

WoodenBoat

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Ashley Butler: An Education in Working Sail
Center-Console Skiffs
Build a Small Daysailer
Vintage Yachts for Charter
Commercial Sail in Haiti



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The JANET DEAR 20



BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ

Tommy Townsend builds boats by instinct as much as experience, informed by a well-developed artist's eye. "I sketch, then build, then take the lines," he says, making it sound as if he's turning traditional naval architecture on its head. "It's kind of funny."

Some of his boats are born, literally, on napkins—simple renderings Townsend then develops into pencil drawings of hulls, interiors, and details. The idea is to communicate an idea as simply and understandably as possible. When a prospective customer sees a sketch of what the completed boat will actually look like, and then says, "Okay," Townsend says, he knows he's getting somewhere.

Townsend, however, is neither wholly self-taught nor much of a revolutionary. He's a graduate of The Landing School, which puts its small-boatbuilding students through a rigorous year of construction and design training at its

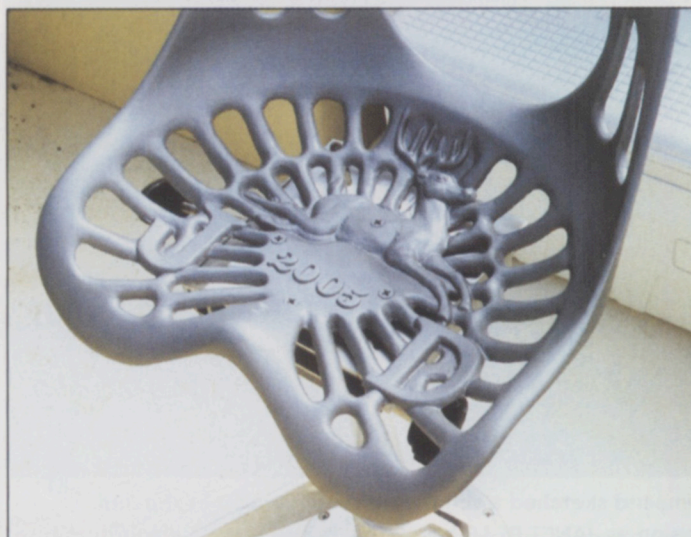
well-regarded program in Arundel, Maine. "It was one of the smartest things I've done in my life," Townsend says. "I wanted to learn what [boatbuilding] was all about, and it's one of the best schools for that. It's a job when you go there."

Fresh out of the school 15 years ago, Townsend visited Mystic, Connecticut, on his way home to Long Island, New York. In Mystic, he met a furniture builder who offered him work in a shop making reproduction chairs and tables with elaborate carvings. "I was a nervous young man," Townsend recalls, "but I learned quite a bit." It wasn't long before one of Mystic's many boatbuilders called, and soon the young craftsman was employed in the trade he had trained for. Today, in addition to running his own boatbuilding shop, he takes on painting and other projects at the Mystic Seaport Museum and maintains yachts for a number of regular customers.

The Connecticut boatbuilder Tommy Townsend has developed a series of workboat-inspired launches, starting with the 15' SKITCH (above left). He refined the design for two center-console 20-footers, NIFTY (above right) and JANET DEAR (facing page).



BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ



TOMMY TOWNSEND



TOMMY TOWNSEND

Top—SKITCH steers comfortably from a seat right aft, but for the 5' longer JANET DEAR Townsend planned a center console instead. **Above left**—The JANET DEAR client's ties to the Midwest gave Townsend an inspiration for the helmsman's seat for the center console: he found an old John Deere tractor seat in an antique store and used it as a pattern for a new cast-iron one, with an updated year stamp. **Above right**—Another tractor adaptation was a steering knob on the wheel.

One eye-catching element of JANET DEAR is the unusual cast-metal, silver-painted John Deere tractor seat just aft of the chrome steering wheel. The wheel itself has a steering knob bolted to it, just like a vintage car's. Janet grew up in the Midwest, where the tractor is king and seats are designed to stay comfortable all day in the hot sun. Townsend found the seat in Vermont, brought it back to Mystic, and, with Janet's blessing, had it re-cast with a higher back and with "2005" replacing the original date stamp.

