

READER BOAT: Norfolk Oyster *Tinkerbelle*

by Jay Scheiner

I purchased my Norfolk Oyster, *Tinkerbelle*, in 1998 after seeing a tiny ad in a British sailing magazine showing a sweet gaff sloop with red sails. She was built for me over a period of four months then loaded into a 20-foot container and transported across the Atlantic to my doorstep (actually a shipping dock).

When I cut open the container I was amazed at how stunningly beautiful she was with her gleaming white lapstrake hull, navy blue top strake with gold cove stripe, fire engine red bottom and battleship gray interior. The bronze and galvanized fittings, combined with workboat character and classic yachting style were perfection. We named her *Tinkerbelle* because she came to us from London and her shapely hull and red sails bore a striking resemblance to the famous little ocean crossing sloop of the same name.

The goal was to have a tough-as-nails boat that could be sailed almost year round in the Long Island Sound. I purchased a winter sailing jacket and padded pants, special mitts to allow all-weather handling of lines, and arranged for a berth through December. The dream was to sail her in every month of the year if possible. The reality was that I fell in love with this boat and it changed me. Having another boat to sail regularly, I began to pamper *Tinkerbelle* beyond all good behavior. Her varnish had to always be meticulous—but varnish required covers. Eventually, the covers needed covers. The traditional spruce spars and red sails were pampered too—and stored in custom Sunbrella tubes. I became fanatical with spare parts and fittings. If I installed a turning block or a cleat and found it was perfect, this necessitated a “spare” in the event that the old one ever needed to be replaced. No matter that bronze and stainless steel could last near forever and a day.

A special garage was built for *Tinkerbelle*, with a window beacon to the admiring world. This was the workshop—and I pictured myself like Robert Manry, skipper of the “original” *Tinkerbelle*, transforming a small sailboat into something capable of an ocean crossing. Back-up plates were made for all fittings, bronze oarlocks and nine-foot oars installed, and inspection ports fitted. The rigging, reefing and sail-handling systems were upgraded for solo use by Master Rigger,



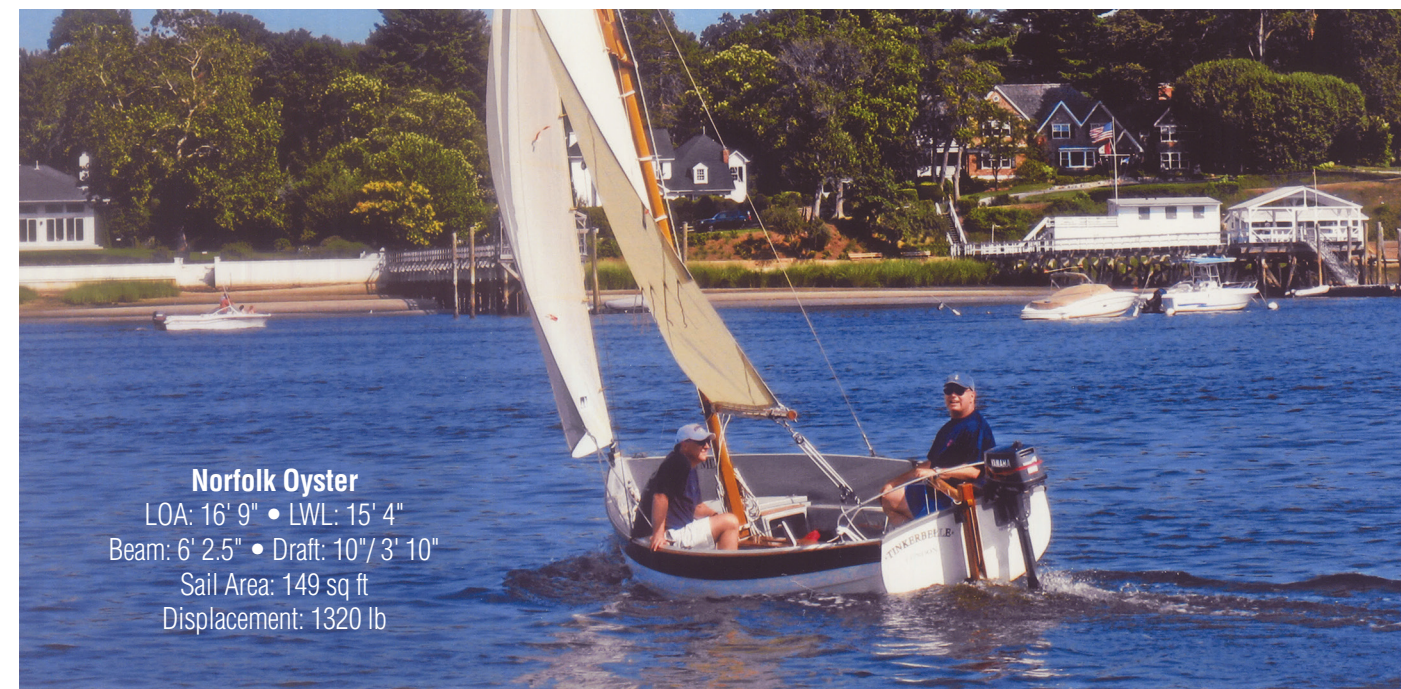
David James, and a massive hand-pump plumbed. New tan classic boat sails were custom made by John Fowler, replacing the original red sails that had barely seen a fresh breeze.

