

REVIEWS

Reviewers this issue: Colin Henwood, Graham Neil and Pete Greenfield

ECO TIMBER

Review by Colin Henwood

of Henwood and Dean Boatbuilders

Restoring and re-building wooden boats usually means you will come across Mahogany. Here on the Thames, it was the timber of choice for most launches, skiffs and punts and to re-build them faithfully, we need to replace like for like. Teak also crops up here and for many, it is the ultimate long-lasting boatbuilding timber.

Building new wooden boats opens up more possibilities for using different species of timber but a deck planked in Teak is the best in terms of durability, appearance and practical use. A wide coaming curving around a shapely cockpit cries out for mahogany with its beautiful grain in wide boards that bend evenly and glow under varnish.

Boatbuilders have always valued the extraordinary properties of teak and mahogany but today, we must also consider their environmental value. I have always justified using tropical hardwoods by saying I am building something which will last a very long time. I feel that this is a responsible use of a timber over whose procurement I have no control; I cannot go to the Amazon jungle, select a tree and then make sure at least two saplings of the same variety are planted after I had felled my tree.

For many years, timber merchants have been telling us that their timber comes from sustainably managed forests in another part of the world and I admit to a cynical attitude to these claims as



the talk of marketing departments; how did I know what went on in remote jungles before the timber was presented to me in neat bundles in the timber yard?

But craftsmanship is about honesty and integrity in the quality of the work you do and these values can extend down the supply chain of the timber you use. I do not think that any craftsman needs to artificially wear his or her ethical

credentials on their sleeve: the work we produce and how we produce it is all that is needed. We are not using a 'green' image for pure commercial gain; we build wooden boats that are individual, beautiful, very long lasting and made of a natural material that, given the right management, does not harm the environment. The question is how do we ensure that the timber we are using has been "given the right management" in its production?

At the Thames Traditional Boat Rally, the editor introduced me to SpecialityWoods, a division of Maldon-based Brooks Bros (UK) Ltd, selling, amongst many other timbers, Mahogany and Teak. The Mahogany is *Swietenia*





macrophylla, otherwise known as Brazilian or Honduras Mahogany. The Teak is marketed as EcoTeak-Non Burma Origin Both these timbers come from plantations not in South America but Sri Lanka where the company has set up a commercial and social organisation to ensure that the forests are properly managed, that the sawmills are processing the timber to the right standard and the local people involved are supported both financially and socially. This seems an enlightened approach to the timber business.

These days a whole raft of certification procedures is applied to timber supply. The logo most commonly seen is FSC for the Forestry Stewardship Council, an independent organisation which checks the 'chain of custody' from the tree to the point of sale. Brooks Bros can point to more certificates of conformity than you can shake a sustainably-sourced stick at to prove the authenticity of their claims. But of course, the question the cynical boatbuilder must inevitably ask is: Is this Eco Teak and Mahogany any good?

I was given two sawn boards of EcoTeak to try out. Once through the planer, I found the moisture content (MC) to be 18% which is about right for air-dried Teak and suitable for most boatbuilding tasks. However kiln-dried is also available, more suitable for use with epoxies. The two sample pieces were sawn through-and-through and they showed a familiar Teak grain pattern. The grain is perhaps more open and uneven than you might expect from Burma teak but the colour is a pleasant dark brown; it is not that light coloured, lightweight and pithy grained excuse for Teak you find in some garden furniture.

The company saws to a large range of thicknesses from 1/4" to 4" (6-100mm) which is handy for efficient purchasing. The widths only go to 7" (175mm) and most of the stock is fairly short, although they can supply quarter-sawn stock up to 10' (3m) in length. Longer and wider Eco-Teak is available at a 10% surcharge. The prices are quoted "per running metre" which I am not really used to but it looks as though the price is between £180 and £200 per cubic foot (or £6356-£7063 m³) for the quarter sawn grade and £140-£170 per cubic foot (£4945-£6004 m³) for the 'Brooks Premium Grade'. There are short lengths available at £90 per cubic foot (£3178 m³). Recently the price of Teak has increased rapidly and these prices are not surprising.

