

# *Gull's* FREEDOM

After reaching 80 years old and being passed down from fathers to sons, this Fishers Island 24 called *Gull* has a new lease of life...

STORY **CHRIS MUSELER** AND PHOTOGRAPHS **ALISON LANGLEY**







**Clockwise from top left:** Herreshoff fittings left unpainted; fitted with North racing sails; original tiller kept on; the name 'Gull' isn't painted on; instead the bronze lettering stands out proud

**V**enetian Harbour does not sound like the name of a place that should exist next to America's bustling submarine base in Groton, Connecticut. But a five-minute boat ride around the corner from the cavernous dry docks, steel girders and massive naval ships finds a narrow strip of protected water only a few hundred metres long surrounded by shingled summer homes and a diminutive police station where the officers wave to everyone.

There is not a lot of 'guarding' going on in Groton Long Point, certainly not since WWII, but the prize possession of Venetian Harbour is a string of 14 low-slung wooden sloops separating the in-bound and out-bound boats there for more than 80 years. The Fishers Island One-Design, a fine Charles D Mower pedigree design and indigenous to this sliver of water off Fishers Island Sound, is a boat passed down by generations since the DuPont family originally commissioned the class in 1923.

Charles D Mower and A Sydney Dewolf Herreshoff both worked on classes for the Fishers Island fleets, and were contemporaries in many ways. Mower is best known for his A-Class catboat racers and for being a chief naval

architect at the Henry B Nevins boatyard, the builders of America's top racing yachts from the 1920s through the 1950s. Only 16 Fishers Island One-Designs were built to Mower's design, all in 1923. Two perished in the hurricane of 1954. For a time, only three boats were sailing in races at Groton Long Point and others were moved to other venues around Connecticut and New York. Today the remaining 14 have made their way home and are now still sailing out of Venetian Harbor.

And now, at what seems to be a turning point in the fleet where the varnish can be seen flaking off the tops of the sloops' masts and the waterlines are hidden by the weight of the sea in their hulls, Chris Christian's *Gull* has had a major restoration and has just spent the last season serving as a brightly appointed Phoenix, calling to her sisters and other classics for a spruce up and to join her on the waters they all know so well.

"My father got the boat when he was 15, straight out of the junior sailing programme here," says Christian, who inherited the boat in the same fashion. "They were built to last 30 years and now she's 80." Even after decades of spot repairs by local craftsmen, Christian said the boat "almost wasn't sailable".

It was a brief conversation at the Newport Boat Show in 2013 that led Christian to commission Alec Brainerd and his team of shipwrights at Artisan Boatworks to bring *Gull* back to her former glory.

On an unseasonably warm first day of autumn, I was taxied out of Christian's summer harbour by elite photographer Alison Langley to catch up with *Gull* on the Sound. The Fishers Island 24-footers we passed, renamed Groton Long Point A-Class when the fleet was bought from Fishers Island a lifetime ago, were certainly sinewy and pretty, if not charming. When the silhouette in the distance of *Gull* caught my eye, however, the legacy of several great American yacht designers was easily identifiable.

Christian, 42, is a young professional with perfectly combed, jet black hair and a soft smile. He was fresh from the birth of his second child weeks earlier and sailing *Gull* in a white polo shirt and shorts with Artisan shipwright Justin Ward. The pair looked like a typical captain and young mate preparing for a 1920s race on Fishers Island Sound, adding nicely to the time warp feeling we seemed to be pleasantly trapped in that afternoon.



**Above:** Justin Ward from Artisan Boatworks (left) and owner Christian concentrate on setting *Gull's* sails  
**Left:** a perfect autumnal day to show *Gull* at her very best







As the two calmly reached along, the few clean and simple bits of bronze that served as hardware on the deck came into focus, though if you squinted, it looked as if both the leg-of-mutton mainsail and fractional jib were being held with their hands by an invisible line.

As *Gull* heeled to the first 10-knot puff of breeze, the trailing quarter wake, leaving a continuous curve from the overhanging bow, confirmed my original assessment: this fine little yacht is not influenced by the drawn-out schooners of Mower's former employer, BB Crowninshield, but she is a mini *Reliance*, Francis Herreshoff's greatest and largest racing yacht design that terrorised her America's Cup competition and its own crew.

This day was the final sail of the season and the boat's bright white North racing sails still held those crisp creases from when they were opened in June. Putting together a keel-up restoration of a daysailing classic is not common, but is now happening more and more. And when Christian chose Artisan Boatworks, he allowed them to continue their trend of rebuilding and restoring these little gems of American sailing history.

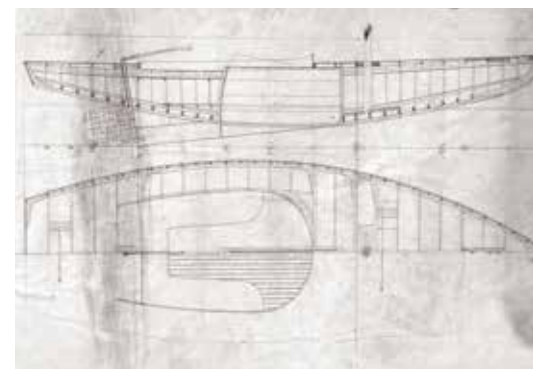
"Chris called us with a leaky boat and he thought maybe she needed a new centreboard case," says Alec Brainerd, who founded his boatworks in Rockport, Maine in 2002 (see our interview with him in CB317). "The bad news he needed to hear was he had a great

**Above:** feeling the heeling! Justin and Christian quite clearly enjoying themselves

pedigree boat but that anything short of a complete rebuild would be a waste of money."

