

Blue Flag



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Starting from scratch

Retirement looming and a desire to travel, Andrew and Nicki Phillips decided to build a new barge. With some advice from DBA members and a successful builder-client relationship they are very pleased with the result.

Hello and welcome to the start of the next stage in our life story. Firstly, to introduce ourselves, I and my wife Nicki (both complete novices to not just this lifestyle, but to boating altogether) have recently swapped our 'land-life' to begin living full time on our beautiful replica Dutch barge, Shensi. We are currently moored in the UK at Marlow, Buckinghamshire, but will soon be taking her over to Europe to travel around the inland waterways for as long as we are able. With no previous real boating experience this did seem a bit of a strange undertaking not just to us but to everyone who knows us, but with retirement looming (which ultimately happened at the end of 2017) and a desire to travel with our two dogs, it seemed an attractive option and so, long story short, we decided to give it a go.

We have a ski apartment in the Alps and whilst we have spent many years travelling to France, it nearly always involved a long drive there and back; due to having the dogs with us there was very little scope to explore further. We tried to expand our horizons but with limited success, although we could see the appeal of doing this on a boat if we ever had more time. Still, at this point we were both past

retirement age and in good health, yet up to now I hadn't really considered spending our retirement years doing anything other than pottering around and doing the odd bit of travel to various places, but I knew I wanted more out of life for myself and Nicki.

Anyway, once the idea was planted and after lots of prevarication, a final decision was made and we started this new adventure. A doddle we thought, look for and buy a boat and, hey presto, off we go but, as all you experienced boaters will know, it wasn't that simple! It very quickly became apparent that there were going to be challenges, and indeed those challenges just kept coming in quick succession. One of the first was to break the news to our four children that not only would we be changing our (and indirectly their) way of life, but we would be selling the family home and moving out of the country – something that they too had to adjust to, and weren't happy about for quite some time - but we felt that this was to be 'our' time and they had all reached the stage of having their own lives (although there had been a constant cycle of one or other of them or in fact their friends as well moving out then back in again).

So as retirement loomed, the whole process really kicked off with a visit to

the Crick boat show back in 2015. This gave us several points of reference and a few contacts, and we subsequently joined the DBA, got the book, bought the t-shirt (no, not really), started researching the internet and talking to many people. Due to a certain urgency in our lives we decided that for us a new build would be the best way to go as after all, with our limited experience (i.e. none) we could potentially end up spending a lot of time tracking down a suitable barge and possibly spending a lot of time and money refitting and/or adapting, none of which appealed to us.

We began looking at a number of builders to gauge what they had to offer and to find someone that we felt we could trust - naively I imagined that from the outset a boat builder would know exactly what we wanted, build it and then we would sail off into the sunset. But what I kept hearing from several builders was "we can build to your requirements" great, yet inside my head I just heard the continual refrain "I have no idea what my requirements are" - all we knew for sure was that this was to be a full time live-aboard and that it would be a completely different world to the one we were used to. After a while we started to get a sense of the level of complexity and how we needed to have a fairly good understanding a wide range





Steelwork for the hull almost complete

of subjects. We needed to work out what was important to us in terms of lifestyle, comfort, practicality and manageability, and we also wanted to limit the amount of compromise, whilst appreciating that some compromise would be inevitable. So, having deluded ourselves into thinking that we understood the basic concepts, the idea of having a strong influence on the build started to gain traction.

One of the many events we attended was a Bluewater Boats open day in Warwickshire, and we were both impressed by what we saw. We particularly liked their replica Dutch barge as it offered so much of what we were after, and we both got a very good feeling about the Bluewater team and their commitment to delivering a quality product, so much so that I decided then and there to book a build slot. I don't think Nicki was overly enamoured with this quick decision - in

fact, knowing me, prior to our visit she had specifically asked me to not commit to anything. Hmmm, I won't go into our chat on the way home!

For months we bounced ideas back and forward with David, the owner and designer at Bluewater. He wanted to understand as far as possible exactly what we wanted and what our expectations were ... mind you, come to that, so did we. At times the whole undertaking seemed insane as it was so far outside of our comfort zone. Good communications have always been key to achieving a successful outcome and as this was our biggest project to date, we were determined to keep this a priority.

