid spruce masts date from the 1930s when the rig was converted to bermudan. The staysail is self-tacking with a big club boom and Chloe made the smart black boom covers with an ancient Singer sewing machine. The teak cockpit grating was bought from Trinity Marine in Teignmouth, who reclaim items from old ships broken up on the beach in India and sell lights and portholes to pubs. “Cockpit grating is a nightmare to make; it’s much easier to trim up than make anew,” Chloe tells.

#### PATINA OF AGE

Even the deck beams are original and left, like so much of the interior, with the rough patina of age just oiled over rather than having its history ground away by orbital sander and covered with layer upon layer of varnish or worse. The century-old iron hanging knees have resisted galvanic corrosion with their bronze fastenings and are in perfect fettle. “The iron is such high carbon that there was no electrolysis,” Guy tells me.

The gimballed mahogany saloon table is straight from Sibbick – *Thalassa*, a later near-sister ship (CB219), has the same one. The solid teak beamshelves, behind those Sibbick diamond-shaped breathing holes, are original too.

When I mention the bronze anchor windlass, though, Guy winces a bit. “Saw that in Ashley’s yard,” he tells me, meaning nearby boatbuilder Ashley Butler. “I asked if I could buy it and offered him £1,500. But he wouldn’t take the money. He would only give it to me if I spent some time framing the new 50ft (15m) Mayflower yawl. Three weeks of the hardest graft in my life. I wish he’d let me pay!” That work was one of many jobs Guy had to undertake away from *Saunterer* to pay the bills.

The finishing touch was the rigging, with help from Lee Rogers, who made the bowsprit net and served the whiskers. “I don’t want to see any stainless,” muttered Guy, whose work serving the bottlescrews in beautiful grey suede leather is to the same end. By this spring, the yacht stood restored throughout and brought back to her first flush of life – and for a sum of just over £40,000, a fraction of the cost of sending her to a yard for the work to be done.

“She turns heads like no other yacht I’ve owned,” Guy tells me as we stand on the quayside admiring *Saunterer*’s lines. She might suggest some of the esprit of her designer’s love of the slim and the fast, but actually she’s an optical illusion, beamy and strong with full standing headroom below. It turns out that Guy, aged 36, has owned nearly 30 classic yachts in his life so far. Old wooden yachts are not generally thought to be appreciating assets, but it’s how Guy makes a living. Here are a few examples: *Corolla*, a Buchanan sloop,



bought for £6,000, sold for £14,000; a Heard 28, bought for £16,000, sold for £37,000. There's been a GL Watson, two Folkboats, another Buchanan... Guy can't remember his boatography, it's grown so long.

His and Chloe's MO these days would count for many as 'living the dream'. First they buy an old wreck and move in. Guy works as a boatbuilder while Chloe finds work nearby, at the moment in the local restaurant. In his spare time, Guy restores the boat they are living on with a great deal of help from Chloe who, on *Saunterer* for example, made most of the decisions on the interior, as well as putting hard graft into achieving the end result. They save up, sail off, then start over again. Of course, the thing about dreams is that they don't come true – they become reality. Guy and Chloe's reality is a life not without its privations, but filled with freedom.

### SAILING SAUNTERER

By keeping *Saunterer* in her 1930s bermudan rig, Guy and Chloe can two-hand her, fully-rigged, so, apart from at regattas, they don't have to spend their time looking for crew, though the running backstays are bad enough, Chloe admits. *Saunterer* might only have been recently finished, but she was sailing last year at Brixham Heritage Regatta, with eight knots through the water and first in class. At the Plymouth Classics, they finished just a boat's length behind a Sweden 39 in heavy airs. "It would have been a walkover for the modern yacht in light



**Left:** *Saunterer* interior: the Beken photo on the bulkhead shows her original gaff rig; the dovetailed dresser is original to the boat

