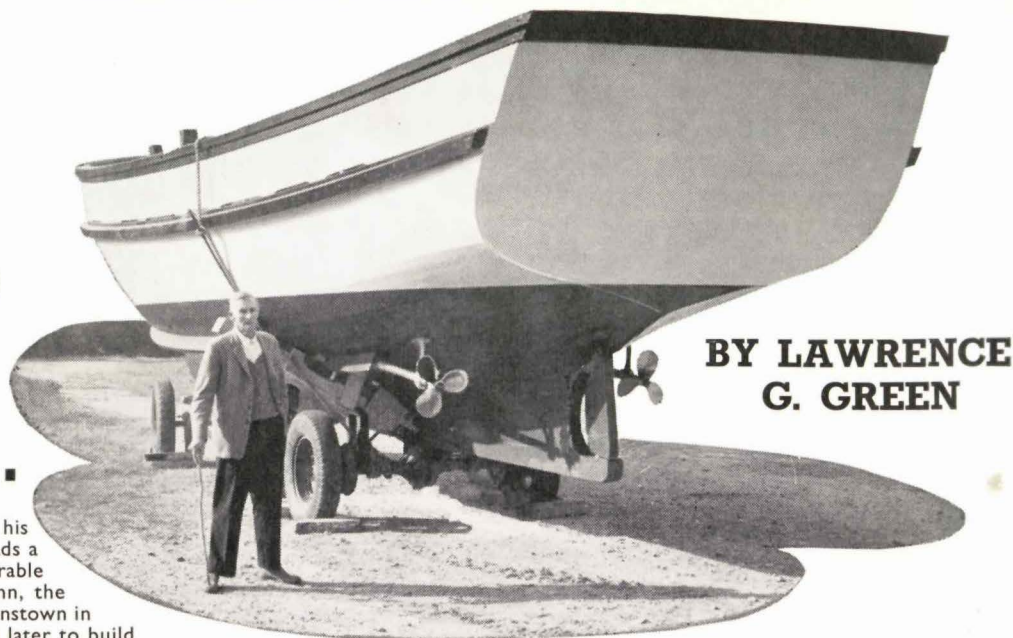


A FINE OLD TRADE, and an honest one...



BY LAWRENCE
G. GREEN

Connie Benn, of Knysna, with his family's latest ship, *Viking*. He heads a clan which started in the honourable shipwrights' craft when "John Benn, the first of the dynasty, arrived at Simonstown in 1838, and reached Knysna 17 years later to build the *Rover*, one of the most famous of all the Cape schooners." The Benns have also been noted pilots.

SHIPBUILDING is not such a recent industry in South Africa as you might imagine. It flourished in Van Riebeeck's time, and started much earlier. Shipwrecked crews of long ago were resourceful men. They knew full well that no one would come to their rescue, so they put together new ships from shattered hulls and sailed home at last.

I possess a sort of vested interest in local shipbuilding. Thirty years ago I watched my own five-ton sloop becoming a reality day after day, from designer's board to the moment when the champagne bottle cracked on her bows. This sounds magnificent, but a yacht of that size cost only three hundred pounds, with sails, thirty years ago. She is still afloat, and worth more to-day than I paid for her.

This is a fine old trade and an honest one. Oak, stinkwood, yellowwood and other timber from Cape forests have gone into all sorts of craft for more than three centuries. They build steel ships at Table Bay Docks nowadays, ships more than one hundred feet long; diesel trawlers, barges, fishery research ships, even naval transport vessels. But the South African wooden ships of the past make a more romantic story.

Van Riebeeck's first local boat was a thirty-two footer launched two years after his arrival and designed to carry salt, wood and manure from the Salt River to the Fort. His next venture was more ambitious. He sent men into the forests to select timber for a decked vessel more than fifty feet in length, and capable of making ocean voyages. This was the adventurous *Robbejacht*, designed mainly for sealing and taking cargoes to and from Robben Island, Dassen Island and Saldanha Bay. She was also used for piloting large ships into Table Bay. Practically all her timber came from Hout Bay and other Cape Peninsula forests. A few imported oaken boards were used, as the first local oaks had only just been planted.