I'll admit, I had many restless nights as random thoughts and worries took over in the early hours but gradually over the weeks and months it got easier. Who am I kidding? Just some times were easier than

others but as we learnt more and more about the build and what we were letting ourselves in for, we finally were happy for the build to begin and eventually took ownership of Shensi in April 2017. During this time some things were easy to relate to, yet others were much more of a challenge, but all the way through David was there to offer his advice and expertise and generally hold our hands.

Quite early on Nicki and I heard about this group who might be of use - the brilliant DBA! Initially we didn't appreciate just how useful it would be to us, but after becoming members we found that it was worth its weight in gold - almost by accident Nicki reached out to Chris Grant via email and a lengthy dialogue ensued between Chris and myself, which proved to be invaluable. Indeed, many times during the design and build period both Nicki and I were overwhelmed by the number of people



who were willing to offer help and advice, and we soon felt that we were becoming part of the 'family' of bargees. As the advice and recommendations started to flow in, our own specification evolved, our confidence grew and we were able to have more meaningful discussions with Bluewater. It was not always plain sailing as 'good practice' sometimes went head to head with what we, the customer, wanted but at times this proved to be a good thing as some of my requests would probably not have worked out too well.

seen a few of that width, they did appear quite comfortable, but on learning that European waterways are so much wider we expanded to a width of 4.2m and 19m long. Maybe we could have gone a bit larger but I think it has worked out very well. We insisted too on larger tanks – 2000 litre water tanks, 2000+ litre fuel tanks, 1600 litre black water – having been told that pump-out stations and water points are few and far between in Europe; we pushed for keel cooling because European waterways are apparently (and actually, as we found on visits to France)

the stern configuration! But after much discussion and further research, I felt happy with what such a change would bring to the build, and so the new design was agreed and the plans redrawn, with just a minor delay to the start.

With basic plans in place and the build about to commence, David then suggested importing the steel from Holland since at that time it was generally considered to be of better quality than the steel currently available in the UK. This seemed practical and more beneficial to us, especially when he also suggested co-ordinating a bulk purchase of steel with a couple of other customers awaiting new builds which meant that we would all share in the transport costs.

Progress seemed to be swift, and suddenly the shell of our barge was ready. Our first view of our future home as it was wheeled out of the steel shed was an exciting moment - now it was really starting to look the part and we could see just what we were buying, and to us 'newbies' it seemed truly enormous. Once spray foamed and boarded out, we were again able to review our options, and it now became easier to fully appreciate the impact of the structural changes we had made.

Besides all the technical considerations, we had to really think hard about the use of space in the boat – since it was to be a home for just two people and two dogs, as much as possible we wanted to be able to use all of it, so did we need dedicated guest accommodation just for the odd guests? If an open plan galley with a large saloon was a fixed requirement for us, how could we accommodate guests? The only idea we could envisage was a study with scope to convert to temporary guest accommodation. Luckily, because of our



Interior spray foam insulation complete so fitting out gets under way

However, one thing we were not prepared to compromise on was that we needed the build to be appropriate for touring European waterways in terms of size and capacities and not to limit ourselves to the restrictions of UK waterways. It had become apparent that we needed to be mindful of the fact that many UK builders will target the UK environment, so size, comfort and services are potentially at odds with how things work in Europe. The usual recommended size to cope with UK inland waterways seemed to be 3.8m wide and having

very weedy. Bluewater also offered the option of a hydraulic wheelhouse roof – a fantastic idea that we were happy to include and which makes life so much easier for us already.

I now believed that we had refined the specification to more or less what we wanted, although we were still open-minded and prepared to make changes as the build progressed and I think this worked very well. However, one alteration suggested by David was literally just before the build started – a potential redesign to



First winter on board and standing up well to the cold weather and snow



Main cabin with forward escape doors



Sliding shutter rises up to separate the dining or work area from the saloon to create a temporary private guest room

many visits to many boating events and how willing everyone was to share their thoughts and experiences, we had already come across a perfect solution - another barge had incorporated a sliding partition between rooms in order to set up a multi-function area. A dining / work area was therefore installed at the bow of Shensi separated from the main saloon by a very efficient sliding partition - raising the

partition allowed us to convert the space into a completely separate temporary guest area when needed with its own en-suite, but when we were guest-less we could lower the partition and have full use of the whole area, and the en-suite became the day toilet. The Bluewater team did an excellent job in this regard - the partition was designed along the lines of the old sash window system, meaning that there

was very little effort required to open/ close it, and the result was a beautifully open yet practical space with masses of storage. At the same time, the dining/ work/guest area was also raised such that its slightly elevated position allowed for functional pull-out filing drawers and storage underfloor, with a good view down the length of the boat - we were not trying to be too fancy, but this was to be our home and had to be functional.