Color is important to Townsend. Complementing the silver seat and wheel, the hull, cockpit sole, and interior are cream-colored, and the foredeck and side decks are painted white. The boat's substantial rubrails are cream-colored, and the one at the sheer is trimmed with a bronze guard. Seat cushions are light gray.

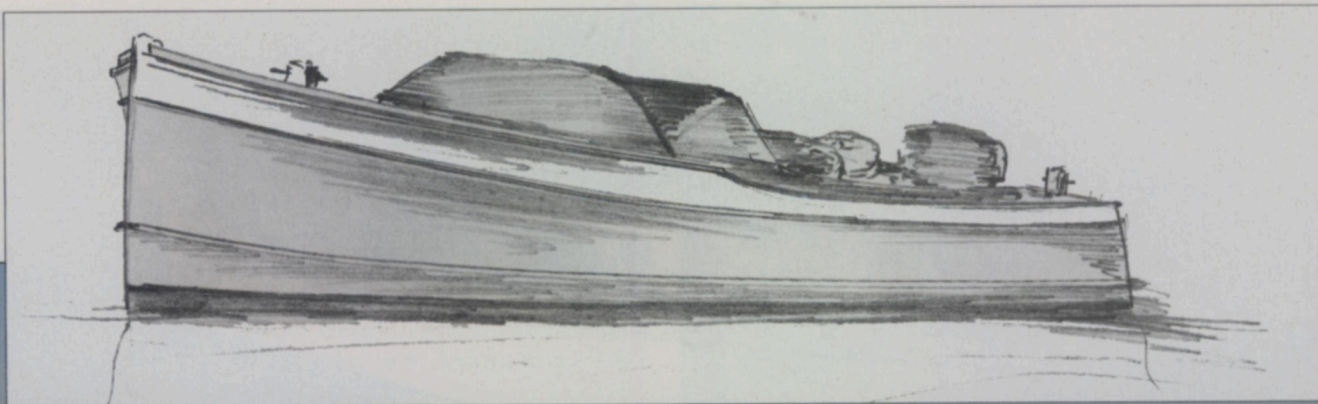
There's space for a cooler just forward of the outboard engine. The space is currently occupied by a standard-

issue plastic version, although Townsend would prefer something more chrome and retro.

Not a single surface is varnished. "I love paint and color," Townsend says. "My life's too short for brightwork and endless varnishing." The entire effect is simple (the color scheme is "loosely based" on the colors of John Deere tractors), and the emphasis is on the boat's lines and form, rather than fancy joinery or rich finish.

"He's great with colors," Janet says, adding that while the color scheme was Townsend's, she finds it very attractive.

The Hattons contracted for only one boat, but Townsend decided to build two side-by-side, the second one, called NIFTY, "on spec." He used the same molds, resulting in an identical 20' hull, but elected to have a slightly different cockpit configuration. NIFTY has a raised foredeck, giving her a more old-fashioned look than JANET DEAR. Her colors set the boat apart from many: mint green topsides and interior, including the console;



BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ

Top—At the same time he was preparing to build JANET DEAR, Townsend sketched a slightly different version of the hull. **Above**—Built on spec, the resulting NIFTY retained the same hull design as JANET DEAR but with a raised-foredeck configuration. Townsend didn't care for the way the black outboard motor looked with his hull, so he fabricated a cover out of the same material used for the dodger.

the waterline because the boat had to be able to squeeze underneath a railroad bridge on its way to and from its marina slip in Stonington, Connecticut.

"We've always owned wooden sailboats," says Janet, who commissioned JANET DEAR after getting to know Townsend during the many seasons he maintained the family's other boats. For summer vacations in Stonington, she decided, a small motorboat would be useful—something she could run herself on trips to nearby Fishers Island, New York, and Watch Hill, Rhode Island, or other spots where she and her kids might swim or go water-skiing. Her first idea was to get a used Boston Whaler or something comparable, but "the thought of owning a plastic boat" was too much for this wood-oriented family. Her husband, Charlie, suggested that they ask Townsend to build something new.

