

Bob the builder



Artist Bob Grimson has painted the sea since childhood, but he decided to get even closer to his subject. Here he explains how he built the boat he and his wife have lived on for ten years

*Words by Bob Grimson.
Pictures by Joe McCarthy*

Meander's design was inspired by the fine looking traditional workboats of the North Eastern United States. Although I would have liked to have built her of wood the cost proved prohibitive, so the hull and decks were constructed from ferro-cement. Having previously built a 46ft (14m) Alan Hill ketch in the '70s I am familiar with using ferro, and I know what good liveboards these boats make.

She was built at Ilfracombe, North Devon, between 1990 and '92. Her interior fit out is in larch and Brazilian mahogany plus bits of anything else that came along, including some pitch pine that was once part of Ilfracombe's original wooden pier, built in the 1870s. A reconditioned Perkins 4108 diesel was

installed and a lot of the hardware came from boat jumbles, while electronics were kept to a minimum. I designed the rig entirely from John Leather's excellent *Gaff Rig Handbook*; spars are Douglas fir, the masts are hollow, gaffs and booms solid. Apart from some plastering work, for which I am ever grateful to friends and family, I worked mostly on my own and *Meander* was completed in just under two years at a material cost including new sails of £23,000.

We launched at Watermouth Harbour, Ilfracombe – a beautiful spot where I once worked as harbourmaster – and my wife and I moved aboard the same day.

From the first outing, it was obvious that *Meander* was something special. She is fast, well balanced and easily handled,



Meander's design is inspired by the traditional workboats of the United States' North East coast



MEANDER

she never gets out of control. Most of all she is a joy to sail and is a very comfortable and homely boat to live aboard. The main reason for this is that we didn't attempt to make her anything other than a two-berth boat. True, we can put up two guests in the saloon, but only on the settees.

Right forward there is a large fore-cabin that is completely sealed off from the accommodation by a bulkhead, which is accessed through a hatch on deck. Then, further aft, there's a cosy double-berth cabin with hanging locker and stowage opposite.

Aft again is the saloon with a small fixed table seating six, stowage and bookshelves outboard, and a solid fuel stove that burns coal, wood, fir cones or almost anything else. Being flat-topped, it can boil a kettle and cook the dinner should we run out of propane to the galley. Living as we do in almost perpetual summer, we don't get to use the stove too much, but when we return to higher latitudes, it is a Godsend. Also aft is a large U-shaped galley with a two-burner propane cooker that has a grill and oven, while opposite is a heads compartment with hand-basin and a Baby Blake WC.

Over the years *Meander's* design has evolved a little, mainly in the rig. Originally, we had a bermudan fully battened mizzen and a yard topsail with a short pole main mast. I found the mizzen an awkward sail to stow and to reef, and eventually I grew to detest it. So in the winter of 1995 I converted it to gaff. The new gaff sail was cut fairly flat so it's not easily backwinded by the main and it works very well. It can be



Meander specification

Length overall	49ft (14.9m)
Length on deck	37ft (11.3m)
Beam	11ft 6in (3.5m)
Draught	5ft (1.5m)

Meander's tender is a 7ft 6in Iain Oughtred-designed clinker-ply dinghy built by Bob himself

reefed in seconds and is a much nicer sail to handle. The secret with gaff sails is to have twin topping lifts that can hold the gaff all the way down as it's lowered.

At about the same time we added a topmast to the main and got rid of the yard topsail, which was a liability in a seaway. We then fitted a jib-headed topsail which has all the lines, including

its halyard, permanently hanked on making it wonderfully easy to use. The working jib's Wykeham-Martin gear fell apart after three years so now we hank on the jib, which improves its set, and I can bring the whole jib stay inboard, which avoids suicidal antics out on the bowsprit. Finally, last year, we had to replace some plywood that had gone bad in the cockpit so took the opportunity to reduce the size of the well which has improved drainage.

All in all, *Meander* has been an enormous success, as has our cruise which began as a two-year jaunt after the Brest 92 festival and 10 years later, is still going strong. There are several reasons for this: a good and enthusiastic boat-wife is certainly one. Another is a simple, effective and well-proven rig which can be made yourself and, by the same token, maintained and repaired yourself. Gaff rig is ideal in this respect and wire splicing, serving and leathering are all skills that can easily be learnt.

Simplicity is definitely the key. Despite what we are told, gadgetry does not make life easier and frequently it makes



It started off as a two-year cruise, but 10 years later Bob and his wife are still going strong



The interior is fitted out mainly in larch and mahogany, with some pitch pine coming from Ilfracombe's pier, which was built in the 1870s

matters worse as it always seems to go wrong. To our minimal electronics of VHF radio, depth sounder and small strip light we have added a handheld GPS and a tiny 12v fridge unit for the coolbox. We have a solar panel, which keeps everything topped up as long as we turn off the fridge at night and, since *Meander* can be sailed more or less anywhere, we can last for months without running the engine at all.

Before I began building *Meander*, I built a 7ft 6in (2.3m) clinker plywood dinghy to an Iain Oughtred design, which has turned out to be a great little tender. It can carry four people, tows well, rows well and is light and portable. After 10 years of hard use, this little dinghy is still in good shape. *Meander's* sails have been another success: made by Andrew Hooper of Newton Ferrers, Devon, they work well, last well and, most importantly, are affordable.

Good gaffers are enormous fun to sail and I suppose the best compliment I can pay *Meander* is that after 10 years and nearly 50,000 miles, we still get a kick out of sailing her.



The ferro-cement hull with timber fit-out makes for a homely and warm space in which to live