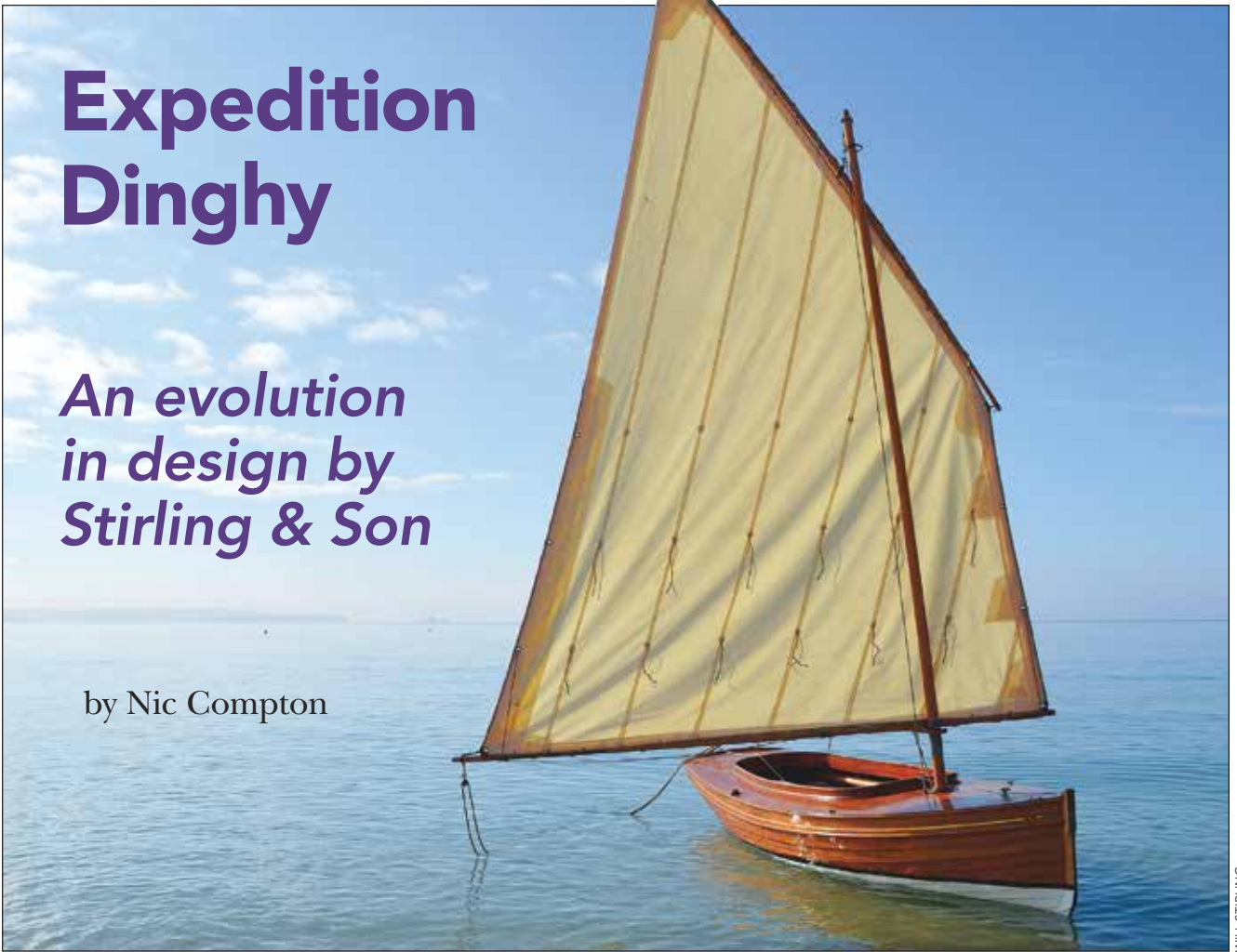


# Expedition Dinghy

An evolution in design by Stirling & Son

by Nic Compton



WILL STIRLING

Will Stirling's 15' Expedition dinghy has a shape that emerged gradually over a period of 15 years. He built his first dinghy in 2002, while in Cornwall employed by Working Sail, a boatyard that builds pilot cutters. In his time off from building cutters, most of them over 40' long, he decided to build a boat (for a change!) and, constrained by the size of the small bedroom he inhabited at the time, which doubled as his workshop, he settled on the 7'10" Auk designed by Iain Oughtred.

That dinghy, built of larch on oak, ended up as the tender to EZRA, one of the pilot cutters built at Working Sail. Stirling reshaped the Auk design to create his own 9' lapstrake dinghy and so started a process of refinement—adjusting the shape of the transom, the stem, the sheer, and

even the number of planks—all inching toward an optimal design. By 2004 he had built four dinghies, and six years later he was producing a steady stream of them, ranging from 9' to 14' long. He's currently building his 38th dinghy.

