



EMILY HARRIS

# HOME comforts

Bought to live aboard, this 45ft 1930s gentleman's motor yacht needed major restoration. By *Peter Willis*, photos by *Emily Harris*



Saunders Roe is perhaps best remembered nowadays as an aircraft manufacturer, but this extraordinary company began life as a yacht and boatbuilder. In the 1930s it introduced a range of motor cruisers known as the Medina class, after the firm's Cowes, Isle of Wight, base. They were mainly 35ft or 45ft (10.7/13.7m) long, well built in teak on oak, striking in appearance with stepped decks and canoe sterns, and powered by twin engines. Around a dozen were built, and a few survive.

One of these is the 45-footer *Gralian*, built 1937 and owned since March 2010 by Jonathan and Helen Lewis. They bought her for long-term liveaboard cruising and were planning to set off for the Mediterranean at the beginning of this season, but as is often the way with newly acquired boats the work required to get her into shape proved more extensive than her owners anticipated.

For Jonathan, a former TV director (with an Erskine Childers-related drama to his name) turned crime novelist (*Into Darkness*, 2010) and Helen, early-retired NHS Trust director, what they were looking for in *Gralian* was size, and space.

They'd had boats, and voyaged in them, before. The first was *Harvey*, an Andrews slipper launch (No 317, 1949) which they kept on the Thames for 20 years and used in a way in which, frankly, no slipper launch would expect to be used. "We took her on long treks, from Days Lock up to Lechlade and beyond, with the children, and camped in her. She sank occasionally," recalls Jonathan.

Their next boat was a proper cruiser, a 26ft 6in Colvic Northerner called *Sea Lion*. Their five-year ownership mainly involved cruising between Woodbridge and the Solent, but culminated in a fairly epic seven-month,





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**Above:** A corner of the saloon, with practical bucket seats, a new stove and plenty of period fittings and mementoes  
**Above left:** The owners' cabin  
**Left:** The heads, with original toilet and period-piece basin

seven-country voyage to Oslo. It was partway through this trip that they realised they liked the cruising life, but the boat they had was “a bit small”. No room for guests, for a start, so they started looking.

**A GENTLEMAN'S YACHT**

The chief requirement, apart from size, was pre-war elegance. “I’d always wanted a gentleman’s yacht,” admits Jonathan. *Gralian*, which they first set eyes on in Brigg, North Lincolnshire, in November 2009, was certainly that. She was built, as *Jeakelard*, for a World War I flying ace, Wing Commander PC Sherren, as a gift from his wife, herself the mayor of Felixstowe. Sherren had the misfortune to be killed in a flying race, and *Jeakelard* passed to Alfred Munns, a perfume importer and later a rear-commodore of the Royal Thames Yacht Club, whose wife’s maiden name was Gralian.

He kept her for 30 years, apart from her war service, when she became a patrol vessel in the Solent and on the East Coast, before participating in the Normandy landings of 1944. She was not decommissioned until 1946, and her ship’s bell, still in the wheelhouse, is inscribed ‘War Service Admiralty’.

After two more owners covering about 20 years each – the first cruising her extensively around Europe even as far as Switzerland, and keeping her for part of the time in

a yard near Amsterdam – *Gralian* came to Jonathan and Helen. They sailed her round from Brigg to Levington, and then to Woodbridge, in April last year, and it was then that the story and the script began to part company. “We spent a month or so trying to work out why she was leaking so badly – and why, with two good engines, we were only getting 8½ knots out of a 10-knot hull.”

They called in a new surveyor, Bill McGregor, who was to see her through the subsequent restoration, and also consulted Dartmouth yacht broker and guru Peter Gregson: “You tell me where she is, and when she was built, and I’ll tell you what’s likely to be wrong with her.”

