

BY MATT DRISCOLL

B uilders and boaters alike bewitched by the fairy queen

The appeal of a Minett-Shields is obvious to anyone who has seen one slicing through the Muskoka waters.

While most are content just to see such a graceful craft on the water, for some the allure of antique boats is much stronger.

“I didn’t even know these things existed. My friend pulled up to the dock in one a while ago and

I said, ‘What the heck is that?’” said Alan Cranfield.

Cranfield has been making the trip to his family’s Skeleton Lake cottage since he was three years old, but he had never seen anything quite like the polished wooden vessel sitting at his dock. He was hooked, and soon there was no stopping him.

In 1997, Cranfield purchased his first classic boat, a 1968 Greavette, before moving on to the line that

*A 21-foot gentleman’s racer, MAB is one of a handful of boats built to this design by Minett-Shields. The boats are sleek, fast, and well loved.
Photo by Timothy DuVernet*



has occupied his life since, the Minett-Shields.

Two of the coveted craft are currently sitting in his boathouse and if all goes according to plan, they will soon be joined by a third.

In September 2005, Cranfield purchased MAB and promptly set about giving the 72-year-old vessel a new lease on life.

Since then, the crew at Brackley Boats in Gravenhurst has been working diligently to restore MAB to her former glory.

Cranfield expects to have her back in the water for July's Antique and Classic Boat Show in Gravenhurst, the same show where he won the 2006 Captain's Choice Award with another Minett-Shields named Chimo.

Even among the other classic vessels being worked on in the Brackley shop, MAB is a standout.

"It was a big job," said Paul Brackley, owner of Brackley Boats. "The construction of these boats was very technical and very detail oriented."

The boat came complete with virtually all of its original hardware, an extremely rare find, noted Brackley.

However, practically everything from



There's no such thing as a square corner on a boat, something these multiple clamps attest to. After 72 years of service, MAB needed to have nearly all its wood below the waterline replaced.

the waterline down had to be replaced, a task that was made even more difficult by the fact that some of the unique wood varieties used in the original construction are no longer available in sufficient quantity or quality.

Brackley said all the information that could be cobbled together on the construction of the boat was compiled in a binder, simply referred to as "the bible."

The craft is a gentleman's racer, 21 feet long, with two cockpits.



Before a coat of varnish can be applied, the builders at Brackley Boats undertake a final sanding. The lights help show any imperfections that still need to be addressed.



The first coat of varnish changes the colour dramatically. The boat will have many more coats before it is complete.

According to Cranfield, it is one of five or possibly six boats of its kind ever built.

“The four that are known are Black Beauty, Black Prince, Gold Faun and Blue Streak,” he said. “The first three are on Rosseau and Joseph, and Blue

Streak was sold by Port Sandfield Marine last year. I’m not sure where it went.”

Ian Marr was in charge of the restoration work, a man who Cranfield said is the best in Canada at what he does.

“He did an unbelievable job,” said

Cranfield.

Doug Smith worked on the upholstery, as he has on all of Cranfield’s boats. An 83-year-old former employee of Greavette Boatworks in Gravenhurst, Smith was the man responsible for installing the upholstery on some of



Once the new bottom is installed, the boat can be turned over so work can begin on the decks.



MAB puts the “race” in “gentleman’s racer.” Built during the Depression, the boat was designed to be small, fast and fun.
 Photo by Timothy DuVernet

Cranfield’s boats when they were originally built.

“He worked at Greavette Boatworks for some 35 years, and knows all the boats and how they were originally upholstered,” said Cranfield. “Doug is 83 and he may not be able to work on many more of the boats, as it’s very demanding physical work for a man of his age, but I know he loves the work and he’s proud of the authenticity.”

Cranfield said he is particularly thankful that men like Smith will be able to pass on the old building techniques through projects such as the restoration of MAB. In addition, Smith has contributed some of his memories of boat building in Muskoka for an oral exhibit at the Muskoka Boat and Heritage Centre in Gravenhurst.

Cranfield said using the old materials and methods was important so the boat could remain as close to its original design as possible.

