

BLUEBIRD COMES HOME

Martin Summers tells how his boat, once owned by 1930s speed ace Sir Malcolm Campbell, was rebuilt to the original plans, plus a touch of Tissot. Photography: James Mortimer





Top left: A brass plaque in the rebuilt wheelhouse bears the legend 'Dunkirk 1940', commemorating Bluebird's part in the dramatic retreat from France. Centre left: The saloon is upholstered in a Peruvian wool striped cloth in myriad pinks and blues, brought back from the High Andes. The chairs in the foreground, set on pedestal legs, came from Seaborne Interiors of St Catherine's Dock, London, and once belonged to the Italian ship 'Giuseppe Verdi'. The flowered chintz inscribed 'Bluebird of Chelsea' was specially ordered from Limoges via Thomas Goode in London. Above left: Graham Parker and the Perkins 6.354 diesel engines, installed in 1967. Right: The bench seats of the wheelhouse have green corduroy squabs and Indian print cushions.

Many hours were spent debating what fabric to use in the master cabin until I looked at the birthday card that Scott's fiancée, Gaynor Hill, had given me, made of various velvet and chintz squares. One of them, a ribbon-and-rose cotton chintz by Warner, had been discontinued, but Gaynor managed to get just enough to cover the walls and bed. I wanted the boat to look, within reason, as un-nautical as possible and more like a Tissot painting, with Persian rugs and other elegant comforts. At home, I had used Peruvian fabrics from the high Andes to cover a sofa and these, with their already weather-beaten look, seemed the ideal materials for the saloon. I went back a second time to Peru and returned to the Sunday market in Chineros to get some more.

Commissioned by Sir Malcolm Campbell from Thornycrofts in 1931, Bluebird was completed, we learned, in an astonishing 55 days. It took 355 to restore her. Campbell had dreamed in 1934 that the petrol engines were going to blow up, so he promptly sold her. The new owner installed a far more sensible pair of Perkins diesels which remained until replaced in 1967 by the latest Perkins 6.354s, which we reconditioned.

After her Dunkirk exploits, Bluebird had had a distinguished career as a Royal Navy radar decoy ship. From then on, it was gradually downhill, even so far as to sinking in Dartmouth in 1962 and spending three days under water. But on 19 April 1986 she was rechristened 'Bluebird of Chelsea' with full honours and on 8 May we brought her back to London. By rendezvous, we passed under Tower Bridge at the same time as Gina Campbell, Sir Malcolm's granddaughter, did so at nearly 80 mph in her Agfa Bluebird.

On her maiden voyage we took Bluebird to Holland. We left Cadogan Pier on a warm Wednesday evening in August, dined at midnight, watched the dawn come up on a flat, calm North Sea and steamed proudly into Ijmuiden Harbour at nine the following evening. For the next two weeks we cruised the IJmeer and the beautiful Dutch canals, and on the return journey home braved the tail-end of Hurricane Charlie.

Now Bluebird lies contentedly at Cadogan Pier and we use her constantly. Nothing is nicer than dining with friends while cruising by the Houses of Parliament, heading for Greenwich, on a virtually deserted river ■



Previous page: The master cabin with one double and one single berth, decked out in a ribbon-and-rose cotton chintz by Warner with curtains and bolster in ruby-red chenille. The watercolour of flowers, painted on silk by Mary Davis, came from The Fine Art Society.
Above and right: The mahogany and brass theme of the master cabin is continued in the bathroom, even the bath itself working on the principle that varnished wood can keep water in, as well as out. All the spaces below deck, as here, are lit by standard brass picture lamps from Mr Light, converted to 24 volts

