

To sea again; to see again.

David Weston

RED ADMIRAL

A Voyage Around Cornwall

David Weston Gallery
Mevagissey Cornwall England



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Sunrise

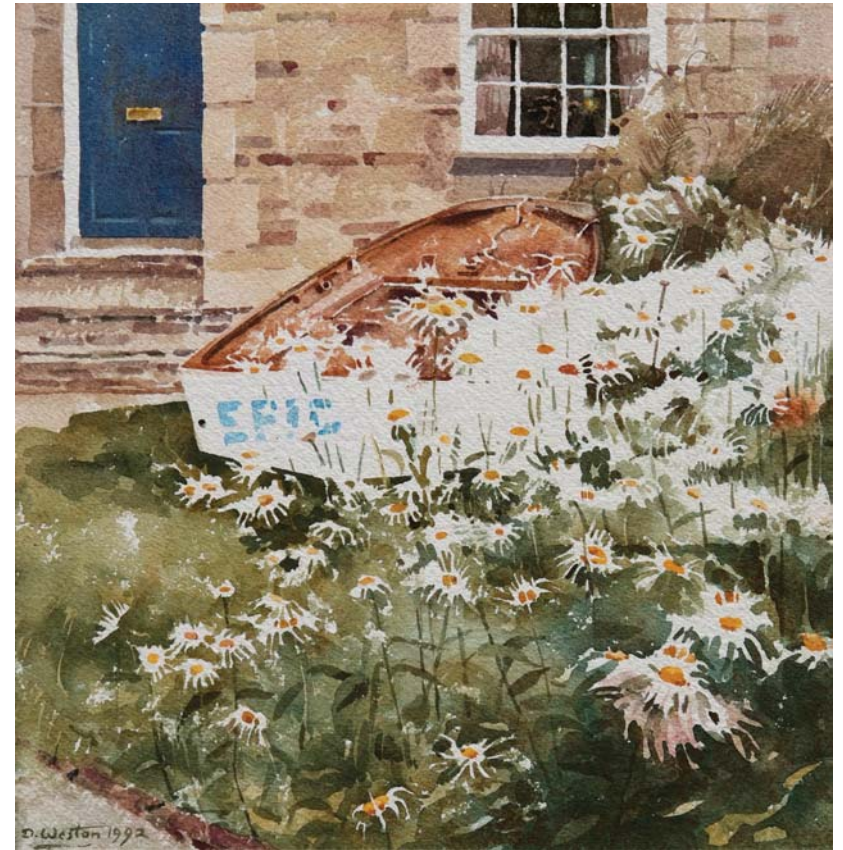
Oil on canvas 30" x 30" 2003

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Epic at Lawn House

10" x 10"

‘I pushed my little voyager home round the one-way system and parked her on the lawn behind a clump of marguerites.’

(All illustrations are watercolours unless otherwise stated.)



for Julia

Preamble

For a few memorable moments the roadside hedges were alternately illuminated. The revolving Wolsey came to rest, headlamps pointing north, the direction in which I should still have been travelling. I had fallen asleep at the wheel. The solid old motor, after striking a rough stone wall, had deposited me on the tarmac. Standing in that quiet country road (not so quiet now) a few miles north of Oxford, I remember thinking ‘lighthouses’, though several years were to pass before the sailing bug bit. The precise forms of the searching beams held me transfixed for a while – perhaps as well; otherwise I may have worried unduly regarding my explanation for the car being on its roof.

The sixties were beginning to swing. The weary art student was returning from London having collected the Wolsey – impounded following a breach of parking regulations. A four by six feet oil painting had been carried on the roof to the capital. The Law, partly responsible for the demise of a future classic car, compensated by providing overnight accommodation, courtesy of her Majesty’s ‘B&B’. Sadly my leather seated, walnut dashboarded motorcar, was claimed by a Chipping Norton garage in lieu of recovery charges.

Vacating my cell early the following morning, I set off to hitch home. The final leg of lifts found me sharing the confined space in the back of a Morris Minor van with a few boxes of reeking fish-heads and a souvenir section of yellow mudguard, shed from my late car, foraged from the crash scene while waiting for a lift.

Less than a year later, with canvases and painting equipment in the back of an exceptionally heavily built 1938 Vauxhall, I arrived in Cornwall. Again I painted the motorcar with bright colours befitting a fledgling artist, or a parrot. The red, yellow and green, certainly livened up the original battleship-grey. Despite the jaunty appearance, the car was decidedly unwell on arrival in St Ives. The natty livery did not prevent the garage-man requisitioning my vehicle – payment for disposing of an automobile too sick to resuscitate. There followed a season both fruitful and enjoyable, painting and washing up, marred only by occasional

glimpses of a large Vauxhall with arty, non-matching headlamps, running surprisingly healthily.

Following my extended vacation I returned to art-school. A couple of years later, as a qualified potter/painter with no idea how to function in the real world, I was kindly loaned a cow-shed at the end of a butcher's yard in the small market town of Tenbury Wells on the Worcestershire / Shropshire border. In that confined space I set up a pottery workshop. Renovation at the chemist's, a few shops down the street, enabled me to acquire, gratis, a four by four-foot piece of plate-glass and a heavy counter. The new (and only) window provided ample light to appreciate the decorative quality of the counter that exactly fitted across the narrow premises. The Victorian robustness of the 'great divide' precluded any attempt to reduce its length. Visitors wishing to do more than pop their heads into the workshop had to clamber over the counter. Occasionally the next stall would house a large, agitated beast that sensed short-term occupancy. Hoofs would rattle the dividing planks, making life precarious for pots and potter. One day an athletic bullock, seeking the desirous environs of the adjacent meadow beside the gently flowing River Teme, hurdled the gate outside my window. He exited death row pursued by white coated, navy aproned butcher and assistant. I remained with thoughts of bulls, china shops and pastures new.