“Some of the modern technologies work really well, but it wasn’t what I was looking for,” he said. “Fifty years from now, I want someone to be able to look at this and see its original design. It’s now my responsibility to keep this for the next generation.”

Despite the emphasis on traditional methods, Cranfield said the boat will be powered by a modern 225-hp, V-6 engine. Using a modern engine is essential to him for safety and reliability, he said. While some collectors’ boats are essentially showpieces, Cranfield uses his boats almost every day.

“It isn’t quite like collecting stamps or coins. These are museum pieces, but I use them all the time,” he explained.

While it doesn’t take a collector to notice MAB’s esthetic qualities, Cranfield said it was the story behind the boat that really sold him.

“When I heard about this boat, I just had to have it,” he

explained. “It’s not very often you see a boat with this kind of history.”

The boat was originally known as Radio II and was made in 1934 by legendary Canadian boat builder Bert Minett at the Minett-Shields boat shop in Bracebridge.

Minett began his boat-building business in 1910, and gained renown as one of the area’s best boat builders. While Minett funnelled all of his time and energy into perfecting his craft, he paid little attention to the fiscal aspects of running a business, and soon found himself in desperate financial trouble.

In stepped Bryson Shields, a man with considerable business savvy and connections throughout Muskoka. Together, the pair formed Minett-Shields in 1925.

Roughly 10 years later, at the height of the Great Depression, Radio II emerged from Minett’s shop.

It was originally sold to Bryson Shields’ aunt, May Belle Beatty. Cranfield speculates that the harsh economic climate of the time might have seen Radio II unloaded for a considerable discount.

David Pardoe bought the boat in the 1960s, and kept it at his cottage on Fairy Island, the family island on Lake Joseph.

It was on Fairy Island that Radio II earned her new moniker. “David’s family owned Fairy Island since the late 1800s and his grandfather, father and uncle built the cottage and boathouse when the sons were in their teens,” said Cranfield. “David changed the name to MAB in reference to Fairy Island and Edmund Spenser’s poem, *The Faerie Queene*.”

In Spenser’s poem, Mab is the name of the fairy queen.

Now in his 90s, Pardoe currently lives in Massachusetts, but he has promised Cranfield he will take the trip to Muskoka this summer to see MAB grace the waters once more.

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BY JULIA KILPATRICK



A winter's work

When boating season ends, the boat builders' work begins. The docks in Gravenhurst will feature a number of recently restored and new vessels from the region's boat builders, such as this Duke Playmate, one of two recently restored by Stan Hunter.

In the dead of winter, Muskoka's lakes lie still beneath a thick crust of ice, their glittering surfaces marred only by the tracks of spirited snowmobilers and stubborn skiers. It is a time of recovery from the rush of summer — the myriad boats that cruise the shores or tear through the open water are gone, tucked away in cosy dens to await the coming of spring.

But not all boats go home at summer's end. For many, winter means retreating to the workshops of boatbuilders who work hard in the short days and long nights that linger between seasons in the sun. These crafts are the special ones — treasured relics of Muskoka's past, timeless beauties in need of a facelift. Some may need minor repairs, others major surgery, but all will be handled with care.

In a place where boats are so much more than a means of transportation, the workers that tend to them are a trusted elite. But the work is demanding, and the standard is perfection. Even in October, the pressure is on to finish the boats before the coming July. The reason? The annual ACBS Toronto boat show.

Here's a preview of the new or

newly restored boats to watch for at this year's show.

From Stan Hunter's workshop, watch for two newly restored Duke Playmates. The 18-foot mahogany single-cockpit launches were built in 1948 and 1951 in Port Carling. They are part of a new boat rental service Hunter is launching this season. Powered by 25-hp motors, the boats are ideal for a leisurely tour of the lakes. "The slower the boat, the larger the lake," Hunter quipped. "It can be more rewarding."

LFL (License for Living), a 22-foot Greavette Streamliner, also spent time in Hunter's shop this winter. The 1952 cigar boat was "really a luxury boat," according to Hunter — it would have originally sold for around \$10,000. Hunter built a new hull and refinished the boat inside and out. It changed hands three times before Alan Greenberg bought it for his Lake Rosseau residence.

