



Rib ticklers ... Ian Smith and Simon Sadubin discuss the restoration of a five-metre gaff rig of the 1920s with its owner Don Taylor, right, at Chowder Bay boatshed. Photo: Dallas Kilponen

Old hands on deck revive a racer from the '20s

Geraldine O'Brien

On a blue winter afternoon the boatshed doors are propped wide apart, the harbour dancing and glittering beyond. Inside the shed a large homemade steamer hisses, softening a length of spotted gum ready to be shaped into a rib of the five-metre hull wedged on the slip.

When the timber is cooked – more than an hour after it is put in the steamer – two men work swiftly and smoothly to bend it into the sensuous curve of the hull, screwing it into place. Watching is the boat's owner, Don Taylor.

Merlin was a five-metre gaff rig built in the 1920s for his grandfather, Charles Saunders, by the famous shipwright James

Hayes of Careening Cove, "probably the best boat builder in early 20th century Sydney".

According to Simon Sadubin, one of the two men working on its restoration in the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust's shed at Chowder Bay, it was typical of the half-deck cruisers that the Sydney Amateurs used to race on the harbour "though most were 24 or 25 foot long, this is a little smaller".

Ian Smith, working with him, adds that he thinks it probably evolved from local fishing boat types and would have raced with five hands and a skipper.

They were contacted by Mr Taylor, who had the Merlin sitting in his carport at Wahroonga since 1951. Although he had done some work on it

himself, he knew it called for more expert hands. "There was little Merlin, propped up, quite original," the boatbuilder said.

But all the ribs were cracked and broken and each had to be replaced, and hammered in with copper nails.

"Boats like this are a bit of a luxury item," he agreed.

"It takes a lot of time and skill to put them back together again, but they are handcrafted items."

Mr Sadubin, an industrial designer who had worked as an exhibition designer at the National Maritime Museum, was bitten by the boat bug early, when his father took him to Nick Masterman's Balmain yard when he was a child.

In his 20s he worked with Rick Wood and Nigel Shannon,

former Cockatoo Island boat builders who were "part of a tradition that I want to keep going. It's a fantastic heritage, and we've got to try and maintain the existing boats and to build new ones in the traditional style."

Mr Smith was also hooked early on the timber boats, and when he realised he was spending more and more time in the Glebe boatsheds helping other people restore their boats he turned to it as a job.

Since then he has trained work-for-the-dole kids, some of whom have now "gone to the building industry and are earning more than me. You've got to take a vow of poverty and chastity, but this is what I wanted to do."



Don Taylor as a boy, with father Don, at a boat launching in 1925.