



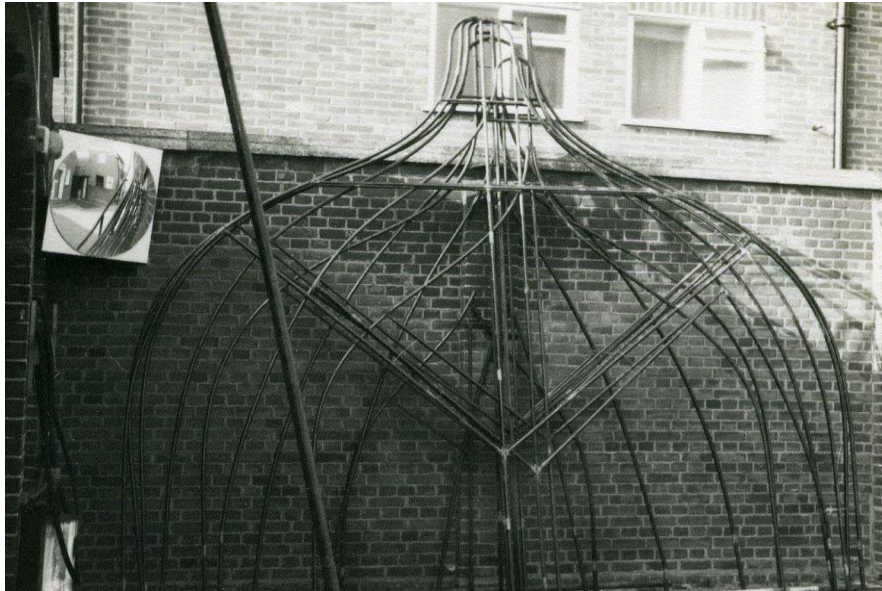
"IRENE"

A short history

"Irene" really started when I bought 20 sheets of 8' x 4' hardboard and painted them with two coats of white emulsion paint. A two day 'lay period' between tenants of the Rose Hall, in Chapel St. Billericay, couldn't have been better timed and the hull was lofted, full size, onto the hardboard. The body lines derived from that exercise were drawn in blue biro for the forward sections and red biro for the after sections. They were then well sealed with 3 coats of floor varnish to be ready for the next stage – making the frames.



Bending and welding of the frames and 'backbone' was done on the floor of the Billericay Police Station garage – very conveniently heated and spacious enough to weld them up complete instead of leaving them in halves. The finished frames were leant against the back wall of the court building to await transport to the building site.



I had rented enough room at what was once a small holding, near my home at S. Woodham Ferrers, and built concrete 'stocks' to set the frames on close to a sheltering hedge.



I started to transport the frames two at a time, on my mini van, but, when a friend found out, he loaned me a roof truss transporter with a 40' flat bed and the rest were taken in one load. A lot of old scaffolding to support the frames and, eventually, to make a safe working platform around the hull was a very good investment – as were a lot of pallets to make good standing - especially on concreting day when there would be so many people on the site and later when fitting out.