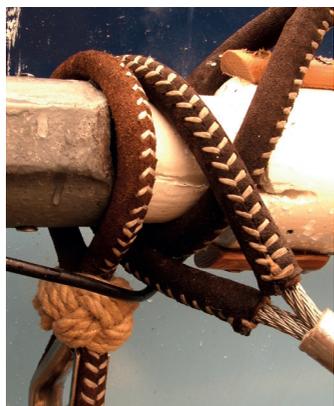


**Far left:** Hiding the fusebox! **Near left:** Ex-Admiralty lamp glass from a boat jumble. The Baby Blake in the heads was found weed-covered on a beach, stripped by Guy to 80 pieces, and rebuilt

“What’s surprised us is how quick she is in light airs.  
In a Force I-2 we punch the tide on the Dart”



Far left: Sanding the galley worktop  
Left: Sibbick's distinctive vents in the panel between beams and deck clamp have survived restoration



From far left: Galvanised, braided steel, hand-spliced and leather-served cap shrouds by rigger Lee Rogers; Guy screws the deck back down with 900 bronze screws; the Singer that made the boom covers; an original iron hanging knee

## SAUNTERER

DESIGNED AND BUILT  
**Charles Sibbick,  
Coves, 1900**

LOA  
**47ft 8in (14.5m)**

LWL  
**36ft (11m)**

BEAM  
**10ft 8in (3.3m)**

DRAUGHTH  
**7ft 6in (2.3m)**

DISPLACEMENT  
**20 tonnes**

UPWIND SAIL AREA  
**1,060 sqft  
(99m<sup>2</sup>)**

airs,” Guy admits, but yachts like *Saunterer*, long, slim and heavy, keep their way in a head sea where lighter, modern yachts are knocked back by the waves.

At the top of a Force 5, they drop the mainsail and, under mizzen and headsails, she’s well-behaved, tacks herself and makes 5-6 knots. “I was blown away,” said Guy, whose many boats have never included a yawl. “I thought the mizzen would do nothing – yet it makes a big difference. But you’ve got to ensure it’s not sheeted in when you’re bearing away. It can catch you out. What’s surprised us is how quick she is in light airs. In a Force 1-2 we punch the tide on the Dart.”

The other thing that’s new to Guy is the length of the counter: “We sit above the water! In a following sea, you see a wave overtake, then nothing happens until it moves forward and lifts up the body of the boat. And seeing the bowsprit dip into waves going upwind is amazing.”

After Guy and Chloe’s wedding last summer, the group of 54 went back to *Saunterer* to line the decks for a photo, a happy occasion for them and the yacht, which sat a little lower in the water that day.

Next year, of course, will be the centenary of the Scott expedition. But let’s not forget Sibbick: two months before the death of Oates, he disappeared from a rowing boat in Coves Harbour to die his own freezing death. His yard was struggling, and some at the time did wonder about the cause of his death. Unlike with Oates, though, the truth will never be known.

## Saunterer, expedition mascot

*Saunterer* was welcomed into the Royal Navy on 1 April, at the Britannia Naval College in Dartmouth, by none other than First Sea Lord Admiral Mark Stanhope, members of the Oates and Scott families, and servicemen from the RAF, RN and Army. The reason? Next year, the quadrennial joint-services expedition, made up of 24 volunteer servicemen, will commemorate the Scott expedition by returning to Antarctica. Its primary objective is to study climate change but, in Scott’s memory, the plan is also to scale unclimbed peaks and cover ground left untouched by Scott and his men. The project also aims to raise at least £10,000 for Help For Heroes, the charity that provides aid for injured servicemen returning home from theatres of war.

In the lead-up, this year, *Saunterer* will act as the expedition’s mascot, raising awareness by racing and sailing at regattas up and down England’s South Coast, sailing with crew from the Royal Dragoons, Oates’s old regiment. For a list of the regattas that she will attend, check the *Saunterer* website, at [www.saunterer.co.uk](http://www.saunterer.co.uk)

For more details of the centennial Antarctic expedition, see [www.bsae2012.co.uk](http://www.bsae2012.co.uk). For sponsorship opportunities, contact Major Dave Jones, [david@drjones49.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:david@drjones49.freeserve.co.uk).

