



# 40-KNOT FIRST-TIME BUILD

The stunning Etoile 18 was the product of a Boat Building Academy project led by a former oil engineer

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**S**imon Hawksley is definitely not the only person to have read an article on the twice-yearly launch day at the Boat Building Academy in Lyme Regis and thought: "I fancy having a go at that." But it's a reasonably safe bet that he was the only one to subsequently quit a lucrative career in the oil industry, relocate 550 miles south from Aberdeen with his girlfriend Laure (who had, in fact, bought Simon the copy of *Classic Boat* in which the article appeared) and sign up for the course. "I read the article and thought it sounded fantastic," Simon recalls. "But I never believed I'd get the chance to do it myself."

It was two years after that moment of inspiration, aged 34 and with the oil industry in decline due to falling





**ETOILE 18**  
 LOA  
**18ft 6in (5.6m)**  
 BEAM  
**7ft 3in (2.2m)**  
 DRAUGHT  
**2ft 0in (0.6m)**  
 DISPLACEMENT  
**1.2 tonnes**  
 BUILD  
**2017**  
 HULL CONSTRUCTION  
**Cold-moulded  
 wood with glass  
 and epoxy layer**

prices, that Simon was offered voluntary redundancy from his job as an engineer. He seized the opportunity, moving to Dorset with Laure and enrolling on a Boat Building Academy course. He was on his way to a launch day of his own. At that point Simon had no thoughts of creating a business out of it, he simply wanted to build himself a wooden boat.

His first thought was a small, wooden, clinker motor launch with a single-cylinder diesel engine. But then he saw a design for something more sporty: an American 1960s race boat called *Wyn-Mill II* which he'd found on the website [classicwoodenboatplans.com](http://classicwoodenboatplans.com), one of the first sterndrive boats and believed to have inspired Don Aronow to create similar Donzi 16ft GRP speedboats in the USA. He stretched the original design by 2ft, to 18ft overall, to add space in the cockpit, and it looked perfect.

**DRAWING PLANS**

It took two-and-a-half weeks to loft the design full size using traditional techniques on 8ft by 4ft white-painted hardboard sheets. Long battens were used to ensure all curves were as fair as possible, and the three views were overlaid to allow them to cross-reference each other. "It's an iterative, slow process," says Simon, "but even having spent 10 years in modern CAD engineering, I now don't see how I could have designed a boat like that on a computer screen because it would be like looking at the design through a letterbox. Seeing it full size and being able to walk around it, adjust the battens until I was happy with the lines and then draw it in was an amazing process which allowed me to get fair curves."

Above: stainless steel detailing throughout with 1960s-style dash and bucket seats

The hull was built upside down with seven Douglas fir frames and with six fore-and-aft stringers and chine logs recessed into them each side. The cold-moulded plywood hull skin – three layers of 6mm in the curved areas and two layers of 9mm where it was flatter – was then laid over the structure before two layers of bi-axial glass cloth were applied over the top with West Pro-Set epoxy laminating resin, creating additional stiffness and impact protection to the hull.

“I think we ended up having three rounds of priming and fairing, each with two coats of the high-build primer, so seven coats of that in total. Half of it was probably sanded off whilst fairing, though. We did a lot of sanding!” says Simon.

## THE DECK

A 6mm plywood sub-deck was fitted with straight-laid spruce planks on top of it with margins and covering boards in varnished sapele. In fact, sapele and spruce run through the whole boat. The transom, for example, is sapele, as is the interior, except the cockpit sole, which is iroko. The deep blue topsides are coated with Jotun Extreme Gloss, a mix of acrylic and polyurethane two-part spraypaint. In fact when the boat was first launched it was hand painted in a slightly lighter colour, but when the decision was made that it needed to be darker, a spray finish was used to get a glossier shine, so in total there are five coats of topcoat. Varnish is three coats of polyurethane two-pack and four coats of single pack.

The result is exceptional. A classy runabout with the sort of elegant reverse tumblehome you just won't find on a moulded GRP boat. In fact it's the shape that most pleases Simon about the finished result. “The shape is everything that I wanted. There are small tweaks that I would make, but the overall shape and the look of it is what had originally changed my mind from the idea of a small motor launch.”

The layout is classic 1960s Donzi, with a bench seat that runs across the back of the cockpit and up the port side, finished in navy fluted cream marine vinyl on triple layers of reticulated foam. A single bucket seat for the driver puts him close to a sweep of dashboard punctuated by simple stainless bezelled white on black instruments and toggle switches.

A frameless venturi screen is supported by elegant stainless fittings. The wood-topped Morse engine control links to a Mercruiser 5.7 litre V8 petrol engine beneath the aft deck, sending its 260hp through to an Alpha One sterndrive and asking one simple question: “How fast does it go, Mister?”



Simon was an oil industry drilling engineer before enrolling at BBA and building his first boat with colleagues there



*In build, clockwise from top left:*  
frames, keel and transom;  
stringers coming into the stem;  
starting the second layer of  
planking; fairing the hull;  
routing a lap joint; vacuum-  
bagging the transom



*In build, clockwise from far left:*  
 engine beds; transom cut-out for the stern drive; shaping the bucket seat; laying the spruce and sapele deck; modelling the cockpit seating; cold-moulding the bucket seat back

In fact on the bitingly cold but clear day that *Classic Boat* got behind the wheel, Simon wasn't entirely sure, having never quite had the opportunity to test the maximum speed. An offshore wind gifted us calm conditions, perfect for a high speed run. And the answer is that the Etoile 18 does a cool 40.8 knots, although with a High Five stainless steel propeller (popular with waterskiers) tuned for acceleration rather than top speed, there's a sense that careful propeller selection may yield a higher velocity. What is more impressive than the top speed, however, is the sense of rock-solid construction. At 30 knots it feels like it was carved from solid rather than constructed, and it responds eagerly to helm and trim. Were it from an established yard it would be impressive, but this is a first-ever build project.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

The first, but as it turns out not the last, as Simon and Laure, who now have a 20-month-old son, are working on becoming an established yard. Although it was never the original intention, midway through building the boat the couple decided that it might create a business opportunity. Simon has always wanted his own company and, with no plans after the course, they set up Hawksley Classics last summer. This boat will remain in Simon and Laure's possession as a prototype, but premises have been sourced in nearby Bridport and plans are underway for the next build, which will be a very similar concept, using what has been learned in the build of this boat to create something even better. Meanwhile Simon is open to discussing design commissions, although his knowledge and experience favours powerboats over sailing boats. Builds will be bespoke, with clients able to choose any wood they like provided it's durable enough for boatbuilding, the engine they'd like, and of course design, layout, colours and upholstery.

In the meantime, the Boat Building Academy has borrowed the Etoile 18 to display at the Countryfile Live Show at Blenheim Palace and for its stand at the Southampton Boat Show, where it garnered a huge amount of interest. This summer the boat will appear as a Hawksley Classics exhibit at the Cannes Boat Show in September but in the meantime construction begins on Simon's second build, which will become the first official Hawksley Classics boat.



Simon, Laure, Morgan and the Etoile 18 on launch day at Lyme Regis

[hawksleyclassics.com](http://hawksleyclassics.com)