THE Schooner "ISABELLA"—CONVERSION FROM TRADER TO YACHT.

By Major-General H. Carr, C.B.

As there is a large number of the Corps interested in yachts and sailing in general, I think an account of the acquisition and conversion of a trading topsail schooner to a yacht may be of interest, more especially as the purchase and work had to be effected with the minimum of expenditure because of the poverty of her present owners. This is a point to keep in constant view as half the interest and excitement is due to the necessity of doing the work with the minimum of skilled labour and of hunting round yacht yards and ship-breaking firms to find the hundred and one articles required, varying from skylights, companion ways, hatches, etc., to masts and sails, in fact everything that a sea-going vessel requires, with the exception of a hull and ground tackle.

Every would-be owner has not the time nor the knowledge for this work, and before commencing the story I think it will be well to describe the principals in the venture.

First there is the owner, "T. H.", next "A.", his wife, and thirdly, "H. C.", not actually engaged, and last, but by no means least, "C. N.", a member of a well-known firm of yacht designers and builders.

"T. H." commenced his sailing career at the age of six on the lake at Naini Tal, and has ascended in the last twenty-five years from dinghies, half-decked boats, 3-tonners, 6-tonners, 14-tonners and a Thames Barge, to finally "Isabella," a 160-ton topsail schooner. Without "A.", his wife, the scheme would have been impossible. Both are exceptionally strong physically, and "A.", in the last four years, has become a really efficient hand. I dwell on these characteristics as I could not recommend anyone, unless endowed with ample funds, to attempt a like venture unless he or they are real practical seamen with not only a sound knowledge of seamanship and motors, but the strength to manipulate heavy gear.

The story begins with "T. H." and "A." seeing in a Yachting Paper the following advertisement:

"Schooner ‘Isabella,’ of Barrow, just passed survey under Board of Trade supervision, extra strong little vessel, make ideal cruiser or training ship for boys.—B. Tregaskes and Sons, Dry Dock, Par, Cornwall. Sept., 1934."

As three years on a Thames Barge, converted by their own unremitting exertions into a really comfortable, warm, commodious home, had created a desire for a deep-sea boat capable of long cruises, and as "T. H." for many years had had his heart set on possessing a yacht with square rig, the advertisement at once caused the smouldering fire to burst into flame, and they wrote to the advertiser in Par, Cornwall, for full particulars and price. The reply proving eminently satisfactory in every respect bar the
price, they made a personal inspection and returned determined to purchase her. Haggling continued for about a year, there being no market now for this class of schooner, the trade being killed by motor vessels. Finally, "A." having come into a small legacy, a deal was effected subject to survey and "T. H.", "C. N.", and "H. C." made a prolonged and thorough survey of hull and gear, "C. N." being the technical expert. She was passed sound. Her description is as follows—for the benefit of readers not versed in the technical names employed by builders, I will keep to simpler phraseology. The following is an extract from Lloyd's Register of Yachts, 1936: "'Isabella,' Aux. Schooner, 162 tons. Thames measurement: Length 88'5 feet, breadth 21'25 feet, head room 7 feet, draft 7'5 feet. Built at Barrow, 1878, primarily for the trade between Labrador and England." She was constructed, even for that time, exceptionally strong and of the very best materials. Her planking under water is American elm, pitch pine garboard, frames of moulded oak 8 inches—each alternate frame is reinforced by an iron hanging knee extending to within two inches of the keelson. Her planking is 3 inches thick and her keelson of green-heart is 15 by 18 inches. The cargo floor is green-heart. There is also a green-heart ice protector strake on the water line. Both booms and bowsprit are pitch pine and the masts oregon; keel and stem are of oak.

Although the survey passed the hull as absolutely sound and in splendid condition, her mainmast was condemned, and one gaff. All her sails were useless with the exception of her top-sails and jib. It was arranged with the shipyard at Par to bore and fit a stern tube and bearers to take a 60 h.p. Kelvin motor engine while she was in dry dock, supply a new mast and repair the foremost, supply new main shrouds and hand her over in a sufficiently sea-worthy condition to sail up to Southampton or an East Coast port—all for an inclusive sum which, although moderate, was terrifying to the venturesome couple "T. H." and "A.", whose only asset of any great value was their Thames Barge on which they were living and which was unsold.

"H. C." now, although at first strongly opposed to the purchase of so large a vessel, became a convert, and being convinced that the headstrong pair had acquired a valuable and workable proposition, came to the rescue with financial aid, seasoned with lots of advice which, although listened to respectfully, was generally disregarded.

The Bill of Sale was signed in November, 1935, and "Isabella" was ready to be taken away.

