



Our series on boatbuilding schools continues... Kathy Mansfield visits a little college in France where you can learn the trade... and the language.



Find your way to south east Brittany, to the bays of Guérande and Mesquer between the estuaries of the Vilaine and the Loire and here, a world away from the nearby chic resort of la Baule, you will find acres of salt pans, flanked by oyster and mussel beds, flooded by each high tide. It is an intriguingly ancient and watery domain. A few small wooden boats sit in an inlet at Mesquer, huddled in mud berths – *souilles* – and nearby is a 19th century salt store with its traditional splayed walls to withstand the pressure of the salt. Logs and planks of wood are drying outside, people are moving about purposefully. Open the door of this *salorge* on a sunny morning and catch your breath, for the sight of traditional wooden boats in various stages of framing look like curvaceous works of art carefully highlighted by sunbeams. This is *Skol Ar Mor*, Breton for the School of the Sea.

A warm glow suffuses the workshop. Over there is a clinker canoe designed in the early 1900s by W P Stephens. Antoine measures while Virginie carefully planes the strakes; curls of Port Orford cedar, sourced in France, fall to the floor. Virginie worked as a forester before building houses and can explain the distinctive features of the timber. A cold moulded Morbic 8 designed by François Vivier is nearby, also built of Port Orford cedar. A skiff with a carvel bottom and clinker sides, a gift to a recently retired secretary, is being built in maritime pine from southwest France; a plank reveals finely delineated grain, lighter fast-growing spring growth against darker, slower summer growth. And splendid in its new frames at the other end of the shop is an 1898 one-design from Ireland, a Howth 17, 22' (6.7m) long, with an oak keel, sapele and locust frames ready to be planked in African mahogany. The variety of boat shapes, timbers and building methods is fascinating.

THE RIGHT TEACHERS...

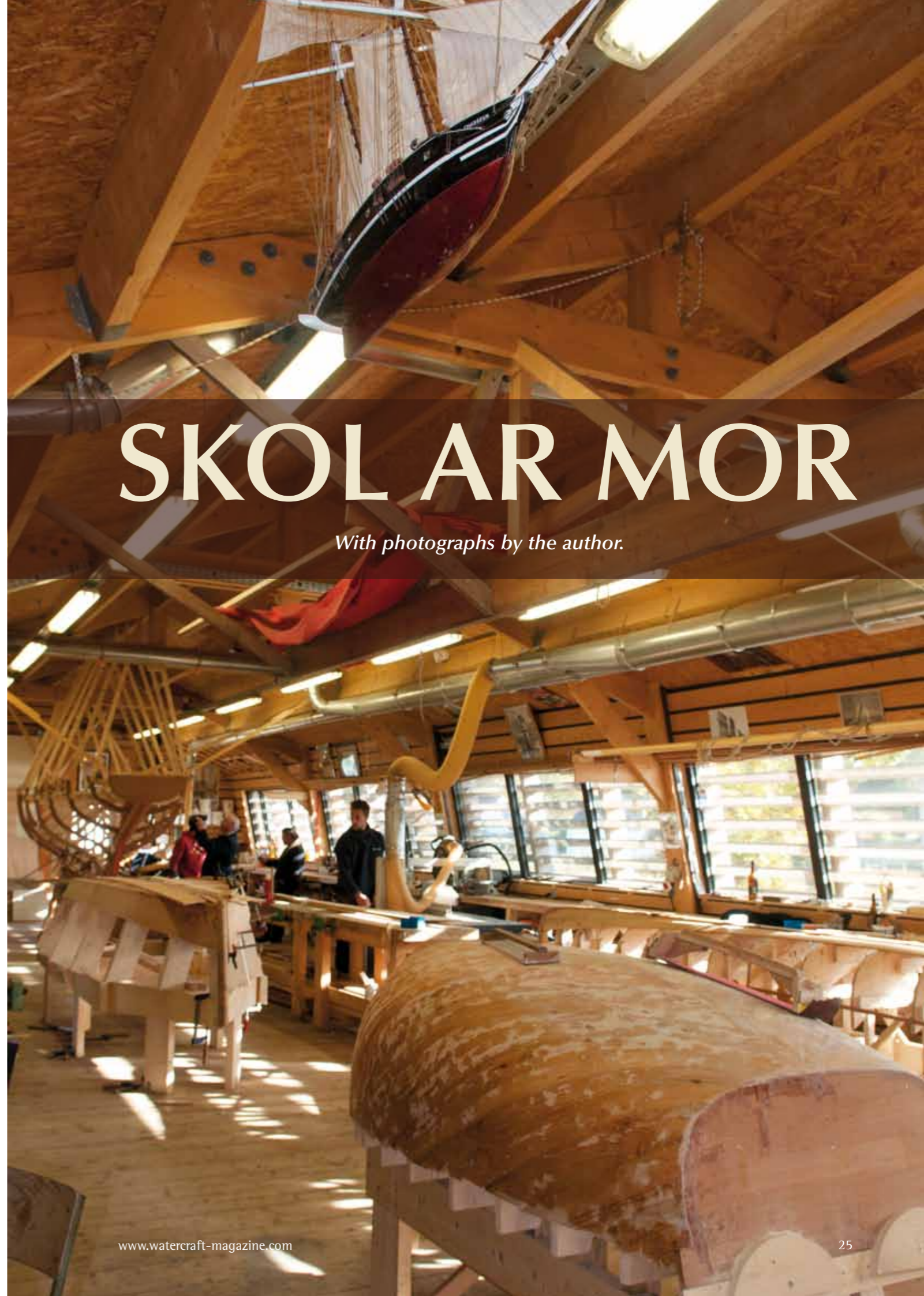
Skol Ar Mor came into being in 2011 and moved to its salt store premises in Mesquer, near the small ancient port of Kercabellec, in 2012. It had an auspicious beginning: Mike Newmeyer and naval architect François Vivier were co-founders and also involved were Lance Lee of the Atlantic Challenge, Xavier Agoté of Alvaola, the Spanish whaling ship project and Bernard Cadoret, founding editor of the beautiful French maritime history magazine *Je Chasse Marée*. Several owners of wooden boat shipyards are also on the board.

