

On that warm autumn day in 2009 when I went to view *Ilka* she was lying alongside the marina wall in the Exeter Ship Canal Basin. She was fully rigged and looked a picture – a Dutch zeetjalk barge, originally twin-masted, and built in 1904, probably for carrying coal, grain and other agricultural products. Flat bottomed, she was substantial enough to ply the Baltic and up to Norway. Now she'd been converted to a liveaboard, and I had come to see her with a view to taking her to London.

Ilka was my second viewing – the first had been half the size (and price), but the incumbent tenant couldn't stand up inside at any point, it was seriously shabby, and I was in and out of there in less than ten seconds.

At 92ft (28m) by 16ft 6in (5.1m) and with more than 6ft 6in (2m) headroom throughout most of the hold, *Ilka* was a grand Edwardian lady, built by the Zwartsluis boatyard in the Netherlands. She was, to say the least, an exciting prospect – four cabins (one en suite), two heads (one with a bath, one with a shower), a saloon, the galley in the wheelhouse, two store rooms (or further cabins) and plenty of flat deck space – she was certainly a lot of boat for the £89,000 asking price.

Also, crucially, she had received the thumbs up from the owner of the central London mooring I intended to berth her at. To be in with a chance of rafting up among the other 25 or so Dutch barges, mine needed to be 'traditional and workmanlike'. She also needed to be between 24m and 28m (78-92ft) to withstand the tidal flow athwart the stream of the Lower Pool of London – where the great 18th-century trading ships used to unload their cargoes. I had friends here, and I knew this mooring, with its floating gardens, community life and ideal location, was exactly where I wanted to be.

After a four-hour viewing with her owner, I called the broker that afternoon with an offer, which was accepted. I had absolutely no doubt this step to becoming a shipowner was the right one.



BOWCREST MARINE



ROB STURGES PHOTOGRAPHY

AT HOME on a DUTCH BARGE

Buying *Ilka* was a stressful venture for *Laura Ivill*, but now she's settled on a spectacular Thames mooring

Laura's comfortably settled in with her stove for warmth. Far left: *Ilka* at Exeter, where Laura first saw her

“Everyone turned to me – either I walk away or I commit there and then to ‘accepting the ship’”



LEFT, RIGHT: LAURA IVILL; CENTRE: STEFAN FRITZ

Above left: A second wood-burner stove in the bedroom. **Centre:** Laura at the helm. **Right:** The alarming state of the hull as revealed by the survey

Six weeks later, however, on a bitterly cold and blustery November day, the survey revealed bad news. *Ilka* was up on the stocks in Mashfords' Cremyll boatyard at Plymouth. My surveyor, Stefan Fritz, and I had only just met, but it didn't take long to realise that if you need someone to help you buy a boat, then Stefan's your man. He spent most of the rest of the day under *Ilka's* great steel hull, making marks with his chalk, while we – the buyer, the sellers and the broker, Tony Charman of Bowcrest Marine – naturally retired to the pub next door for lunch and stories of life afloat. I'd gone through the previous survey report with the owners at the viewing, and everything seemed to be in order. We all expected the survey to be a necessary formality.

CORROSION BOMBHELL

Then Stefan took me under the heavy black hull, by this time covered all over in white chalked numbers. *Ilka's* hull was pitted with corrosion from end to end to such a degree that many spots were less than the 4mm thick she needed for insurance. Stefan suspected that the corrosion had happened many years before the previous purchase in 2004, while she was laid up, perhaps without any anodes. We all assembled back in the yard, glum faced in the cold, fading light.

The news was a bombshell to all concerned. Stefan's view was that she needed not just patching, but a whole new bottom plate – a wrap of steel from bow to stern, costing tens of thousands of pounds. The broker confirmed that, according to the contract, I was entitled to walk away from the deal there and then with my 10 per cent deposit in my pocket. The owners, on the other hand, desperately keen to sell, now had a ship to get rid of whose value had just crashed through the floor.

A decision always has to be made on the day of the survey, which is why Tony was there in person. Everyone turned to me – either I walk away, or I commit there and

then to 'accepting the ship'. If I carry on, then I am legally bound to seeing through the process. The yard would do the work, I would pay the same agreed price to the broker, he would pay the yard, then hand the balance over to the owner.

Stefan said he had more to do to complete the survey, and suggested he finish off in the morning; I was relieved to have the chance to sleep on it all. That evening I had to do a lot of serious thinking. Perhaps this was beyond me? Perhaps I, too, would be caught out like this in years to come? I was buying from a man who had served aboard Navy ships for 24 years and who had renovated boat after boat down the years; who had searched high and low for a barge such as *Ilka*, had sailed her across the English Channel from Germany, and who had spent the best part of five or more years converting her inch by inch into a home. If this financial bombshell could happen to a man with this experience and skill, then what on earth was I getting myself into? It was a troubled night, but by morning I had made up my mind.

Just over two months later, I became *Ilka's* new owner. The yard had worked on her through the winter to give her a shiny new bottom, decently covered with £6,000 of top-grade epoxy paint that I bought for her.

