



NIC COMPTON

Dan Lee

A cyber boatbuilder

by Nic Compton

Dan Lee has an astonishingly high profile for someone who only became a full-time boatbuilder two years ago. Regular readers of *WoodenBoat* have encountered him and his classic speedboat MISS ISLE since March 2023 on the back cover, as the poster boy and boat for Epifanes varnish. Elsewhere, the same boat has been used as the face of WEST System epoxy. And anyone with an interest in wooden speedboats can't have missed his YouTube series on building and restoring various boats, the most popular installment of which has had over one million views. All of this attention got me to wondering: Who is Dan Lee?

It so happens that Dan's workshop in Gloucestershire in southwest England is only a two-and-a-half-hour drive from where I live, so I set off early one morning to seek the answer to this burning question. I expected to find a busy workshop, with machinery whining, wood shavings flying, and dust everywhere; the usual sights and sounds of a bustling boatyard. Instead, what I found was a super-tidy space, big enough for at least half a dozen people to work in, with a couple of speedboats in mid-restoration, a CNC machine dominating one corner, a circular saw, and a huge old planer-thicknesser lying idle. Upstairs, there was a small stack of lumber, half a dozen boat frames made up, a large office and,

Dan Lee, boatbuilder, of Gloucestershire, England, brings a cutting-edge sensibility to wooden boat construction—and to teaching the trade. His YouTube channel has more than 35,000 subscribers, and his most popular video has more than one million views.

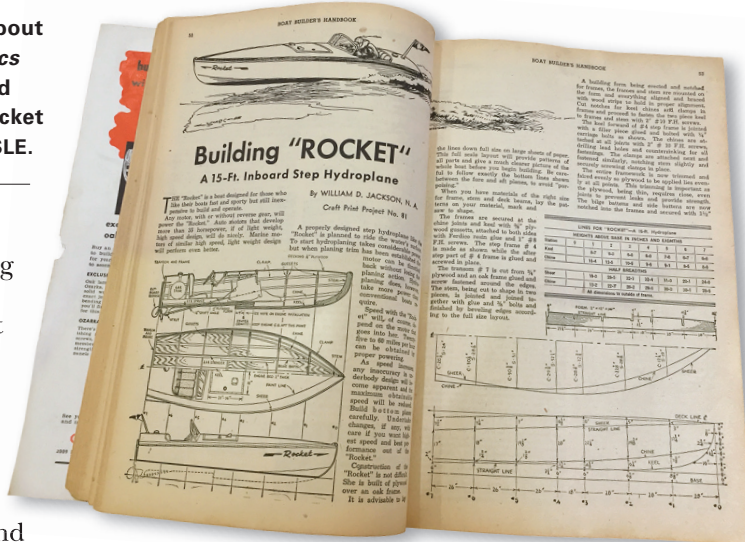
Right—Instruction for how to build the Rocket runabout appeared in a vintage issue of *Science and Mechanics* magazine. Dan digitized the boat's plans and created CNC cutting files for it. **Below**—Dan built his first Rocket before digitizing the plans. He calls the Boat MISS ISLE.

tucked to one side, a very professional-looking umbrella light. And silence.

For, despite the amount of equipment packed into this space, the workshop is used by just Dan and his wife, Sasha. With Dan busy being interviewed and Sasha busy on the computer fulfilling orders for another joint business, the workshop was eerily quiet. And that is just as it should be. This isn't a regular boatyard churning out dozens of new boats and restorations. This is a multimedia craft workshop, where building boats is only part of the picture and where the actual earning part of the business happens online. Welcome to the world of cyber boatbuilding.

"At heart, I see myself as hobbyist boatbuilder, because that's where I started," Dan says. "I design plans for other home-builders. I wouldn't want to design for commercial boatbuilders and forget the home-builder. YouTube works with that: sharing with other people at home who are doing the same thing. I don't ever want to be a big commercial entity building 10 boats a year. In an ideal world, I'd like the business to be me doing my hobby for a living. I'll choose a boat, build it at my own pace, exactly as I want to, and fund it through the video series. That's how I'd like to earn a living."

