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PLAN STUDY: Autumn Leaves: A Canoe Yawl

by John C. Harris

Designers of small boats are entertainers, in the same class as musicians and comedians. The work is challenging and we serve a useful purpose, but we don't approach our day with the same sobriety as might an engineer, say, or a physician. Autumn Leaves is an entertainment, an exercise in whimsy. Acknowledging the entertainment value is how I justify expending a lot of effort on a design that is fun but unlikely to enjoy mass appeal.

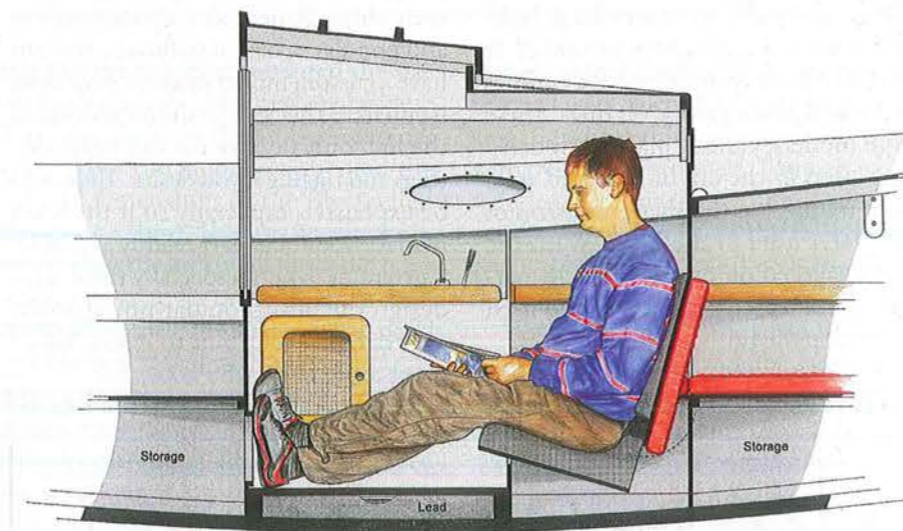
What will stop the Autumn Leaves concept from darkening the waters is its modest crew capacity, and the insistence on oars for auxiliary power. Mass-produced boats of this LOA can daysail four adults and sleep two, while this design is optimized to coddle a singlehander. And in deference to the spirit of the classical canoe yawls, there is no provision for an engine of any kind.

To me, a "canoe yawl" isn't just a design type. It's a self-contained small boat cruising philosophy. According to this philosophy, skilled boatmen (and women) move their little boats along the coastline in all weather, artfully playing wind and tide to make passages without resorting to engines.

Some history: The Humber Yawl Club was created in 1883 by canoe enthusiasts who wanted to cruise the rugged estuaries of Britain's east coast. The club oversaw the evolution of a uniquely elegant and capable class of pocket-cruising sailboats, led by legendary designers such as George Holmes and Albert Strange. Few of these boats were canoes and most were not yawls, but the term "canoe yawl" remains attached to the type.

The attributes of a good canoe yawl include excellent sailing qualities on all points, the ability to make coastal passages in safety, snug but comfortable accommodations, and shoal draft. All of the best examples are engineless, instead relying on sailing efficiency and auxiliary oars to make the next anchorage. The chapter on *Rozinante* in L. Francis Herreshoff's book *The Compleat Cruiser* is probably the most persuasive case ever made for cruising in engineless boats like this.

The best-known canoe yawls, such as Albert Strange's *Wenda*, George Holmes's *Eel*, and Herreshoff's *Rozinante*, have something else in common besides a design philosophy: they are all really, really hard for amateurs to build, or impossibly



