

pimp my dinghy



Fireball

first sight

The winner decided, all that remained was for our competition partners to get to work... but it wasn't quite so straightforward, as boat repairer **Pete Vincent** discovered when he examined the hull of our winning Fireball... we kick off the story.

Running a competition like this was never going to be an easy task, but we had assembled a keen panel of experts, leaders in their field of expertise who were keen to work together. We received a huge number of entries, and our panel selected a shortlist from which our readers voted on to decide the winner; Kirsten Claiden-Yardley's 30-year-old wooden Fireball.

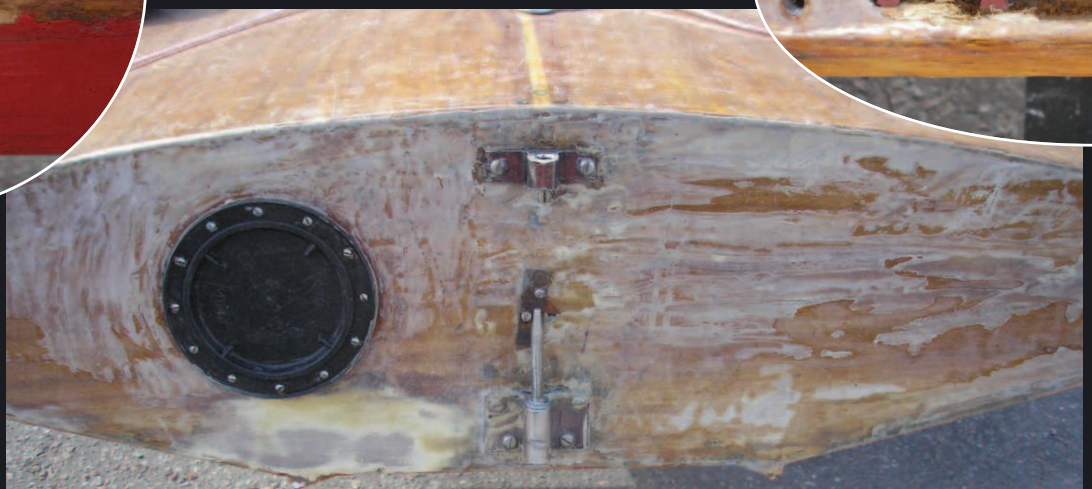
The Fireball was going to be a challenge; the class has moved on a lot in 30 years, and the hull would need some tidying up – we knew there was a hole which had just been patched – but the hull was by a good builder, and our expert, Pete Vincent at West Country Boat Repairs was

Right Amateur repairs, such as where fittings have been removed, had caused water ingress and freshwater rot – see how the wood is flaking away.

Below This was the state our poor Fireball was found in – with epoxy sloshed all over the transom.



Above Spinnaker fittings had ripped out but not been replaced or holes repaired – creating another entry point for water.



confident that it shouldn't be a problem... that was until he saw the extent of the boat's problems.

'Umm... it's a shed,' the call we had been dreading came a few days later. Pete Vincent had collected the winning boat, not without some difficulty as its trailer left something to be desired, but that was nothing compared to the state of the hull. Never mind 'pimping', this was a full restoration project.

'The more we start to dig, the bigger the problems we are finding. Initially I thought that we had a massive project on, but as we scraped back some of the varnish work and dug deeper to have a closer look at the areas of concern, we soon realised that this hull wasn't a pimping project, it's pretty much a write off,' admitted Pete.

Pete Vincent's assessment

'If someone came to me with this hull I would suggest they buy themselves a cheap hull for £500, and sell off the spare sails and rigging to recoup some of the cost,' stated Pete. 'This isn't a pimping project, this is a full restoration. It simply wouldn't be a viable project to take on commercially. There's a year's work here for a full-time professional, not a couple of weeks. It would have to be something which someone took on for a labour of love. There are a few amateur repairs which have been done over the years, but that's not the biggest problem. The biggest problem is the freshwater rot. If you were to put a new rig on this boat it would simply break in two. Pretty much the whole hull needs replacing, the centreboard case needs to come out and everything.'

Why was the boat so bad? 'It's actually a really good example of what not to do. There are a lot of very simple things that could have been done over the years which, had they been done, would have meant this boat would still be fine, not the shed that it is.'

The solution

Our Fireball has a tight deadline; the class

Boat care tips

Pete Vincent shares a few simple tips that could have saved our Fireball...

Replacing fittings

'A really common mistake is that if you remove fittings and don't replace them in exactly the same screw holes then you HAVE to fill up the holes. This dinghy had had more fittings than the average chandler's and water was going straight into the wood.'

Freshwater rot

'This boat really showed the importance of buying a good proper cover. It had an ill-fitting cover that was letting water straight into the boat. Most of the damage was done, not while this boat was sailing, but in the dinghy park. You have to leave your boat in a way that water drains out properly.'

'The other thing which had contributed to freshwater rot in the decks was that the boat had holes drilled into the gunwales to fit rope as a non-slip surface for trapezing. Unlike normal rot, where water stays in the wood until it goes black, with freshwater rot the water drains in and out until it becomes crumbly like balsa.'