Mike is the school's Director, François its President. "We would not attempt the variety and complexity of boatbuilding and designs we can offer without François," teacher Jacques Audoin told me. "We are very lucky because he is happy to advise and solve problems for us, as well as designing new and interesting boats for the students to build." François Vivier has designed the largest proportion of the small traditionally inspired boats sailing in France today, so he is indeed the right person for Skol Ar Mor. He is also introducing them to the modern 3D design software which can connect with

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SKOL AR MOR

With photographs by the author.



traditional skills. Jacques too has design experience: the school has built his design of pleasure fishing boat and has taken the lines off older boats, from traditional fishing boats to a one-design from Arcachon.

Director Mike Newmeyer is a towering force of knowledge and enthusiasm. An American who left his geology studies years ago to enrol and later teach at The Landing School and then become Director at The Apprenticeship in Maine, Mike believes in experiential teaching and learning through taking responsibility, two tenets from John Dewey in the 1930s which have stood the school in good stead. "We have no classroom, we learn in the boatshop with a tool in our hand." Mike is an educator, a mentor, a motivator as well as an experienced boatbuilder. His fellow teacher is master craftsman Jacques; the combination is ideal. They are now building an extension so that they will be able to add short leisure courses alongside their course for putative professionals.

THE RIGHT STUDENTS...

Skol Ar Mor is the top boatbuilding school in France, offering a two year Level 4 professional diploma. Potential students may have progressed from four secondary school courses at lycées in Cherbourg, Arcachon, Audierne and Marseilles which offer basic introductions to boatbuilding. There is also the

adult education boatbuilding school, les Atelier de l'Enfer, in Douarnenez, home of the bi-annual festival of traditional sail; after a successful year there, students can apply to Skol Ar Mor.

