

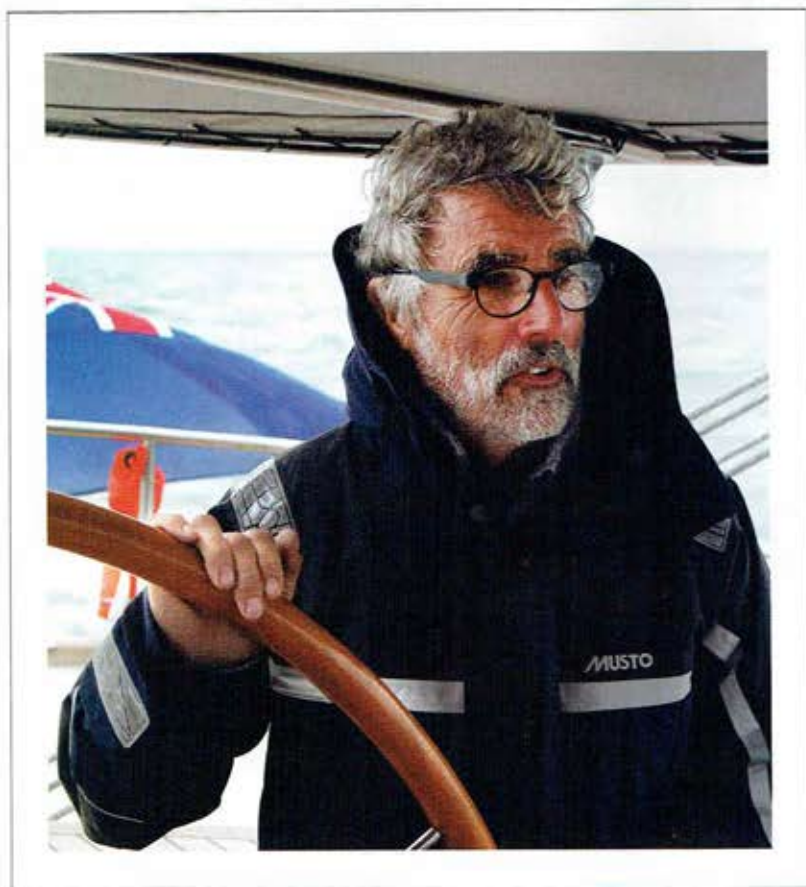


# THE ARTIST'S Muse

*Wolfhound* is a new 22m schooner commissioned by marine artist Steven Dews and his wife – and they're sailing her home to New Zealand

PHOTOS AND WORDS **NIC COMPTON**





**G**lorious sunshine lights up a perfectly-set line of sails, as the boat heels to the breeze and tacks off a distinctly English-looking coastline. The sea is a bright greeny-blue with a few white caps interrupting the surface, and overhead some scattered clouds drift effortlessly across a pale blue sky. If there was a soundtrack playing, it would be the steady hiss of the bow cutting through water: powerful, timeless and sublime.

This is the typical setting of a Steven Dews painting, usually depicting a handful of yachts vying for dominance, portrayed with historic accuracy. Certainly it was the scene I was hoping for when I came to sail the British artist's new boat on the Solent this summer. Instead, I was greeted by grey skies and a smattering of rain, as the wind picked up to a moody Force 7, and I regretted not bringing my warm jumper. But Steven and his wife Louise were not going to be put off by a bit of bad weather. This was only their third sail on the boat, and they were still pinching themselves that, at last, after an emotional eight-years, they were finally on the water.

"The inspiration for all this goes back to when I was nine or ten," Steven told me, sitting in the saloon of his cosy little ship. "I read an Arthur Ransome book which had a schooner in it [Wild Cat in *Peter Duck*], and I thought it was such a beautiful shape. There was a plan of a schooner in the book, and I redrew her shape in my





mind over and over again. That's how I got hooked on schooners. The idea of a trip to the Pacific came after I saw *Mutiny on the Bounty* – the romantic one with Marlon Brando and Trevor Howard in it – and it struck a chord with me. I thought: 'One day I'm going to do this trip. I'm not going to fly to Tahiti, I'm going to sail there!' Time goes on and life gets in the way, but that nucleus of an idea was always there."

