

Roger Wardale: Swallow's Tale

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Swallow's Tale

Swallow II (as I call her) was built by Sam King of Harry King and Sons at their Pin Mill boatyard in the autumn of 1938. Sam was the dinghy builder of the firm and he constructed the boats by eye, without plans or moulds, as many craftsmen did in those days. *Swallow* was built for Arthur Ransome who had lent his rather large dinghy, *Coch-y-bonddhu*, to his young crew George and Josephine Russell who had no boat of their own. 'Launched and sailed *Swallow*. Great fun', announced his diary for October 18th. The little craft is only ten feet long with a dagger-board and carried a balanced lugsail which was tanned with brickdust and linseed oil, or some such concoction. Ransome sailed *Swallow* on the River Orwell at Pin Mill, in the secret places of the Walton Backwaters and around West Mersea. I like to think that *Swallow* was towing astern of Selina King on that famous wartime dash up the coast to Lowestoft to be safely laid up for the duration.

After Ransome had finally parted with Peter Duck about 1950, Clark and Carter, the West Mersea boatyard, sold *Swallow* to Gordon Imber for £25. At that time the oars had 'AR' inscribed on them by means of copper tacks, but sadly these oars no longer exist. Three generations of the Imber family sailed *Swallow* on inland waters, and on the East Coast and she became a well-loved family boat. Then, about ten years ago, *Swallow* was caught between lock gates on the River Lea. After that it was not possible to make the hull watertight and she was relegated to the Imber's lawn where she lay upside-down and slowly deteriorating.

The sight of Christina Hardyment's *Mavis* appeal in a yachting magazine prompted a friend of Imber's to write saying he knew the owner of *Swallow*. A phone call from our President was enough to send me to Letchworth the following weekend to investigate the claim. I found myself inspecting what had once been a lovely little boat. I had a copy of a clear photograph of *Selina King* towing *Swallow*, and from that it was possible to make a positive identification. It was all most exciting as I had not been expecting to find *THE Swallow*, which has vanished without trace. There were other craft on the lawn and it seemed unlikely that further attempts at repair would be made. I said that if the time should come when they had no further use for the boat, I would love the opportunity to attempt a cosmetic restoration, at least.

A short while later a letter came to say that they would like me to have the boat. The exchange took place on the hard at Pin Mill (where else?) where

Yachting Monthly held a Ransome Rally to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the publication of *Swallows and Amazons*.

Photo: Pin Mill, *Swallow II's* birthplace

Nancy Blackett and *Peter Duck* were sailing in company off the hard where *Swallow* stood resplendent in a new coat of white paint. We gently transferred the dinghy to my trailer and I set off on the 150 miles back to Bognor Regis. It was not a journey I should care to repeat. At every bump (and there are plenty on the A12) I glanced in the mirror fearing the worst.

Once I had *Swallow* safely in my garage, I stripped the hull down and the true extent of the necessary restoration became apparent. It was only then that I realized what I had taken on. The keel was broken at both ends of the slot for the dagger plate, the transom was almost entirely rotten and would need replacing and the metal case for the dagger plate had rusted badly. The sheerstrake which had rested on the ground had mostly rotted away and the damage which had occurred in the lock meant that three planks would need partly replacing. Most of the timbers had cracked and would need to be doubled or replaced.

TARS member Jonathan Ross and his friends, who were at that time in my class, helped with the paint scraping and they have continued to work on the boring scraping and sandpapering tasks and consumed quantities of grog in the process. Later another TARS member, Andrea Barton, lent a hand. When I started, I sought advice from various boatbuilders and repairers and, although helpful, they were far from being in agreement. I decided to rebuild in the traditional way, using copper nails and roves, but I have also used epoxy resin to strengthen the repair. Finally I coated the exterior with three coats of resin and the interior with two.

First of all I fitted a new oak keel and replaced the cracked planks with new ones of Columbian pine. I used mahogany for the new transom, stern bench and gunwales. The new timbers were of elm, immersed in hot water and bent round a former before fitting. Eventually it began to look as if *Swallow* might one day sail again and I began to think about a re-launching. I had been at work for almost a year at the time of the TARS AGM in Ipswich and was tempted by the thought of re-launching her at the lunchtime gathering of TARS folk at Pin Mill that day. By the time the great day arrived the hull was ready - but only just – and the interior still looked decidedly tatty. I had not had time to fit new seatings for the rowlocks, so we could not even go for a row about the anchorage.

I will not dwell on the terrible hold-ups south of the Dartford Tunnel that day, or on the speed at which *Swallow* flew over the remaining 70 miles. Suffice to say that we pulled up beside Alma Cottage spot on cue. As we prepared to re-

launch *Swallow* on the hard I imagined I could hear half of those present saying, 'Wouldn't it be awful if it sank?' I began to wonder what would happen if *Swallow* did sink in front of all the assembled Top Brass of TARS? I would have no option but to resign! Pushing these thoughts aside, I put two young TARS friends, Jonathan and Katy Jennings, aboard and *Swallow* floated off at the end of the painter. Suddenly everyone seemed to relax and I became aware of cameras clicking. Very little water entered the hull and there was every reason for a celebration, although I was sorry that Sam King, who had identified *Swallow* the previous year, had not lived to see what we had achieved.

We arrived safely back in Bognor Regis in the early hours of the following morning and in the weeks that followed the work continued. The interior was painted white but externally *Swallow* is varnished and looks much as it did in Ransome's day. The sail carried the barely decipherable name of Jeckells of Wroxham and so I returned it to see if they could repair the tears and holes. The sail proved too rotten to save and so they made a new one – from the measurements which they still had on file from 1938. Finally, in September, three TARS members, Ted Alexander, Jonathan and Edward Purser, sailed *Swallow* off Bosham Quay in Chichester Harbour. To me, standing on the end of the quay with three cameras slung round my neck, *Swallow* looked wonderful!

Photo: **Maiden voyage under sail. Ted Alexander and Edward Purser aboard *Swallow II* at Bosham.**