January blog - Matthew Gregory

On New Year's Day this year I flew to Alicante with friends. We visited Puerto de Mazarrón, where there are a number of fishing boats and a fish market. I was surprised to find that a number of the boats were made of wood.

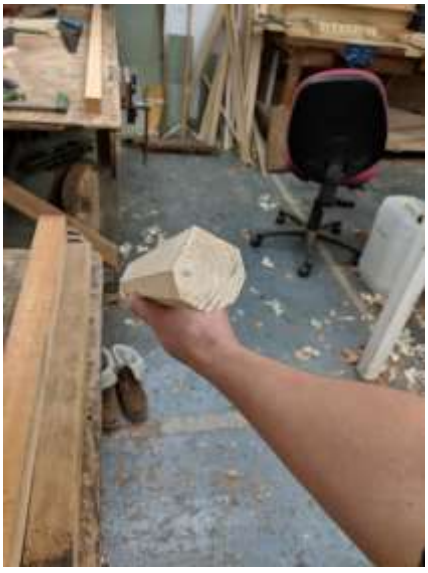
We sat on the quayside and watched a fisherman sort through his catch, while another gentleman cut up some squid, feeding tidbits to local stray cats.

It brought back memories of our time in Brixham, and Toni teaching us about the different types of trawlers. I had a new-found respect for these men, knowing how hard they would have worked for their catch. I remembered Toni telling us about the co-operative in Brixham informing the trawlers when the best time to land their catch was, based on the market price. Here in Mazarrón, they seem to have a different system where the fish were sold at auction.

They had a kind of 'auditorium' with a conveyer belt running through it, and a camera connected to a television monitor, so everyone could see what they were bidding on. The whole affair started with a cheery little electronic tune and then the conveyer belt moved some bonito under the camera lens. The bidders all had small electronic devices with a button on; and some had more than one.

Later during our trip, we went to Cartagena and saw *Sailing Yacht A*, designed by Philippe Starck. She is the largest sailing yacht in the world, with 100-metre masts and sails as big as football pitches. The yacht design looked like a love child between a doorstop and a games console.

Back in the tropical paradise that is our workshop at the International Boatbuilding Training College (IBTC), we learned about spar making. First, we made a spar gauge with a ratio of 7:10:7 for marking out how much of the corners should be planed off. We use this ratio to assure that the faces all end up the same size. Next, a long piece of timber is planned true all round and marked out with the gauge, and then planed into a regular octagonal prism.



Next, a ratio of 5:9:5 is marked out on the remaining faces and then planed off until we are left with 16 faces. We then plane these off (by eye), and then sand off the last 32.

Following this, we made a masthead fitting that could take a cylindrical collar. We planed a long piece of timber true all round and then marked out the required widths, using a compass on one side. The shape was then cut out on a band saw and the widths redrawn on the side where material was just removed. The last two faces are cut on the band saw before being planed circular, using the gauge.

The day we were shown how to use a range of different power tools there was a fantastic feeling of omnipotence! The power plane was especially awesome. The only down-side (apart from needing electricity) is that they can ruin a piece very quickly if you are not careful. They have to be treated the way the old barge skipper Geoff Harris treats a glass of ale – with respect.

We were all pretty excited the day we started lofting.

Here we are waiting in anticipation on the lofting floor. Little did we know we were actually in the classroom doing lofting theory on a smaller scale.

My dad had shown me a bit of technical drawing before, and it had always interested me. It was really nice to transform a table of offsets into the lines of a dinghy. One thing I found was that a tiny mistake in one projection threw out another by a long way.

I also didn't realise before that there is an element of artistic licence accounted to the lofter. The same design lofted by two different people, or by the same person on a different occasion, will most probably be slightly different. It takes a keen eye to know how to fair a line properly, leaving a properly seaworthy vessel.

I would definitely like to try doing it full-size at some point.

We had the chance to use an adze next, and we all did a section of a stem made of oak. The wood was well seasoned and incredibly hard to work (especially after knowing the awesome power of the power plane). John, from *Excelsior*, dropped by and explained to us that two of the adzes we were using were used for making railway sleepers, and the other two were shipwrights adzes.

He also showed us that a good adze had to have the pin shorter along the stock than the cutting edge, otherwise it would 'bounce' out of the piece. This can be checked by butting the end of the stock up against something and marking off the distances.

I found that by visualising pushing the adze in when perpendicular, one could usually take off the right amount of material so as not to lodge the tool in the piece.

That weekend I made my first trip to Hamble to look at a room for rent. The drive took around five hours, so I thought I'd make the most of my time down south. I had a look round Hamble to see if I could spot *Jolie Brise*. My future landlord informed me his father had a little motor cruiser, which he moored on the Hamble. One day whoever was skippering *Jolie Brise* at the time got caught in an eddy caused by shallow water, and swung around, taking out the rig of the motor cruiser with her bowsprit. Not a scratch on *Jolie Brise* however.

My search came to no avail, and I drove into Southampton and went to IKEA to get some stuff for my van conversion.

That evening I thought it unwise to try and drive back in one stint, so I spent the night in the van. It was cold, as I expected (I had brought plenty of blankets), and I was woken up at 6:50am by what I assume was the park ranger shining his touch through my window. Apparently overnighting in the New Forest isn't permitted.

I drove away feeling only slightly less tired than the night before. I drove on further north, up to Potter Heigham on the way back, as it was a loverly sunny day. Maynard told us, when he used to work at the yard there, most of the hire fleet was made of wood. Now it is entirely glass-reinforced plastic, but I did see a couple of wooden work boats.

At college, Maynard taught us the all-important skill for boatbuilding: pattern making. It's a very simple concept but incredibly useful, especially on a boat where nothing is square, like in a building.

We used this new skill to make a plank for *Eleanora*. This involved taking the pattern and cutting it out off larch planks. It is important with a large piece of wood to take into consideration that the wood can warp when being ripped into, due to the grain.

A hollowing plane is used on the inside of the plank so it sits correctly on the frames. If the plane is sticking to the piece, candle wax or boiled linseed oil can be used to lubricate the sole.

I carved a spatula from one of the off-cuts. I used an angle grinder to hollow out the inside as I didn't have my spoon knife to hand.

We did an RYA engine maintenance course. Having lived on a narrowboat for a while, I'd gotten quite used to hanging upside down in bilges poking around at diesel engines. It was nice to have the luxury of being able to walk around the engine while working on it.

I learned the default way to fix an engine was to loosen off the unions around the injectors until fuel is coming out without bubbles, and then doing them up one by one. You can also check for a faulty cylinder this way by listening to the change in engine noise. If there is no change, the cylinder is faulty.

This week we learned some more about deck construction and the different ways of going about it. We learned which parts you would make a pattern for and some areas where you might have to shorten the members up to account for short-grained wood.

We then learned some wire splices with Rob – the Liverpool splice and the Board of Trade splice. The former went more smoothly than the latter. We also made a wire grommet which we parcelled and served:

“Worm and parcel with the lay, turn and serve the other way”

The famous yachtsman, Bernard Moitessier, said in one of his books: ‘Life is too short for wire splicing.’ I’m not sure if I agree with him 100 per cent, but ask me again in a couple of years.