When the *Robbejacht* went sealing the crew received a few "comforts" to encourage them. Wine, tin dishes and plates, butter, sugar, plums and candles were supplied. But life was seldom tranquil on board the *Robbejacht*. She was attacked by Hottentots while lying close to the beach at Saldanha, and a gun and all the coffee and tobacco carried for barter were looted. Then the *Robbejacht* was sent with the sloop *Maria* to explore the West Africa coast and bring back slaves. The *Robbejacht* became a total loss on the Gold Coast, though her crew escaped and marched to Elmina castle safely.

Van Riebeeck appealed to his directors for a new ship to replace the *Robbejacht*. However, they pointed out that he had built the *Robbejacht* and a sister the *Schaapejacht* successfully and there was no reason why he should not build others. The *Schaapejacht* carried sheep for a time. She was sold to others who traded in penguin eggs, fish, seal oil, meat and salted birds. Once she sailed to Saldanha

loaded with carrots and turnips, beets and radishes, milk and eggs, for the scurvy-stricken men of a Dutch ship. A trumpeter sailed as captain on that trip, and one man was regarded as a sufficient crew. The *Schaapejacht* was lost on Robben Island, but the thrifty Hollanders built a smaller sloop from the wreckage.

A fine shipbuilding achievement of the early days was the large sloop *Bruidegom*. She brought cargo after cargo of blue slabs of Robben Island slate to the mainland for Cape Town's kitchen floors, stoeps and graves. This was the ship in which some prisoners on Robben Island tried to escape; the first of many attempts through the centuries. After a useful career of eleven years she was lost at Saldanha. *Bruidegom's* Hoek, near the lagoon entrance in Saldanha Bay, was named after her, but the name does not appear on modern charts.

Another fifty-footer called the *Voerman* was laid down soon after the *Bruidegom* went to sea. It took the combined strength of the whole garrison to haul the *Voerman* into the water. A "merry dinner" followed. The *Voerman* carried dried fish, salt and sheep along the coast for several years; but this dull routine was varied by one voyage to Madagascar and Mauritius for ebony and amber. Her crew landed at St. Francis Bay (near Algoa Bay) during this voyage, and were attacked by lions. The *Voerman* was lost on Vondeling Island, outside Saldanha.

Two more seventeenth-century vessels built at the Cape were the *Oester* and the *Schulp*. Many prisoners were carried to Robben Island on board the *Oester*. She was not designed for beating to windward, and the south-easters often blew her out to sea. Her crew nearly died of hunger and thirst on several occasions. Some of her men deserted while the unpopular *Oester* was lying at anchor in Hout Bay, and vanished into the forests. The *Schulp* was the ship in which Eva, the troublesome Hottentot, travelled back from her exile on Robben Island.

I have mentioned the castaways who built ships when the South African coastline was still wild and unexplored. The greatest recorded enterprise of this kind followed the wreck in 1686 of the spice-laden Dutch East India ship *Stavenisse* on the Natal coast near the present Port Shepstone. Some of her survivors joined forces with a party of Englishmen who had lost their ketch *Good Hope* at the entrance to the bay of Natal. They decided to build a new ship, but they had no saw. Iron bolts and rings were fetched from the wreck of the *Stavenisse*, while the *Good Hope* provided the timber. A craftsman named Kingston made a saw from an iron ring. Within a year they had a seaworthy vessel, the *Centaurus*, at their disposal.

By this time the two crews had been joined by survivors from a third wreck. Some decided to remain in Natal, but the others provisioned the *Centaurus* with millet and smoked

meat, goats, fowls and pumpkins, and sailed safely to the Cape. So fine a vessel was the *Centaurus* that she remained in service on the Cape coast for many years.

Government shipbuilding seems to have ended at the Cape with the *Oester* and *Schulp*, and there was no private enterprise to take over the industry. A revival came early in the nineteenth century, when shipwrights were busy not only on the shores of Table Bay but in the forgotten harbour of Port Beaufort and at Knysna and the Kowie. Port Elizabeth, East London and Port Natal entered the trade later.

Small vessels were built at Algoa Bay before the 1820 Settlers arrived. A coaster named the *Thomas* was launched when there were only thirty-five white people at the Bay; when the whole settlement consisted of the stone Residency, two mud cottages, a few pondoks and two farms. The *Thomas* loaded cargoes of hides and skins, kegs of butter and bags of salt. Then came the schooner *Uitenhage Packet*, specially built for trading up the Zwartkops river. She entered the river safely on her maiden voyage in 1819, but was wrecked on the rocks at the mouth while leaving.

