

CHAPTER 1



Dreaming of a Van der Stadt

AUTUMN 2003

The search for Scarlet was preceded by years of sleeping with the Van der Stadt catalogue on my bedside table. It was required reading before dropping off to sleep.

Having already built a couple of dinghies from reclaimed wood found in Edinburgh skips, I very much liked the idea of building my own cruising boat, but observed that there wasn't much time left over from earning a living.

Stefan is a master of under-statement as you will discover as you read on. Many academics are brains on legs but there is a lot more to Stefan. He has always been a skillful maker-of-things. Like Superman, he goes into his phone box and emerges ready for some daunting project. So he starts this tale in typically throw-away style, not acknowledging the skill that went into building the boats. The first, built with son Louis, was a perfect turtle-shell of a dinghy with russet polished planks. It was used for several years to take the crew out to our Drascombe which we kept at Cramond. The second project was much more ambitious – a replica of an old Ness yawl designed by Ian Oughtred. Stefan bent ten foot lengths of quarter inch wood, fragile and wobbly to exactly fit the curved shape of the hull, holding them in place with dozens of clamps (a job for a ten-handed man) until the glue set. The boat was made of many reclaimed woods – teak,

oak, ash (the tiller handle), iroko, spruce. By this stage in his life, Stefan was known around The Grange as the eccentric professor with the wild white hair who carried home on his shoulders massive pieces of wood discarded in skips or found on the pavement waiting for the 'special uplift' (I love that word for household items too big to fit in a wheelie bin). Built into the boat was the solid teak rail out of the Victorian bar of the Queens Hall, chucked out when the place was refurbished. Stefan used it for the gunnels and tiller. I played no part in this year-long weekend and evening activity except to admire the precision with which father and son worked and to register the love and care that went into the boat's creation.

I liked the Van der Stadt philosophy of self-build, fast, light cruising boats. We knew, after a number of close shaves in our first twenty-seven footer, the necessity of being able to get to windward on a lee shore and to know we could scrape into a harbour entrance in time when the tide was fast running out.

Lynn and I were a few years short of retirement and planning to go long distance cruising as soon as the various dependents went independent – dogs, kids, parents – but since they showed no sign of doing so, we decided to jump the gun and buy a boat anyway to get into practice. Yes, we knew that this was not very sensible in terms of finance. It would be better to save our pennies, but psychologically, the idea of gradually working up to the big round-the-world voyage made more sense than buying a boat the day after retirement and before departure.

We wanted a sailing boat that would sail well, would carry enough stuff to allow us to be fairly independent of shore, and which could be managed by just the two of us. Initially we decided to look for an aluminium boat because they have lots of good things going for them – strength, lightness, low maintenance. From the engineering point of view too, aluminium is definitely what a boat ought to be built from, as Van der Stadt explained. There was just one problem; they were like hen's teeth, which cut down our choice when looking for a bargain, and a bargain was what we were going to have to find.

As we searched the web, we found ourselves returning again and again to a description of a fifty foot Sparkman and Stevens ketch, a one-off, owned by an American and kept in Norway. Too much money but not

ridiculously too much and perhaps there could be some negotiation. It just so happened that there were cheap flights to Norway. The only trouble was that it was October and the three-hour days would soon be setting in.

Sitting up late one night in the spring (most nights actually) I saw that the very same boat was now in Scotland. We were definitely meant to see it. I searched for other boats that we could look at at the same time and found, in the very same marina, a steel forty-four footer which looked quite nice. Half a dozen other contacts didn't get back to us, or the boats were in South Africa, or their owners had decided not to sell.

The following weekend saw us heading for Argyle.

