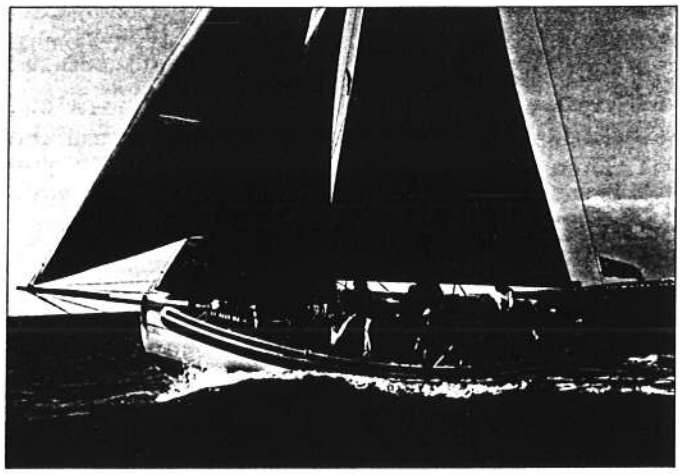
SAM L. MORSE Co.



Some boats look elegant and lean, like the lady of your dreams, and some boats just look fast and mean, then there are boats that look like true friends, and Sam Morse's little cutters seem like the best friends you can find. □ I might as well start off by telling you that the Bristol Channel Cutter and the Falmouth Cutter are the most beautiful 28 and 22 foot fiberglass sailboats in the world. There. Now that we've cleared that up we can begin at the beginning.

The designer of both boats is Mr. Lyle Hess, whose accomplishments include *Seraffyn*—the boat Lynn and Larry Pardey sailed around the world without an engine—as well as a new boat designed for the Pardeys. The most reassuring thing about all of his designs is that each new boat is more beautiful than the last. And that may be because Lyle Hess is one of the last of the old school of designers, like William Garden and Bill Crealock and the eccentric Ray Bolger, who believe that sailboats are mystical, and magical, and among the—sadly few—truly beautiful creations of man. Aside from that they all believe that sailboats have to sail well and take just about anything the sea decides to give.

Now you might rightfully think that to incorporate all the above in a design is no small task, but I think as long as a *good* designer is given rein and not hobbled by racing rules and market surveys and the need to cram four hundred berths into a floating thimble, then, if the man is honest, listens to his heart and respects the sea, he'll find it pretty hard not to draw a fine boat.

But first and foremost a boat has to be beautiful, if for no other reason than to avoid insulting the sea. And to get a bit more selfish, I must tell you that for me one of the great joys of sailing is coming upon beautiful little yachts in hidden harbors, something that happens too infrequently nowadays. The two little yachts of Lyle Hess that Sam Morse builds in the old Westsail yard in Southern California help to keep a flickering flame burning.

Lest you mistakenly believe that these sweet-looking yachts are clunky old dears who can't get out of their own way, let me tell you that one Bristol Channel Cutter sailed from Dana Point California to Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas in twenty-two and a half days, or an average speed of 5.8 knots over 3,150 nautical miles. One day she made good 180 miles or 7½ knots, and for a 28-foot boat that's as good as you can get. Apart from that, the boat is stiff and heavy, with an even, gentle motion, thanks to her heavy displacement of 14,000 pounds for a waterline/displacement ratio of near 340 which is about as heavy as you'll find on a boat that sails so amazingly well.

Her sailing ability comes from her extremely long waterline of 26 feet 3 inches—if you want to be generous, then think of her as a 34 footer without the overhangs—and her deceptively full lines aft which give her good stability and lots of sail carrying power. Yet her fullness aft does not indicate a clumsy boat as many an old boat tended to be because they carried their beam too far forward causing bloated bows. If you look at the lines of the Bristol Channel Cutter, you will see she reaches maximum beam well aft of mid station, and her entry lines are all straight, very much like the best of modern cruisers.

As to how well she handles, all you have to do to answer that question is read the Pardeys' books, for they sailed her without an engine all over the world, which means a lot of mean tight tacking in mean tight harbors, and they came back to the same design again.