The master bedroom was to be in the stern providing a degree of the isolation from the rest of the boat and despite the storage challenges it has worked out well. Within the master bedroom, the height of the bed was raised to allow for the curves at the stern, thus allowing the bed to go further back into the structure and at the same time increasing space within the bedroom. Whilst this would probably not be to everyone's taste, we quite liked the raised aspect (especially since in doing so we were able to gain increased storage underneath the bed).

It had been important to us that the master bedroom to the rear of the boat had a large en-suite bath and shower, plus lots of wardrobe space in the room, but this proved somewhat tricky. However, after much thought and re-consideration of what our actual requirements would be (i.e. although we particularly wanted a bath, it was only really for occasional use and for bathing our dogs) we realised that a bath would use up quite a bit of important space in the rear cabin. David's suggestion was to place the bath in the guest en-suite at the other end of the barge rather than in the master en-suite - a simple but effective solution and this, combined with some changes to the wardrobe space, gave a much more spacious feel to the master bedroom.



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You might have noticed, storage had become a bit of a fixation for me but although I think we could have done better, there is more than we currently need. It may still prove a challenge once we have moved across the channel though.

Throughout the whole process, David and his team were all very approachable and accommodating, providing a wealth of knowledge and experience, and they were all very proficient, always willing to stop and discuss any aspects that we had any difficulty understanding or just to fill us in on what they were intending to achieve at any particular point. Any issues that came up were quickly brought to our attention either in person, on the phone or clarified in emails, and we were more than happy that we would not be presented with something we would be unhappy with (well, maybe once or twice, but we easily worked through these), and this worked both ways in that we could easily approach Bluewater with any concerns, ideas, questions. We were also both so pleased to see that all of the staff, from the metalwork to the carpentry to the electrical engineers and anyone in between took great pride and enjoyment in their work. One thing they all seemed to agree on was just how much they enjoyed working on larger boats since it meant that several of them could be working together without getting in each other's way, and this therefore meant that progress was quite rapid and you could quickly see things coming together.

From the outset we were encouraged to visit as often as we wanted so that we could really be a part of the whole process, and it was exciting to watch the barge



Early outings on the river Thames to bed everything down before planning to cross the channel for some continental adventures

grow and develop – since this was very much a custom build it meant that even in the space of a week or two, things could change so rapidly, such that sometimes even weekly visits did not seem to be enough towards the end.

We are now at a point where given our experiences over the last few years, it is apparent that custom builds bring their own challenges in being able to visualise the end product and there are some bits that did not work quite as I had hoped, yet others have exceeded expectations. For me in particular, I have to say that the walk-in engine room, just off the corridor, is particularly special. It is a delight to be able to have such ease of access not just to all the key components, but to the room itself. I asked Bluewater to make it beautiful and to me it is although Nicki hasn't yet got what I mean!

Nicki and I have now been living on

board since April 2017, and so far we are incredibly pleased with our new home; we are now preparing ourselves for the next phase of our adventure - our imminent move to Europe. There are so many things to think about and consider, not least of which is getting there, but with much nervous anticipation we are ready for the challenge, and look forward to meeting lots of new and old faces on our travels. So, roll on the spring and all that the future holds; we look forward to meeting many of you when we join the DBA Ghent Rally or perhaps at our already booked winter mooring at Flandria, Brugge.

Here's to a great 2018. Good luck everyone!

Shensi is 19m x 4.2m and was built by Bluewater Boats, Warwickshire UK. We are pleased to welcome Bluewater as a new advertiser on the previous page.



Andrew and Nicki with a happy crew and looking forward to meeting others at the DBA Ghent Rally in May - here's hoping for good weather and a smooth channel crossing