"Stirling has combined a full 'midship section with moderately fine bow and a nicely tucked-up transom—a hull form that slips along very nicely indeed."

It wasn't until he had built 14 or 15 of the small boats that he was happy enough with the shape to commit it to paper as a set of lines, the first of what is now a range of six dinghies available as plans from Will's company, Stirling & Son, in Devon, England ([www.stirlingandson.co.uk](http://www.stirlingandson.co.uk)).

When he wanted a boat for himself for coastal voyaging in 2012, he naturally chose what was then the biggest boat in his range, his 14' sailing dinghy, and adapted it for adventure sailing. It was on that boat that

**Above**—Will Sterling named his first 15' Expedition dinghy GRACE. The name seems a fitting one, as she lies anchored near a beach in just a breath of wind.



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he made the first two voyages of his slightly madcap project of sailing around every offshore lighthouse in Britain (see “Wolf Rock Light,” page 6). A potentially dangerous near-capsize during a 120-mile offshore trip from Devon to the Channel Islands and back, however, convinced him he needed something more seaworthy.

The 15' Expedition dinghy was born by simply spacing the molds of the 14' dinghy apart an extra inch per foot. The main changes were an extension to the foredeck and the addition of side decks and an after-deck with a coaming around the cockpit to keep the water out. The longer foredeck allows someone to sleep under it without getting a shot of spray in the face. The 15-footer also has a slightly stronger sheer. Like most of Stirling's dinghies, it is varnished on the outside and oiled inside.

**W**ell-thought-out details abound in the 15-footer; some are purely decorative, others extremely practical. The sheerstrake has an elegant, gold-leafed cove; the thwarts have nice decorative beads scribed into their bottom edges. The dinghy also has some special features to fit its role as

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The balance lug sail is made of Clipper Canvas, a stable fabric woven of spun polyester designed to look and feel like canvas.



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**Above left**—A half jaw is used instead of a parrel to keep the boom tight to the mast.

**Above**—The Stirling dinghies have mahogany lapstrake planking copper-riveted to oak frames.

**Left**—Cast-bronze outriggers add 18" to the span between locks.



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Will Stirling’s 15’ Sailing Dinghy is designed for coastal expeditions. Its long foredeck and wide side decks help keep the spray out of the cockpit. The balance lug sail works well on all points of sail, except close-hauled.

expedition boat, such as the enclosed centerboard trunk, which prevents water flooding into the boat in case of capsize. The plate-brass centerboard will drop when the pennant is released, but it is fitted with a downhaul in case stones jam in the board and prevent gravity from doing its job. There is even a short length

of line, which Stirling calls a “pig’s tail,” secured to the lower aft corner of the centerboard so it can be pulled out of the slot from beneath the hull if all else fails.

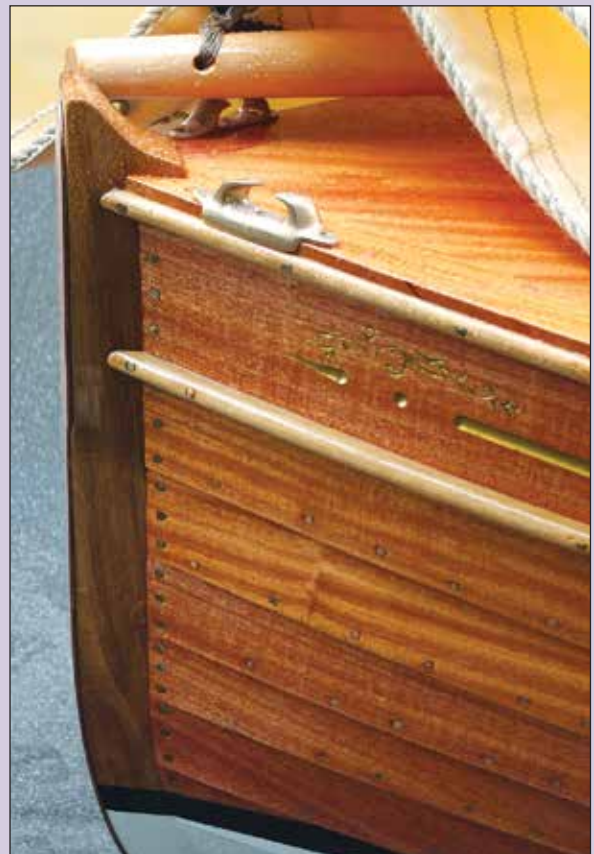
For planking, Stirling long ago abandoned larch in favor of mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*, Forest Stewardship Council–certified). To keep the garboard from



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**Above**—The rudder blade is weighted with discs cut from lead sash weights. Hammering the lead spreads it out to cover the beveled edges of the hole and to lock the lead in place.