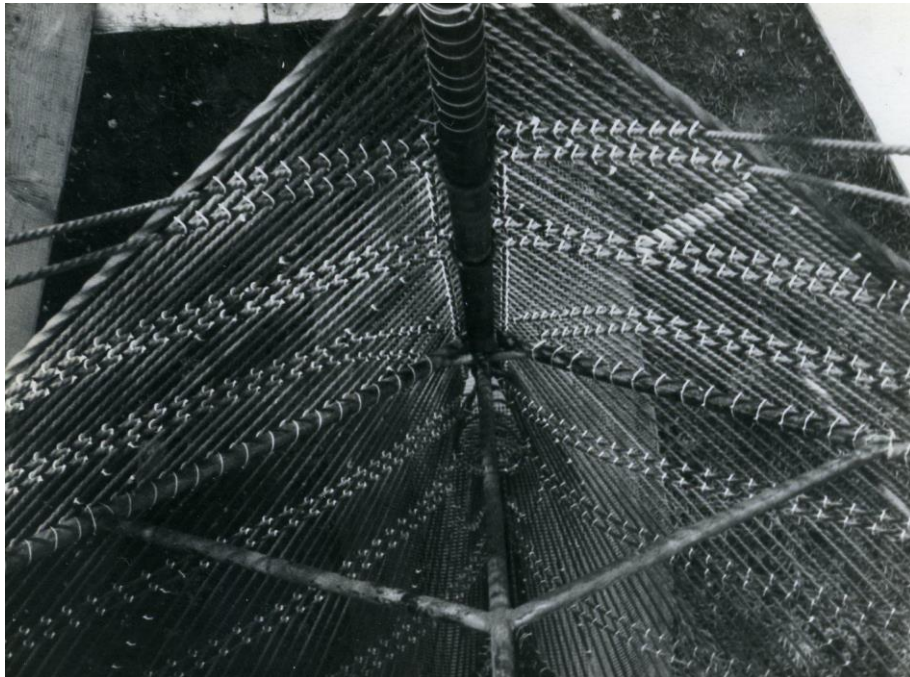


Once the frames and 'backbone' were set up $\frac{1}{4}$ " twisted square reinforcing rods, laid horizontally 2" apart, were tied to them in fair curves – too tight would leave flats and too loose would leave bulges – there are 82 rods each side and heavier ($\frac{3}{4}$ " dia) rods under the keel sweeping right up to the raised stem head and right round the sheer line. Next, tied to each of the horizontal rods, are 100 evenly spaced $\frac{1}{4}$ " vertical rods – the same tension rules applying as for the horizontals.

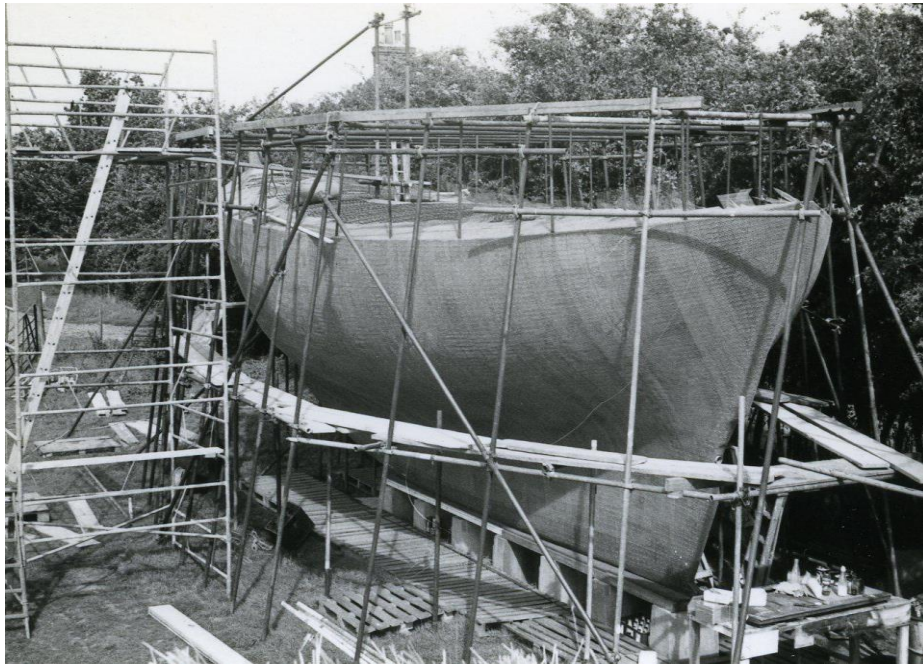


Rods bent to form web frames in the hull were next to be tied in. These are everywhere that deck beams and frames would normally occur in a wooden boat – i.e.: for bulkheads to fasten to, in the way of chain plates,

hatches and deck openings and for mast partners. Specially shaped webs formed engine bearers and watertight bulkheads divided off the focs'le and engine room. The completed armature had then to be clad with 6 layers of 19 swg x ½" square welded mesh with an extra layer over, and for 6" each side of, every frame and web – 3 layers inside and 3 layers outside. The whole lot was then tied together – each tie less than 3" from the next. This was where and how R.S.I. was invented and over 300,000 wire ties are there to prove it. Much of this work was done in winter – sometimes my boots would freeze to the boards and a climb to the ground to retrieve several pairs of wire cutters I had dropped was a welcome chance to warm my hands. My late night shifts were often watched by foxes – who would stare up from the edge of the pool of the work lights – and I often wondered what they thought of me.