The Mahogany I was given came in 7' (2.1m) lengths and 7-8" (175-200mm) widths. I put a couple of pieces through the planer and tested the MC at between 8% and 9%. This is quite low for some boatbuilding applications but very acceptable for good quality internal joinery and will certainly accept glues and finishes very well. The colour is not the dark rich reds of "old Mahogany"; this Mahogany is a fairly light pink colour with some darker flecks in the grain. Brazilian Mahogany often suffers from poor quality kiln-drying which results in "stick staining" that can penetrate deep into a board. This timber had none although it did have some patchy staining on the surface visible after the first planer cut; after the second cut to clear timber the odd stains had gone. The grain pattern is fairly faint but the boards had a pleasant leafy grain that would look good behind some varnish. As with most timbers, there were some minor faults such as some worm holes but with careful selection this should not be a problem. The timber machined very well, the grain did not lift or chip as you often find with African Mahogany and there was very little tension or springing in the boards when ripped through the saw. As there was a 2" (50mm) board in the batch I put a piece in my lathe. It turned beautifully and sanded to a fine finish. Brooks Bros carry a standard range of

thicknesses from 1" to 3" (25-75mm), board widths range from 6" (150mm) and wider and lengths up to 13-14' (4.2m). They can supply longer and wider than standard stock to order. The price ranges from £90 per cubic foot (£3178 m³) to £100 per cubic foot (£3532 m³); not cheap but if you are serious about working with sustainable legal timber you must expect a cost. **Brooks Bros (UK) Ltd, The Causeway, Maldon CM9 4LJ**
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SealSkinz Gloves

Review by Graham Neil

As the nights start a-drawin' in and autumnal gales bring the usual wind and rain, boating folk start delving into kit bags for warmer weatherproof gear. Last year I trotted down to our local canoe emporium in search of a decent pair of gloves to keep out the worst of the damp and cold. After rummaging round their end of season sale, I came out, having been relieved of the best part of £25, the proud owner of a rather flashy pair of purpose-made fake leather canoeing gloves. Feeling rather pleased with my purchase, I set off in *Polythene Pam* – see W77 – for a paddle up the Hamble.

With the sky darkening and the wind freshening, I was confident that whatever the weather, at least my hands would stay warm and dry. But as the November wind whipped up the spray from the bow and every stroke brought more dribbles running down the paddle, it wasn't long before my optimism had blown away on the breeze. Cold water found its way in through every seam, slowly freezing my finger tips the bone.

To make matters worse, the stiff palms made it difficult to grip the paddle and they slid around making feathering a hit-and-miss affair. I'm convinced a pair of cheap gardening gloves would have been just as good.

So I was interested to try out these gloves from SealSkinz which they promise are 100% waterproof, windproof and breathable. I was a little sceptical about their bold claims, so I went to the venerable St Deny's Rowing and Sailing Club in search of



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truth. We have a lovely lady member who goes kayaking almost every day of the year and when it's wet, she wears a shower cap of the type which comes free in 'better' hotels so as not to spoil her permanent wave. She gave me a look of disdain when she noticed that on this particularly mild September morning I felt the need to have two pairs of gloves strapped to my foredeck.

The two types of gloves I tried out are distinctly different. The Ultra Grip

is a close-fitting knitted style, of glove with a good long elasticised cuff which will fit well up inside jacket sleeves. The palms and finger tips are covered in those little rubbery nodules which feel faintly tacky to the touch and provide the grip. The outer layer is a woven elastic nylon material which makes them durable and the merino wool inner layer provides warmth and also wicks moisture away. The secret ingredient, apparently, is the Porelle® membrane, sandwiched between the

inner and outer layers; it lets moisture out, avoiding a build-up of what we used to call sweat but stops water getting in.