For four exceedingly long nights a week I became a 'Snowman'. The Snow was a big grinding machine – one of many in the local factory where items for use in car manufacture were produced. Those ten-hour shifts, excluding time out for vacuum flask tea and cheese and chutney sandwiches, were a potent incentive to move on. It was wintertime when I visited the local surgery with 'Snow strain'. The doctor happened to be a governor of a secondary modern school, some ten miles distant, which had an idle pottery facility. Prescribed light wedging and kiln fixing, I was taken by surprise one day to find my little group of eager helpers had become my first class, and I, their 'Please sir'.

Though my ultimate aim was to be a painter (of pictures), by default I became a teacher. After a year and a bit at Ludlow Sec Mod I moved on to a half time teaching post at Shrewsbury School of Art. The other half week I taught blind children to make pots in a castle, where they

boarded and I resided four nights a week. Though mock (early twentieth century), the impressive building had turrets, a courtyard, numerous flights of stone steps and several carp ponds. It was deemed necessary for a sighted person to be around – to be led to safety in case of fire, and humiliated on the football court where the visually unimpaired were savaged during night-time matches.

One weekend, while queuing to see a James Bond film with my new (and only) wife Julia, my attention was drawn to a picture of a sailing boat on the cover of a yachting magazine. 'Of all the newspaper stands in the world, I ...' Hooked – just like that. Such practical beauty. That sculptural form, hull flowing into a deep cutting keel, captured my imagination. Not only a beautiful piece of engineering, but one incorporating a magical element – sailing into the wind.

With both of us working in Shrewsbury, the purchase of a property seemed a sensible move to save paying rent, and to build capital for our escape, 'hi diddly de', to the artist's life.

"Half down (£350) and £6 a week to settle."

"All right then."

In this way we acquired our first home. Twixt disused canal, prison and gasworks, it may have been humble, but it was also desirably close to the River Severn which ran down to the Bristol Channel, on into the Atlantic Ocean; cue the crashing sound of cymbals. Hang on a minute; sail into the wind, could that really be true? The evening after the encounter with the newspaper stand and 007, with Stanley knife in hand and a recently purchased Readers Digest World Atlas on my lap, I fashioned the experiment. Several six-inch nails were encapsulated within the keel of my cardboard boat which was faced with masking tape and sported a mast cut from a wire coat hanger. A half handkerchief triangle was rigged. With the hair-drier on low speed, substituting 'head' winds, the craft actually sailed down the bath, more towards than away from the prevailing drier. Magic.

That is how I became captivated. Soon I was drooling over ads for thirty, forty, eighty, ninety foot, oak framed, mahogany planked sloops, yawls, ketches and schooners, dreaming of trade winds and epic voyages. Bearing in mind that my entire sailing experience was concentrated at the non-tap end of the bath, it was with coincidence and great fortune that

one evening, while taking a pottery evening class, I chanced upon my old woodwork teacher. Mr Fisher was taking a class in a workshop across the corridor. It took him a while to recall the indifferent pupil 'taught' twelve years earlier. An extract from my first report: – JUNIOR ART DEPARTMENT, SHREWSBURY TECHNICAL COLLEGE. Woodwork: C, rather useless. Everybody got a C. I was happy with the 'rather' - it could have been a 'totally'.

"Why don't you send away for some plans then?" I had casually mentioned to Mr Fisher that I would quite like to build a boat, but would need a little guidance. There are degrees of understatement, but mine, to one who penned that cutting phrase in the 'any special remarks' box, was totally misleading. It would not have helped my cause had I informed Mr Fisher of my year teaching woodwork to a class of first year Sec Mods. Knowing practically nothing of the craft, I was instructed five minutes before each lesson by Alf, head of department and true craftsman. I would lecture with authority on the importance of finding 'face edge', but be rather evasive concerning the next week's lesson.

The eagerly awaited package arrived. It contained one very large sheet showing side and top elevations of various craft. There was a vast selection – small dinghies to whacking great schooners – from rudimentary 'bookshelves' to ocean-going thoroughbreds.

Mr Fisher thought in practical terms. Not wishing to clutter up his workshop, size was a major factor. This fitted well with my ideals – finance, and storage after construction. Our house, 'two up and one and a half down', was rather compact and sparsely furnished, in need of most things including a place for books. So the six foot six Gremlin Major it was. With two inches to spare between the ceiling and its flat front end, it stood imposingly opposite the front door. We did, in fact, store within its varnished interior, among other possessions, our few books including the Stanley-slashed atlas. (The outdated publication is still with us – useful for nostalgic musings over the likes of Rhodesia and Upper Volta.) Mr Fisher, bless him, built the Gremlin entirely without my help. Even the tan sail was made professionally. My contribution was most of the work on the spars and oars – rather useful.

The multi-coated white painted hull exterior was a blemish free delight; so it was rather a shock when it rapidly filled with the River

Severn on its maiden sail. The internal centreboard housing did not fit flush against the floor of the 'Gremlin'.

Imagine a screen. Picture the Gremlin filling with river water. The image becomes wavy; harp strings tremble. The screen clears. Twenty-two years have passed. There is the dinghy; no, not the Gremlin Major; though with flat bow, white outside and varnished within, the craft is similar but seems to have grown to over ten feet (almost eleven). The location is now Morwellham Quay, beside the beautiful River Tamar on the Devon / Cornwall border.

That's all you're getting for now - to purchase
Red Admiral, A Voyage Around Cornwall,
and browse my Watercolour Paintings and
Oil Paintings in my fine art gallery and online store,
visit www.davidwestongallery.co.uk

Cheers

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