



NIC COMPTON

# An American at Home Abroad

*A visit with the director of Skol ar Mor*

by Nic Compton

It's another day at the office of Mike Newmeyer, director of the Skol ar Mor boatbuilding school, and the questions are coming thick and fast. Every time students come to him, Mike fixes them with a discerning look and gives them his undivided attention.

"Non, non, non, Arnaud. You can't have two different size knees. It won't look right. Right from the start you have to think about the aesthetic quality of the boat as well as its structural strength. You can't separate the two..."

He talks in an energetic, emphatic manner, as if every question is of utmost importance and deserves his full focus. It's an impressive performance—all the more so as it's conducted entirely in French.

"Salut, Anthony, qu'est-ce qu'il se passe? You don't have

enough screws? Well, use the long ones on the centerboard trunk, and we'll sort the rest out later..."

The lively tour continues when Mike shows me around the boats being built on the shop floor. There's a dainty dinghy having its half-decks fitted, a lapstrake Shannon One-Design about to receive its centerboard trunk, and a 6-meter (20') carvel-planked sloop having its cabin sides trimmed to size. At each boat a student approaches Mike and asks him something in French, and each time he displays not only his in-depth knowledge of the subject at hand but also his impressive language and people skills.

Though he's 4,000 miles from home, Mike is very much in his element here. A graduate of The Landing

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**Above—**The busy shop of Skol ar Mor (Breton for "school of the sea") is a place of "experiential learning," with a mission to connect at-risk youth with the trade skills of boatbuilding.

School and a former instructor at the Apprenticeship of Rockland, both in Maine in the United States, he has been teaching boatbuilding for almost 25 years—often to underprivileged kids—and has lived in France off-and-on for almost as long. He excels at answering questions about boat construction and inspiring students to perform beyond their own self-imposed limits. Now, finally, he has set up a boatbuilding school where he can put his theories of “experiential education” into practice. And he’s loving every minute of it.

The popular TV series *The Voyage of the MIMI* turned Mike on to boatbuilding. At the end of one of the episodes, there was a mini-feature about The Landing School, and Mike decided in a flash, “That’s what I want to do!” He dropped out of his geology studies at Colorado University, drove to Maine, and slept in his car so he could go to boatbuilding school. At the end of the course, he got a job at Rumery’s Boat Yard in Biddeford, Maine, followed by a spell running charters on Walter Greene’s legendary catamaran SEBAGO from Key West, Florida.

Ever the idealist and appalled by the “incredible decadence” of Key West, Mike signed up for the Peace Corps and spent two years in Gabon building desks for schools in the bush. The idea was to train local people to run the workshop so that, at job’s end, Mike wasn’t needed any more. He took on two apprentices and, to teach them woodworking skills, got them to build a Swampscott dory. It was his first experience teaching carpentry and boatbuilding.

While in Africa, Mike met and fell in love with his French wife-to-be, Elizabeth, and eventually moved to France to be with her. It was the early 1990s, however, and boatbuilding jobs were few and far between, especially for an expat with limited experience and even more limited command of French. Eventually, Mike found a job teaching boatbuilding to disadvantaged adolescents in Nantes. It wasn’t exactly what he had dreamed of when he dropped everything and went to Maine all those years before, but it was a job and it would turn out to be the making of him.

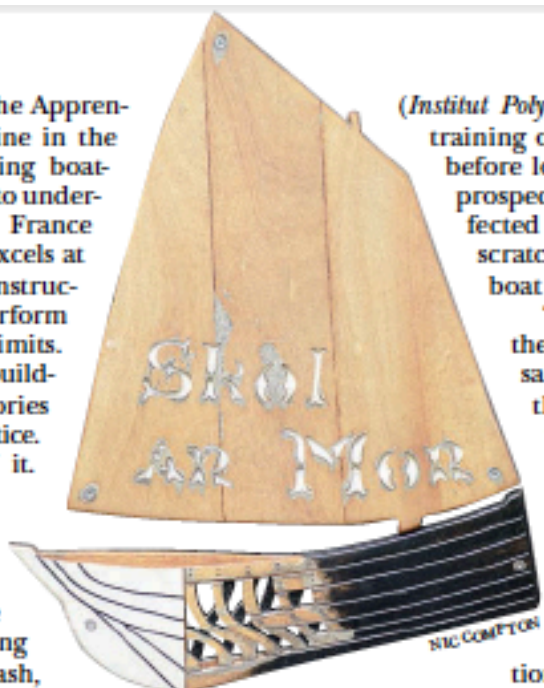
At about this time, the French magazine *Le Chasse-Marée* launched its *Défi Jeunes Marins 2000*—a challenge to build traditional longboats for youth sail training in every port in France. The boats were to be replicas of a 38’ longboat abandoned in Bantry Bay, Ireland, by the French Navy in 1796. Mike decided to put together a bid to build a boat with at-risk kids through the IPFA

(*Institut Polyvalent de Formation Adaptée*), a training organization in St-Nazaire, and before long he found himself with the prospect of having to inspire 16 disabled young people to build, from scratch, a 38’ lapstrake-planked boat to a very precise set of plans.