Steven had little experience of sailing as a child, until a trip in a wooden Dragon aged 5 made a big impression and he taught himself to sail on land yachts, which he built and sailed on the back roads of East Yorkshire, far from the sea. While his two brothers pursued nautical careers, Steven never passed enough exams to follow that path ("I couldn't spell to save my life," he says). He studied technical illustration and eventually set up a studio in a derelict farmhouse on the banks of the Humber River, where he drew and painted ships.

Steven had his first exhibition in 1976 and sold almost everything on the first night, followed by an equally successful exhibition in San Francisco the following year. In 1979, he was commissioned by the Amoco oil company to paint 12 pictures for its calendar. The paintings became part of a travelling exhibition to raise awareness of the Mary Rose project, supported by Prince Charles. It was the making of Steven's career. Prestigious commissions followed, from the San Francisco Maritime Museum, North Sea Ferries, the

**Above l-r:** Steven painted on photos of the boat in build as a guide for the builder; during successful seatrials.

**Left:** celebrated artist and new schooner owner

British America's Cup syndicate, BP Marine, the New York Yacht Club, and the Woolwich Building Society.

As his reputation grew, so did the value of his work. There was astonishment when his painting *The Battle of Trafalgar* sold for £95,000 in 2005 – an unheard of sum for a living artist in such a specialised field. That was soon eclipsed when *Westward Reaching Through Cowes Roads* sold at Sothebys for £120,000 the following year. More recently, *The Battle of Trafalgar* set a new Dews record when it sold for £169,000 in 2012.

Meanwhile, Steven indulged in his passion for sailing by buying a series of yachts, all more or less modern and GRP, starting with a Contest 38, followed by a Sigma 362, a Bénéteau 405, and then a Swan. He was married twice and had six children, but neither of his wives shared his passion for the sea. His dream of sailing across the Pacific in a schooner remained just that.

Then in 1999, he met Louise. Brought up in Lymington, Louise was a sailor herself and owned two iconic Solent boats: a Lymington Scow and an X Boat. She had worked on superyachts for most of her life and, when Steven met her, was shore manager for the J-Class yacht *Velsheda*. Soon after meeting, the couple emigrated to Australia, where they bought an 800-acre farm north of Sydney. Their new yacht was a suitable meeting of tradition and modernity: an Alajuela 38, a fibreglass version of a classic William Atkin double-ender.

As he approached his late 50s, Steven realised it was





time to fulfil his childhood dream. Not only did he have the means, thanks to an outlandishly successful painting career, he had a wife who shared his passion. A series of random events drew the pair first to a small boatyard building bespoke wooden yachts in Shillingstone in Dorset, and then to Dutch yacht designer Olivier van Meer, best known for modern classics such as *Zaca a te Moana* and more recently the Puffin range of cruisers.

Their brief to van Meer was simple: a 60ft yacht with shallow draft, comfortable accommodation for long-range cruising and, of course, a schooner rig. Van Meer is a past master at designing yachts that combine classic looks – incorporating elegant sheers and pleasing overhangs – with all the creature comforts of a proper home. The boat he drew for Steven and Louise has all these virtues: with a powerful canoe hull, drawing just 6ft with the centreboard up, with ample beam amidships and a wide counter stern. At 64ft, she ended up 4ft longer than planned to accommodate the Lugger engine that Steven and Louise specified and which they ended up not fitting for technical reasons.

It was the biggest yacht built to date by Martyn Brake and his team at MB Yachts. The yard has built up a reputation for producing solid classic yachts in modern materials and collaborated closely with the designer Ed Burnett, before his untimely death last year. Indeed, it was an article about the 58ft Burnett-designed schooner *Amelia* that had prompted Louise to visit the yard in the first place. But Martyn and his crew had to notch things up a gear for this latest commission.

“The size of everything on a big boat goes up exponentially,” says Martyn. “For instance, the hull required 2km of planking, so the staff were machining planks for a fortnight. Just getting rid of the chippings and shavings was a major job!”

Unlike the Ed Burnett boats, which despite being strip-planked, were fitted with substantial framing throughout, the Dews boat has no frames apart from those fitted in way of the chainplates. The hull’s stiffness and strength comes entirely from the 36mm strip-planking sheathed with GRP cloth, beefed up by two hefty stringers running down each side. Topped with a 2in thick deck (made up of three layers of 12mm ply, a layer of GRP, and 12mm of teak), it creates an immensely strong structure that needs minimal maintenance.