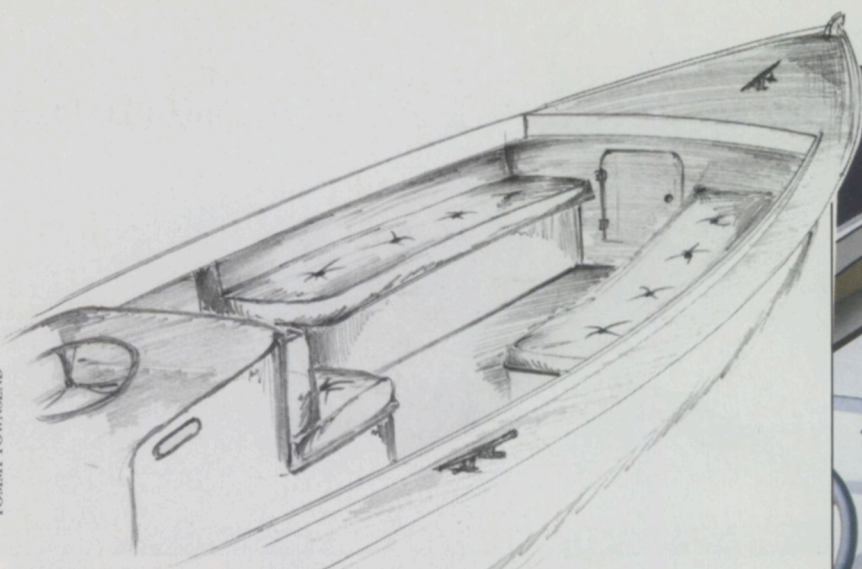
"It became a collaboration between my practical requirements and Tom's expertise," Janet says. "I wanted a boat that was able to take eight to ten people if need be, with lots of storage and that would be easy to get up

and running. We ended up meeting everyone's needs—it's a beautiful wooden boat that runs very well." She has had JANET DEAR out in "fairly wavy" conditions on Long Island Sound and never felt unsafe, and after a season she's confident the boat will "look nice without a lot of work or expense."

"Not Shiny"

Building with fir plywood, which is relatively economical and easy to work, requires considerable attention to finish. Townsend sheathes his boats with two layers of 10-ounce fiberglass cloth set in epoxy on the exterior and a single layer on the interior. In addition, at seams and at the chines, the boats get heavy biaxial fiberglass tape inside and out. All is neatly faired.

Townsend favors paint as a finish. For the topsides, he prefers flat paint, which hides irregularities and allows the eye to focus on the boat's lines rather than its surfaces. "Shiny boats are offensive to me. You can see the boat for what it is if it's not shiny," Townsend says.



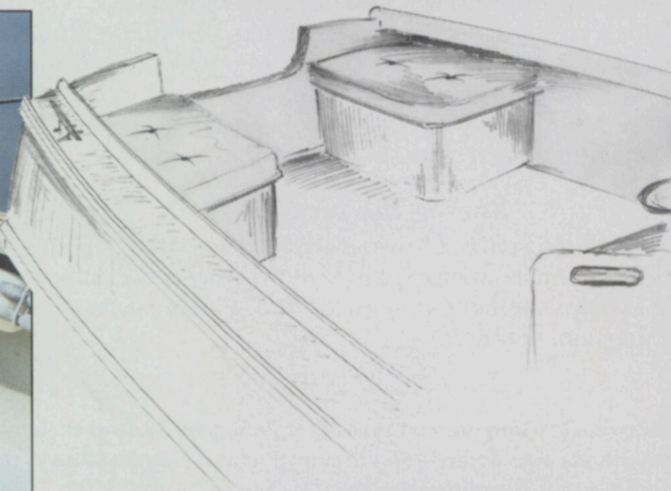
Above—Rather than drawing formal accommodations plans, Townsend used his artistic sense to produce three-dimensional sketches of the cockpit layout for JANET DEAR. **Right**—With the concepts decided, Townsend then built what he had envisioned.



