



PETER WILLIS

LUKE POWELL

Tradition rebuilt

Luke Powell's latest hand-built pilot cutter underwent her sailing trials in Falmouth harbour in April, before heading north for a charter career on Scotland's West Coast. *Peter Willis* was aboard



In she goes –
Ezra is launched
at Gweek Quay

LUKE POWELL

From the top of the tower at the Maritime Museum, I look down on Falmouth harbour and there, on the visitors' pontoons by the Town Quay, is a boat with her creamy-new gaff mainsail and topsail raised. It's a stunning sight, completely transforming the waterside scene and – despite the presence of a bloated motor-cruiser behind her – dragging it back in time by about a century and a half. I love the way old boats have the power to do this to a harbour, and I love Falmouth, so this is a sight to savour. But this is not an old boat, in fact she's brand new. And there's better yet to come.

Ten minutes later and, pasty in hand (Oggy Oggy Pasty Co, for the benefit of connoisseurs), I'm walking up the pontoon to this selfsame boat, and being confronted by a man in a kilt. He's Sam Brooke, master and owner, and this is *Ezra*, the latest creation ('product' hardly does it justice) of Luke Powell's Working Sail.



In the Bible the book of
Ezra is all about
rebuilding the temple...

Ultimately, she will be away to the west coast of Scotland to earn her keep as a ‘sustainable’ charter boat, but today is marked down for sailing trials. Not strictly her first sail, I suppose – she’s motored down from Gweek Quay where she was launched the previous week, and been out a couple of times since but, in rough weather, was well-reefed. Today, it’s a glorious, sunny, Force 3, everything-up sort of day, which is just as well because there’s also some photography to be done. Soon after we slip our mooring lines, Luke and sailmaker Patrick Selman, plus the guy with the video camera, are over the side into an outboard dinghy and away.

Sam, whose kilt, like himself, proves to be Manx, not Scottish, is on the beautifully-carved tiller. Ingrid, his partner, is Scottish, from the Shetlands (hence *Ezra*’s Lerwick registration). She’s in charge of ship’s baby Morag who trundles up and down the deck, attached to the jackstay,

tumbling over occasionally but protected from harm by her baby-sized buoyancy aid. Also aboard are two of Luke’s boatbuilders, Andy and Jim, *Ezra*’s relief skipper John, and a few others – but there’s plenty of space for all around the deck.

As we make our way down to Pendennis Point, we’re joined for a while by *Eve of St Mawes*, Luke’s first repro/retro Scillonian pilot cutter, launched in 1997 and now operated locally by Classic Sail, also as a charter vessel. We pretend to be racing her, but it’s not really a contest – apart from the fact that we suspect *Eve* is not really playing, *Ezra* is 6ft (1.8m) longer, with 700sqft (64.5m²) more sail.

Once beyond the headland, we begin the business of trying her on various points of sail and, of course, various photographic angles. Sam’s helming is constantly interrupted by his mobile phone –

“I wanted a boat to get to difficult places”

calls from Luke micro-managing the set of the sails from the photo-dinghy. “Sloppy luff on the bowsprit jib.” “Get those running backstays off.”

Being a traditional gaffer, with dual foresails, there’s an agreeably large number of ropes to play with, and some handy purchases to make sure the work’s not too strenuous. Sam tries the tiller-rope at one stage, but it’s not really necessary, even when the wind pipes up a bit and, close-sheeted, we give the lee scuppers a baptism.

Sam’s persuaded to take a turn in the dinghy to see his boat from the water. “She looks stunning,” he reports on his return. “The shape of her is just beautiful.” Sam discovered Luke’s boats three years ago when he decided to take a year out of chartering – they used to run a

Rustler 32 called *Celtic Spirit* – and signed-on, as first student as it happens, for the new traditional boat-

PILOT CUTTER EZRA

building course being set up at Falmouth College. *Ezra* was built for Sam and Ingrid on commission. “We wanted a more traditional boat,” Sam explains, “There are environmental issues in chartering, and there’s always lots to do on a boat like this. Also, I got into sailing from mountaineering – I was inspired by Tilman – and I wanted a boat to get to difficult places.”

Ezra was built around their requirements, though it seems mostly a matter of details – a hanging locker at the foot of the companionway; a flatter skylight to help stow a clinker dinghy and heaviest cloth for the mainsail to match the heavy West-Coast weather. The barrel windlass, traditional and a Working Sail standard item, was a must. “We have very deep anchorages – it’s very powerful; it gets huge amounts of chain up without huge effort.”

This seemed a good moment to take a look below – there’s a sense of solid comfort and deep space, as one would expect, but the mood is light, with blond oak and cream paint, and sanded larch floorboards.