“And he was right,” says Jonathan. “For example the break of sheer – huge problems. And just the sense that a boat of her age that hadn’t had a major restoration would probably need one.” But no-one, Peter, Bill, Jonathan or Helen, was prepared for what John Buckley of Harbour Marine Services in Southwold, the boatbuilder to whom they handed over *Gralian*, discovered. “She was leaking from the top down,” says Jonathan. “Bill asked John to lift three planks on the deck for inspection. He took the screws out, but they wouldn’t lift up. They turned out to be side-fastened with nails, driven in at various angles, across each other.” Worse was to follow: a bad repair, using car body filler, on the port side, after the boat had fallen over; “no attempt to tie the boat back together at all”. Rain had

got into the fabric of the structure – the beamshelves and carlins, tops of bulkheads, knees and frames and then further down into the boat. And so it went on. The hog was rotted. The stern sections had been affected by electrolysis, and the teak was yellow, powdery and fibrous. The hull planks were generally not too bad, but the starboard garboards were “horrific” – leaks along a 20ft (6.1m) section. All the joints in the cabin sides and wheelhouse were shot away.

**NOT SAFE TO MOVE**

“The steering had never felt right – the pulleys behind the panelling turned out to be half off. She hadn’t had much use, apparently, in 20 years,” says Jonathan. “We were told she probably hadn’t been safe to move that far by sea.” In the words of John Buckley: “As we discovered more and more problems, so it went from repair, to refit, to full restoration.” The initial five-week estimate stretched eventually to the best part of nine months. When I first caught up with *Gralian*, on a visit to Harbour Marine last September (CB273), you could look through the aft deck – or where it should have been – right down to the yard floor. In fact all her decks were off, and the interiors a mass of cables, inspection lamps and tools. She looked a sad sight indeed, and would have looked sadder if it hadn’t been for her wheelhouse and aft coachroof standing proud.

**Top:** Chart locker  
**Above:** Train-carriage-style window-port





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PETER WILLIS

Above: The wheelhouse still has a period feel with a predominance of chrome fittings

Above left to right: Helen in painting mode; the ship's bell; Jonathan with a copy of a prewar *Motor Cruising* manual that features *Gralian* on the cover

Even so, the Harbour Marine shipwrights were full of admiration for the boat herself: "They kept saying how beautifully she'd been built," says Jonathan. "They told us, 'you're going to end up with a restored Saunders Roe – stiff, strong and sound, that'll do what you want it to.'"

"The yard were very turned on by working on a classic boat, and one that was going to do something, go on voyages," comments Helen, "and we ended up with an intimate knowledge of the boat."

#### HELEN'S CHISEL

Helen herself got very involved in working on the boat, starting with carefully removing the internal panelling. ("Though I couldn't put it back again!"). One day she announced, "I want to buy a chisel." The idea evolved that Helen would work on the boat to help speed things along and keep down costs, while Jonathan stayed at home writing, to attack the yard bills from the other end, so to speak. (The result, a second crime novel, *Into Dust* – appropriately, perhaps – is due out this autumn.)

"I did a lot alongside the yard guys, restraining the language – for a while," says Helen. "I got a seven-month course in painting and varnishing."

The second time I saw *Gralian*, she was lying to a pontoon in Levington Marina, completed and ready, more or less, for her projected voyage through the French canals to the Mediterranean. There's now a

