



# *The floating* COTTAGE

After a glorious launch, captured on film, *Meridies* suffered fire damage during the war, but is now hailed by her owner as the cheapest summer residence in Southwold

STORY **PETER WILLIS** PHOTOGRAPHS **EMILY HARRIS**



Above: *Meridies* motors and sails past Southwold's seafront.

Right: the forward cabin



If it is part of the role of a classic motor cruiser to act as a weekend cottage – and let's face it, that is part of its charm – then its conservatory is undoubtedly the wheelhouse, catching the sun and offering great views. That's certainly the case with *Meridies*, a 1937 46ft (14m) Silver Leaf class boat built by JA Silver in Rosneath on the Clyde.

I've instinctively bagged its best seat, high up towards the rear, while her owner, David Worthington, occupies the helmsman's chair. Outside there's a great panorama of the River Blyth at Southwold in Suffolk, but what I'm actually looking at right now is the past.

This particular seat (more about it later) is served by a small occasional table that swings and turns out from the side, on, I notice, a modern, but unobtrusive, multi-directional bracket. The table is just big enough to hold my mug of tea and David's MacBook Air, which is showing some old home movies. Intriguingly they were shot on a very early and rudimentary form of colour film. Even more intriguingly they show the commissioning, launching and maiden cruise of this very boat. The first sequence shows John Bain himself, director and chief designer of James A Silver & Co, greeting the prospective customer, Herbert Brookes. Then there is the bottle of champagne smashed against the stem (sensibly below the waterline), *Meridies* slipping

into the loch and floating free for a moment before a yard launch bustles up and attaches a rope. Finally, some footage from the subsequent eight-day cruise among the nearby lochs. It's all charming stuff. The film has been transferred to video by Bob Brookes, Herbert's son, now over 90, who is to be seen on the screen as an excited 13-year-old, bobbing about in his school cap "We didn't have any other clothes in those days," he told David. "We just wore our school uniforms the whole time."

#### ALL-TEAK CONSTRUCTION

Herbert Brookes was the MD of the family firm of Brookes & Adams, makers of brass and plastic components, established in 1853 and still going today. Now, it makes hardware such as shackles for yachts. Back in the 1930s it produced the sort of wall-mounted light fittings and so on to be found on boats like *Meridies*, along with a brand of picnicware known as Bandalasta.

Herbert was also a commodore of the Severn Motor Yacht Club, and based *Meridies* at Worcester. He had paid Silvers £2,000 for the boat, and an additional £100 to have all-teak construction. There was also walnut panelling in the saloon, though David is pretty sure it's actually mahogany, stained.

The Brookes family were not to enjoy *Meridies* for long, however. In 1940 she was requisitioned by the

Admiralty, and, with some help from her owner who delivered her as far as Sharpness, moved to Avonmouth to act as a Bristol Channel port vessel and seaplane tender. In 1941 she was bought outright by the Ministry of War Transport for £1,960, plus "arrears of hire" of £121. 4s. 0d. And in September 1945 Herbert Brookes bought her back again for just £150. Why? Because in the previous April, while in Barry, a mistake during refuelling meant that petrol had flooded the bilges, and then combusted. The Wrens aboard had managed to jump clear, and a passing fireboat had doused the conflagration, but the wheelhouse was destroyed, along with extensive damage to much of the deck and interior. *Meridies* went back to Rosneath to be rebuilt by Silvers, but was then soon sold. "Father never really loved her after that," said Bob Brookes.

In all, *Meridies* has had 10 owners, including the Admiralty and the original and present owners. David Worthington, a graphic designer by trade, had previously owned two smaller Miller Fifers, the 24ft (7.3m) *Suikerbos* (Afrikaans for Sugarbush) in Milford Haven between 1985 and 1991, and then the 28ft (8.5m) *Kim*, 1993-98, coincidentally at Worcester. But what he had always wanted was a pre-war motor yacht. "In 2001 I had sold out of my business, paid off the mortgage and was seriously looking around. In fact I had already

Clockwise from top left: classic images of the era, from print and on board *Meridies* an well-stocked bookshelf; a modern Danish lamp seems to suit the ambience





Left: to the left of the wheelhouse is the 'cruising seat' upholstered in London Transport bus seat fabric



Above left to right: the clock; a model of another central-wheelhouse boat - a shape that David finds "enormously satisfying"; a corner of the galley



looked at many boats, but never one I wanted to make the jump on. I saw an advertisement for *Meridies* and thought I would go and have a look at her." She was lying at Woodbridge, owned by Bryony Hebson who had been recently widowed, but had enjoyed two years of happy cruising with her husband Robert (she later bought the 33ft (10m) *Blade*, featured in CB260), and brokered by the late, larger-than-life Peter Temple.

At the time, David had also got interested in *Rummy III*, a 1935 Stanilands-built cruiser (CB202), which was lying at Harbour Marine Services, Southwold. She was slightly smaller at 42ft 6in (13m), and David decided he liked the look of *Meridies* better.

"She was more of a yacht, and all teak," he said. But in visiting *Rummy* he also got to meet Harbour Marine's owner John Buckley, and asked him to come and take a look at *Meridies*. They had long conversations about the two boats, the upshot of which was that David bought *Meridies* and, with John's help, sailed her up the coast to Southwold.

Inevitably, she was in need of some attention, and John and his team at HMS quickly got stuck in. "John did a massive refit in 8-10 weeks," David recalls. All the metal deck fittings and the portlights had been painted white, so they were all taken off and sent to be regalvanised and returned to their original bronze or

chrome finish. Most of the floors were replaced, together with several keel bolts and deadwood fore and aft.