Knysna became a British Admiralty shipyard in 1820, but before the first vessel, a brig, had been completed the yard was transferred to Simonstown. The mysterious George Rex laid down his famous two-masted brig *Knysna* (140 tons) at Knysna six years later. She was still afloat and sailing as a collier early this century, a wonderful tribute to local craftsmanship and the seasoned stinkwood that went into her.

Cape Town builders launched the schooner *Elizabeth* in 1821 for the Kowie trade. Both skill and nerve were needed to cross the dangerous bar into the Kowie river. The *Elizabeth* crossed safely and loaded a cargo of local produce, hides, fats and butter and the beef and pork cured in the district by Mr. Henry Nourse, a London merchant. However, the *Elizabeth* escaped the perils of the river only to be wrecked on Cape Recife.

Hatton the carpenter, King and his companions at Port Natal launched the *Tshaka* (later named *Elizabeth* and *Susan*) in 1828, and she started her first voyage with Farewell and King on board in April of that year. She also carried two of Chaka's indunas as envoys on an unsuccessful mission to Port Elizabeth. The little ship later carried ivory to Algoa Bay and there she was seized by the authorities on the ground that she had no register. Sold by the Customs, she traded along the Cape coast for some years.

Port Natal does not seem to have produced another ship until the middle of last century, when the small coaster *Albion* was launched. She carried pineapples and potatoes, butter and mealies to the Buffalo River. The same firm built the cutter *Herald* for this early trade in Natal farm produce.

Cape Town claimed to have built the first South African steamer. This was in 1863 and she was launched in Table Bay, but I can find no further reference to her. In the same year the little iron steamer *Emma Scot* slid into the water at Port Natal. Her ten horse-power engine gave her a speed of seven knots. Apparently she always worked inside the bay as tug and pilot boat. It is not clear whether she was built, or merely assembled, in Natal.

Nearly all the leading South African shipbuilders had their yards on the edge of Table Bay during the second half of last century. They turned out a fleet of brigs and schooners, including a few grand little ships which were never forgotten until sail vanished from the seas—ships like the *Walter Glendinning* and *Lord of the Isles*, *Springbok* and *Western Province*.

De Pass, Spence, the guano people, were also shipbuilders. Robertson and Bain were able to build a small brigantine, the *Assegai*, just over a century ago for £675! At the same period Murray and Prince launched the *African Maid* (148 tons) at the North Wharf and claimed it as the largest vessel ever built in Table Bay. After the launching ceremony by Miss Emma Jarvis a "large and smart company sat down to a very liberal repast".

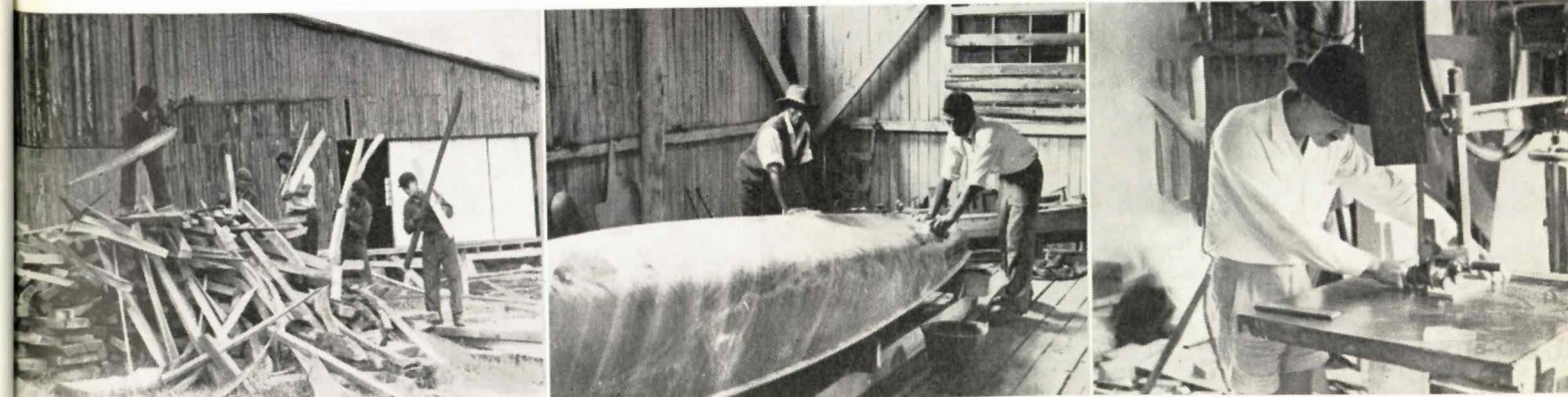
Some of the old firms specialized in fishing craft. For many years the *buis* of the Netherlands influenced the design, but the typical open fishing boat still seen on Table Bay and far beyond was the work of an Englishman. His name was White, and he was trained by the famous Cowes firm of that name. White took a partner named Beck; but to the coloured fishermen they were always "Black and White". They created a fishing boat design known as the *Springbok*, and this model became the standard design and was copied widely.

