



Above left to right:
Bollard cleat; The original
ship's bell; Port light and
boat hook



THE LAST SAUNDERS ROE

Magyar, launched in 1939, marked the end of an era for her famous builder, who would go on after the war to build hovercraft and space rockets

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It seems so unlikely now, but there was a time, and it's still on the edge of living memory, when Britain seemed to be leading half the world on a technological collision course with the future.

Between the two wars, British dominance in automotive engineering on land, at sea and in the air, seemed to be nearly unassailable. Before the war, the fastest motorbike you could buy anywhere in the world was the English-made Brough Superior and the fastest train was the Mallard. Rolls Royce was still a superlative term and in the skies above western Europe, the glorious Supermarine float planes with their elliptical wings, broke record after record in the Schneider Cup air races before going to war as the Spitfire. Bentley made Le Mans their own and dominated it throughout the 1920s. Henry Segrave and Malcolm Campbell were the fastest men on land and on water – and under sail, Britain was the only nation on earth flamboyant and wealthy enough to challenge, albeit unsuccessfully, for the world's greatest prize – the America's Cup.

MISSILES AND STEAM LAUNCHES

No British firm – before or after the war – was more exciting in terms of the automotive technology of the day than Saunders Roe, based in East Cowes on the Isle of Wight since 1929. By the 1930s, 'Saro' as the company is also known, was an established seaplane manufacturer, building planes with model names like the Kittiwake, Valkyrie and London, many of them wooden-framed. After the war, Saro went on to build helicopters, the world's first operational hovercraft, missiles and rocket-powered fighter planes, while the prolific space division launched dozens of rockets into orbit throughout the space race era of the 1950s and 60s. Back then, if you wanted an ICBM, you would dial Cowes 2211.

Saunders Roe might not be the first name you would associate with a boat like *Magyar* but the firm's 19th-century roots are in fact in boatbuilding on the upper Thames. In fact, founder Sam Saunders built what might be the world's first stitch-and-glue vessel in the form of the still-extant steam launch *Consuta* in 1898, and until 1939 Saro continued to build traditional motor yachts like *Magyar*, a twin-screw gentleman's displacement yacht for river, coastal and estuary cruising. She is one of eight

Above left: the telegraph is original Saro gear – the rest is either original or carefully sourced
Above right: Boarding ladder
Facing page: Sea-level boarding platform as specified by Saro, but this one was bought and modified. Note the predominantly oaken interior and vintage radio

Medina Class motoryachts built by Saro and named after the river on whose banks the factory sat. She is, in fact, the last of the class, and the last yacht of any sort built there.

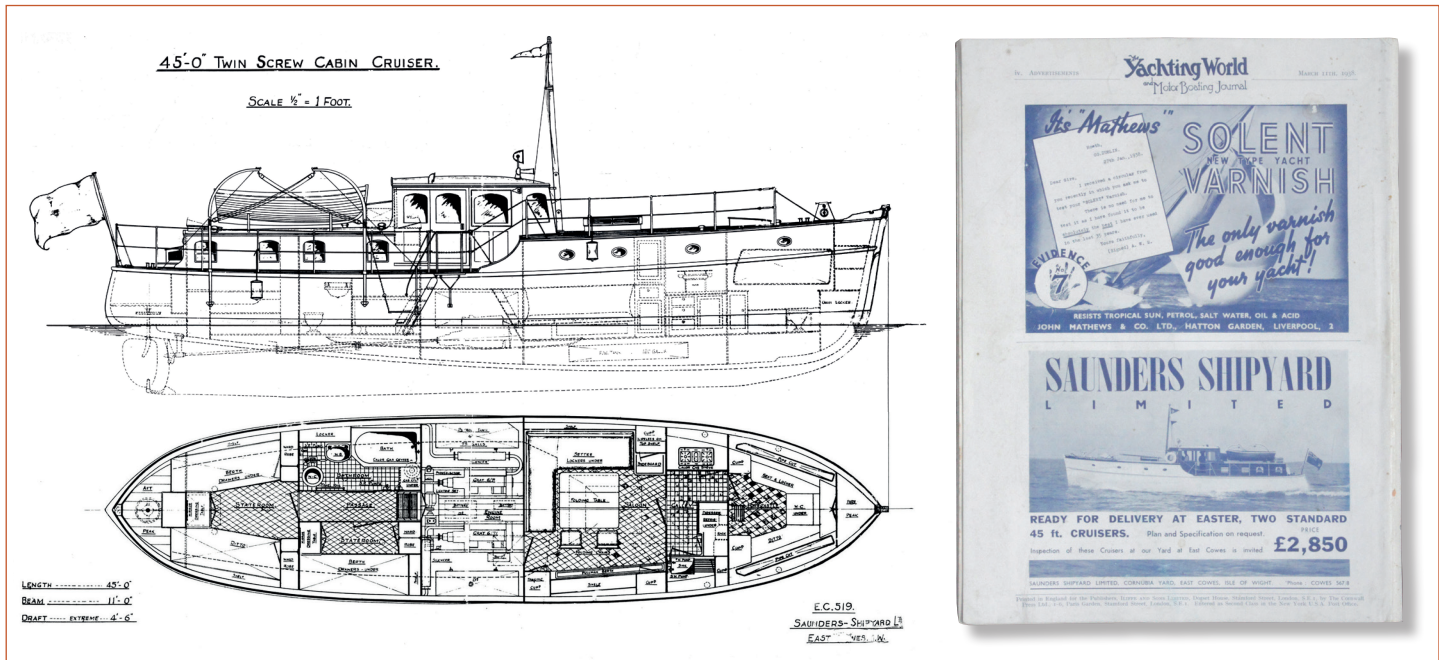
It wasn't surprising, last year, to discover that *Magyar's* engineer owner also has a 1929 Bentley 4.5-litre Sport. The car, reminiscent of those Le Mans wins of the 1920s, was parked beside the boat on a Thameside meadow at the Henley Trad, a few weeks ahead of *Magyar's* re-launch. Cars and boats appeared in John's life in early childhood. He started sailing around the age of 11 on holidays in Poole, then kept BSA and Triumph motorcycles as a teenager. With adulthood came a Bowman 36 sailing yacht, a 1970 GRP Holman and Pye design that John calls "a cheating classic" which he sailed with his wife from Corsica to England through the canals. "I started thinking of a more suitable boat – a motorboat – for that sort of thing. It had to be British, as I love British greatness. The 1920s and 30s were a period of particularly fine design. Look at the Bentley – in the 1920s, it had OHC, 16V, twin carbs... advanced stuff, some of the acronyms you see on car boot lids today."