It turns out that Dan is much more than just a YouTube phenomenon. As well as filming his own boatbuilding projects, he sells CNC-ready boat plans for home-based builders, makes video product guides for Epifanes, and creates online courses for various boatbuilding skills. The latest string in his bow is teaching a kit-boatbuilding course at the highly respected Boatbuilding Academy in nearby Lyme Regis. It's an impressive output requiring



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a very different range of skills than you'd expect from a typical boatbuilder, but then Dan hasn't come to this via the traditional boatbuilding routes.

Born and bred in Cirencester, which lies 39 miles northeast of Bristol on the River Churn, a tributary of the Thames, Dan attributes his interest both in boating and woodworking to his grandfather, who built several boats, including a James Wharram-designed catamaran. The senior Lee was a keen woodturner, too. His grandfather focused on sailing boats from an early age, but Dan was always drawn to powerboats. At age 18, in 2005 he and his brother-in-law built a 14' Cobra speedboat designed by William Jackson from free plans Dan found in an old copy of *Science and Mechanics* magazine. Built of plywood and fitted with a 30-hp outboard motor, it was every teenager's idea of a cool speedboat. GOOD ENOUGH FOR JAZZ (as the boat was named) was followed by a 13' rowing skiff.

Dan had caught the boatbuilding bug and, always one to do things properly, he decided to buy himself a 40' container, which he stuck in a nearby field to use as a workshop. After GOOD ENOUGH FOR JAZZ, he built two more Jackson designs, a Jazz Baby named AURORA II in 2008 and a Playboy named LADY S in 2012.

Back in the real world, Dan had by this time trained in electronics and started working for a scientific instruments company, testing chips and playing around with circuit boards (a skill that would have a surprising application later in his boatbuilder career). Boatbuilding was still very much a hobby, but as his skills developed, so his ambitions grew. Whereas his first three speedboats all had outboard motors, for his next project he decided to go for a very cool-looking 1950s classic inboard speedboat, yet another Jackson design from *Science and Mechanics*: the 15' Rocket. "She was my childhood poster boat," he says. "The boat I wanted and was only ever going to have if I built it."



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Dan's career, which blends the old and the new, is perfectly aligned with the interests of a tech-oriented 37-year-old millennial with close links to traditional crafts.

photo montages of the three motorboats he had built up to that point. He started taking actual video footage when he embarked on the Rocket project, and a 2014 video shows him (speeded up) setting up the frames and stringers in the narrow confines of his original container workshop. That was followed by 20 or so videos, posted between 2014 and 2020, focusing on specific aspects of the build, from cutting chines to drilling the propeller shaft to making Kevlar fuel tanks. Some of these videos attained more than 100,000 views. But the real clincher came in 2021, toward the end of the project, when Dan posted a montage of the entire project, which eventually

At around this time, however, he also started a small business making tree-shaped shelving. It was only intended as a sideline, initially to pay for his and Sasha's wedding in 2015, but soon took off and became a full-time job, quickly outgrowing its premises and eventually employing half a dozen people. As the business boomed, Dan's boatbuilding aspirations had to be pushed to one side and his half-finished boat was sidelined.

That all changed (along with so many other things) with the Covid-19 pandemic. Orders slumped and the workshop lay empty for weeks at a time. With time on his hands, Dan returned to his old love of boatbuilding. By then, he had used CAD design and CNC cutting extensively for his shelving business and, being something of a computer nerd as well as a craftsman, had taken to it like a duck to water. Convinced there must be a way of combining digital technology and boatbuilding, he started adapting the old *Science and Mechanics* plans, which were by then out of copyright, for CNC construction. It was only intended as a side business, but soon he had a website selling boat plans.

Dan had always had an interest in posting videos on YouTube, just for fun. It started in 2013 when he posted

garnered more than one million views. Suddenly, the idea of being able to earn a living from making videos seemed very real.