Knysna, with its forests, was bound to become a shipbuilding centre. Among those who followed George Rex's example were the Benns, the redoubtable Benns who piloted so many ships across the bar. John Benn, the first of the dynasty, arrived at Simonstown as a shipwright in 1838, and reached Knysna seventeen years later to build a ship for Captain Horne, then owner of the Royal Hotel. That was the *Rover*, one of the most famous of all the Cape schooners.

I heard the story of the Benns from John Benn the second. He was then almost ninety, a tall, fresh-faced, white-bearded man; and in spite of his age, he was building a boat when I called on him at his house in Benn's Avenue, Knysna. (Houses in this road were all occupied by the son, grandsons and great-grandsons of the original John Benn.) Yes, there was the first John Benn's son fitting the seats in a brand new dinghy.

Benn told me that his father ran the pont at Malagas on the Breede River before he settled at Knysna as shipbuilder

(Continued on page 53)



★ This article is an extract from Lawrie Green's latest book, *Eight Bells at Salamander*, which is packed with salty good fare for boating folk. It tells "the unwritten story of ships and men in South African waters, and some of the forgotten adventures and mysteries of the oceans that wash the

shores of Africa and break on lonely isles". Once again, Howard Timmins is publishing the book for only 15s.

The pictures above were all taken at Thesen's yard in Knysna, which has a long record of shipbuilding and is still today on ships large and small.

OUR SHIPBUILDERS

(Continued from page 51)

and harbour pilot. After building the *Rover*, Benn the first, helped by his sons John and Donald, laid down the *Annie Benn*, named after his wife. White elms was used for the frames, stinkwood and yellowwood for the planking. (At present-day prices, the cost of such timber would be ruinous.) Captain Stubbington, master of the *Annie Benn* when she became a Cape coast trader, had such a contempt for engines that he refused the command of a steamer when it was offered to him. He lost the *Annie Benn* in a gale at Mossel Bay.

Four generations of Benns piloted ships into Knysna before the harbour lost its official status as a seaport. Ten years ago the Knysna municipality commissioned a model of George Rex's brig *Knysna*, made from a cache of old stinkwood unearthed at the spot where the brig was built. The man who made that model was Roland Benn, professional boat-builder, great-grandson of the first John Benn.

Knysna still builds many types of small craft. I was cruising on a lake in Central Africa nearly a thousand miles from the nearest sea not long ago, and I happened to see a small brass plate screwed to the stern. The words "Made in Knysna" recalled the day when I looked out across the water while old John Benn told me how he had gone to sea under sail in the brig *Galatea*, wrecked on Woodstock beach in the 1865 gale. It seemed a long way, a long time ago.

Simonstown has had its shipbuilders, of course, and several fine schooners were launched there last century. Old residents may recall a strange character named J. R. Black, who made a living not only as a shipwright but also by collecting natural history specimens for museums. Dr. R. W. Coppinger, a naval surgeon, found Black in possession of a very large and valuable egg of the extinct *Aepyornis*, the wingless Madagascar bird. Black had bought it from the supercargo of a trading schooner, and he sold it at a handsome profit.

With this money available the eccentric Black decided to build a ship with his own hands, and without help of any sort. He quoted Noah to friends who tried to reason with him. Black designed a schooner of one hundred tons, and spent the last fifteen years of his life on this herculean task.