It now became necessary to decide how she was to be moved from Par to Southampton. Naturally the easiest way was to arrange a tow, but here expense had to be seriously considered, and after much discussion a crew of amateurs was collected, including "T. H." as skipper, "A." his wife, "C. N." and two others, one of whom is a well-known amateur and skilled yachtsman. These, taking with them sails which they persuaded the Railway Company to regard as personal luggage, arrived at Par in the first
week in November and took possession just about one year after negotiations had opened. As all the crew had limited leave of absence, an early start was essential, but the rigging on the main-mast was not complete, it was blowing a full gale, the weather forecast from Calshot was bad, so after three days had passed and time was short, a tow was arranged with a local company, and on November 8 they started at noon. By 1.30 they had cleared the harbour, and "Isabella," being without ballast, rolled and plunged furiously. As a detailed extract from the log would bore all but deep-sea sailors who know the South Coast, I will summarize and just say that they ran into a gale from the south-west and very nearly were blown on to Portland Bill. The night was really dirty, torrents of rain, and a heavy swell making it a nightmare passage, not improved by a fire breaking out in the after cabin from too vigorous stoking of the stove, which fire required the application of many buckets of water, adding much to the discomfort of the crew. However, the little tug proved equal to the task and safely landed them in Southampton Water at 3.30 the following day, having well earned the £45 paid for the tow.

All parties being now convinced that "Isabella" was a real beauty in her class and worthy of being converted by skilled labour, as distinguished from the amateur work that "T. H." and "A." had put into their Barge. An arrangement was made that she should be berthed at Camper and Nicholson's yacht yard at Northam, and converted by them under the most favourable terms possible. Accordingly, one shipwright and one joiner were detailed for the job; much to our comfort and advantage, they both were left with us permanently, becoming quite interested in the work and most helpful and friendly.

The lay-out of the interior had been worked out by "T. C." most carefully to scale and had been revised and altered again and again. The experience of living permanently on board the Barge proved most valuable in small details which would not strike the professional designer or the ordinary owner who only lives on board for week-ends or a couple of months in the summer. Time after time "A." altered the position of cupboards, sinks, draining boards, taps, etc., by the light of her personal experience.

The first step was naturally to remove surplus iron from the open cargo hatches and deck them over, leaving spaces for the large skylights which each carried. While the shipwright worked on deck, the joiner was laying the floors and erecting bulkheads and partitions. Before the flooring could be permanently laid, the four steel water tanks, each holding 250 gallons, had to be fitted along the keelson and connected, also the various pipes to pump, air vents, filling orifice, etc., made good. Thirty tons of pig iron ballast was packed aft and midships, all under the floor boards, resting on the original cargo floor and about six inches above the outer skin.

The conversion plan was as follows: The original bulkhead shutting off the after cabin where the skipper and mate berthed was not touched, nor was the cabin, also the bulkhead between the hold and the fo'c'sle and
sail-locker was left intact, and the original cargo hold was divided according to the plan by \( \frac{3}{4} \) inch boards nailed to frames of 2 by 1 deal and faced on each side with "Sundela" patent sheets; no teak or mahogany was used below, but these woods were used above deck; all skylights, hatches and companion ways being of the very best seasoned material in the most approved yacht finish.

As it was thought useless to cut portholes in the sides owing to the expense and the thickness of walls, all light and air came from above, and five large skylights, one main companion way and two hatches gave access to the ship, with no less than five large screw down portholes and four oblong deck windows with ten prismatic dead lights, made all the cabins both light and airy. In addition there were seven cowl ventilators, of which two were in the galley and two in the bathroom.

I will try and describe the alterations made in the appearance of the deck. From right aft, the wheel and steering gear are the same, the sliding hatch over the after cabin is untouched, an ugly skylight with solid top and side frames has been removed, and a teak yacht's skylight fitted. A large teak flat hatch gives access to the engine room. Then comes the main companion way with ladder and brass hand rail, and sliding hatch
set in the deck over the old cargo hatch, in which is a large skylight over the saloon. Then come two more skylights side by side over the forward cabins. The old cumbersome windlass for the anchor has been replaced by a geared winch; the original cargo winch has been retained for hoisting sails, etc. A new bilge pump has replaced the old cumbersome pump and the deck has been cleared of superfluous erections, such as the galley and round house, leaving a clear run from stem to stern.

The accommodation plan is as follows, from aft:—

The original captain’s cabin with two bunks off it, now lit and ventilated by opening deck ports and separate companionways with sliding hatch. Next, the engine room, shut off fore and aft by bulkheads pierced by doors with large hatch in deck. This room takes the Diesel engine, a workshop bench and lighting plant. Then comes the entrance lobby with companion ladder, under which is the oilskin locker, also a beer barrel. On the starboard side is the bathroom containing a full-size bath, basin with hot and cold taps, also a Blake w.c. Passing through a door one enters a second lobby containing the “Ideal” boiler with hot water tank overhead and hot cupboard. On the starboard hand is the galley and to port one large cabin and one single berth one. Next comes the saloon, 14 by 18 feet, with large skylights. Two double cabins open off this, containing double beds, wardrobes, chest of drawers, a writing table and dressing chest. This is the end of the original hold, and now comes the bulkhead. On the other side of this is a large sail locker and bosun’s stores. Next comes the fo’c’sle with four spring cots, washstand, etc., and right up in the stem head is the lamp locker. Underneath the floor are the chain lockers containing the cables of the two anchors, 45 fathom of 1 inch stud link chain on each with 45 spare. The fo’c’sle is well lit and ventilated by two deck ports and is most comfortable.