*Above l-r: design details were communicated between New Zealand and Dorset; the Wolfhound’s paw marks; tender*

*Opposite: Northland Spars & Rigging in NZ took care of the rig and it was shipped over by container*

Steven’s painting skills came in handy when it came to the fit out – particularly as the couple had by then moved to New Zealand and were, if anything, even less accessible. First off, they raised the cabin sole by nearly 12in (“The Dutch are very tall – we didn’t need all that head space!”) which increased the floor area. They then marked all the accommodation out in chalk, full size, on the floor of their barn, and spent hours experimenting with different cabin permutations, working out which way the doors should open and other details.

Back in Shillingstone, Martyn emailed photos of the various elements as they took shape. Steven painted what they wanted directly over the photos – sometimes experimenting with different effects, such as window shapes and sizes – and emailed them back to Martyn to turn into reality. It was a very effective way of directing the build from the other side of the world, even down to small details such as the angle of the tongue-and-groove lining (Martyn thought it should be horizontal, Steven insisted it ran parallel to the beam shelf).

“It worked really well,” says Martyn. “We usually get a loose description from customers which we have to interpret as best we can, but this way we truly got to see exactly what they wanted.”

The result is a wonderfully comfortable, easy interior, which flows very naturally from space to space. There’s an airy deck saloon with windows all round, which is a great space to hang out while cruising in sunny climes, while below decks there’s a ‘downstairs’ saloon, which makes a cosy winter retreat, or just a quiet space to get away from it all. There are two cabins with bunk beds, a large double cabin forward, and a generously sized galley to starboard. And, as you’d expect, there are some quirky features, such as the saloon table which converts into an easel, and the small workshop accessed through a cockpit locker, where Louise can make her jewelry.

With its bleached oak panelling and cork flooring (apart from the ‘upper’ saloon, which is teak), the accommodation is light and airy and easy on the eye. It’s really not difficult to imagine living in this space for months or even years on end.

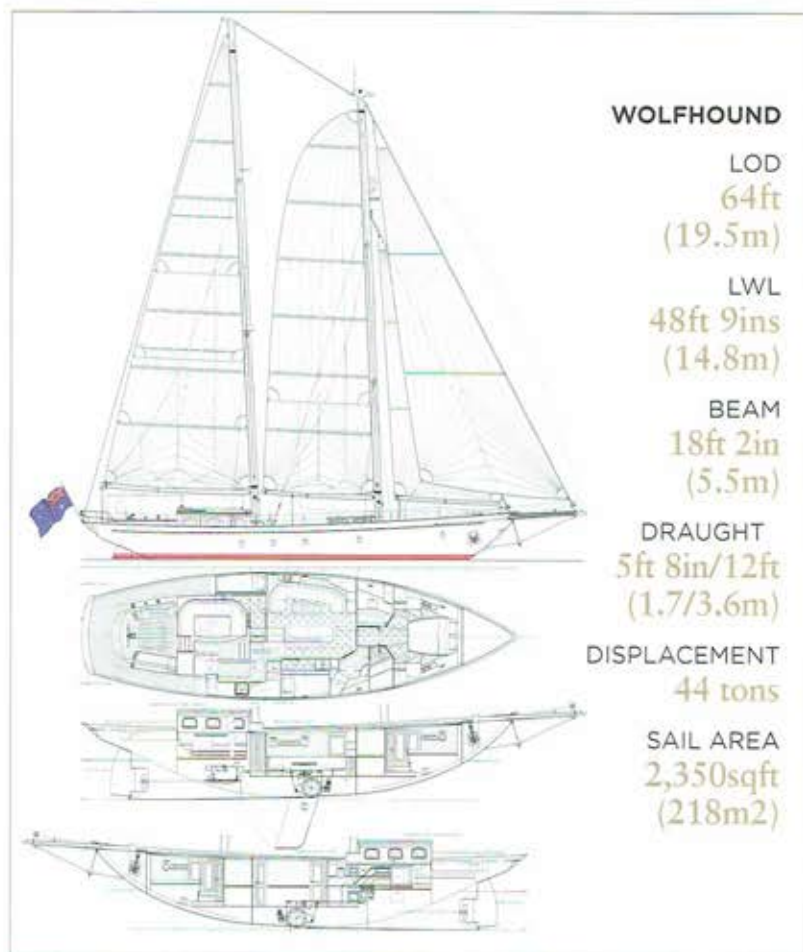
“I told Louise we weren’t going to make a downward move when we went sailing; we were going to go sideways, and she held me to it,” says Steven. “So the boat has a bread-maker, dishwasher, washing machine – all the stuff we had on the farm.”