The motorboat desire came into focus when John picked up a copy of the October 2011 issue of *Classic Boat* and caught sight of *Magyar's* sistership *Gralian*. "It's CB's fault" he says (many things are). He called John Buckley of Harbour Marine Services in Southwold, Suffolk, the yard that restored *Gralian*, and he put John Burgess in touch with the owners Jonathan and Helen, then on a round-Britain cruise. "I caught up with them in Milford Haven" remembers John. "My first impression was one of pleasure at realising how usable these boats are. My brief was to be able to do something like that, again with a crew of two, my then-wife and me."

After a year of searching, John spotted a small, obscure ad for *Magyar*, lying in Béziers in the south of France and owned by a liveaboard French couple with no English, so a stream of nonsensical Google-translated emails followed, then a flight to see the boat in the flesh. "They were jittery about my request to lift the boat out for inspection. Turns out they'd never taken the boat out of the water before" said John, who had to get a diver down to clear the propeller before taking *Magyar* for a spin. Prolonged negotiations followed, but in 2014







Magyar made her way by road to Harbour Marine Services for the magic to begin. She had suffered modernisation over the years, and needed quite a bit of structural work. The Medina Class boats were low-displacement compared to, say, a Silvers launch of the same vintage. The framing was all in bent timbers, where the Silvers boats alternated two timbers to a heavier sawn frame. Then there are what John calls the “flying boat floors”, i.e. too light. When John the boatbuilder says “lightly built”, John the owner drily remarks “they’re not built, they’re engineered, John.” Quality was, at the time, of the ‘money-no-object’ sort, with nearly everything, including the hull, in Burma teak, the reason that even today, *Magyar*’s hull is all original bar a small area where collision damage was repaired.

The two clearly have a healthy rapport (“John Buckley is absolutely straightforward” says the owner “he’ll give you his view, but will respect the owner’s wishes”), borne of hours of communication, almost daily contact and monthly weekend visits when John would drive the four to five hours from Bristol to Southwold to spend the weekend on John Buckley’s motorsailer moored at the yard, and Saturdays going through the plans and progress on *Magyar*. The work carried out is too much to relate. “Every keelboat came out in two pieces,” remembers John Buckley. “She had all new deck beams bar four. New bulkheads and beamshelves, and

MAGYAR

TYPE
Saunders Roe
Twin Screw
cabin cruiser

LOA
45ft (13.7m)

BEAM
11ft (1.4m)

DRAFT
4ft 6in (1.4m)

BUILT
1939

DESIGNER
Saunders Roe

new blockings in oak. These are normally softwood, but the owner wanted oak. They are better in oak – just more expensive.” A particular challenge was to remodel the wheelhouse to its original compound-curve shape – not an easy challenge in tongue-and-groove timber.

DONOR VESSEL TO THE RESCUE

The structural work took more than a year, then the owner, and by extension the project, was struck by personal tragedy when John’s wife died. You’ll remember that the plan was for the two of them to take long cruises on *Magyar*. In terms of expenditure and personal investment, John had passed the point of no return – as he points out, people are not interested in a half-complete project – so decided to finish. Now that *Magyar* was to be restored as “an article rather than as a dream”, and for charter and eventual sale, rather than cruising, the standard of restoration went up a notch.