“The intention wasn’t to teach them how to build boats,” Mike said, “the intention was to get them into work. We were just using boatbuilding as a tool. Because when you’re building a wooden boat, you’ve got to do it right. You can’t screw it up and put some glue in the hole. I told them, it’s just a series of steps. You have to pay attention

to what you’re doing, you have to get to work on time, wear the right clothes, learn to follow orders—and you’ve also got to learn to get satisfaction from it.”

Twenty-seven gigs from all over France were launched at the international maritime festival Brest 2000, but the highlight of the show was when the IPFA boat, LE TRAICT, was lowered from the davits of the 1896 bark BELEM, and after the ship blew her horn dozens of other boats all around followed suit. Later, the boat was awarded first prize for construction. It was an astonishing achievement for both Mike



**Mike Newmeyer is a boatbuilder who has become an idealist. This graduate of The Landing School and former instructor of The Apprenticeship in Rockland, Maine, says it’s important for him to get as much out of his teaching as his students do. “If you can’t do something for yourself, then it isn’t going to work.”**



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**If you were driving in the French countryside, you might miss the Skol ar Mor workshop perched at the edge of Kercabellec, where lovely beaches are nearby. The building was once a salt store in this formerly busy port, and most of the boats around town now belong to Skol ar Mor.**

and his crew of "problem" kids, considering most of the other boats were built by professional yards.

During the event, Mike met Lance Lee, founder of The Apprenticeshop. Lee recognized in Mike a fellow people-motivator, and before long he offered Mike a job teaching boatbuilding at the school. By this time, he and Elizabeth had three kids of their own, and the family would spend three years in Maine. With its emphasis on learning through doing and its rejection of class work, the course structure at The Apprenticeshop provided a perfect template for Mike's later endeavors.

**B**ack in France in 2003, Mike got a full-time post at the IPFA, this time teaching 40 kids, shared with four other workshops, including carpentry and general life skills. It was the best of times and the worst of times. He was given free rein to run whatever projects he wanted, provided they were educational, centered on boatbuilding, and within budget. After the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, he got the kids to build an outrigger which was sent to India to help with relief work; then they built a Bantry Bay gig to take part in the Atlantic Challenges in the Canadian provinces of Québec (2008) and Ontario (2010). He even got permission to build a

full-sized chaloupe, a traditional fishing boat, over five years, thereby passing on an important lesson in breaking a very big job down into a series of very small tasks.

"I've never been one to do the 'good' thing. When I joined the Peace Corps, I did it for the adventure. I did my job, and it did do good, but that wasn't my objective," Mike said, acknowledging that his own satisfaction with the task at hand meant everything to the success of the program. "If you can't do something for yourself, then it isn't going to work; you're going to get disappointed at some point. When I taught



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**Students take lines from a derelict "Dinghy Matonnat" in the yard at Skol ar Mor. The boat built to her lines is shown in the lead photograph (page 74).**

**When the author visited Skol ar Mor, the students included an architect, a carpenter, and a land surveyor. This student worked as a shepherd before coming to the school.**

disadvantaged kids, I did it because I needed a job and because in the end they let me build any boat I wanted.”

Teaching troubled kids is rarely easy, and it demands a rare combination of strength and empathy (the clichéd “firm but fair”), which Mike seems to possess in abundance. At times, however, even he was pushed to the limit.

“I hated that job [at the IPFA] at one point,” Mike admitted. “It was making me a mean and nasty person. Some of them didn’t give a shit. So I’d say to them, ‘Okay, go home. Go back to dealing drugs. You’ve been caught twice already, and you’ll be caught again, and next time will be your last time. Because the police know you, and you might be smart but you’re not smart enough to outwit them.’ Sometimes I’d see the lightbulb go on, but not all the time. It took time for me to get it, to be able to show them they had a reason to be there.”

I could hear a hardness in Mike’s voice as he talked about the tough cases he’d had to deal with; it’s the voice of someone you don’t mess with, someone you either listen to or get out of his way. But then his face softens and he smiles as he remembers other outcomes.

“But I am sentimental, and I do get teary. And it’s always the same thing. You show them a photo of this boat, and they say there’s no way they’re going to put their foot in that thing. And I tell them, I guarantee when we launch that boat you’ll be pushing and shoving to be the first in it. And every time it’s the same thing, they’ll be in that boat and so proud of what they’ve achieved. Then I get teary.”