A huge oil lamp, hung in the skylight, can be let down to illuminate the saloon dining table, and is augmented by discreet electric lighting. The table itself folds down, the flaps held in place with solid brass hooks. A Little Cod stove, in its tin-lined alcove with wood locker below, gives a promise of warmth on those rainy Scottish evenings. Going forward, there is a generous-sized heads, with washbasin and a shower-spray unit on the taps, then four bunk berths in the forepeak. Two double quarter-berths run under the



aft-deck and there’s a curtained pilot-berth (of course!) portside in the saloon. Typically, *Ezra* will carry five or six paying guests on her charter trips, with two crew.

Twentieth-century accoutrements are kept to a minimum. There’s a 62hp Beta Marine diesel, which we don’t use at all on this trip, and a single multi-display panel on deck. “Otherwise we might be in the 19th century,” says Sam with satisfaction.

“It’s a lot of boat for the money,” he adds. As, indeed, it is. He has a unique handbuilt boat for £224,000 (ex-VAT) – a price that compares very well indeed with, say, a Rustler 42 or a Hallberg-Rassy.

By now we’re enjoying a long relaxing beam reach up Carrick Roads past St Just for the fun of it. Sam produces a bottle of champagne, and then it’s back to the Town Quay. The aim is to make a pass of the pontoon, get some canvas down and motor up, but as we come in, it’s clear we can just sail in, no sweat, so we do, to a convenient gap. As we’re sorting the mooring warps, though, we hear a toot-toot from behind us. It’s the real pilot boat. By instinct, or something, *Ezra*’s taken her slot. Everyone laughs and we warp her along out of the way.

Afterwards, in the Chain Locker – the quayside pub – we chat about *Ezra* and her predecessors. She’s the fifth manifestation of Luke’s fascination with the old pilot cutters of the Scilly Isles. After *Eve*, 38ft (11.6m) LOD, came *Lizzie May*, 42ft (12.8m) in 2001, then *Agnes*, a full-size recreation at 46ft (14m), then *Hesper*, 44ft (13.4m). And *Ezra*, also 44ft but beamier than *Hesper*, and with a “snugger rig”,