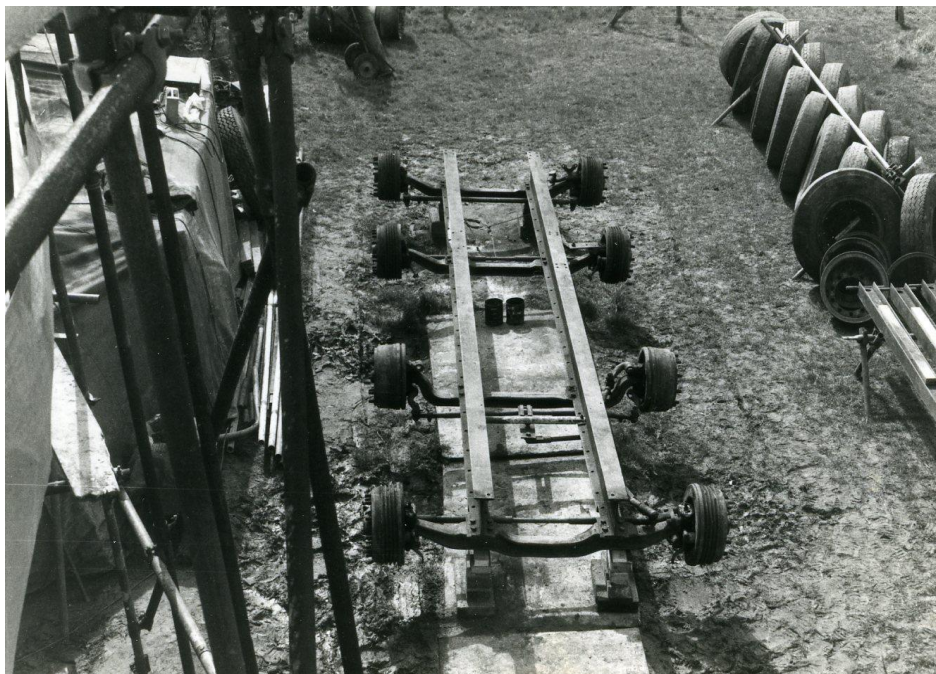
My help, once so keen, had been fading for some time so I had to put in more hours – working on the outskirts of London took 50 hours a week and I was soon putting in 50 hours a week finishing off the interior rebuild of the house and then working on the boat - a routine that was to continue for some years to come when partially rebuilding another house, overhauling second hand woodworking machinery, moving the boat, rebuilding a cottage and then, eventually, getting to work on the boat again.



Concreting day was quite an event – 12 tons of sand and cement had to be mixed, using two mixers, poured into buckets and hoisted inside for a crew to push it through with gloved hands. There were at least ten girls outside telling the twenty boys inside if the mix was penetrating evenly. They all had to be fed and 'watered' too. Three hours from starting all was ready for the seven plasterers to start – putting on a 1/8" layer and trowelling it over and over again all afternoon and well into the evening. Twenty-four hours later I wrapped the hull in polythene and turned on a water sprinkler – for a month of slow curing.