THE THAMES IN SPRINGTIME

So how is living aboard on the Thames? I'd originally expected to arrive in November, but with the work it wasn't until April that we were able to move. Still, it was no bad thing arriving in spring. Our walkways are made up of seven lighters held down by chain, and planted with trees, hedges, swathes of greenery and flowers bursting with colour at this time of year.

A gentle rocking comes and goes with the tide – and this is when all's well with the world. At other times, with the Thames in full flood and the pleasure cruisers going past, even a big boat like *Ilka* is mercilessly

“I never tire of seeing the Thames rushing past outside”

boomed from side to side. All in a row, like tethered horses, we strain at our warps as the wash tosses us up and down, one after the other in an arrhythmic dance, so that we snatch and cannon into each other. Down below the creaking ropes go into a frenzy of stretching and rubbing and banging, all *Master and Commander* on the high seas, until the wash subsides.

Spring is also the time when the Canada geese build their nests and hatch their young. The crane barge is a favourite spot, as it is for the ducks. The coots are particularly noisy, and many's the time I have searched for one under a barge convinced its punchy squeaking means it's got stuck. They aren't very bright.

As spring moved into summer, I settled into boat life – the sunrise over Canary Wharf turned the skyscrapers into towers of gold and breakfast on deck was a pleasure. Neighbours grew tomatoes and courgettes, sunflowers and nasturtiums. On warm evenings, the party cruisers stream past – a summer soundtrack of rowdy cheering, disco lights and music that time forgot.

PIMM'S AND TWINKLING LIGHTS

This is when we break out the Pimm's, the chilled white wine and the vodka, get a bunch of people over for dinner and enjoy the twinkling lights of London, or settle down for the Sunday-night outdoor film screenings at the mooring's own events venue.

But my first winter arrived with a bang, for which I was totally unprepared. At the slightest sign of frost, *Ilka's* steel deck becomes a skating rink. The prolonged covering of snow and ice was, I confess, a formidable hazard. December, though, was a blast. Each boat in turn hosts a 'lighting up party' – an evening of fairy lights, mulled wine and mince pies, hot cider and brandy, thick soup, cheese platters and big tins of Celebrations – to which all your neighbours are invited. This is, of course, the best excuse to embrace the spirit of Christmas as much as you feasibly can; I got to know lots of new faces and was welcomed onto interesting boats large and small for a jolly good time and a good nose around.

But as joyous as the month was, it took a turn for the worse just after my own lighting up. Only a few days before Christmas, the boiler packed up. On the bright side, however, with no central heating I learned the art of making a cracking good fire in my burner and would fall



Mid-Channel alarm on the night watch

When you're waiting three months for a weather window – Force 4 or below – the weather had better be good. And on Friday, 9 April 2010, we had glorious sunshine and a calm sea at Plymouth. By mid afternoon we were under way for the 312nM journey along the English Channel and around North Foreland into the Thames, to *Ilka's* new berth below Tower Bridge.

We divided the watches and at 3am I rose for my three-hour stint. I took the helm and chatted to Chris, the navigator, as I steered. With the huge bays along the Channel it was just a case of aiming for a series of lighthouses in the far distance. We had Selsey Bill on the nose for much of the way.

Ilka's original 1955 Mercedes engine was going very nicely. However, skipper (and surveyor) Stefan likes to rig up his own fuel system, not knowing what the fuel tanks are like inside, so we had 1,000 litres of diesel in a plastic tank on the foredeck. It had just gone 5am when we closed on the headland and drew level with the lighthouse, its rocks now just a short distance away to port. *Ilka's* engine started slowing, then gathering pace again – this hunting was alarming and at 05.10 we lost the engine completely. Silence. By then, Stefan and Shaun, the engineer, had joined us on deck to investigate. I fixed my gaze on the lighthouse and said nothing. We were uncomfortably close to the rocks, but luckily the air that night was fairly still and, if anything, we were slightly drifting east on our original course.

The pre-dawn light was as pink as a fairy cake, and a crescent moon rose over *Ilka's* silent, drifting bulk. It turned out air had got into the rigged-up fuel system – not hard to rectify. At 05.50 *Ilka's* engines burst back into life. At 06.00 *Ilka's* owner finished her watch and shot straight down to bed.



Above: *Ilka* on her delivery voyage, heading towards the White Cliffs of Dover in deteriorating conditions
Left: The communally-minded mooring on the Thames

asleep in the semi-darkness watching the flames licking the glass. I soon came round to thinking: “It’s a boat, it’s cold, get used to it.” I also came round to appreciating how much skill, effort, sheer hard work – and cash – converting a boat takes – and what has gone into *Ilka*.

And, yes, after almost three years now, I never tire of the pleasure of opening my front door to see the extraordinary, tumultuous Thames rushing past outside; I don't just overlook the river; I'm on it, part of it, with its tides, its big sky, and the wide sweep of rough water always flowing in and out, and never twice the same. 🌐