

# **FireBugs - A Great Club Building Project**

**by Ray O'Brien**

*Canon fire launches 15 FireBugs built at the Pleasant Point Yacht Club*

***The Pleasant Point Yacht Club had a declining membership but turned things around with a well organized FireBug building scheme. The club now has 27 'Bugs, double the race day fleet size and a lot of new family memberships.***

The PPYC in Christchurch New Zealand came into existence in the early 1920s through a group of weekend holiday bach owners who kept their craft moored in the Christchurch Estuary. The original site was in very sheltered waters, but low tide mud curtailed much of their boating activity and it was decided that a local contractor be approached to scoop out a channel down to the main stream. But the hoofs of the draft horse pulling the scoop sank into the mud. A set of shoes, not unlike snow shoes were manufactured and fitted to the horses hooves. While these worked with some success it was an on-going job because the channel would slowly silt up again. In 1929 a site was procured on an island further up stream and over the years much reclamation has been carried out to the extent that there is now two and a half acres of rigging and car parking space and one of the finest dinghy clubs in the country.

## **Going Through a Lean Spell**

Over the years the club has had its highs and lows and it was during one of the lows that my attention was drawn to the little Firebug while reading a local boating magazine article. These articles continued at regular intervals until a description of the launching and performance of the boat got me thinking that here was a yacht that could stop the membership fall off at our club. This boat had everything that the first time builder required: ease of construction, low building costs, approximately 70 hours of work and a pleasing appearance when finished. Added to this the pedigree was good as she had been designed by one of New Zealand's most successful yacht designers, John Spencer.



*Nice club facilities on the Estuary*

## 55 Years with the Club

During my fifty five years with the club I have been involved with building 72 boats in a number of schemes. The building programs have always created great camaraderie amongst builders and mentors alike and in turn this friendship quickly integrated these new people into club life. There were also other pluses worth mentioning. The variety of wood working tools that turn up in such a scheme make boat building a pleasure and buying materials in bulk is a great way of saving cash. We were able to do some great deals.



*Build-a-boat displays worked wonders!*

My next move was to get the backing of the club committee, who like many yachting committees tend to be conservative in their thinking in that they prefer to support the already established local junior classes. So I drafted a letter that gave what I thought was a balanced look at the pros and cons of such a project. Having done this, it became very obvious to all that the only inconvenience was having to ask the boat storage holders to take their boats home for the winter because we needed the floor space. Having submitted my scheme to the committee, they in turn asked me to attend a meeting and explain how I thought the project should be launched. It went well.

## Shopping Mall Displays Work Well

Firstly we had to have a boat to display and two members offered to build one in quick time. I was to contact three large City Malls seeking space to hold our weekend displays. A graphic designer (club member) offered his services for the visual display. A roster

was drawn up to man our displays on a two hourly basis. This was a three weekend project and it gave us outstanding results. In fact it could easily have become an embarrassment, with some 84 names being collected on our clipboard building list. After the displays, a meeting was held to sort out the most likely builders. Of the names listed 65 turned up to this meeting. We were still in an embarrassing situation, as we were looking for about only 15 starters. It was decided that we should call for deposits on the night and we received 15, each with a signed contract saying that all would abide by the clubs decisions at all times plus front up with the cash on time. Another requisite was that they join up with the club for one season. After some discussion regarding times for building, it was decided that Monday nights and Sunday mornings would be the allotted times. Fifteen boats would be built basically in three batches of five.



*All the builders enjoyed the building and the scones!*

## Getting Started

Just as in previous years support from club members couldn't have been better and offers to help came from all directions. A small team would act as mentors. One club member who ran a joinery shop offered to make up five jigs and to kitset out most of the hull 'parts'. It then came down to our organization. A purchasing officer was appointed with instructions to get the best deals around the city that he could. I was to oversee the building and my 'treasurer' was to be a chap who had worked with me on four other building schemes. In fact between the two of us we had organized the building

of some 40 boats over four building projects. We started the first night by drawing "lots" to establish the order of building, and again for sail numbers. Once this was agreed too the builders were taken through the plans giving them a chance to query any problem spots and to test their ability as wood workers.

### **Building Five at a Time**

A good start was made by getting the various parts ready for assembly. While all builders were not required every Monday night and Sunday morning, most couldn't keep away! The next session was spent setting up the frames, bow and transom and dropping in the main girder, while the second group were putting the finishing touches to their frames so that they would be ready to go on the jigs when the first boats came off. Our aim being to set up five jigs and build the 15 boats in three lots. We were allowing ourselves around five weeks for each group. In fact we got the last five off in four weeks saving some seven hours. I guess we were just starting to get the hang of things.

The third night was spent fitting chines, stringers and gunwales. In some cases the fitting of some of the stringers was carried over to another session. At about this time it is usual to find out who is used to handling wood working tools and those who are not so handy. Some people needed to be given extra help. Once framed up it was time to fair the hull ready to take the ply. The design has the stringers precut to shape which does away with much of the fairing. But I felt that it would be a good experience for the first time builders to experience this part of boat building. It did cost us another 4/5 hours of work, but I think that it was worth it. We had now come to the part that everyone was looking forward to putting on the ply.