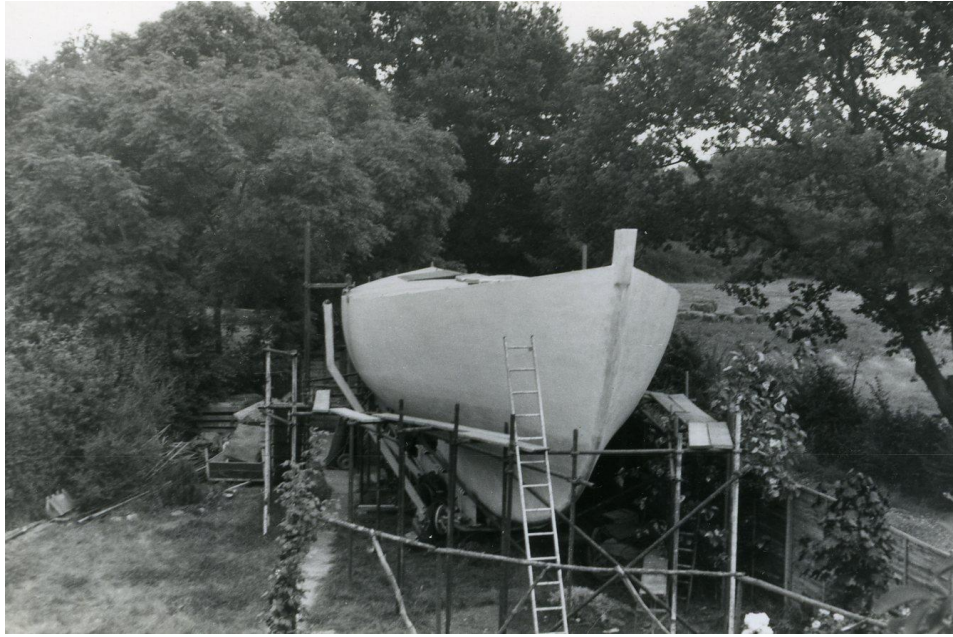


An unreasonable local council that had given me 5 years to stay changed the rules – life was about to get in the way. I had to buy another house, partly rebuild it, build a boat trailer and move everything. The trailer had to be good enough to take the boat when it was fitted out and at least partially ballasted. Two heavy 'I' beams twenty feet long and four lorry front axles with sixteen wheels, (later reduced by four at the towing end of the trailer as there was little weight at that end), made a substantial job and was good enough to lend to someone else and then sell when I had done with it. As the boat was on stocks it was no trouble to put the axles under the hull, raft the beams either side of the keel and assemble the trailer. I could then jack the boat up until she was comfortably on it and easily take away the stocks. This also avoided the very considerable cost of a crane and the problems of soft standing for the lift.



It was more than just a case of hitching up and towing up the road as the hull was 'over-width' and 'over-height' as far as traffic regulations were concerned – I had to obtain permits and clearance from : Railways (there was a level crossing to pass - and I held up the first Sunday train for twenty years), Electricity (underground and overhead), Water authority, Telephone company (underground and overhead), local Highways Dept., Dept. of Transport for a permit and Police for an escort – in short an awful lot of paperwork.





All went well – even the police escort crew were happy - the boat sat comfortably at the bottom of the garden and I spent the next year doing serious interior rebuilding work in and around the house – despite this the help, that was once so keen, dropped out altogether. I had also built a shed/workshop to house the re-built second hand woodworking machinery for fitting out the hull – all of which had to be moved – basically she got the house and I got the empty boat and the trouble of finding another site. A kindly neighbour lent me plenty of space in a field adjacent to his house and all was ready for work to start.