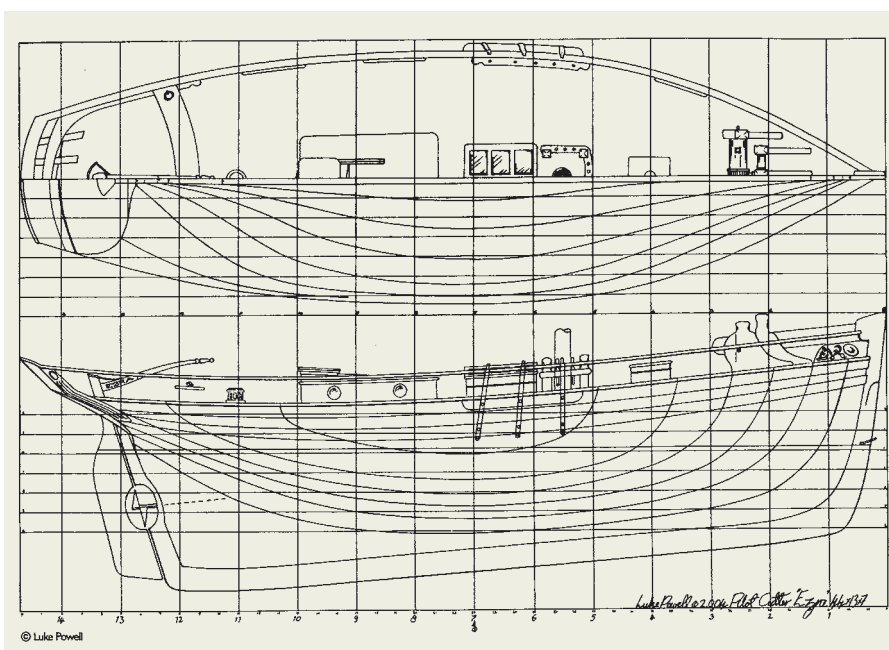


LEE WHITEHEAD



Kettle’s on – in the light but cosy cabin

PETER WILLIS



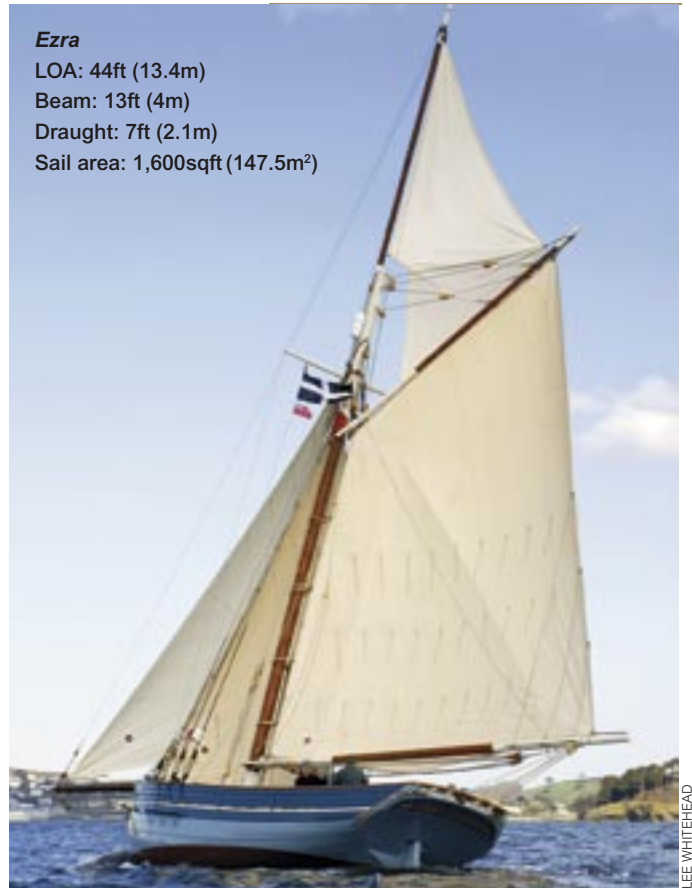
© Luke Powell

according to Luke. “*Hesper* was built for speed,” he continues, whereas *Ezra*’s virtues are comfort and customer confidence.

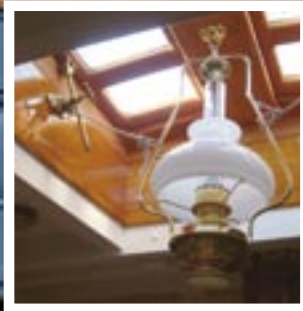
“We get a little better at building each time,” Luke reflects. “Each new boat looks a little more professional – we look back at *Agnes*, in the yard now, and go ‘oh dear, did we do it like that?’ The scantlings of the deck furniture on *Agnes* – so much flimsier than this.” This ‘flimsiness’ is distinctly relative (*Agnes*’s deck furniture looks perfectly fine to me), but Luke is nothing if not a perfectionist. It also seems that the newer the Working Sail boat, the older the pilot cutter it’s modelled on. *Agnes* ‘dates’ from 1841; *Ezra* was one of the Scillies’ earliest, dating from the early 1800s.

Luke’s expertise on the subject is legendary. The distinctive and glorious lute sterns, for example, “died out in the

Ezra
 LOA: 44ft (13.4m)
 Beam: 13ft (4m)
 Draught: 7ft (2.1m)
 Sail area: 1,600sqft (147.5m²)



LEE WHITEHEAD



Ship's baby Morag with Ingrid
 Insert: The cabin lamp

Master and part-owner: Sam at the tiller



LEE WHITEHEAD



Above: Cornish flag at the crosstrees

Left: Powerful as well as traditional – the barrel winch makes light work of deep anchorages

LUKE POWELL

1860s”, and the Scillonian pilot cutters themselves were finished by the 1880s, “the first pilot cutters to be killed off by steam,” he explains. “Prior to the railway, it was Scillies for orders, not Falmouth.”

But he’s also a practical boatbuilder. Of *Agnes*, recently repurchased and sailed back from Norfolk, Virginia, he reflects, “She wasn’t quite understood out there – they don’t have the same tradition of working boats on the American East Coast. And it’s a tough climate for a wooden boat – hot and humid.” *Agnes* is theoretically for sale – she’s at Gweek now, being thoroughly refurbished – but Luke’s tempted to keep her for himself.

Meanwhile, Working Sail’s sixth boat is about to be started, and is pre-sold, for charter in Chichester. But it wasn’t

always like that. Luke had to take jobbing work to get the money together to finish *Eve*. In fact, the first three boats were all speculative builds.

“When we started, people were saying ‘I like the shape of your boat, but can you sheathe it in epoxy, can you build it in plastic.’ But they are regaining confidence in wooden boats – previously they’d been comparing a 40-year-old wooden boat with a new plastic one when it came to things like maintenance. Now they’re looking at new wooden boats and realising they’re competitive. They’re saying ‘I can have a hand-made wooden boat for the same price as a Rustler, and individually designed’. You get a lot for your money.”

What does that mean for the future of Wooden Sail, I wonder. Luke has a

good team of craftsmen working under him. Has he thought about expanding, building maybe two boats at once? “There’s probably not the market for it,” he replies. Frankly, I doubt that – the confidence in wooden boats is undoubtedly on the rise, thanks partly to Luke himself. “I’m not a businessman,” he adds. I doubt that, too – anyone who can manage the finances on a single large project over 18 months to two years is clearly doing something right.

But his next remark rings totally true. “I prefer the craftsmanship side. I do like pushing the chisel.” Anyone who’s seen the finely-engraved tiller on *Ezra*, or the name and home port carved on her stern, will appreciate that. And, Luke adds, reflectively sipping his pint, “I’m not sure I could manage two boats at once. I do enjoy the focus. When you’re focused on one boat, you give it your all.”

“We get a little better at building each time”