He laid the keel, cut the huge timbers to shape, set up steam troughs and bent the planking, and drove the copper bolts securing the stem and stern posts and timbers. His strength and determination astounded everyone in Simonstown. All who lived there late last century went to see Black's schooner from time to time. Sometimes the old man fell from the scaffolding and cut himself, but he simply washed off the blood, treated the wound with Stockholm tar, and returned to his work.

Black was still pottering about on board his schooner when he died. It was then found that parts of the keel and timbers had decayed, and the schooner never felt the touch salt water. She was broken up for firewood where she lay.

As a contrast, I may recall the fishing ketch *Star of Africa*, built by Henri de Villiers in 1922 and 1923 on Witsands beach, only about five miles from the scene of poor Black's labour. De Villiers, who likes to describe himself as a farm boy, is really an experienced shipwright and seagoing skipper. He made a model from his own design, felled his timber in the Tokai forests, and built the large ketch with only farm hands to help him.

De Villiers remained in command of the *Star of Africa* for thirty-four years. Every season he sailed her up to Walvis Bay. From the decks of the seaworthy ketch he had built, De Villiers and his crew hooked more than two million snoek. De Villiers left the *Star of Africa* to take charge of the schooner *Kernwood*. But the craft he built from Cape Peninsula timber was still absolutely sound after nearly forty years at sea. Van Riebeeck's craftsmen from Holland could not have built a finer little ship. And now François de Villiers, Henri's nephew, is in the boat-building trade. A self-taught carpenter, he has built dozens of mahogany dinghies and several larger crafts. It runs in the family. ■

Advertisement

SKINFOOD FOR WOOD

It has been realised for many years that water is most destructive to timber. Timber has a natural affinity to water, but in absorbing and shedding water, it alternately swells and shrinks. Timber is not a homogeneous material; it consists of alternating hard and soft graining. The softer the grain the more absorbent it is, and the more swelling and shrinking occurs by water absorption and loss. A second factor to make the life of a boat owner difficult is that water vapour will penetrate even the best of varnishes and paints, and thus even a thorough surface maintenance will not bring about 100 per cent results as long as the timber still swells and shrinks, and by its movement starts to break up the paint film.

Hence the phenomenon of "grainraising", where as a final result of repeated swellings and shrinkings the soft grain recedes and the hard fibre stands out.

Plywood is equally susceptible to water. The top layer of veneer has a tremendous capacity for water absorption and becomes saturated down to the glue line almost instantaneously.

With the help of modern technology the natural affinity of water to timber can be destroyed by certain compounds which are totally absorbed by the wood and still leave the surface capable of receiving the normal paint and varnish finishes.

There is Woodyouth Toxic, a water repellent pre-treatment including also a fungicide, which should be painted to the completely bare timber surface, either when new or when completely cleaned of previous finishes. A special grade containing copper is available under the name of Marine Woodyouth Green for below the water line.

Both Woodyouth Toxic and Marine Woodyouth Green are in the nature of a pre-treatment. A further material used frequently as a finish is P.A.R., a water repellent glossless finish obtainable in clear and various tints. There are some excellent reports by boat owners who have treated the decks and general superstructure with P.A.R. The absence of a gloss, which may not satisfy on luxury craft, is offset by the great ease of application. Once P.A.R. is applied, a re-treatment does not require any preparatory work at all. There is no crust which makes the renewal of varnish finishes so laborious. Just wash off accumulated dirt, allow the surface to dry and re-apply P.A.R. On craft which are in the open throughout the year, the P.A.R. should be renewed at nine-month intervals, particularly on all horizontal surfaces which get the sun full blast all the time.

Also watch out that at the time of application the timber is really dry. If it is at all possible, keep the boat in the shade or avoid painting under strong midday sun; Woodyouth and P.A.R. must have a chance to soak in and should not dry on the surface.

All these materials are available from KR Sales S.A. (Pty.) Ltd., corner of Voortrekker Road and Eighth Ave., Maitland, Cape (telephone 51-1256, P.O. Box 2751, Cape Town.)

KR Sales also invites inquiries from stockists and distributors with good connections in the marine and pleasure boat fields.

It would pay you to get in touch with KR Sales. ✓
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