By 2009, with his marriage falling apart, Mike knew it was time for a change. It took two years for his proposal for a new kind of boatbuilding school to be approved, but finally in 2011 Skol ar Mor (Breton for “school of the sea”) opened. For the first year, it was based at the IPFA workshop in St-Nazaire, but in 2012 the school received its own premises, in a restored salt



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store in nearby Kercabellec, which was once a major port though now little more than a muddy ditch with few boats (mostly from Skol ar Mor) moored up on mud pontoons. From the outset, the project had influential support, with naval architect François Vivier (see WB No. 122) and former *Le Chasse-Marée* editor Bernard Cadoret (see WB No. 238) listed as co-founders,

and Vivier carrying on as president. The school’s prospectus is full of aspirational language about promoting maritime culture (France’s beloved *patrimoine*) and developing “cultural tourism,” and its original formulation included a large component of working with socially excluded youth. Mike still has plans to develop these ideas further, but for the time being, simply running a boatbuilding school along with instructor Jacques Audoin (himself a former boatbuilder of 20 years’



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**Skol ar Mor builds different boats for each session of the program, challenging both the instructors and students. Mike also insists that students learn a spectrum of methods that will serve them well in the work force.**



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Students work on the deck of a 20' (6m) daysailer designed by François Vivier. AS DE COEUR, as she's called, was launched in August 2016. It's more instructive to students to build lots of little boats than a few big ones, so a project such as this is rare for the Skol ar Mor shop.

experience) and a part-time secretary is quite enough of a task.

Skol ar Mor's philosophical cornerstone is the type of experiential education advocated by American progressive thinker John Dewey in the 1930s, which suggests that learning occurs through experience. The idea is to get away from the classroom and focus on practical skills, building real boats in conditions that simulate those of a boatyard—much like The Landing School and The Apprenticeshop.

"I'm a firm believer in experiential education," Mike said. "Lance put me on to that, and it was also the method used by The Landing School. You learn by working on boats, by building boats, not in the classroom. We don't have a classroom. Because you can explain things all you like, but until they've got a tool in their hands, they're not learning a whole lot. We cover theory during our Friday walk around, when we go from boat to boat and talk about the challenges and problems and how we resolved them."

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Skol ar Mor collaborated with the French Association of Shark Owners to build the school's largest boat to date: the 31' (9.6m) Requin (French for "shark"). The Gunnar Steinbach design is popular in French racing circuits.

In keeping with this ethos, the first-year students start off by building three so-called "simple boats," one carvel-planked, one lapstrake, and another hard-chined. A team of three students, two of them in their first year and the other in the second, works on each boat. Once these

boats are launched in January, two teams composed of three first-year students and one second-year student start work on two slightly more complicated boats, in this case the Shannon One-Design and the decked day-sailer. The second-year students take turns working on

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COURTESY OF SKOL AR MOR

An avid audience attends the school's January 2016 boat launching. From left to right: A carvel-planked 13' sloop endemic to northern Brittany, François Vivier's 14½' Mesker design based on an American semi-dory, and a replica of a 16' Furey Skiff—a Shannon River fishing boat. The boats built at Skol ar Mor are either the students' own projects or are up for sale to help fund the school.



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From the editors of **WoodenBoat**



This 16' student-built Gentleman's Runabout is a rarity in European waters. Launched in August 2015, it's an American design by Edwin Monk. The varnished mahogany topsides and careful grain selection are a testament to the level of work Mike demands from his students.

the "big boat," which this year was a 21'(6m) daysailer from the Bay of Morlaix, tweaked by François Vivier. (As Mike says, it's useful having a designer as president.) The boats of this second batch are launched at the end of July, giving another firm deadline for completion.

All the boats are traditionally built, using minimal plywood and little modern glue, which Mike insists will stand the builders in good stead even when they are called upon to work with more modern materials.

"These guys really need to learn to work with wood—the constraints and advantages of it. I want them to understand how wood works: how it changes shape in different levels of humidity, how to encapsulate it

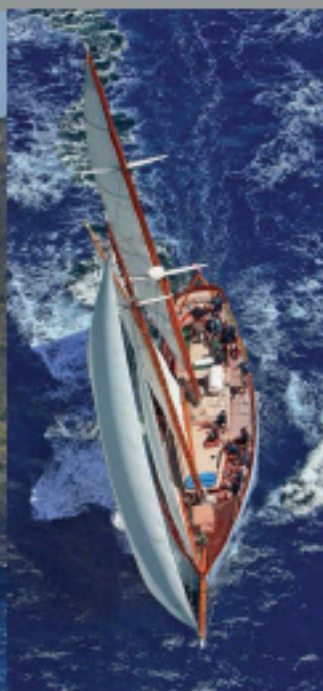
with glue if you have to, why certain plywoods are better than others, how to use resorcinol, Aerolite, and modern glues, how to work with fastenings on their own, and how to work with fastenings in combination with glue, and why. The objective is for the students to learn traditional boatbuilding so all the skills are there. If you can build a clinker boat, you can build a glued plywood boat; if you can build a carvel hull, you can build a strip-plank hull. The skills transfer easily."

When I visited the school in May 2016, there was a steady bustle of activity as students wandered around the workshop clutching

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