Of course, the weather never plays ball when you need it; in perfectly calm conditions there was no rain or spray and it was soon clear that drastic measures were required. So the Dunk Test was invented. Plunging both hands into the water up to the cuffs, I dabbled them there for a while waiting for that familiar cold seeping sensation. It was about then my friend with the shower cap came by. More pitying looks. I'm happy to report my fingers stayed dry to the bone, and after about half an hour of paddling, there was no build up of moisture inside, even though the temperatures were quite high. The close fit means the gloves fit round the paddle shaft without bunching up, they feel comfortable enough to wear all day and those sticky nodules provide excellent grip even when everything is soaking wet. I reckon a pair of these will be handy for wild winter days, so this pair has slipped into the pocket of my kit bag, next to my shower cap.

They come in Black, Olive and Hi Vis Yellow if you're in the habit of losing yours. Sizes are XS, S, M, L, XL and sell for around £28.

Next I tried the Versatility gloves. New for 2009, Sealskinz say they are designed to be worn anywhere. They are certainly much more tailored and the first thing you notice is they are very light-weight. The palm is soft goat-skin and the back is made from a polyester/elastane material. They have a polyester lining and the same Porelle® membrane as before. The adjustable Velcro strap on the cuff ensures a tight grip round the wrist, and there is a clip to hold them together so that you can lose both of them at the same time.

They seemed altogether too smart and delicate for rough treatment but nothing ventured, in they went for the Dunk Test. A good long soaking – what is he doing? – and once again not a drop made its way inside; in fact, the water sloughed off the back of these gloves like the proverbial mallard. The manufacturers say the Versatility

gloves are ideal for sailing and that their products have been used by two thirds of the teams in the last Global Challenge and who am I to doubt them. But I took one of our Mirror dinghies out for a couple of laps round the buoys just to make sure.

They certainly feel comfortable and supple, with enough flexibility to enable all but the fiddliest jobs, and having dry hands will make a big difference during the cold winter months. Just how robust they would be if heavy rope work is required is difficult to tell but if your boating pleasures are more sedentary or even if you just want to stay dry while walking the dog these are certainly worth a look. They come in S, M, L and XL sizes, in black and red. There is a ladies version available with a longer finger/palm ratio, The RRP is £30. SealSkinz Ltd, 36 Oldmeadow Rd Harwick Industrial Estate, Kings Lynn PE30 4PP
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from a book too extensively and rarely from the Introduction. But... *Let's get this clear from the start: it is a waste of time to build your own wooden boat, These days there are far quicker ways to get yourself on the water... You can go out... and buy a boat... with a lot less fuss and bother.* The author continues in the same vein:

Instead of building a boat you could be at work earning more money... Building a boat takes time, some physical effort and a lot of concentration...

And then he writes: *On the other hand, building a boat is a break from a world of instant gratification and impending deadlines... There is something special about boats. Lots of projects can satisfy the bug to build things but there are few projects*

accessible to the average do-it-yourself craftsman that you can travel in.

All of which reassures me that on this particular voyage through strip-plank construction, there will be a grown-up at the tiller.

Nick Schade has been building strip plank boats for 25 years and it shows in this chunky, generously illustrated 280-page volume, which at £12.99 represents excellent value for money; I've paid twice that for less informative, less useful and less clearly-written DIY books. And it includes full instructions, plans and offsets for building a nice pram-bowed tender, a good canoe and a serious rough-water kayak. However, I ought to warn readers of a sensitive disposition that just occasionally the author's otherwise adult writing lurches into the downright twee. But if you can forgive a grown man calling sawdust *dookie schmutz*, it really is one of the best books yet for strippers.



CLASSIC SAIL 2010 CALENDAR
by Kathy Mansfield Published by Tide Mark Press, USA and available in the UK from +44 (0)1491 836791 at £10.99 plus £2 p&tp.