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## WOLFHOUND

LOD

64ft  
(19.5m)

LWL

48ft 9ins  
(14.8m)

BEAM

18ft 2in  
(5.5m)

DRAUGHT

5ft 8in/12ft  
(1.7/3.6m)

DISPLACEMENT

44 tons

SAIL AREA

2,350sqft  
(218m<sup>2</sup>)

Open 60 keel designer Roger Scammel was brought in to redesign the centreboard and created a “Spitfire wing” shape that not only stops the boat sliding to leeward but provides lift. The board itself was built of composite carbon fibre and mahogany by MB Yachts and is operated by a hydraulic ram – fitted with a sheer pin in case of accidental grounding. The electronics system was designed by Steven’s brother Paul, who, conveniently, runs a marine electronics business based in Ibiza.

For the rig, they chose a company closer to their (new) home: Northland Spars and Rigging at Opua in the Bay of Islands. It worked out cheaper than having it built in Europe, even taking into account transport cost, and meant they could keep a close eye on progress. Once ready, the whole rig was put in a container and shipped to the UK, along with Cornish ex-pat Rob Galley, who was tasked with assembling the dozens of components.

It took more than eight years, from commissioning to launching, to complete the boat, with work proceeding when funds allowed. But finally, on 5 June, the yacht was launched at Saxon Wharf, in Southampton. A few days later, she was named *Wolfhound*, in memory of the couple’s pets, Paddy and Shamus, and as a nod to other yachting “hounds”, such as *Deerhound*, *Staghound*, *Greyhound* and *Bloodhound*. The dog motif is picked up in small details, such as the paw marks inlaid on the saloon table and engraved on the forward skylight.

“We looked up the attributes of wolfhounds,” says Louise, “and found they were the same as you’d want in a boat: courage, loyalty and grace.”

“They’re economical too,” chipped in Steven, “compared to labradors!”

*Below: Happy owners, with another journey together ahead*

During the naming ceremony, a flax garland, made by a friend in New Zealand, was thrown into the sea as an offering to the sea god Tangaroa, and Steven’s youngest daughter Alex read a blessing in Maori:

*Kia hora te marino,*

*Kia whakapapa poumnamu te moana,*

*Kie tere te Karahirohi i mua i tou huarahi.*

*May the calm be widespread,*

*May the ocean glisten as greenstone,*

*May the shimmer of light ever dance across your pathway*

*Wolfhound* certainly made a distinctive sight as she came to pick me up at Trinity Landing in Cowes. It was the start of the Cowes-Dinard-St Malo race, dozens of snub-nosed, open-transomed racing yachts darting about like so many mean-eyed ravens. As the breeze stiffened and the new schooner swept across the Hurst Narrows, it was hard not to feel sorry for those crews lined up on the rail of those lightweight modern race boats, bouncing over every wave. There’s no doubt which boat I’d rather cross the Channel on – let alone sail halfway round the world.

Later, when I hopped onto the camera boat, the crew were rapt with admiration for the new boat, not least due to the manner in which she was created. Certainly there is something special about a boat created by an artist and funded by art. While *Wolfhound* may be no Picasso (her bottom is too symmetrical for a start!), she might well spring from a modern Winslow Homer or James E Buttersworth – or even a Dews painting.

Nearly 60 years after Steven became enraptured by schooners, he now has one of his very own. For Steven and Louise, it’s the start of another journey together and there was a tangible feeling of nervousness and excitement as they talked about the voyage ahead, starting with a shake-down cruise to Spain and Portugal, before crossing to the Caribbean, followed by a year or two in Maine, then on to the Pacific, Tahiti and home. On the way, they will take time out and fly home to allow Steve to paint any major commissions – as they literally paint their way halfway round the world.

The next few years will bring adventures and experiences which they can’t even begin to imagine, but Martyn has built them a little ship which will stand them in good stead. Godspeed Steven and Louise.