THE SPARKMAN AND STEVENS KETCH

It's a sunny early spring day on the north west coast but absolutely freezing out of the sun. The marina guy ferries us out to the aluminium boat on its mooring and drops us off. She looked really stunning on the web and still looks beautiful in reality from a distance, still attractive on deck. But do we really want a ketch? You have to understand that in this size range, all our knowledge is theoretical. Maybe a ketch is just what we need, but all those years of sleeping with the Van der Stadt catalogue, and our practical experience of boats up to thirty-eight feet, suggests that ketches are a bit fussy and, given today's modern sail-handling aids, the division of their rig into smaller sails is not necessary anymore. But maybe when you get to fifty plus (boat length and age), a ketch is just what a husband and wife need? We have no way of knowing. The experts disagree wildly and you can't charter a boat like this to find out. Charter boats are what we call 'plastic fantastics' – all from the same mould – and anyway, chartering is so expensive that by the time we had tried all the possibilities, we would be perfectly certain of what we wanted and perfectly unable to buy it.

This boat is big! Not absolutely out of the question, but BIG.

We slide the hatch back and descend a long way into the saloon. She's pretty, but also pretty tatty. Apparently she was built for a Mr. Watson of IBM fame to his very high specs, but that was a little while ago. The design and layout look nothing like the photos. After so much web surfing, we thought we had become adept at constructing an interior from photos but here the reality is far off what we had imagined. The entire galley requires limbo dancing. Headroom is a big thing; I'm six-four and although this

boat has six-six headroom, that's only if you don't need to cook. The rest of the boat is rather worn with lots of white dust coming off the aluminium. A good design generally though not for us, I think, and Lynn agrees, but it's been instructive because we get a feel for a boat of this size.

After being picked up again, we head for the steel 44. Our ferryman/broker doesn't seem too keen himself on the aluminium boat and mentions a couple of others that we might look at.

Oh my goodness, are we really contemplating buying this air-strip of a boat? This is the first time I have stood on the deck of a boat this size. It is about a mile from the steering wheel to the front tip. How am I supposed to get this into a tight parking space in a marina? She is massive. There are big 38 ft boats and small 38 ft boats. Our 38 ft Bavaria is of the small variety with a good part of the length taken up by a big bathing platform at the back. She is a neat, modern, unchallenging rather boring kind of thirty-eight footer with a few steps down to the modest sized cabins. This monster is 48 ft and twice as heavy. From the deck, she feels daunting.

Inside, she is a big mess. Stefan insisted, before we set out on this quest, that I look beyond mess and dirt and bags of sails heaped up on bunks because all that is mendable, like you don't worry about the colour of the wall paper when buying a house. How about rust? There is a pale patina on the surface of the aluminium like icing sugar. In the corners it's quite thick. I point it out to Stefan and he nods. The galley is built up against the curving side of the boat so that I can't reach the far side of it. We exchange glances and, with relief, I know he has ruled her out.

A bit of a reality check, this. Other sailors have glibly told us that if you can sail a 38 footer, you can sail a 48 footer, but I'm not convinced. Afterwards, alone, we talk and worry about her size and the rust. Despite her pedigree, we cross the Sparkman and Stevens off our list.

THE STEEL 44

The steel boat is out of the water, a lovely double chined hull with a shiny paint job. Deep fin keel. Steely but speedy. But the owner has a look of desperation. He bought the boat for a long-planned round-world trip but his hopes were dashed when his wife became seriously ill. He has to sell up. We climb the ladder, and into the stern-cockpit where we see that she

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is gracefully rusting away. Steel boats rust from the inside out. OK, much of the rust is superficial, but still depressing, and her size confirms our belief that we want slightly more boat than this. A pity, because she has a good design with the engine, unusually, slotted under the saloon table. And we feel sorry for the sad skipper and would love to help him by buying his boat.

Poor skipper. His face speaks of sorrow. I find it hard to concentrate as he shows us round his beloved boat. A boat he doesn't want to sell. It is a total tip inside with stuff everywhere. Lone men seem able to live in boats that resemble garages that haven't been tidied for twenty years – bits of boat lying next to coffee cups and packets of biscuits and spare anchors. There is no demarcation between maintenance and living. I try to look past all that, as instructed. But my sympathy for the skipper doesn't hide the rust. Lots of rust. We can't even consider it.