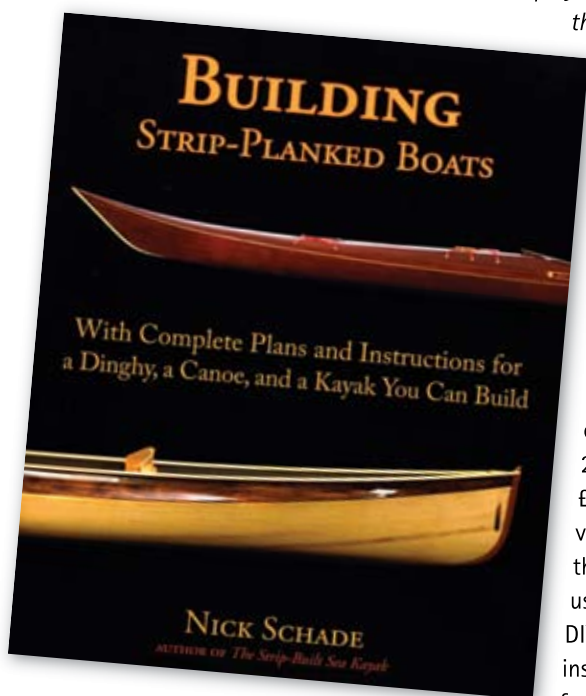
It is a truth not entirely universally acknowledged that the best place for a classic yacht is on somebody else's bank statement and on my wall. In the form, of course, of Kathy Mansfield's annual calendar. This year's has a particularly vibrant fleet of images, perfect for brightening the *Water Craft* office on grey winter days.

STARRETT DUAL-CUT JIGSAW BLADES

Review by Pete Greenfield

This is one of those discoveries which make this column such fun to do. There I was multi-tasking in my manly way one August morning – most of the brain polishing prose while the rest figured out how it was going to make a Chebacco boat transom – when I had a call from an inventor. He said his name was Max Ashton and then described a new kind of jigsaw blade he'd invented; I said: *Hmmm*.

Like most backyard boatbuilders, I have had a long love-hate relationship with my jigsaws. Well, not hate exactly; more disappointment. In theory, for we who need to cut out lissome plank shapes, curvaceous bulkheads and cute Chebacco boat transoms from marine plywood, they are the perfect tool. In reality, all too often they give you a rolling bevel where you don't want one, they buck



BUILDING STRIP-PLANKED BOATS
by Nick Schade, published by McGraw-Hill, USA.

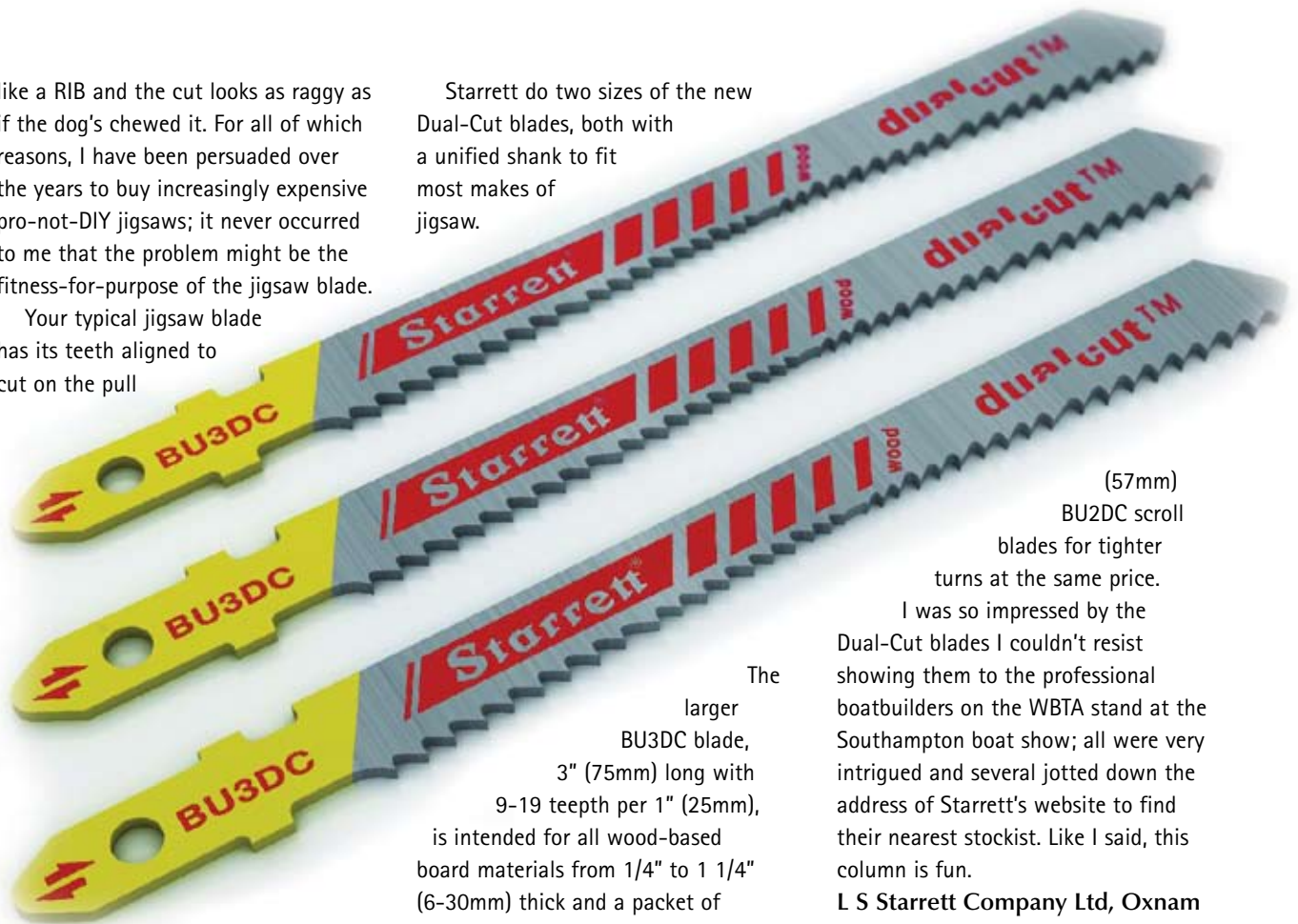
ISBN: 978-0-07-147524-2
Softback available from the Boatbuilders Bookshop £12.99
Review by Pete Greenfield