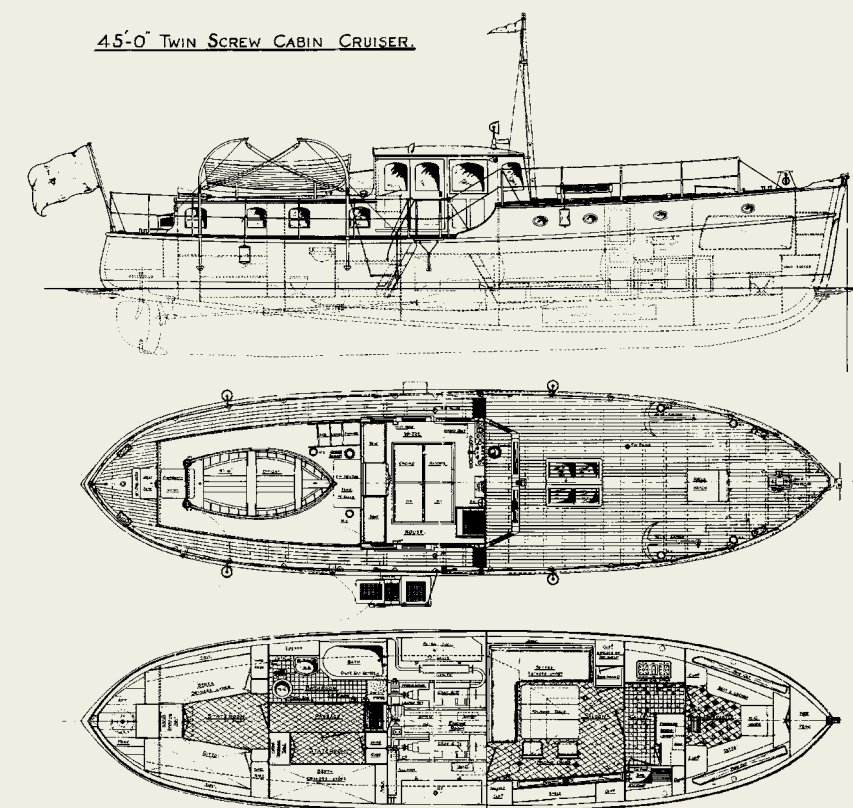
liferaft strapped to her aft guardrails. On a more homely note, a small herb garden is tentatively flourishing in a box on the aft coachroof, tucked in behind the wheelhouse.

Much of the other deck equipment, though, is original. There are the davits, swung inboard and crossed at present, for the tender, a clinker dinghy with inboard engine, nestling in chocks on the aft coachroof. The cat davit on the bows is also original and it would seem pretty uncommon. Moray McPhail of Classic Marine said he'd never been asked for cat davit blocks before. However, it is supplemented by a Simpson Lawrence Seatiger windlass and a tipping roller.

In the wheelhouse, there are inevitably some modern navigation screens, but tradition is reasserted by a rack of signal flags and a chart locker which in memory of her war service has its drawers marked up for the likes of 'Western Approaches', 'Swept Channels' and even 'Top Secret'. The train-carriage-style side windows, raised and lowered using leather straps, have also happily survived.

Down below, they have made every effort to complement and enhance the period ambience of the boat. The art-deco frosted-glass light fittings in particular are a joy, and matched with ornate 1930s switch fittings. Fabrics have been carefully chosen; chrome fittings have replaced brass, and in the heads, the Simpson Lawrence Kentigern toilet (as fitted to *Britannia*) is accompanied by a decoratively-glazed blue and white wash-hand basin.

"We ended up with an intimate knowledge of the boat"



## GRALIAN

BUILT  
Saunders Roe, Cowes  
1937

LOA  
45ft (13.7m)

BEAM  
11ft (3.4m)

DRAUGHT  
4ft 6in (1.4m)

ENGINES  
2 x Mercedes-Benz  
OM315 85hp diesels

RESTORED  
Harbour Marine Services,  
Southwold

SURVEYOR  
Bill McGregor

## Saunders Roe: Streatley to Cowes; Consuta to hovercraft

The business that became Saunders Roe, builder of aircraft, flying boats and hovercraft, started life modestly enough in or around 1830 on the Thames. Moses Saunders, landlord of the Swan Inn at Streatley, was also the ferryman and was responsible for maintaining the locks and weirs on the river. Some boatbuilding undoubtedly formed part of the mix, but it was his grandson Sam, born 1857, who established it as a business, supposedly in 1870 when he would have been 13. In 1878 he built the elaborate 75ft (23m) University College barge. By 1881 he is describing himself, on his son's birth certificate, as a 'steam launch builder'.

In the early 1890s he developed a lightweight laminate called 'Consuta' using thin layers of wood interleaved with waterproofed canvas, sewn together with copper wire. His 1896 steam launch *Consuta* (still to be seen on the Thames) promoted the product.

In 1901, the company set up in East Cowes, enabling it to build larger, faster boats and test them on the Solent. Short-lived outposts in Kiel, Paris and Genoa also followed. The company built fast motorboats and hydroplanes, lifeboats (a sole contract with the RNLI) and in the First World War biplanes and flying boats, and even Consuta-bodied cars.