Repairs

This boat had had plenty of DIY repairs made to it, with two classic errors. 'First they'd fallen for out of sight, out of mind. There was a panel in the bottom of the boat that had gone rotten, and someone had screwed two panels sandwiching the rotten wood. Although it looked fine for a while, the rotten wood was left there, containing water, and the dampness just progressed along the ply and expanded the area of the problem.'

'The other mistake many wooden boat owners make is thinking that epoxy is the answer to everything – it was everywhere in the boat. It's a bit like if you have a crack in your ceiling at home and you fill it with Polyfilla it'll look okay for a while but the crack will come back again if you don't prepare the surface properly. Preparation is everything with boat maintenance, otherwise you're just trapping damp moisture in the boat and it rots from the inside out.'



Below and left Parts of the wood were sodden and rotten through – see the black areas. Patches of good wood only spread the problem.



Bottom far left More epoxy!

Buying an old hull

Pete Vincent's guide to buying an old hull; how do you choose a cheap boat that's not a 'shed'?

Buying an older hull, especially a wooden one, is not an easy task, but it can be a great, affordable way into the sport. So what are the key problems to look for, and what can be sorted out relatively simply?

'Look very carefully at any areas that show blackness in the wood – you can see me pressing a screwdriver into the wood of our Fireball and water is oozing out.

'Yellowness on the decks is a sign of moisture trapped underneath the varnish. It's not normally too bad, but realise that very quickly after buying the boat you'll have to do some significant varnish work.

'If you find a boat with lots of unfilled holes then I really would walk away. It's a real sign that there's likely to be lots of moisture inside.

'If you've got a reasonable amount of nous when it comes to wood then, daft as it might sound, but a simple hole is relatively easy to sort out. What is far more difficult to sort out is a boat that hasn't been properly looked after or stored and has lots of general water ingress.

'I would be very wary of a boat that has a painted cockpit or deck because it's very difficult to see any problems underneath,' admits Pete. Our replacement Fireball had just that – but then Pete knows what he's looking for.

And one final tip? 'When you're buying at the £500 end of the market then you really need to go in with your eyes wide open. The boat will need regular maintenance, and if you don't have the time, skills or space to do it then you shouldn't buy a really cheap boat.'

nationals are at the end of July. The hull, according to our expert, was a write-off due to the way it had been looked after over the years. Our expert's suggestion was to buy a cheap hull, so that's what we set out to do...

Our aim was two-fold; find something that wasn't going to cost too much, and would demonstrate the difference between a boat that had been properly looked after and one that had been badly abused. It wasn't a decision we took lightly, but it was our only option – in the same way it would have been the only option for anyone else who had taken the project on and wanted to race at the Fireball nationals 2007, rather than 2008!

Our competition winner, Kirsten, was shocked to hear about the full extent of the problems

with the hull of her Fireball; like many buying a very cheap old boat, she wasn't aware of the extent of the rot, in fact she was quite concerned about what she had been sailing and relieved that the rig had stayed in the boat.

We found a number of hulls for sale, and eventually, with a bit of negotiating, we purchased sail number 13152 from a private seller in Paignton for the grand sum of £650.

What next for the boat?

Even with our 'new' hull, West Country Boat Repairs still have their hands full. Although basically sound, there are a number of jobs that need doing to bring the hull up to date, the foils are out of date and in poor condition. We'll bring you the full story of the boat's two weeks at Pete Vincent's 'dinghy hospital' in the next issue.

Harken have the challenge of putting a set of fittings on the boat. Armed with pictures of the hull, and closely liaising with Pete Vincent and the other partners, they are poised to complete the fittings side of things. Selden have made a new mast for the boat, and P&B have the rig ready to fit as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, our other partners have been busy. Andy Yeomans at Grapefruit Graphics has been working on an image for the boat... all we'll say at this stage is that chrome and pink have formed the basis for a design which will mean the boat will have a distinctive image!

On the clothing side, Nick Gill was relishing the prospect of kitting the crew out: 'I was delighted to hear that a Fireball had been selected for the Pimp. I have spent many hours crewing in one in my younger days and love the distinctive boom you get from the hull as you bounce over waves.

'The Gill range has lots of choice for both helm and crew and I would envisage latest technology wetsuits, with a breathable top. Obviously the crew needs a trapeze harness as well. The footwear will be slightly different for each; the helm needing a hiking boot with a flat sole and good support, whereas the crew will want more flexibility and a wraparound sole that will curl round the side deck. The modern, thin cordage on the boat means hard-wearing and excellent grip gloves will be essential.

'I am looking forward very much to seeing the pimped Fireball so that we can ensure the clothing colour and style works well with the new colour scheme and graphics,' Nick continued.

The nationals entry is in and it really is a race to get the boat completed in time. Watch this space to see how she fares as her new look is revealed... ■

Right More unfilled holes and replacement fittings on the centreboard case – and poorly applied epoxy that isn't preventing water getting in.