It didn't take him long to realize that the two sides of the burgeoning business could work together. Videos of the boatbuilding plans were followed by videos of CNC-cutting and assembling the backbone for what he called Rocket MKII—the CNC version of the original Rocket; this series, however, stopped short of building the whole boat.



Dan built LADY S in 2012 following plans that William Jackson published in *Science and Mechanics*.

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Dan's varnishing skills—and his teaching of that process on video—drew the attention of the Dutch varnish manufacturer Epifanes, who were so impressed they commissioned Dan to create a series of video tutorials. They also placed his runabout MISS ISLE in their advertising.

He took an online course to improve his videos, followed by an online course on making online courses. The result was another piece of the Dan Lee jigsaw: instruction on varnishing, painting, and spray-painting, with another on CNC woodworking coming soon. It sounds easy enough, but the varnishing course alone contains 8½ hours of video, broken down into 11 modules and about 50 lessons. It took Dan nearly a year to make the course and another year for it to gain an audience. It's now one of the most profitable parts of his business, with 433 subscribers paying £148 (about \$192) each for lifelong access. His painting course has 91 subscribers. You don't need to be a math genius to work out that those two courses alone have earned a sustaining salary over the past two years.

The Covid hiatus also provided Dan an opportunity to finish building his beloved boat. Unlike the original, which was entirely planked in plywood, Dan planked the topsides with a thin layer of plywood topped with a longitudinal layer of solid sapele, glued to the plywood

and screwed through to the frames. He then added extra bungs to the planking to give the appearance of a traditional carvel hull. The whole lot was then varnished to a high standard and fitted with custom-made hardware. The result was a little jewel of a boat called MISS ISLE, and she is photogenic from just about every angle. It was as good a calling card as an aspiring boatbuilder could wish for, and the calls soon came—first from Epifanes (who had enrolled in his varnishing course) and then WEST System epoxy (with whom he had collaborated on his epoxy video), who both used photos of the boat in their respective advertising campaigns.

So impressed was Epifanes with Dan's varnishing course that they commissioned an ongoing series of videos, demonstrating each one of their products. The series was in its 15th episode as this issue went to press, and provides ample evidence of Dan's likable on-screen personality.

If you're wondering how good a boatbuilder Dan really is, consider this: in July 2023 he won a rare double at the prestigious Thames Traditional Boat Festival. His first award was a first prize in the Piston category (for cruisers and launches) for MISS ISLE's engine installation; then came another first in the Chaplin category (for unpowered craft) for his restoration of a Tideway dinghy. It was all the proof required that his work could stand up to scrutiny in the real world just as much as in the virtual world.

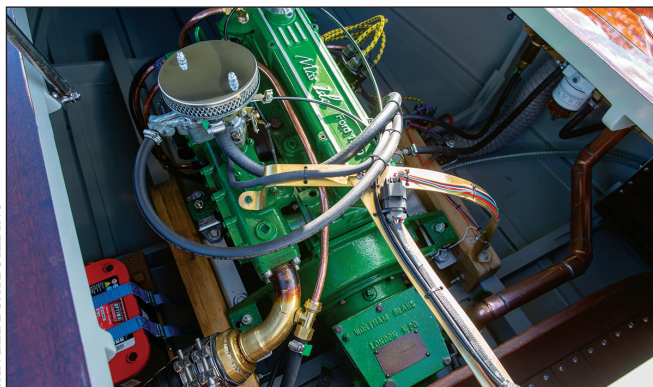
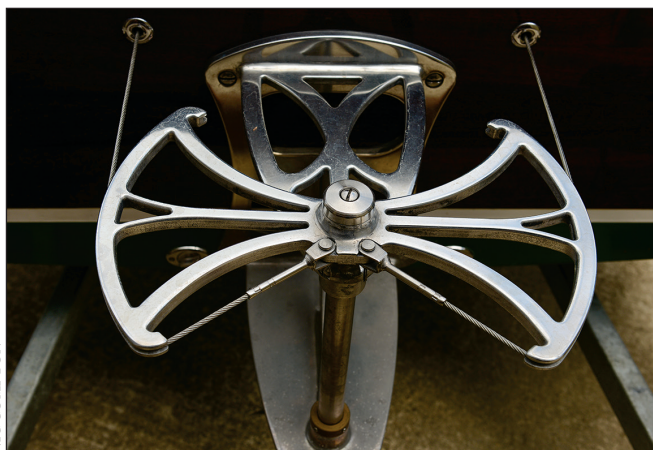
Dan restored this circa 1964 Tideway-class dinghy and presented the process in a slideshow on his YouTube channel.



