

Building Baccara in 1966

By Peter Tait

*Sunrise discovery of the Bay of Islands,
where I now live, in January 1967.*



In the 1960s New Zealand yacht designer John Spencer broke all the rules and came up with a range of light, fast keelboats, big plywood dinghies with fibreglass skin, bolt on keels and a simple structure. It seemed like amateurs could build these boats? I saw an opportunity..

Getting Started, Workshop Space and Materials.

I had sailed dinghies for several years, done short cruises on bigger boats and built a Mk 2 Moth with tuition from one of the older guys at the local club. I dreamt of a boat of my own that I could sleep on. I was twenty years old. Then I heard about a boy my age building a small keel boat under his Dad's house. That's what I wanted to do! I read that a new John Spencer 25 footer (7.6 m) was on the drawing board. John lived in Auckland so I called in to his boat building yard. He said "My new 'Stiletto' is going to be a little beauty. It's the one for you!" The other boy was doing a van de Stadt and without knowing it we were heralding in a new era in amateur boat building. Large numbers of these small, hard chine, plywood-on-a-timber-structure keel boats were built.

Several months after launching we raced against the van de Stadt and had an easy victory, 25% faster! We were pleased with that! The builder's name was Peter Blake who later became one of New Zealand's leading off shore sailors and lead Team New Zealand to victory in the America's Cup. Later when my sons heard that story they of course asked "What happened after that Dad?"



My Dad's basement workshop with frames stacking up.



My 1952 Light 15 Citroen earning its keep.

My father, a direct descendent of the Tasmanian seafaring Tait's was keen and said "Yep, good idea! I'll clear a space under the house." We extended the 20' x 20' basement out 6' under the deck with sheet plastic. I added a second hand bandsaw to my collection of hand tools then took a deep breath and ordered the chines and stringers from a waterfront boat timber yard. My beaut old Citroen managed the 26 foot (8 m) timber on

the roof with the mudguard mounted lights and cute door handles taking the ropes. Might have trouble doing that today!

The Frames and Stringers.

John Spencer produced excellent drawings and had developed a very simple structure which he used in all of his ply boats, right up to 73 feet – timber frames and stringers with two layers of plywood. The frames were lofted out on a sheet of ply, the sections cut and glued up with ply doublers at the chines and gun'l and timber doublers on the centreline. The curved stem was laminated from ½" strips.

The assembly jig consisted of two timbers fore and aft with cross pieces at each frame. The frames were at 39" (1 m) centres, that is two frames to a bunk length. The keelson and bottom stringers were two pieces of ¾" timber glued together in place. It was not at all difficult to assemble but took a while.

The frames bolted on to the cross pieces on the jig. Later the keel bolted on through the frames and intermediate floors which were made up from laminated plywood.



Me on the left and helper Clive contemplating it right-side-up with a beer.



The hull structure taking shape. Note the simple jig.

Two layers of Plywood and a Fibreglass Skin.

The ply and glass skin went on and that brought us to the first milestone - we man-handled the boat outside, rolled it over, carried it back in, took another deep breath and worked on.

The way the two skins of 3/16" (4mm) Australian plywood worked on the bottom and sides was clever - the grain ran at right angles to the stringers so each piece joined at the chine. The width of each length varied to suit so each bit was relatively small and easy to glue and nail on. Quick too. The edges of each piece were staggered and simply butt joined. An epoxy fibreglass skin with heavy cloth completed the job. The deck was two layers and cabin top three layers of cedar ply with no fastenings showing as I intended varnishing the underside. It looks a bit odd in the photo with the three skins tommed down from the ceiling but it came out well. Light too – the idea was to be fast!

The hull interior was epoxy sealed to the chine then painted up to the gun'l. The combination of glass skinning outside and epoxy sealer below the chine inside, ie where water might sit, worked well. The boat, apparently still sound nearly fifty years on, re-appeared recently for sale on TradeMe. It should end up in a museum perhaps?

The work inside the cabin was straightforward. There is no room for anything complex in a 25 footer! The bulkheads were already in place on the frames. The squabs I made myself by getting foam rubber cut to the shape of the bunk board then wrapping fabric around the lot and stapling it to the underside of the ply. That was easy and cheap! The stove was gimbaled in the tiny galley. There were bunks for four – two quarter berths under the cockpit seats and a 'vee berth' forward which could be considered a 'double' but you had to know the other person well! The after hatch accessed a good storage space.