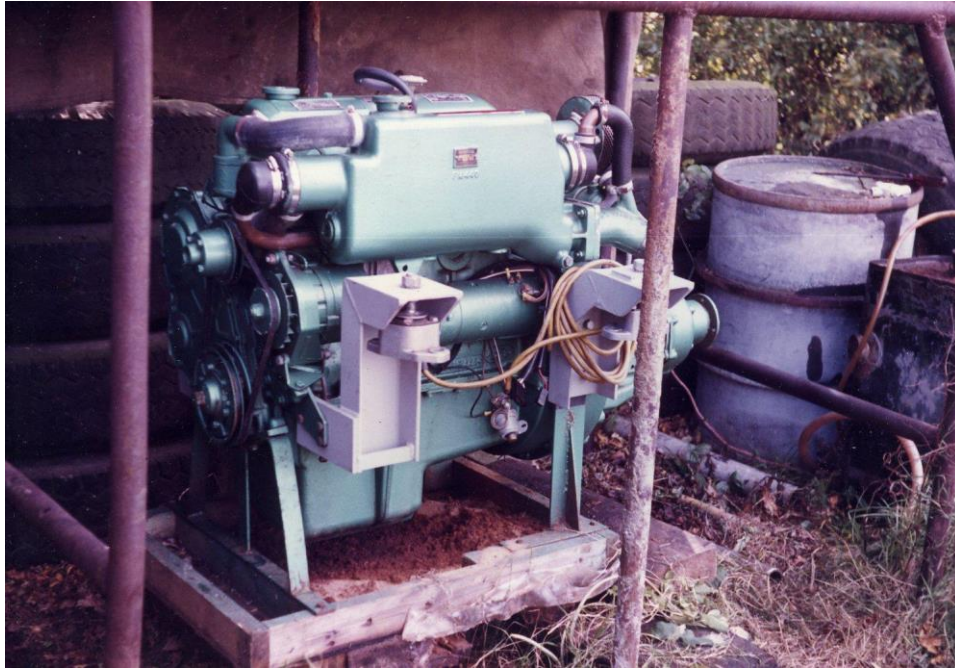
Before I moved the boat, I found some Sitka Spruce trees in prime condition for making masts and spars – they were in the Dovey Forest in North Wales. I went there to choose them and then went back with a lorry owner friend and his 40' vehicle. The load was highly illegal with 18' beyond the trailer coupling – 8' is legal – and 12' over the back of the trailer also very illegal. On small roads every bend had to be negotiated on the wrong side of the road as the overhanging logs would either rake the oncoming traffic or, on right hand bends, hook behind power poles, lamp standards or road signs – but we got away with it and the logs were soon barked, trestled and covered in the lee of a hedge.



The second move (and the third), was made with a steam traction engine which meant I could get round a lot of traffic regulations and had the additional advantage of the steam tractor's winch to take the load into the field without actually going in itself. The new site needed some preparation and I had to make a new gate and entry into the field. It was a move of only a few hundred yards but, of course, needing the same pile of paperwork and permits as before. All went smoothly but I had not been there long when the council started on me. Their claim was that a change of purpose had been made without permission. In fact, the field was within the curtilage of the house. I couldn't afford to fight them legally – for they were certainly wrong – but I did manage to lie and cheat for 3 years or so until they got so spiteful that I had to put 'Irene' on the road yet again – this time to launch her.



Another problem had to be addressed too – I had no home. The first piece of good luck for some time came my way and I found 'digs' in what was to have been 'grannies flat', only a mile up the road from the boat and easy to 'bike to. Anyone who has had a hard time will know what it is to be kindly taken in – and I was – by the kindest people I could have wished for – my meals were cooked, my washing done and I was even loaned a small shed for the new boat engine where I could 'plumb it in' and run it up to temperature once every month.



Near to the end of the 2nd year my shed/workshop was burnt out. I lost some timber, some marine plywood, and some laminated beams, the wooden masts were spoilt and my machinery and most of my hand tools ruined. Life was to get in the way yet again – my landlords had to move and I was out of a home again. A small derelict cottage came up for sale and I bought it. For the next few months, I lodged with some more good neighbours while I rebuilt it. As it had a damp problem, I changed its name to “Half Tide” and it was on the very brink of being condemned. It was a case of floors out, staircase out, ceilings out, fireplaces out, roof overhauled, chimney rebuilt, a new staircase, floors, walls, ceilings, re-plumbed, re-wired and made habitable. A 20' container was added to the bottom of the garden before houses were built very close to my boundary.

By now the boat had a rudder, a coach roof and hatches, engine fitted, rubbing strakes fitted and basic frames for bunks etc. The council were now getting really spiteful. I cheated them of their vengeance and prepared to launch – more paperwork of course. This time serious incompetence in the council offices held things up giving me two more weeks and they had to hold up the enforcement proceedings. The traction engine came into it's own again. This also meant a repeat of all the paperwork and some underhand 'cheating' to get over the railway bridge at North Fambridge, (late one night a friend and I 'modified' the temporary parapet on the side of the bridge so that it would 'wobble' rather than collapse on to the track if the trailer brushed it). We also had to paint guidelines in the road to align both the engine and the trailer for the reduced width of the crown of the

bridge.

