

Hamish McKenzie

My first boat was Venture... which is an old motor... torpedo boat... so she was World War 2... and they were the equivalent of the Spitfire... so anyway, when I moved here in 1986 they'd just gone over from being council rented moorings... and we'd got freehold for the whole site... the essence of freeholds and living on boats is... and the realisation took a little while to click in... you can do anything you want... you've got no planning permission... you've got no building regs... so, yeah, if I can think of it... the only constriction on my building is my imagination... not my imagination, it's just working out how to do it.

I would have thought a little bit of a constriction is what materials you can get.

Yeah, well... yeah... that helps cos I was broke... I was skint... I was always skint... so when I first started working I'd go out and earn a grand or something like that... and then keep that grand going as long as I could but it meant I spent an absolute bare minimum on materials.

From the start were you using the kind of materials you are now, such as washing machine parts and obviously the vehicles?

No, that developed... my initial structures were very standard studwork construction...

Did you do anything like this before you arrived in Shoreham? Were you self-building previously?

I went to Loughborough University when I... I came out of school at 16... worked for 3 years... decided I didn't like working... so I went back to evening class, got enough qualifications to get me into Loughborough University where I did civil engineering... the only thing the civil engineering got me was 2 years in voluntary service overseas in Fiji.

Amazing.

So I was working up in the villages... well, all the carpentry I learned at school came back to me... and the local village carpenters would teach me a bit... the main thing I was doing was building community halls.

What was the inspiration for your first use of non-conventional materials?

I was lying in bed one night... and I've got to make a stair canopy... I was thinking about a studwork stair-canopy and thinking it didn't really... it didn't perform... you could go for a standard studwork construction which would just be a triangle really... and a flat bit over the top of it... and would take 10 minutes to make... and wouldn't look very good at all... and I was lying in bed and my neighbour had just offered me his rowing boat... and I put 2 and 2 together and I didn't sleep that night for working out how I could make this rowing boat into a stair canopy... and I worked it out and set about doing it and I've been... I've got stair canopies made out of boats all over the place... you sort of develop a feeling for... well you just look at the space you've got and then you try to work out what material... what you could use to fill that space up which would fulfil the function you want it to do... and also give you an aesthetic... an aesthetically pleasing result. You get better at it by the practical experience of making. I've never liked to call myself an artist... I've never really felt like an artist, I've never really wanted to be one... cos I think... to my mind engineering is just as important... what I do is design and make... I mean part of the joy is the design-work... the real work's making it.

But does the term... does a description of it as floating sculpture, does it feel OK to you?

Yeah, that's fine.

Can I just talk to you about the materials themselves? I mean where are you getting all this stuff?

It ties in with my hobbies... everything's complimentary... I walk... I cycle... I always explore... so I find an awful lot of it.

But you've got half an aeroplane in here?

Yeah... my plane wings... I'm particularly proud of them.

Where on earth do you... first of all is it a military jet?

Yeah... they're Hawks... jet fighter.

Where do you get a military jet?

I worked for a... I worked for Adrian Wright... he set up his own aircraft spares business... and I worked for him for quite... and at college as well... working through the summer holidays... dismantling planes... it was great fun. I gave him a call when I was doing this boat up because I already had the idea for a coach... on the side... and I thought there's plenty of boats in here it would be nice to have some aeroplane... aeroplane stuff in it.

When I got the plane wings I could have got cockpits and everything for next to nothing and someone put me onto the idea that there were some plane bits in a farm yard over at Helmsworth... so I went over... there were all these lovely cockpits and everything... so I phoned up the owners and they wanted five-grand apiece... which is way beyond my budget... so I ended up giving them fifty quid and taking mouldings of the shapes I wanted... and started building from scratch... much more sculpting the shapes I wanted rather than using the second hand stuff.

Do you dismantle the vehicles and bring them in parts on here?

Yeah, it took 2 of us 3 days to dismantle the coach and get all the bits I wanted off it... it took 3 of us 3 weeks to dismantle the fire engine...

One of the things I love about what you've done with the aeroplane wings is the way the interior is exposed... and you've got all the wiring where, I take it that would be the wheels.

Well I looked at them and thought, they're beautiful... he would have let me have Jump Jet wings but they went out at a ton a piece and these were only half a ton a piece...

Really?

There's a big difference between half a ton and a ton... especially when you're putting them up by hand...

So how many people helped you with this?

Me and... a mate helped me a bit...

Getting a military wing onto the roof of your boat... you managed to do it with 2 people?

Yeah...

How do you go about doing that?

These are lampposts... they were lying by the side of the... when I went to the scrap yard to pick the coach up... they were lying by the side of the coach... and so I bought those as well... they lay in the ditch for a while... I got a one ton winch... a one ton winch and a half ton winch... you can operate those by hand... dragged them up the bank... then brought them up to the back of the boat on the lampposts.

OK... so you used the lampposts that are now part of your ceiling as...

Yeah... to put them onto the boat... got them in the right plane... got them in the right configuration... then just built scaffold towers round them... then just levered them up with bits of 4 by 2.

The space over there... that doorway... tell me about that.

Oh yeah... that was literally one of the exploring things... we went for a walk up... exploring the upper reaches of the river Adur... and I walked past a farmyard and spotted a nosecone in the farmyard... the owner wasn't there... I went back and he sold me the nose cone of a Jumbo...the air intake... I'm pretty sure that's the air intake of a Jumbo... and I got an air intake off a much smaller plane.

Did you immediately see that and think... that would make a great doorway?

I've been looking for a nosecone for years... I bought the other bits but it's the nosecone I really wanted... it caught my imagination.

It's a fantastic object

Yeah... it's interesting... I didn't know what to do with it for a year... people kept suggesting things... that it would make a great jacuzzi... couldn't be arsed... they're too much maintenance... the last thing I want in my life is maintenance.

I've got seven boats now... what happened was I started working on the boats and people just kept offering me boats... because they couldn't keep these old boats themselves.

Does it not become a bit of a burden?

It's bloody... I feel a responsibility towards them... I've got no kids... they're my babies really... I can't get rid of them... I've got to try to get them floating... I've still got 2 sunken ones.

Really? There's an ecological element to this.

Yeah. I think all my life I've loathed profligacy... I don't think there's ever been a stage in mankind's existence... when we've thrown quite so much away... when we've wasted quite so many resources... we completely act as if there's no real tomorrow... and it's not surprising we're in the shit...

Do you hope in any way that this might inspire people?

I hope they give it some thought... if they're rushing off to buy a brand new kitchen made out of melamine... which is vile material... it might not be the best way to use our resource... there's

something desperately wrong with the whole system... the way we use money... the way we throw it away on complete rubbish...

The whole riverbank is changing as the years go by and the money has started moving in now... and you walk down this... this avenue of boats now... and it's all six-foot fences now...

What do you think is the future for this site? What do you hope it will be?

Well I hope it survives? If sea-level rises are as it's predicted to be, I think we'll be lucky to survive more than a hundred... hundred and fifty years.

But do you hope that someone will carry on these boats after you?

Absolutely, yeah.

That they'll take them over after you?

Yeah... but I haven't quite worked that one out yet...