The above comprises the whole accommodation. Everywhere, even in the fo’c’sle, there is ample head room and space.

It took considerable time and search to pick up all the “Isabella’s”
requirements, but Southampton is a fertile field, as there are numerous ship breaking yards and marine dealers. Camper and Nicholson taking, as they do, old boats in part exchange for others, accumulate an enormous stock of spare and surplus parts. From them we got skylights, companion ways, spars, sails, davits and small gear of all kinds at junk prices, all being of the best yacht finish. Also we were fortunate in buying many cwt. of rope for our running gear, most of it in the original coils, which at one time was on a "Shamrock." Needless to say it was of the highest and most expensive quality. Pollock and Brown, the well-known ship breakers, also contributed, as did the Belsize Yard. The "Mauretania" and the "Majestic," when their contents were being sold, supplied Vi-spring mattresses and other small articles. By these means the total cost was kept within reasonable bounds.

The engine question was a grave one—the original idea of removing the 60 h.p. Kelvin from the Barge was upset by her sale as she stood for an inclusive sum. A Rustom Hornsby 70 h.p. Diesel, lying at Camper and Nicholson's yard, was most suitable and tempting, but the price was prohibitive. However, having convinced ourselves that without a motor "Isabella" was too large to handle with safety without a much larger crew than was proposed, "H. C." hardened his heart and produced the needed funds, thereby adding enormously to the sale value of the ship and rendering it possible to take her into narrow waters and crowded anchorage without any qualms.

I am afraid the total cost has exceeded all the original estimates by many hundreds, but there is the consolation that we now have a beautiful ship, comfortable and seaworthy, in which there is not a soft spot in hull or gear, capable of sailing round the world and built of material good for a hundred years. All painting and varnishing, as well as the scraping of the old fittings that were picked up, were done by ourselves—painters are very highly paid and as it was imperative that the labour bill be kept as low as possible, none was employed. Fortunately we had a hand who was really expert and liked the work. The general colour scheme is cream colour walls, white underside of deck, with the oak beams coloured chocolate, also all the mouldings. The doors were painted teak colour with bakelite fittings—there is no brass to clean with the exception of the hand rail on companion ladders.

Three boats are carried, two in davits, one a motor launch, the other a C.b. sailing 14 foot dinghy, and a small dinghy on deck when making a passage.

All cabins are fitted with Vi-spring mattresses in standing bunks with chest of drawers underneath, and shelf and hanging wardrobes. The floors are stained dark oak and covered with rugs. The saloon has a swinging oak dining table set on the starboard side close to a settee, with a service sliding hatch in the bulkhead. There is ample room for four or five arm chairs, a round table, an Electrolux Refrigerator, and a Courtier stove, also cup-
boards, writing desk, etc. It will be noticed that no attempt has been made to mention prices, but even with the rigid economy practised, and the purchase of all fitting and gear, etc., at rock bottom prices, the vessel as she now stands represents several thousand pounds and is valued by experts at a fairly large figure. I may mention as of interest that we bought the winch from a steamer for £10, present value about £30; skylights new, value between £15 and £30, for £2 and £3; Vi-spring mattresses for 20s.; life belts from the "Majestic" for 1s. each; a double action bilge pump Army surplus for £3. With the exception of the wire rigging of masts and topmasts all the standing and running gear was renewed and fitted by "T.C." and a few nautical friends. The decks are dressed with boiled oil and red oxide as recommended by the late Dr. Claude Worth. In conclusion I wish to emphasize the fact that "Isabella" was built and shaped as a cargo vessel and no attempt has been made to camouflage her as a yacht although she is now as smart as paint and bright varnished fittings can make her.

We have been severely criticized by our knowing friends for going to Camper and Nicholson's for the necessary skilled labour, but we are firmly convinced that none of the small yacht yards with their limited machine shops and small resources could have handled the proposition effectively or more economically, even allowing for the perhaps exceptionally favourable terms we received.

On one point we were, I admit, defeated. Whenever we suggested a rough and quick way of doing a job we were at once against strong opposition, and told that such work could not be allowed to leave Camper and Nicholson's yard—everything done by the firm must be "just so"—of course any amateur work put in by us was our affair.