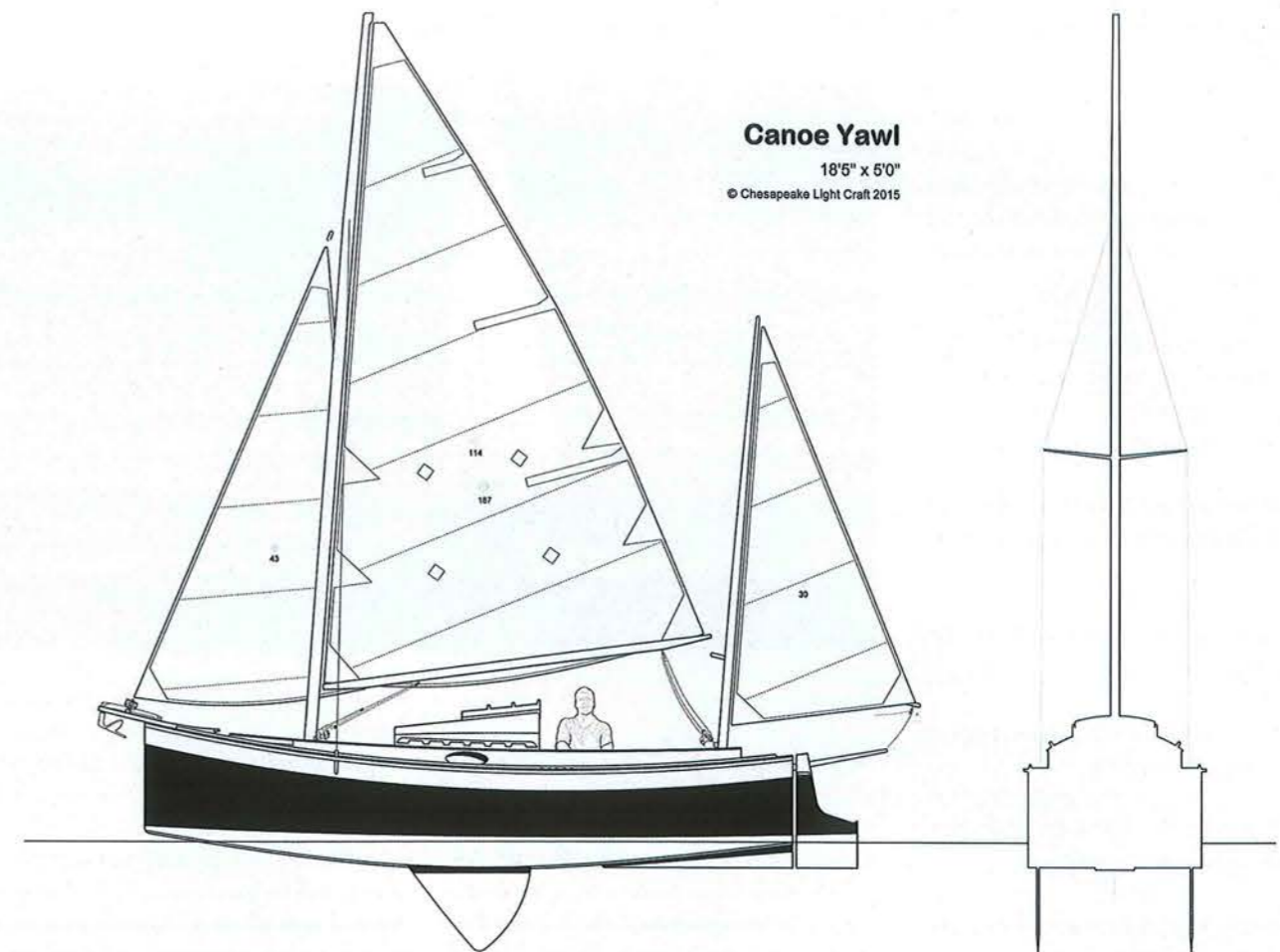
expensive to have built.

My hero Philip C. Bolger was drawn to the canoe yawl ethos and created a number of accessible modern designs, meant to be easier to build and/or more affordable. Dovekie, Birdwatcher, and Anhinga are some examples. These are all double-enders, with modest accommodations and auxiliary oars.

Autumn Leaves is another riff on the theme. She's intended to be straightforward and cost-effective for amateur construction, capable of coastal cruising, and handy enough under sail that an

engine is not missed. She measures 18' 5" long, 60" wide, draws just 8" with the twin bilgeboards up, and weighs about 1500lbs on the trailer. She'll be easy to tow behind smaller cars.

Construction is a departure from the stitch-and-glue designs with which I pay the bills. The plywood hull is joined with sheer clamps and chine logs, rather than with epoxy fillets and fiberglass cloth. This will speed assembly for most builders, and will save a lot of money in epoxy and fiberglass. (A light sheathing of fiberglass is suggested for durability, but not required.)



The straight-sided hull eliminates at a stroke innumerable beveled joints. The careful proportions won't entirely disguise the Bolger Box shape, but a nicely-finished rendition wouldn't offend the reactionary yachtsmen sharing the anchorage. And they'd have to appreciate its nimble handling and the skipper's panache in wafting up to the mooring under oar and sail, without a single gasp of internal combustion.

Five hundred and twenty-five pounds of lead beneath the floorboards keeps the slippery hull upright and will help her carry momentum in tacking. In skilled hands, this big dinghy will coast from catspaw to catspaw, delaying the need to take up the oars. (A thousand pounds worth of foam flotation tucked away in the hull offsets the lead ballast in the unlikely event of a swamping.)

The cabin is small, as with all of the famous canoe yawls. It's unusually ergonomic, however, and a vast improvement over Albert Strange's *Cherub II* and that ilk. There's a palatial single berth. The aft end of the berth flips up to create a luxurious "throne" for the singlehander. All

cooking, eating, and contemplation may be done from this plush chair. Someone used to traveling light could make themselves at home for weeks at a time.

The cabin could probably be rearranged to accommodate two adults, but the boat as drawn is ideal for singlehanders. When I join up with pocket-cruiser rallies, I note that most of the participants are solo sailors, the family having elected to stay home. Mass-market boats in this category are sold to the family on the basis of being able to daysail and sleep everybody, whether that ever happens or not. Ignoring this reality results in a better-optimized design, but makes it less likely that many will get built. This is why they call economics "The Dismal Science."

The economics of building boats this size make less sense compared to thirty years ago. If you use good marine-grade materials throughout, and I hope you do, the cost savings won't be remarkable compared to buying a decent old fiberglass pocket cruiser on CraigsList. Such boats are being sold off by the pound these days.

However. It's very hard to find a boat with sailing qualities like this at any price.

And don't discount the instant gratification of such rapid hull assembly. While the glued-lapstrake builders are still setting up their molds and lining off planks, Autumn Leaves builders are already installing the cockpit and interior. Autumn Leaves will be lying to anchor in a secluded cove 60 miles down the coast before the traditionally-built canoe yawl is in primer.

The design suits someone who has spent a lot of time admiring *Rozinante*, *Wenda*, *Eel*, and *Cherub II*, but lacks the time or money to build their own. I am one such, though I have doubts there are many others. I hope I'm wrong. •SCA•

John C. Harris designs, builds, and writes about boats at Chesapeake Light Craft, in Annapolis, Maryland.

Autumn Leaves

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