The term “gilding the lily” was used by some when talking about our *Tinkerbelle*. It did not stop until I had her sailing only in July, keeping her dry, waxed and perfect for the remaining 11 months a year. That is when my family and friends turned *Tinkerbelle* into a verb. To “*Tinkerbelle*” an object is now to coddle and protect it, keeping it from its originally intended purpose for fear of (take your pick) scratching, bruising, tarnishing, weathering, barnacled, etc....

The original clinker built Oyster sailboat was designed by John Leather in the 50s as “a practical day-boat, stable yet

exciting to sail and accommodating up to 4 or 5 adults and accompanying children.” In 1965 *Yachts & Yachting* described her as “the sort of boat which is just as much at home when over-stuffed with a large picnic party as when helping to earn her keep by engaging in a little inshore fishing.”

One satisfied owner was Charlie Ward, who sailed his own Oyster, *Emily*, with his wife and children for many years on the North Norfolk coast in England. Ward was so impressed that he set about developing a fiberglass version, using his own boat as the plug for the mold. Ward was exceedingly well qualified for the job, having built many fiberglass craft including lifeboats. Charlie built the boats with attention to detail. The bow section forward of the mast houses two large separately molded lockers with cam-



Norfolk Oyster

LOA: 16' 9" • LWL: 15' 4"
Beam: 6' 2.5" • Draft: 10" / 3' 10"
Sail Area: 149 sq ft
Displacement: 1320 lb



bered watertight lids forming a lowered foredeck. These are big enough to stow an outboard—we use a 4 hp Yamaha long-shaft, and *Tink* scoots along at hull speed. Everything comes together just right—the angle of the bench seats and seat-backs for comfort, the large storage bins that can swallow a weekend’s worth of clothing, food and cruising supplies.

Norfolk Oyster is 16' 10" long with a beam of 6' 2 1/2" and draws 10", or 3' 10" with the galvanized centerboard lowered. The extraordinary strength of construction and practical gaff rig has enabled the Oyster to successfully complete some long ocean voyages in Europe. For a heavy boat (1,320 pounds) she tows easily behind a mid-sized SUV and the gaff rig has the advantage of allowing all of her spars to store within the boat while transporting

her. When underway and approaching a low bridge, the skipper has the ability to lower the mast because it is mounted on a huge galvanized tabernacle.

Tinkerbelle became a particularly good vacation boat. Trailered to fun locations such as Montauk Harbor and The Hamptons, Long Island, she became the boat everyone wanted to sail on. Our daughters grew to love her and they knew they could always find Dad in the garage taking care of *Tinkerbelle* after coming home from work.

Sailing *Tink* is a dream in all types of wind, as she carries her way like a keel-boat, is stable like a catboat, yet shares the responsiveness of a dinghy in a breeze. Handling the tiller and looking up and seeing those classic spars sewn to a small cloud of tan sails set off by the blue sky is

unlike any other experience.

After all these years the Norfolk Oyster is still in production. Neil Thompson Boats www.neilthompsonboats.co.uk in England lovingly builds a few per year and has an active brokerage of all the boats in the Norfolk range. As far as I know, our *Tinkerbelle* is the first and possibly only Oyster ever brought to the U.S.

My wife and I have now arrived at a different stage of our lives and are moving to a new home farther from shore. Unfortunately, this is one journey *Tinkerbelle* cannot take. •SCA•

Jay Scheiner holds a USCG Master's License and has been sailing all of his life. His adventures have included a solo voyage from New York to Maine on a 19 foot sloop and climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.