The steam tractor, built by Burrell, is a 6 H.P. Single crank compound machine and weighs 14 tons all up, (full of coal and water), uses about 12 gallons/mile of water (about 48 litres), and travels about 7 miles (about 10 k's) on a hundredweight (about 50 kgs) of coal. It was built in 1914 and 'rescued' from scrap in 1956 as a hobby project by the present owner. It was conveniently fitted with a winch inside one rear wheel so that work over soft ground could be done by sending a wire rope from the engine, when it was standing on hard ground, to wherever effort was needed – ideal for moving “Irene”.



At long last the move to the water was underway. The steam tractor parked at the gate and the boat and trailer were hauled out into the road using the tractor's winch. I had built the trailer to steer at both ends to get round tighter corners and this came into play several times during this move. The boat was manoeuvred to one side of the road with a friend's Fowler tractor and the traction engine hitched up to it for the 8½ mile tow. Walking pace was fine – the steam tractor in 2nd gear – the whole sight could have been a scene from before the 1st world war. I wanted to do the job on a Sunday – but the police escort dept insisted on a Saturday – not very bright as it held up no end of traffic on its way to Saturday shopping – made worse when one of the police escorts said he could do with a cup of

tea - so we stopped to provide him, and anyone else involved, with the necessary refreshment. Catering was organised by my mother in the back of a land rover and homemade cake and buns disappeared at a rate of knots.



The actual launch was on the Sunday tide at North Fambridge and, duly christened by my mother, "Irene" floated off of the trailer and into the mud berth that she was to occupy for most of the next few years while I continued the fitting, rigging and ballasting. It was slow work with not even basic power tools but, eventually, a few second-hand tools, and some generous loans and gifts helped out. The simplest wood machining had to be 'scrounged' at the 'side door' of furniture factories or the job done by hand.



On the Friday before launching I was made redundant and started a new job on the Monday. It was a bad job for a very bad company, but it was a job - and it had some benefits. I not only spent less time travelling but also had use of a small workshop in my lunch hour. A bench, a vice, a drilling machine, a lathe and a milling machine meant I could make any number of fittings for 5 hours every week – skylight furniture, main and mizzen sheet buffers, pins and sheaves for blocks and even a heavy brass bracket for the ship's bell, (engraved with my mother's name). Much of the material for these fittings was from 'scrap' materials off of the company production line.

I tried to 'buy time' by ordering steel masts, to replace the spoilt wooden ones, from Spencer's at Cowes – where better to get a cowboy job. They were rubbish and the matter went to law – over the next 4 years. Spencer's had to foot the bill, but closed the company so, though it cost me nothing and fitting out was still progressing – it meant that I had to re-build them myself. Having now learnt about making steel masts I went 'the whole hog' and made gaffs and booms in steel too. I later made the bow sprit of the same material.

Fittings, made in the back yard, were welded on and I had the masts, gaffs and booms galvanised. As soon as they were back on hand they were craned in and rigged – that was 1989 and my luck began to change – Pat joined in with the effort and with the sailing – 'Irene' was then in continuous use from Easter weekend to New Year's Day and for all the holidays we could get. The longer holidays gave us time to go to Belgium



or Holland or down channel to the Channel Islands or to the West Country for a taste of the passage making that "Irene" was built for.



After being made redundant three times, and carrying on at the same place, I had the chance to get 'early severance' - and took it in April 1998. There is 'almost ready' and 'ready enough' – by working as much as 18+ hours a day by August "Irene" was 'ready enough' and Pat had handed in her notice – volunteering for a six month trial – and is still with me 14 years later – where luck did find me it did so to perfection. Friends who had helped along the way came with us for a farewell day sail to Pin Mill, on the River Orwell, where we then spent a week at anchor, re-stowing stores to correct a 5 degree list and settling a lot of the minor things ready for a rough passage. We then set off down Channel at a cracking pace.

This very brief history covers from 1977, when the loftings were completed, to 1998 when the current cruise started, and is a sketch of events only. Many good people, (and a few ratbags), were involved along the way – the good ones have my sincere thanks for their contribution to the project and I hope that it's successful conclusion and their warm welcome whenever they call is some small reward.



“IRENE” Sailing in Tasmanian Waters

L.O.A.64 feet, L.O.D.45 feet, Beam 15 feet, draft 7 feet, Weight 30 Tons