There is a generously funded retraining system in France, something the US and the UK might well seek to emulate in areas of high unemployment. The local region, Pays de la Loire, pays for unemployed people who are accepted on the course, which costs about 14,000 euros per year for students coming from outside France. Accommodation costs are extra but students often share a flat or room. Skol Ar Mor takes 12 to 14 students: six in each part of the two year course and another two on one-year sabbaticals from their firms. Each applicant spends two weeks at the school before being accepted, which

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gives them time to see if it suits them. And of course, it gives the school the chance see whether they have the interest, focus and ability to work not just with wood but with people to ensure a good fit with the school.

It works well: in the day I spent at Skol Ar Mor, the level of engagement and interest was impressive. Second year students have a specific area of responsibility on a current project, as well as helping the first year students working



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on the various smaller boats. Teachers are supervising and answering questions, François was checking with students the dimensions and shapes of the floors that would be produced elsewhere in stainless steel for the Howth 17 project. Everyone is responsible for the maintenance of the building, the tools and machines. Some students were away on three-week placements with boatbuilders in other areas or countries, learning to work with deadlines, budgets and customers as well as improving their skills and gaining experience of repair and maintenance, the lifeblood of most boatyards.

Skol Ar Mor acts as a boatbuilder as well as a school and has built a considerable number of boats for the Irish, including a Shannon One Design, a Water Wag, a Whitehall, a Dublin Bay 24, an Alfred Mylne pocket sailer and a replica of an Irish rowing skiff of 200 years ago. They have also built a 1932 American runabout, a peapod: the list goes on.

On Fridays the students assess the progress made on each boat and there's a chance to grapple with underlying boatbuilding theory. When I was there, students had each been given a topic to discuss: one was the chemistry of marine paints, another the problems of electrolysis in a marine environment, another the effect of the centre of lateral resistance on various sail plans. By explaining the topics to each other, students grapple with the concepts in a practical way with teachers on hand to expand their knowledge.

THE RIGHT PROFESSION...

Students come from a range of backgrounds. Emeline Marc from Brest had first "taken on any job that filled my fridge." She eventually did an internship in a shipyard since she liked sailing, and found she liked working with wood, learning new

skills. She'll soon be doing a three-week placement in Fowey, Cornwall with boatbuilder Tom Owen. Antoine Robert will soon do his placement at a boatbuilding yard and school in Stockholm, a big change from his original work as a gallery photographer. He had missed a practical element to his work and after a year's woodworking course, realised that he wanted to learn boatbuilding skills. And even farther from his origins was Bruno Arguello from Argentina; he met his French wife when she was working in the Andes as an agronomic engineer and lives now in Bordeaux. He hopes to become a boatbuilder, either there or in Brittany.

Cyril Pelcot worked on timber framed houses but found it quite mechanised and longed to learn how to bend and curve wood for a boat. He had recently returned from a French placement building fishing boats, where he realised that sometimes precision and quality have to give way to pressures of time and budget. He learned what was essential and where shortcuts could safely be made.

Virginie Ponchon had also worked for a builder and was looking forward to learning about computer design programs so she could work with them herself. "I like to see the 3D plan as well as the two-dimensional lines drawing. I can learn from each and it's important for our futures to

understand both traditional and modern techniques. We can take lines off an old traditional boat and with the program calculate its centre of gravity or modify its sail plan." She is there on sabbatical but hopes very much to stay on to do the two-year course.

THE RIGHT FUTURE...

Skol Ar Mor has quickly established itself as a unique school, practical, professional and forward looking, with plenty of goals and dreams. The public courses will connect with leisure interests, local and international: building oars, even a simple boat, learning knots or sailmaking. The teachers and half the students I met spoke excellent English and it would be a good way to practice French. Soon the school hopes to expand their French/English website to include 'how to' podcasts and relevant modern technology.

Further down the line they dream of a traditional sailing school, based on the fishing smack *Paimbotine* now under restoration. And I liked their mooted idea of 'intelligent holidays'; alternatives to lazing on the beach at la Baule which could introduce the wider public to boatbuilding, sailing, local sea salt making, mussel and oyster farming. This is just the place to return to the basics of life, working with your hands, putting value on real craftsmanship and maritime skills; not dropping out from the modern world but reinvigorating one's experience of it.

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