Mr. Hess designed and styled his boats after the old Bristol Pilot boats and Itchen work boats which in turn were designed to handle nasty steep seas in a sea kindly fashion And if you think that these little boats are just for old-fashioned dreamers who never sail anywhere, then look at the photo with not one but *two* Bristol Channel Cutters anchored in the Solomons in the far reaches of the Pacific.

They make ideal long-distance cruising boats for a good number of reasons: First, they look just perfect in far distant harbors; second, their heavy displacement results in a very comfortable motion despite their small size, a motion much less wearing on the crew than the bobbing skidding sliding hopping motion of a light boat; third, their construction—of which I'll say more later—is excellent; and last, because their design shows good common-sense and utter simplicity.

The long keel gives you good tracking and relaxing turns at the helm, yet the whittled forefoot makes her a decent handler in tight quarters. The cockpit is comfortable but small, holding but 700 pounds of water if filled to the brim. The decks are broad and, with the outboard rig, uncluttered for safe sailhandling and movement. The enormous rudder makes her respond quickly, and since it is aft hung, is easy to repair, and even easier to add a self steering vane to. Better still, she's steered by a tiller that needs almost no maintenance, and very seldom fails. Her rig, although big enough to move her well in light airs—sail area to displacement ratio of almost 16.5—has a total sail area of less than six hundred square feet, still small enough for a couple to handle with ease.

And perhaps this won't mean much to some, but when sailing her I felt as though I was handling a little ship that moved through the sea as if she'd done just that for centuries. Those of you who have sailed in boats that felt like pingpong balls and mushed to and fro like a bowl of melting Jello—causing you to look anxiously back to see if the rudder was still there—will know exactly what I mean.

The one objection that some have is that the bowsprit is narrow and long without a platform or a pulpit—hardly a place of comfort and security for changing headsails in a blow. True enough. But Sam can add little "ears" to the sprit, making it nearly 1 foot wide and much safer to stand on, and you *can* get a furling jib and never go near the blessed thing again, or you can avoid being out there in a blow if you change your headsail early. And if it's a question of a *real* blow then you'll probably want only reefed main and staysail anyway, meaning you just want the jib down and out of the way, a feat which can easily be accomplished if you have a net of some sort strung between the whiskerstays, for then you can just net the jib and lash it to the bowsprit. It might get a little salty overnight, but then that's the sea.

Meanwhile back on deck. Thanks to the dead-parallel cabinsides, the side decks are astoundingly broad—2½ feet in one spot—which, with the very high 8-inch bulwarks, make for a comfortable cradle in which to sunbathe. The bulwarks alone are beautiful enough to make you want to have the boat. They are not a part of the hull as is customary, but are made of solid planks slightly raised off the deck, supported by through-bolted wood posts on 20-inch centers. What this means is that the entire deck is one long scupper,

guaranteeing you quick drainage in any seas, and assuring that there will be no puddles of water left anywhere, no matter how badly she may be loaded out of trim.

The entire top of the little forward house opens, making passing of sails a sailor's dream. The split trunk cabin may cause some to object to the loss of space belowdecks, but the deck in between makes for a low safe place to stand and brace yourself while handling the halyards. And I almost forgot; there are good coamings around the cockpit to keep the water out and the small of your back braced.

But let's talk about belowdecks. Good design and common sense are very evident here. Too many designers and builders simply refuse to believe that some people are seriously interested in sailing long distances with a crew of two, requiring but two good berths, and ample living, working, and stowage space belowdecks. Or if not involved in voyaging, that there are many couples with one child or no child, who seek peace and solitude, who do not jam their boats full of friends and aquaintances but take refuge in the company of only their dearest, and go and hide and watch mother nature unveil all her secrets.

The Bristol Channel Cutter has the ultimate small yacht layout for world cruising for two. The galley to port is ideally sized, with the sink near the centerline and the stove outboard with some bracing to be had against the companionway ladder. As with many small boats, the icebox is found opposite the galley, in this case under the chart table. This is just as well, for as you are preparing food in the galley, you won't have to sweep the counter clean to get into the icebox. The traditional drawback such an arrangement used to have was that the lid was set into the center of the chart table and the cracks and trim surrounding the lid made the use of pencils and dividers a forecastable nightmare. *But* Sam has saved the day. He has transformed the *entire* chart table top into a lid without the cracks and trimpieces that used to change the simplest course line into the sign of Zorro.