### **Glue**

We used a four to one glue mix which proved to be messy and wasteful mainly because we were using bulk containers. Perhaps if each builder had had his own pack of glue they may have been more prudent with their mixes. I prefer glue that has an equal proportion mix

(one to one). It is I think, easier to gauge the quantity needed for each task. In our first group we had a professional builder who put most of his ply on by using a staple gun, although I must point out here that the bottoms were nailed on. He slipped a piece of cardboard under each staple which stopped the staple from marking the ply and also made it easy to lever the staple out. Nails were only put in every 150 mm. Using this method we had fewer holes to stop up and the staple holes were almost non existent.



*Ray makes it on to the TV*

The ply all went on very quickly. We have used this method now for all other schemes. Next came the exciting part, lifting off the first hull! It was smiles all around. (I must say at this point, after some eight years of hard sailing these boats are showing no signs of any structural problems.) Once the first boats came off, the second group were ready to go on and the third group were setting up their parts in readiness. When the last group went on the jigs, the first group had fitted in all the deck bracing's, mast supports, carlins and side bulkheads. Then all the inside parts were waterproofed ready for putting on the deck. The team work was great, because the first group worked in with the others, helping them to catch up. Once the decks were on, the centerboards and rudders were made and the ships were taken home for painting.

### **Sunday Morning Teas**

Sunday morning teas were a highlight of the scheme. These were provided by my wife Nola, and were to become a very much looked for part of the project. They certainly helped to produce the camaraderie which developed

as the scheme progressed. It was always the case of after a tea break having to call out "TIME GENTLEMEN PLEASE AND BACK TO WORK!"

These morning tea breaks proved to be great social levelers, because there is a lot of dependence on your fellow team mates while building. There was also much hilarity one standing joke being "Did you do your scone while making these this morning?" and amongst the youngsters she became known as the Fruit Loaf Lady. Tea Breaks like these play a great part in running a successful scheme.

### Finishing off

A date was set for all boats to be back at the club to have fittings and masts rigged. We had an engineer in one of the groups who wanted to organize this side of things, but after eight years one or two things have started coming adrift..

I would recommend obtaining the complete set of spars, rigging, sail and fittings pack from Firebug Headquarters in Auckland, as you can be sure that all will be of the right stuff and well put together.



*Great excitement - 15 new boats launched!*

### Launching Day

When the time came for launching, which in our case has been mass launchings, you can actually feel the excitement of all involved. The completion dates for all the boats had been set one week prior to Opening Day and I am pleased to say all the boats were ready, finished to a very high standard, complete with good names and colourful graphics. It was a big day with a large crowd attending,

including the press, the local MP, mums, dads, grandparents and children everywhere. The weather was just right for a first sail.

Subsequent years saw more boats built but never more than 15 at any one time. We haven't run one for two years now, but I still get phone calls asking if I am going to run another, from people who have at some stage seen one of our Mall displays in recent times. When asked if they would like some help at home in building the boat, most of the replies have been. "I would rather work in a scheme like you ran at the club. I am told that they are great fun."



*Ray launches his own 'JitterBug'*

### Further Observations

We have doubled our fleet size through the little Firebug. We now have twenty seven Firebugs registered with the club and several others who visit from other clubs. Many parents have brought larger boats so as to be part of the action and a number have now served on both the General and Social Committees. To see youngsters in a group enjoying themselves so much makes the effort put in worth while.



*School Championships - you can see why all the kids want to graduate into a 'Bug'*

## Popular Little Ships

Fun wise, the youngsters who sail them are full of enthusiasm, some having sailed both the Optimist and P Class and say that they prefer their 'Bugs by far. Not only has the Firebug taken off amongst the juniors but all age groups are enjoying sailing. Six of our senior skippers ages are between 53 and 73 and of the six, three are female. Need I say that there is a lot of banter that goes on between the ages and the sexes.



*The skippers at the recent South Island Champs*

After our first scheme one builder's wife came up to me and said "Hubby has got so much from building his boat, he has now embarked on altering our kitchen. He would never have had the confidence to do anything like this before."

Not all builders were father and sons, for in each of the first two schemes we had a mother and daughter.

## Costs

We put our first boats in the water for \$NZ1100, (\$A1000). Now that is good for a new boat. The equivalent in other established off the shelf junior classes are for Optimists \$4,500, for the P class which is similar in size to the Firebug, \$7,500 and \$10,000. As value for money the Firebug would be very hard to beat and of course it's a bonus having great fun building it yourself.

Building schemes like the above are all about having fun, in both building and sailing whether you belong to a club or not, and making new friends. Would I recommend them, definitely and especially if it involves the little Firebug.

Ray O'Brien.