THE OYSTER

We look quickly at a wooden 48 foot Oyster as we happen to be here. Oysters are up towards the Rolls Royce end of the continuum. In fiberglass she would be totally out of reach, and as it is she is still too dear. She is a lovely modern work of wood and glue, and the owner happens to be on board. He is just completing a major refit. Some interesting conversation ensues. He has replaced the whole transom, and I ask him why. A long story about late night reversing.

Wood is good for the soul.

I'm distracted and intrigued by the details below deck that make this boat a beautiful home. It looks clean and organised; comfortable and welcoming. There are pretty cushions and good lighting and a net over the galley dangling dozens of oranges. I tune out of the technical conversation between Stefan and the skipper because we aren't about to buy this boat. Yes, the wood is gorgeous.

THE RIVAL 48

Next we take a quick look at a Rival 48 which is priced at twice our absolute maximum budget. The owner has reached 70 and is downsizing and we

are told that the price is completely unrealistic and that it might go for not much more than half. As if the task of choosing a boat weren't difficult enough already, we now discover that a boat's listed price is not necessarily much indication of its actual price. This boat looks straight out of the showroom. Rivals have a tremendous reputation for long-distance cruising, but this one has a centre-cockpit which, from experience, we don't like. Our first ever boat share had one but we've been sailing stern-cockpits ever since and are not likely to change back. Lynn says centre cockpits make her feel a bit claustrophobic. She likes to trail her legs out of the back. So – apart from the centre cockpit and the list price – this would do very nicely. An interesting boat all told and she turns out to be something of a benchmark for our later deliberations.

THE VAN DER STADT 48

That's it for the Argyll coast. There is one more we want to look at in the Clyde before going home but we know that this one is very special, and we are viewing her just to satisfy our curiosity. This is a Van der Stadt 48. The price is even more seriously over budget and it isn't going to go for a third, but after all those years of sleeping next to that catalogue, we can't turn down this rare chance. We won't waste much of their time.

This is the alpha-boat in a very large marina. She is only five years old and immaculately fitted out. Standing on deck takes the breath away, even more so when you look up the near eighty feet of mast. Down below is equally boat-show beautiful, but much to my surprise, not for us. Van der Stadts are often individually tailored. On this particular boat, the two aft cabins in the quarters under the cockpit have been squeezed so much that I'm not even sure I could contort myself into one of them. It's because, like many modern boats, the sleeping quarters have been squeezed at the expense of a huge saloon. The master cabin forwards is beautiful, and the navigation station quite out of this world. But the internal layout is for throwing parties in marinas, not sailing around the world. We console ourselves that this beautiful boat is not for us. Sour grapes?

Wow! This is an up-market apartment that happens to be on water. There are leather sofas and leather swivel chairs; TV and sound system. The kitchen is positively elegant with marble counter tops and a floor-standing,

front opening fridge instead of the usual sort which you jump and dive head-first into. There's a wine cooler. I want to play on the shiny high-tech gadgets in the Nav Station. The bedroom is like a room in a luxury hotel though how do you stay tucked under the sheets of a central bed when the wind blows? The only place to sleep securely is in one of the two stern cabins, but they are for the minions. Squashed and underground. This boat has 'entertainment' written all over it but we don't entertain. We sail and drop anchor in the most isolated bay we can find. Stefan has insisted I don't stare at the decor but this boat is all decor. I must remember to ask him what she would be like to sail.

So that was boat hunting in Scotland. After a great deal more web browsing, we turned our attention southward where the list of boats for sale is much longer. Then, when we started looking even further afield, we realised that boats anywhere in Britain are really expensive compared to other countries. Holland seemed cheaper, and the US cheaper still.

But there was to be one more diversion that summer in the hunt for the boat.