As a reviewer, I prefer not to quote

like a RIB and the cut looks as raggy as if the dog's chewed it. For all of which reasons, I have been persuaded over the years to buy increasingly expensive pro-not-DIY jigsaws; it never occurred to me that the problem might be the fitness-for-purpose of the jigsaw blade.

Your typical jigsaw blade has its teeth aligned to cut on the pull

Starrett do two sizes of the new Dual-Cut blades, both with a unified shank to fit most makes of jigsaw.



(57mm) BU2DC scroll blades for tighter turns at the same price.

I was so impressed by the Dual-Cut blades I couldn't resist showing them to the professional boatbuilders on the WBTA stand at the Southampton boat show; all were very intrigued and several jotted down the address of Starrett's website to find their nearest stockist. Like I said, this column is fun.

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The larger BU3DC blade, 3" (75mm) long with 9-19 teepth per 1" (25mm), is intended for all wood-based board materials from 1/4" to 1 1/4" (6-30mm) thick and a packet of two blades currently comes at a recommended £7.82 inc VAT. There's also a packet of two smaller 2 1/4"

stroke which means that when you are cutting to a line, you invariably get those splinters we call break-out. The larger the blade's teeth – for thicker ply – the worse the break-out. When Max Ashton discovered this, he decided there should be a better blade. And he not only invented one, he convinced the large American tool company L S Starrett, known to pro woodworkers for its range of saw blades, to put them into production.

Starrett's Dual-Cut jigsaw blades have upper and lower rows of progressively smaller teeth oriented towards the mid-point of the blade, so the blade cuts in two directions, on the pull stroke and the pushstroke. And while cynics will inevitably expect this to cause break-out on both sides of the cut – it's what I meant by *Hmmm* – when Starrett sent me some to try out – on 3/8" (9mm) birch ply, 1/2" (12mm) gaboan marine ply and 3/4" (19mm) – I was delighted with crispness of the cuts in every case. And just as impressive in its way, while my conventional jigsaw blades seem to want to heel like a keelboat rounding the mark, the Dual-Cut blades gave me even-keel 90° cuts every time.