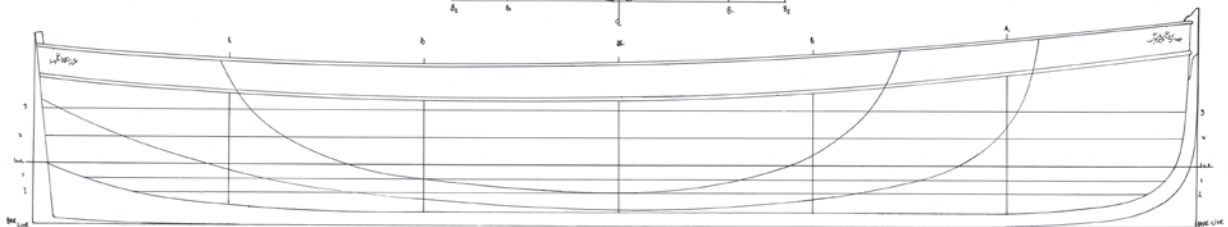
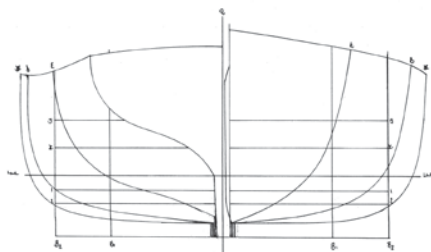
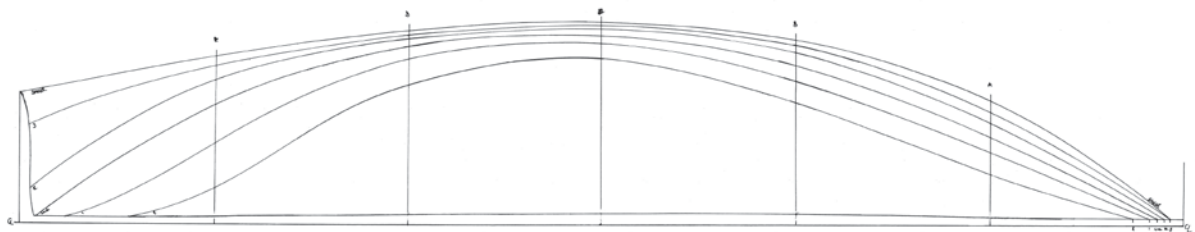
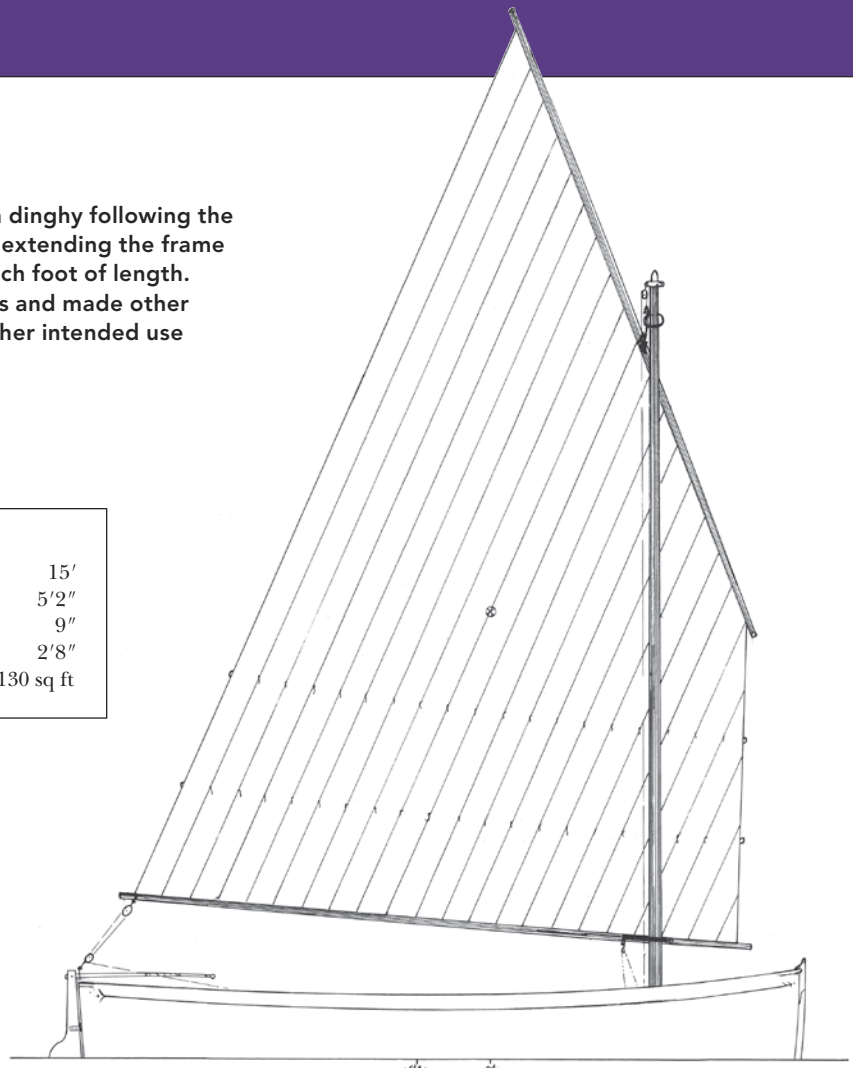
**Right**—The sheerstrake has protective strips above and below, and is decorated with gold-leaf coves and carvings.