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Beautiful as she is, however, MISS ISLE is, in truth, already out of date. An eight-year project, she encompassed Dan's transition from traditional boatbuilding methods such as setting up frames and keel by eye to an increasing use of computer-dependent methods, mainly CAD and CNC. Perversely, one of the boat's most traditional-looking features is also one of the most modern. The fancy rudder quadrant, which looks like an antique piece of hardware salvaged from the 1930s, is in fact brand new: it was designed by Michel Berryer (whose Berryer Design & Manufacturing is based in Lansing, Michigan) after a chance encounter on a boatbuilding forum. The fitting was cut out of aluminum on Dan's CNC cutter.

Dan likes to mix old and new: manual and mechanical; analog and digital; classical design and CNC production; and traditional skills, such as varnishing, with online demonstration. It's a blend of interests tailor-made for a

Above, left—The steering quadrant for MISS ISLE was designed by Michel Berryer of Berryer Design & Manufacturing in Lansing, Michigan—a connection Dan forged in an online boatbuilding forum. Dan cut the aluminum parts on his CNC cutter. **Left**—Dan's installation of MISS ISLE's engine won an award at the Thames Traditional Boat Rally in July 2023.

TEN OF THE BEST YOUTUBERS



@SampsonBoatCo

504K subscribers, 210 videos, 113m views, joined 2017

The king of boatbuilding YouTubers, Leo Sampson Goolden has developed a following through the restoration of his 47'6" Albert Strange-designed gaff-cutter TALLY HO (see article, page 46). The British boatbuilder found the boat as a wreck in Oregon, bought her for \$1, and restored her first in Sequim, Washington, and then, from 2021, in nearby Port Townsend. The boat was relaunched in April 2024.



@AcornToArabella

176K subscribers, 370 videos, 51m views, joined 2016

Two likable young men, Steve and Alix, build a 38' William Atkin ketch from scratch. The videos follow the build from felling the trees on Steve's family farm in western Massachusetts to launching the boat, ARABELLA, in June 2023, and learning to sail her. In between, there is a wealth of nitty-gritty details, from making copper rivets to casting a lead keel. It's inspirational stuff.



@TipsfromaShipwrightvideos

193K subscribers, 232 videos, 46m views, joined 2012

No-nonsense shipwright Louis Sauzedde has been on the YouTube scene for longer than most. It started in June 2012 with a video about cutting "progressive bevels" on hull planking and carried on with whatever he happened to be working on at the time. His most popular video is "How to sharpen a chainsaw by hand with a file," with 3.9 million views. He also has several series of videos following the construction of various skiffs and dories.



@Liaswardanibuatperahukayu

92.2K subscribers, 51 videos, 31m views, joined 2020

An unlikely YouTube star is Indonesian boatbuilder Lias Wardani. His video on how to build a traditional longtail fishing boat has clocked up 9.8 million views. It's worth it just for the sequence on joining the hull planks with home-made dowels and bark caulking. Another popular video is, "An easy to make a wooden kayak for fishing in lakes and rivers" (1.7 million views), using concealed nails instead of dowels to join the planks.



@SaltandTar

85K subscribers, 328 videos, 24m views, joined 2015

An attractive husband-and-wife team chasing a dream is usually a winning formula for a successful YouTube career, and Garrett and Ruth Jolly (aka Salt and Tar) show us why. The couple owned six boats before they started building the 35' George Buehler-designed gaff ketch REDIVIVA. They launched the boat seven years later.