Interiors were refurbished, pulling out a lot of Formica, and using a £4,000 length of teak tree (none of which was needed on the teak planking, which was sound). At nearly 46ft (14m), *Meridies* is longer than the original Silver Leaf class, by more than 5ft (1.5m), and feels a lot more spacious below. The saloon is forward of the wheelhouse, a cosy space with rich, dark panelling alleviated by a white paint of the deckhead carried down to about shoulder-height, and lit through one of the boat's splendid glass skylights as well as several 1930s wall-lights and a modern Danish Stelton pendant light above an enlarged dining table.

**OVERLAPPING BUNKS**

Everything forward of the saloon was refitted and rejigged to gain some space for a well-equipped galley. The forecabin, which had been fitted with upper and lower bunks on the port side, was returned to its original arrangement, with overlapping bunks, one each side. Right in the stern, reached via a corridor past a newly-installed shower in the heads to port, and a single cabin to starboard, is the master cabin. Here they have deviated quite a bit from the original, swapping the two single bunks separated by a central chest of drawers for a



PETER WILLIS



Above left: proud owner David Worthington. Above right: Meridies with Harbour Marine

double bed to starboard, and the chest offset to port, together with some padded bench seating.

Out on deck, a second steering position was installed, behind the wheelhouse, and the mizzen mast, which John had tracked down somehow, was reinstated.

Over the following years, other works have been carried out, including reconditioning the twin 55hp Thornycroft diesel engines, along with the gearbox and stern tubes. Installation of two Webasto heaters has improved comfort, while a small fireplace and mantelpiece has been built around the Taylors diesel stove in the saloon. Dorade intakes have been added, where previously there was no ventilation. "She's a dry boat now - she used to be really musty," explains David. "We've slowly worked our way through the interior, getting the woodwork tidy and sharp."

Up in the wheelhouse, an oversized instrumentation console has been cut back to more pleasing proportions, and has a flat surface whereon rest a pair of period Simpson Lawrence binoculars and that hallmark of a classic cruiser, an old Roberts radio, longwave only, so that it's getting the Morning Service when I arrive rather than Book of the Week, as well as being able to receive the cricket and of course the Shipping Forecasts. There's also an extremely pleasing 'cruising seat' as David calls it. Its purpose is to enable the occupant to see out of the wheelhouse windows, and it's very comfortable... but there's something naggingly familiar about the design of its upholstery fabric. Then the penny drops. David's mentioned that he's also a trustee of the London Transport Museum. This is moquette bus seat cloth, the RT type bus pattern to be exact, and it suits the Silver Leaf ambiance rather well.

**VARNISHED PLANKING**

Perhaps the most significant recent alteration to *Meridies* is the reinstatement of the Silvers' trademark false break of sheer, where, partway along the white-painted hull, the deck line dips suddenly (while the deck itself carries on), and is carried on to the stern, creating an area finished as varnished planking about 18in deep. On *Meridies* this feature began, originally, quite far forward, well ahead of the wheelhouse. By the time David found

her, it had been obscured entirely, with the strake that marked it out removed, and the hull uniformly white.

In deciding to put it back David reckoned that a shorter length of varnishing would look better, so it now starts in line with the forward edge of the entry door to the wheelhouse. A more practical issue was what would happen if the varnished planks were to move against each other, as they surely would. "The varnish would crack within six months," David and John reckoned.

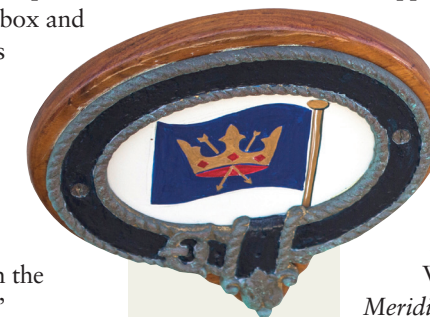
The solution they came up with was to rout out the joints between the planks, insert epoxied splines, then coat them with UV-resistant epoxy and varnish on top of that. So far, after about two years, it is still stable.

What David clearly likes best about owning *Meridies* is the chance to work on her and improve her. "They are really lovely objects, these boats," he explains. "They're all different, but as a designer I find the shape of a central-wheelhouse boat incredibly satisfying. And there is always something to do. She is very engaging, very satisfying to work on - and very organic. If it looks right, it works right, and as you own the boat you get to know it better, buy little bits for the boat, make little improvements." This is why he describes the restoration undertaken by Harbour Marine as still ongoing.

David is happy to describe *Meridies* as "the cheapest summer cottage in Southwold - and the one with the best view". Her value might not be increasing like the land-based ones, but as he points out, "Mechanically she's always ready to put to sea."

His next project is to find a way of lifting up the mizzen boom, with a new socket higher up the mast, so that it can provide the ridge for an awning over the aft deck, and bring out the old, smaller saloon table for sheltered al fresco dining. Then, perhaps, work commitments for himself and his wife Kenna permitting, they might unmoor their Southwold summer cottage and take her across to the Continent to begin a leisurely exploration of the Dutch and French canals.

To access the link to the video of *Meridies*' launch, visit [www.classicboat.co.uk](http://www.classicboat.co.uk)



**Meridies**

LOA  
45ft 10in (14m)  
LWL  
43ft 6in (13.3m)  
BEAM  
10ft 3in (3.1m)  
DRAUGHT  
4ft 6in (1.4m)  
GROSS TONNAGE  
21.6  
CONSTRUCTION  
Teak  
ENGINES  
Twin 55hp Thornycroft diesels