Around this time, John learned of another dead Medina class, this one the direct sistership *Kelvinia*, abandoned on a field in northern France. They were built side by side in the same shed in the same year, so *Kelvinia* was perfect to provide all the bits that *Magyar* had lost over the years. Enter Peter Gregson, the sage behind the Wooden Ships brokerage of Dartmouth, Devon, a man with a famously long memory and fluent French. John and Peter travelled to *Kelvinia* to strike a deal with the owner, and *Magyar* ended up, as John put it as “the bottom half of *Magyar* and the top half of *Kelvinia*” although in truth, quite a bit of *Magyar*’s superstructure is her own.

The internal deckhead was a happy accident. “I got yellow cedar from Stones Timber for the deckhead, as the owner wanted to look up and for it to look like an old-fashioned deck.” It is, in fact, a modern, ply sandwich deck, with two layers of 9mm Robbins Elite marine ply in the middle. “In 3,260ft of the yellow cedar, I found one single knot, and it was so nice we varnished it rather than painting it.” The rest of the interior is characterised by carefully-sourced oak, with the pleasing



Left: Sistership *Kelvinia*, on a farm in France, acted as the ‘donor vessel’ for much of *Magyar*’s superstructure



medullary rays of that timber found throughout. The deck was another challenge, with owner John wanting unbroken plank runs, hiding the few joints under deck gear. “Sourcing 4.8m lengths of teak is not easy,” confirms boatbuilder John. All portlights were refurbished by Peter Tracey at Davey and Co, who did a “superb job”.

RAISING THE BAR

A few years ago, I was on a visit to Harbour Marine, and saw *Magyar* in primer grey. I remember John saying she was going to be one to watch and that he had raised his bar on the project. It's worth noting here, for those unfamiliar with the yard, that Harbour Marine has carved out a rare niche in these mid-20th-century cruising motor yachts in the 40-50ft range and mostly twin-engined, or ‘twin screw’ in the language of their era. The yard has restored, in addition *Gralian* of course, nearly countless ‘Silver’ yachts to the design of John Bain and others less well known. So when John tells you that this one's special, you'd better listen. She's special for many reasons. Firstly and most obviously is the boat itself – the canoe stern, the stepped sheer and the handsome superstructure create an intensely maritime aesthetic. *Magyar* might be properly referred to as a ‘yacht’, but something so distinctly naval and restrained clings to the design that ‘ship’ seems more fitting. Then there are the thoughtful details, from the deck boxes and air vents on deck to the miniature guttering under the portlights on the inside, which drain the condensation of the night, the breath of your dreams if you like, into the bilges of the boat.

Then there's the Saunders Roe provenance. Then the sheer practicality: the tender on davits and sea-level folding gangway, so the owner can embark and disembark like a naval commander; private accommodation in two cabins and more in the saloon,

Top, left to right: The galley was extended, one of the few layout alterations; The heads; Wheelhouse with its drop-down windows on leather straps, as original

even a bath (“they had baths and hot water even in 1939” reminds the owner). Add to that a Burmese teak hull, a keel-up restoration, and MCA coding for up to 60 miles from a safe haven and you are part of the way to understanding *Magyar's* appeal.

THE DEVIL AND THE DETAIL

It is the attention to detail, more than anything else, that sets *Magyar* apart. Thanks to the availability of original drawings, John Buckley's experience with *Gralian*, the donor boat *Kelvinia*, and the willingness of the owner to spend what it takes to reach perfection, *Magyar* might represent a pinnacle for this sort of boat. Early this summer, after spending a day with *Magyar* and her owner near Hurley Weir on the Thames (I was relegated to the role of chase boat driver for photographer Joe, but we had plenty of fun with the boarding ladder and the tender, for which we had to cut a new bung using a wine bottle cork and Stanley knife), I got back in touch with John Buckley, and one anecdote told the whole story. “You know the drawer pulls?” he asked drily on the phone, referring to the delicate escutcheon mouldings, “the owner had them sand-cast as original, but they weren't up to scratch, so we had them re-cast in wax. Take that detail and multiply it by everything on *Magyar*.” I wonder if owner John, with a car background, went a bit ‘Pebble Beach Concours’ with *Magyar*. We are, after all, talking about 10-12,000 man hours here... but the result is perfection, just as Saunders Roe intended before the rumble of war, then computers and plastic swept lovely little ships like this away forever.

Magyar is available for charter and will be for sale in the near future. Harbour Marine is busy completing another of the eight Medina Class boats – Maimonde – and has yet another, half-complete, awaiting an owner. See classicruising.co.uk and southwoldboatyard.co.uk