The salon is exactly like it says in the Sailor's Bible, "Two settee berths, dropleaf table, footlocker over end of berth." The pilot berth to port opens into a big double and that's nice indeed unless you're a loner, and even then it's good to have in case you change your mind. With the deep broad bilges of the BCC accommodating the fuel and water tanks, there is good stowage beneath the berths.

So far, you may say there is nothing truly spectacular about this layout and of course you would be right, but I think it's rather hard to improve on a layout that has served small yachts so well for nearly a century. But what lies forward of the main bulkhead of the BCC definitely falls under the heading of "remarkable."

Customarily you have a cramped head to one side and a pigeon hole to the other with a V berth forward which can be utilized only by the most dedicated and astute of leg braiders among us, normally followed by a sail locker too small for a hanky and a chainlocker that barely holds two links of chain. As a blessed change, the BCC has the following solution. The area forward of the main bulkhead, running the full width of the hull, is an open space incorporating a head, two vast lockers to starboard, either hanging or not —the choice is up to you—and miracle of miracles, a true, honest-to-god workbench off to port. For those of you who tend to belittle the importance of a workbench on a small cruising yacht, let me tell you that Eric Hiscock, who has cruised almost as much as the rest of us put together, once remarked that after his berth his most cherished place aboard was the workbench.

The workbench on the BCC is of perfect standing height and nearly 4 feet in length. There is good headroom here, and don't forget that the hatch above you opens to give you all the light and air you could wish for; a true blessing indeed for either working at the bench or sitting on the throne. The area beneath the high bench is full of lockers and drawers, and the head has a lid that flips down over it, making it a place to sit while you're working, and even better, a place to kneel when you're trying to rummage in the good-sized sail locker, which is accessible through a large opening in the bulkhead directly forward.

The remarkable thing about all this is that all these functions can be performed here, utilizing only the very small surface of the shower grate as floorspace. Now *that* is intelligent, ingenious, designing.

If you're not converted yet, then let me tell you how she's built. A good indication of the solidity of this good yacht is that in spite of her 28 feet she weighs almost 9000 pounds *without ballast.* And let me tell you that ain't all wallpaper. What that means essentially is that she's built like the proverbial brick relief station. Her laminates are all hand layed up and the schedule goes like this: white gelcoat, dark gelcoat (makes it easier to see air bubbles and dry fibers during layup) then mat and cloth, then four layers of mat and woven roving, finished up by a mat and cloth. In all you have six structural layers.

The glasswork is done by Crystaliner, who have over twenty-five years of experience building fiberglass hulls. They used to do all the glass work for Westsail, and they do very good work indeed.

The main bulkheads are all of sturdy ¾-inch plywood, and what is remarkable about them is the bonding. Whereas many builders use only a piece of 4-inch fiberglass mat tape to tab the bulkheads in, Sam Morse uses cloth and mat and roving a full 12 inches wide. What that means is that the potential of bulkhead delamination is cut down drastically. But Sam Morse is a worrier and he likes to do things better than mere humans, so to reduce even further the chance of failure, he drills 2½-inch diameter holes through the bulkheads in the area of the bonds to come. When he lays in the wet bonds, he actually joins the bonds together through the holes to "lock" the bulkhead in. This makes it almost impossible for the bulkhead to pull away, or separate, from the bonds.

Apart from that, Sam bonds every piece of furniture in place—there are no liners in the boat—making a hull of great strength even stronger. The deck is fastened in the industry-standard through-bolted flange method, with 5200 sealant in between. The work throughout is excellent, completely befitting a world-class yacht.

So that in short is the story of the Bristol Channel Cutter. Perhaps, to create singularly beautiful little yachts such as these, it takes a pair of incurable old romantics like Lyle Hess and Sam Morse. They are, without doubt, an endangered species. Who will come to take their place, God only knows. Perhaps no one. And a sadder and more dreary place will the world be for all that.