The cabintop on and the builder looking weary.

Keel and Rudder Fitted in the Garden.

Next milestone was to carry the boat outside, around the side of the house and up on to the cradle. I vaguely remember this as being only just possible! The hollow keel was fabricated from mild steel plate, almost a bulb shape with most of the volume down low. The ingenious arrangement of a borrowed steel melting pot with a hand blower fanning the flames saw the lead eventually melted and poured out of a very hot tap into the keel. The rudder was also made up from mild steel and attached to a timber skeg. Both keel and rudder were sandblasted and epoxy painted before bolting on.



Melting half a ton of scrap lead. Not much safety gear in sight!

Fittings and the Rig.

All non-standard mast and deck fittings were detailed on the plans so where stock items weren't available the stainless steel work was made up by a boat fitting company. This included the sheet winch. The aluminium mast was painted and the fittings pop riveted and/or bolted on. The boom was wooden and had a roller furling gooseneck which worked well. Sails came from a company whose design work was carried out by John Spencer. His approach of parallel cut headsail and generally flat-cut sails for what was a narrow and tender hull worked extremely well. The boat was very fast. Other 'Stiletto's' with more conventional full-cut sails fell over and struggled in anything above fifteen knots. We were delighted to discover we could man-handle the mast up on the boat in the garden. But trying things out nearly resulted in disaster as the spinnaker got tangled and out of control. Whose silly idea was that? A DIY headsail furler was an option on the plans but we didn't have time to make that and I couldn't see it working well for racing.



Manpower carried the boat to the front lawn.

John Spencer had spent several years designing dinghies like the Cherub, Javelin, twelve and eighteen foot skiffs where the class rules allowed some experimentation. Other designers took part also and it was fast track learning on the water. The 'Stiletto' benefitted from all this and the result was a perfectly balanced boat. Sweet to sail in all weather up to 55 knots where, with tiny headsail and a reef in the main she sailed herself well on the wind. John commented that he had kept the rig well aft where the bulk of the hull was. The forestay was well back from the stem head.



Looking for trouble! Mother about to dive for cover!



The big day arrives and we're off to the boat harbour.

Launching Day Generates a Lot of Interest.

Just nine months on the 'Baccara' was the first 'Stiletto' to be launched. Interest levels were high and a crowd turned out to watch. We popped the mast up again for the launching and were quickly afloat! The sails were soon up and we were out on the Auckland Harbour, slipping along so sweetly! *"Oh what a sensation after all that work!"*



Afloat and tied up to the jetty, now what do we do next?

A lot more 'Stiletto's' were built throughout Australasia and before long in Auckland we had fleets of twenty or more doing regular racing and group cruising.

The New Boat Never Rests

The launching was in August and the winter weather wasn't up to much but that didn't matter. At every opportunity we went cruising, day sailing and did all the racing we could fit in. She seemed to be just perfect, a dream come true. I couldn't afford a motor or much more than a meths cooker and a kero lamp. We carried just the one bucket which sometimes caused concern. If we were likely to use navigation lights the car battery came along for the ride.

So we sailed everywhere including the annual four hundred mile, three and a half week Xmas cruises from Auckland up the coast to the Bay of Islands and weekend sailing around Auckland's lovely Hauraki Gulf. No motor wasn't a great problem like everyone expects – you work with what you've got and that's how you learn to handle a yacht really well. Only once did we get home awkwardly late. We had a Member of Parliament on board and he hadn't told me he had a meeting on that night. Auckland Harbour was a millpond and I can still see him desperately trying to paddle the boat against the ebb tide with a dinghy oar! I didn't think much of his politics but can't recall if the late hour was deliberate!



Very first sail – perfect balance and she's a little beauty!

'Baccara' was only small but as I still say *"The people in the little boats have the most fun!"*

Design and Construction Details:

Designer - John Spencer New Zealand

Length – 24'-10" (7.6 m)

Beam – 7'-0" (2.2 m)

Draught – 4'-0" (1.2 m)

Keel weight – 960lbs (435 kg)

Construction - 2 skins of plywood on frames and stringers, fibreglassed and epoxy sealed inside.

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