Hunter also built a new Peterborough dory with a Dispro motor, fashioned after one his client enjoyed as a boy. The boat features the original motor and seat, but the rest is new.

Showgoers can also check out the

latest outboard designed and built by Hunter. The 16-foot craft is made from smooth skin instead of lapstrake and runs on a four-stroke, 40-hp Yamaha motor. "It's a real joy to drive," Hunter said. "They're clean, and they go all summer with one tank of gas."

Mab (formerly Radio II) is fresh out of Paul Brackley's Gravenhurst shop. Featured elsewhere in this issue, the 22-foot 1934 Minett-Shields gentlemen's launch features a dual cockpit design with a split windshield. Brackley built a new bottom for the craft and refinished the interior and exterior to make it shine in time for the show.

Another one to watch for is the Jolly Roger, a 31-foot Minett-Shields run-about. Designed by John Hacker and built in 1931, it is now being completely restored. The design highlight of the triple cockpit, hard-chine craft is its dual split-curved windshield. It is modelled after the original, but Brackley had it built new.

"We had to make new patterns and recast the supports and whatnot for the windshield — it's a very complicated piece," Brackley said. "If I show you the patterns it would blow you away



Ken Lavalette is bringing five Aristocraft outboard runabouts to the show, including this 14-foot Torpedo. "They're all crazy colour schemes, but they all look great together," said Lavalette.

because they're very difficult to make." Jolly Roger, at home on Lake Joseph, is one of only three of its type. Its sister ships are Scud II on Lake Rosseau and Glenavy II on Lake Muskoka.

Flying Lady will be back after making an appearance at the 2006 show. The 1928 Minett-Shields was originally a long deck launch christened the

Dickdon, but the builders converted it to forward drive in 1937. The 34-foot, triple-cockpit craft has retained most of its original wood, including the bottom, and has a distinct "barrel back" transom. It still runs on the original one-tonne, 12-cylinder Scripps engine. Brackley restored the craft over the 2004-05 winter.

Sure to turn heads this year is the Q.M., a 24-foot Greavette runabout built in 1936. It is made of sapele, a type of mahogany with a distinct "stripey" grain. The boat runs on a Chevrolet 350-hp engine. Reportedly built for the Labatt family, the craft now belongs to Richard and Pamela Hallisey of Lake Muskoka. The owners com-



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Mike Windsor of Gravenhurst managed to find time to build a boat for himself. The result is a brand new Dippy.

pletely rebuilt the boat after purchasing it, and Brackley refinished it over the winter.

It began as a father-son project, but 17 years later, the 11-foot Glen-L runabout still wasn't completed. That's when owner Ken Auden decided to hand it over to a professional. "It turned out that we really weren't that good at working with wood," Auden said with a laugh.

Patricia Ross harboured the TNT in her Bracebridge workshop over the winter. She finished building the boat, adding a pale ash trim to complement the dark mahogany body. Ross also updated the design to suit the now-older occupants. "It's supposed to be like a knee banger," she said, explaining that she installed a cockpit bench seat in place of the usual knee cushion for a smoother ride. According to Auden, "She took it from looking like a hunk of junk to looking like a really nice boat."

Ross is also refinishing the SeaBear, a 20-foot mahogany SeaBird Swan built in 1955 by Port Carling Boat Works. A familiar sight on the water near Port Carling, SeaBear "goes to all the shows," Ross said.

Ken Lavalette of Woodwind Yachts is bringing five Aristocraft outboard runabouts to add some colour to the show. The boats were built in the mid-1950s, and painted in hues from turquoise to red to yellow. "They're all crazy colour schemes but they all look great together — they just dazzle you with



TNT started out as a father-son project, but after 17 years of little or no progress, the owners asked professional Patricia Ross to finish the job for them.

the colours," Lavalette said.

Three of the models also have tail fins like the American automobiles of the same era. "They're really neat little things — like little Batmobiles," Lavalette said. The crew at Woodwind Yachts completely restored each of the boats, which range in length from 12 to 15 feet. The entire collec-