In 1928 one of many financial restructurings saw the arrival of aircraft builder Alliott Verdon Roe (Avro) and John Lord, and Sam's effective retirement to the position of life president; he died in 1933. The 1930s began with Sir Henry

Seagrave's *Miss England II* (personally supervised by Sam), followed in 1938 by Sir Malcolm Campbell's *Bluebird K3*. Bread-and-butter work meantime included a 31ft (9.5m) Crusader cruiser class, yacht tenders, launches and just one aero-engine-powered 'Hydroglider'. But business was slack in the shipyard, and the Medina class, in 35ft, 45ft and 52ft (10.7m, 13.7m and 15.9m) versions, was introduced in 1932 in an attempt to reverse this. The design took off rather slowly, but by 1937, when *Gralian* was built, the order book was full.

World War II inevitably saw both marine and aircraft production at full stretch. Postwar, diversification often featured aluminium, used to make buses, office partitioning, golf clubs, the Mk III Airborne Lifeboat, as well as military powerboats, flying boats and the odd yacht. There was also the first hovercraft, SRN1. At about the same time as its launch, in 1959, Saunders Roe was purchased by Westland Helicopters, part of a chain of mergers and acquisitions which gradually saw the disappearance of the name.



Saunders Roe's Columbia Shipyard, East Cowes, in 1937, with Medina yachts moored



## “She’s much lighter than say a Silver of the same era”



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Far left: *Gralian* displays her steadying sail, dinghy and davits  
Left: In the yard, working around the wheelhouse



Above left: Scarphing in a new deck piece  
Above right: Her stern area needed a lot of work

In the saloon, with its built-in bucket seats (“they do hold you steady in a sea”) a modern Davey’s Hot Pot solid-fuel stove has been installed, more for comfort than effect, but it blends in well. Around the sides are mementoes – including that photo of *Mavis* (the original of Ransome’s *Amazon*) with a giant lugsail featured in the August CB, p46). Taken in the 50s it includes a young Jonathan. His father, professor of Turkish at Oxford, knew Ransome’s old friend Ernest Altounyan.

After the guided tour, and a sit and a chat and a coffee, it’s time to head out into the Orwell, to show off her handling and get some photos. Jonathan fires up the engines, a pair of sturdy Mercedes-Benz 85hp OM314s now freed from the strangulating exhaust pipes that had previously been holding them back, and the business of extricating 45ft of motor cruiser from the depths of this pontoon bay begins. Her canoe stern certainly helps, providing that little extra bit of manoeuvrability as the bow swings out. But it’s in the engines and the control of them that the secret of success lies.

Jonathan alternates the twin controls between ahead and astern, in the marine equivalent of handbrake turns, and explains what’s going on. “She’s got a single rudder, with the twin props just forward of the rudder. Much under two knots, she’ll only steer on engines. But she’ll turn in her own length – she’s quite manoeuvrable, a delight to handle really.”

One more two-handed flick of the controls and we’re free of the marina, out into the river and it’s full ahead both (well not quite, there is a speed limit). *Gralian* surges forward quite eagerly. For a big boat, she’s not as heavy as she might be, as Jonathan points out. “She was built by people who were building seaplanes and racing boats. They were developing new techniques – she’s much lighter than, say, a Silver of the same era.”

We hoist the small steadying sail and execute a series of turns for the camera, while Jonathan and Helen enlarge on their forthcoming voyage – up the Seine, through Paris, down the most westerly of the routes, into the Rhône, turn left at the Med, and head for the Italian border.

They are philosophical about their belated start and *Gralian*’s extended sojourn at Harbour Marine. “Some of the most interesting times Helen and I have had have been listening to John [Buckley] and the shipwrights in the yard talking about what to do to *Gralian*,” says Jonathan – “conversations about cruising, endurance, stamina, strength, manoeuvring, positions of cleats and so on – John always used to say the lads enjoy it when the client gets involved, and they can’t meet the clients’ wishes unless they do get involved.” Helen puts it more simply: “Treat it as a partnership with the yard.”

Now, however, they are reaping the rewards of their work, sailing away in a boat they love and understand. The latest email from *Gralian* was sent from Saint-Tropez. 🌐