Like many 80-plus-year-old boats that haven't received a major overhaul at some point, the boat had little value other than her pedigree and family history.

Brainerd refers to the *Gull* project as a rebuild, not a restoration, and placed the priorities of the rebuild in the same order as most of the boats they have worked on. First, he says it is important to restore the structural integrity of the boat to like-new or better. Artisan shipwrights replace all original materials with like parts unless there is a known structural problem in the design that they can remedy. Second, restoring the shape of the



## GULL

LOA  
24ft 6in (7.5m)  
BEAM  
7ft 8in (2.3m)  
DRAUGHT  
5ft (1.5m)  
SAIL AREA  
600sqft (56m<sup>2</sup>)



1 All paint is removed and *Gull* is stripped down to a bare hull as quickly as possible. Note the reverse sheer and lump of putty where the stemhead should be.



2 With all of the frames and floor timbers removed, some plywood moulds, longitudinal stringers and anchors in the shop floor are used to reset the hull to its original shape. A new iroko plank keel has been laminated in place.



3 New iroko floors and steam-bent oak timbers are installed. Floors are fastened to the plank keel with bronze bolts and copper rivets secure them to the timbers. Planking is removed as necessary for access, and the whole set-up is carefully faired.



4 Once new garboards are in, each plank is removed and repaired. Butt joints are eliminated with scarf repairs. Old fastening holes are filled with WEST system epoxy thickened with 407 filler. Planks are sealed with varnish on the inside and then tightly with clean edges.



5 With the sheer plank replaced, the sheerline faired, and the hull right side up, the beamshelf is repaired and reinstalled with copper rivets. The inside of the hull (with exception of garboards and sheer planks) still has its 90-year-old patina.



6 Usually the deck frame is replaced next, but with *Gull* the deck was only 10 years old. The new centerboard case is mahogany plywood, epoxy coated inside and out. Bilge stringers, often the cause of broken frames, have been left out deliberately.



7 The top of the stem has been replaced and the new deck has been laid. This maine plywood deck, glued to the sheer planks with 3M 5200 adhesive sealant, will ensure that *Gull* maintains her shape for many years to come.



8 The deck is epoxy coated and covered in traditional canvas set in a latex lagging adhesive. New coamings, rails and cockpit sole are installed, and the hardware is put back. Any modern hardware that may have been added over the years is replaced with period bronze.



9 Just prior to launching and *Gull* is rigged in the yard. The mast was split in half longitudinally and glued back together along a failed glue joint. Both spars were stripped and re-varnished and all standing and running rigging was replaced.





**Above:** a lovely camera angle, giving us a feel of just what it's like to be inside *Gull's* cockpit; an Artisan Boatworks shipwright sets her new keel in place  
**Below:** *Gull* leaves a beautiful wake as she returns to Venetian Harbor, Connecticut

boat is critical. In the case of *Gull* and many other older boats, the hull was “massively distorted” from sitting on trailer bunks for decades. *Gull* was hogging, where the pointed ends of the boat had dropped and the middle of the boat was beginning to cave in, folding some frames. The final priority was to remove all iron fastenings that were sickening any, and retain potentially reusable wood.

Brainerd was asked to complete the rebuild over the winter, so Christian wouldn't miss a sailing season.

The three-to-four-month time frame, he says, is standard for such a small boat. And in the beginning, Brainerd says, “We were more concerned about saving original material than the owner was.”



Surprisingly, the lack of heavy restoration on *Gull* allowed the shipwrights to save almost all of the original planking. Where there were butt joints connecting plank ends, a problematic area where there are many fasteners and the joints collect rain water, the team scarphed the planks together with epoxy.

The reframing of *Gull* was completed when the deck was off. Brainerd says, however, that, as in the case of working on several S&S-designed Dark Harbor 17s, some boats can be reframed without removing the deck.

Brainerd and his team are students of the Herreshoff manufacturing process and working on designs from those Rhode Island drafting tables is easily considered Artisan's niche. They are currently building a new Buzzards Bay 15, a 25ft (7.6m) gaff-rigged sloop, not dissimilar in proportions and style to Mower's Fishers Island class.

Painting, Brainerd points out, is interestingly a critical part of the rebuild and restoration discussion. “It is singly the most important thing we do differently,” he says. “We massively paint the boats, four coats inside and out. The bilge from bow to stern.” He says there are still builders out there who don't believe in painting the bilge.

### REBUILT TO LAST AND TO PASS ON

Ultimately, even though the shipwrights at Artisan are prepared to rebuild a 65-footer (20m), Brainerd says the small boats they specialise in restoring provide the same satisfaction as a large classic yacht project.

“The history and the pedigree is where the value lies,” he says. “Some people, like Christian, have boats in their family for generations.”

For Christian, the birth of another child may have put some urgency on the *Gull* project. And he wants to continue the legacy his grandparents began when they bought his father this splinter of a sailboat.

“I didn't want to build a brand new boat,” he says. “I had done a lot of research on what needed to be done so *Gull* would last another 30 years and more. It turns out Alec was the only one I believed could do that.”

Though Brainerd and his team of shipwrights were comfortable with the rebuild, the importance of “getting it right” was a primary motivator for Christian.

“This is really for my son Teddy,” he says. “She'll be his in 30 years' time.”



To see more photographs of *Gull* visit [www.classicboat.co.uk](http://www.classicboat.co.uk)