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Stirling built the Expedition dinghy following the plans of his 14' dinghy, and extending the frame spacing an extra inch for each foot of length. He then extended the decks and made other modifications that befitted her intended use as an expedition boat.

Particulars	
Length	15'
Beam	5'2"
Draft: Board up	9"
Board down	2'8"
Sail area	130 sq ft



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The dinghy's deck is wide enough to be a comfortable seat while hiking out on the weather rail when the wind pipes up.

cupping, he inserted small wedges between the plank and the steam-bent frames and riveted through them to hold them in place. It takes about 2,000 copper rivets to build the boat, with a rivet about every 4" (10cm) on each plank holding the laps together and the frames to the planks. The plank ends are triple-fastened with bronze nails.

The boat I sailed, christened GRACE after Stirling's 7-year-old daughter, had been out of the water for nearly two years before we launched her at the end of this past summer, yet she only took on a wee bit of water before the planks swelled up and she was water-tight again. She certainly made a pretty sight, bobbing at her anchor in Sennen, Cornwall, with her balance lug sail set. Weighing almost 500 lbs, she's not the lightest boat, and while it was easy enough for the two of us to drag her across the 30' strip of sand from the stone slipway down into the sea, we were glad to have help with her recovery eight hours later, by which time the strip of sand had tripled in size. But lightness is not necessarily what you are looking for in a small boat intended for big voyages, and this boat is built to last.

There was a light westerly breeze and a confused sea as we headed out of Sennen, but GRACE cleared the off-lying rocks without any fuss and we were soon in the open sea making good, if not spectacular, progress. GRACE has a burdensome hull well suited to her role as expedition boat, but that doesn't mean she's slow. Stirling has combined a full midship section with a moderately fine bow and a nicely tucked-up transom—a hull form that slips along very smoothly indeed.

Stirling opted for a balance lug rig, which performs excellently on every point of sail except close-hauled. The boat slowed down whenever we tried to pinch her up into the wind, and she took off as soon as we eased off onto a more comfortable angle. It was probably no better or worse than on many traditionally rigged boats, where it's usually better to opt for the extra speed rather than try to claw an extra few degrees upwind. Once she was sailing at a sensible 45 degrees or so to the wind, GRACE was unfailingly steady and, well, graceful.

Even though we were only sailing 8 miles offshore and the wind was never more than moderate, mostly 4 to 6 knots rather than the forecast 7 to 10 knots, I was grateful for the extra protection provided by the side decks and cockpit coaming. The only slight drawback is that, when seated inside the cockpit, you can't lean out as much as you would on a completely open dinghy. You




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soon get used to this, however, and when the boat does heel over you can sit out on the rail and take advantage of the extra comfort provided by the side decks.

On the longer journeys for which this expedition dinghy is intended, you can't always rely on having continuous wind, so it's important that the boat rows well. Stirling fitted a pair of custom-made bronze outriggers, which were bolted through the side decks and extended the oarlocks a good 9" outboard of the hull. The arrangement was fine when I rowed the boat in flat water but awkward in a seaway; the oar blades tended to catch the waves and the looms chafed the top of the coamings. Stirling has since added a pair of collars around the oarlock shafts which should raise the oars enough to clear the coamings and the water.

GRACE was a pleasure to row, even against the strong contrary current we encountered at one point. I'm a sucker for rowing and will happily row at my own slow but steady pace for hours on end, but there are other boats that will be more nimble under oars if rowing is the main objective. One obvious use for Stirling's expedition dinghy is for so-called "raids." The boat is both seaworthy and fast enough with two people on board to do very well in those events.

Just a few weeks after our voyage, GRACE was sold and packed off to some superyacht in Mallorca to start a new life in the Mediterranean. Whatever use any of the Stirling dinghies are put to, it's a comforting thought to know they will almost certainly end up as someone's family heirloom, with owners decades down the line appreciating their handsome design and solid construction. 

Stirling & Son sells finished 15' Expedition dinghies, and in addition, sells finished boats and builders' plans for similar boats 9' to 14' long. Stirling & Son, Crapstone Barton, Buckland Monachorum, Devon, PL20 7LG, UK; (0)1752- 567-137, info@stirlingandson.co.uk.