DAVID D. PLATT



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TOMMY TOWNSEND

Above left—SKITCH, which Townsend uses for general yard work, is outfitted with a towing post. **Above right**—The same basic aft cockpit configuration was retained for JANET DEAR, without the post.

the center console, seating, cushions, the coaming, deck cleats, the cuddy, the transom's tumblehome—are all there, rendered with light and shadow by a sure hand that's informed by an artist's eye.

Townsend's design for the JANET DEAR 20—the first 20-footer—is based on an earlier 15' design called SKITCH, which he built six years ago to the same basic hull shape. With the help of a computer program at Mystic Seaport, he expanded the design to 20'.

He built the prototype 20-footer during the winter of 2004–05 in his shop in West Mystic. The name JANET DEAR, Townsend says, recalls the many conversations he had with Janet Hatton that began with “Now Janet, dear...” The hull is made up of $\frac{1}{4}$ ”, three-ply marine fir plywood with no visible voids. Such thin plywood bends easily over the molds. Townsend then uses a single layer of 10-oz. fiberglass cloth inside and two such layers on the exterior. All joints are taped with heavy fiberglass tape. The V-bottomed hull has no chine logs, “just a lot of ‘glass,” meaning fiberglass cloth set in epoxy to join the plywood

panels together where the sides meet the bottom. ‘Glassed-in bulkheads and seats, plus a pair of full-length laminated stringers 9” outboard of the centerline, lend strength and stability, as do a series of athwartships floor timbers. A short skeg to improve the boat's tracking runs aft from the stem to about 2'6” short of the stern. There is no keel in the ordinary sense of the word.

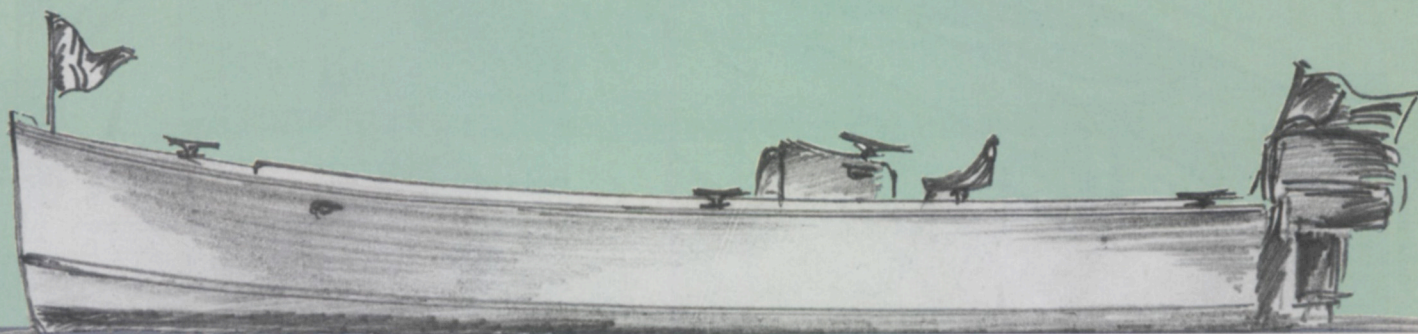
“I'm building a series of boxes,” Townsend says. “It's very strong.” Flotation material fills the bilges outboard of the stringers, below the cockpit sole.

JANET DEAR is a light boat, easily powered by a 90-hp Honda outboard. Offsetting the engine's weight is considerable lead ballast forward, in the bilge. The ballast gives the boat a “big-boat feel,” Townsend says. “I'm not a naval architect,” he responds when asked about the boat's handling characteristics, “but some boats tend to porpoise and pound—this one's smoother.” The ballast, he maintains, has a lot to do with it.

Townsend had to work within at least one limitation on the first boat: no part of it could be more than 3' above

A workboat to play in

by David D. Platt



TOMMY TOWNSEND

But these days, Townsend's heart is in a series of 20', center-console, workboat-inspired boats he began building in 2005. The first of these boats was built for his client Janet Hatton, who was looking for a simple, safe boat in which to take her kids water-skiing and picnicking. "I wanted to build a plywood boat people wouldn't mind paying for," Townsend says. He also wanted to bring his own design sensibility—a "look"—to a boat he hopes will appeal to a particular slice of the market.

Seeing the Not-Yet-Built

Sketching is part of Townsend's process, from the quick drawing on a paper napkin to something more elaborate that helps someone who might not be adept at visualizing things not yet built.

"I'm an artist as well as a boatbuilder," he says. "I do a lot of pen-and-ink and pencil illustration—it runs in the family. When I do interiors, I can do an illustration. People know what they want, and when I show them a rendering, they see what I've got in mind." His 20-footer, in fact, began as a thumbnail sketch.

Townsend's preliminary drawings of boats have the same late-19th-century feel as pen-and-ink renderings by turn-of-the-last-century architects such as Stanford White and H.H. Richardson, who sketched exteriors and interiors of the structures they envisioned for their clients. For his first 20-footer, for example, Townsend sketched two views showing how the boat would look to someone standing on a dock next to the starboard side of the boat, one view looking forward and the other aft. The details—

Above—Starting with an artist's rendering, Townsend sketched out his ideas, then built the boat over molds, which he adjusted largely by eye. **Below**—The design give-and-take resulted in the plywood-planked, center-console 20-footer JANET DEAR, a larger version of the earlier SKITCH.



Townsend, who learned his boatbuilding at The Landing School, Arundel, Maine, attributes the comfortable ride of both JANET DEAR and NIFTY to 200 lbs of lead ballast fitted in the bilges well forward.

brown trim at the sheer, on the coaming, and on the console; and white decks. Townsend used sampson posts forward and aft instead of cleats. Next to the console is Townsend's signature-modified John Deere tractor seat. NIFTY also features a dodger in light-green canvas, with sleeping-bag space beneath it for two. Again, there's no varnish in sight.

Townsend's two sketches of NIFTY aren't as detailed as those for JANET DEAR, but they leave no doubt about the differences between the two configurations. One drawing, a standard profile from the starboard side, shows how the raised-deck version will look with its motor and canvas dodger in place. The other, a view from forward on the port side, provides a little more detail and even a suggestion of the boat's shape at the bow. This drawing also shows a foredeck sampson post—a feature not included in JANET DEAR, which has a foredeck cleat instead.


An afternoon run aboard NIFTY on Long Island Sound confirms Townsend's and Janet Hatton's comments about handling characteristics. NIFTY is responsive and stable; she tracks well, knifes nicely through waves while on plane, and doesn't pound.

It takes Townsend two to two-and-a-half months to build one of these boats, which can be customized to owners' specifications. As of early October 2005, he still owned NIFTY and was confident that he would get an order for a third boat this winter.

At somewhere between \$25,000 and \$50,000 (the variation depends on the level of finish), and including an outboard engine costing about \$10,000, these boats would



appear to be moderately priced in the new-boat market. "I haven't really figured out the cost," Townsend says candidly. "In the case of the first boat there was a learning curve, and in the second, I got a little carried away." NIFTY has a bigger engine, for one thing: a 115-hp Mercury four-stroke, fuel-injected, that drives her a little faster than JANET DEAR.

But with these boats it's impressions, not costs, that are most likely to make the sale. Townsend the artist, the impulsive sketcher and visualizer who thinks in many colors, has combined his skills as a designer and builder to produce a boat that's different—and delightful. 

David D. Platt is the editor of Working Waterfront, a monthly newspaper published by the Island Institute of Rockland, Maine.

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Visualizing a boat is one thing—seeing it under way in ideal conditions in its home waters as the moon rises over Stonington, Connecticut, is something else again.

