TRIED AND TESTED
Kieran Flatt reports on a new design process for custom-made awnings, covers and canvaswork

A room with a view

Why can’t you put a modern cockpit enclosure on a small, traditional yacht? Kieran Flatt met a man who can

Have you ever fancied one of those neat, zip-up cockpit awnings that look so snug when a chill breeze blows through the anchorage, with great big window panels so you can still enjoy the view? If you’ve ever used one, you’ll know how good they are. I’ve wanted one for years, but three marine canvasmakers talked me out of it. They could make it, sure, but the cost would be prohibitive. And they wouldn’t, anyway, because I’d be disappointed with the result. Just accept it, they said. That sort of cockpit enclosure doesn’t work on small, skinny boats. Have a boom tent instead.

It wasn’t bad advice. There are many reasons why you rarely see modern cockpit enclosures on boats like mine. You can’t have full standing headroom inside – it would create too much windage, making her skittish on moorings and at anchor. Besides, it would look ridiculous. And you can’t sail a small yacht to windward with a cockpit awning rigged, not comfortably at least. You’d have to re-route the mainsheet, too, and move the primary winches, which is a big job. And you’d have to crane your neck out the side to see what the sails are doing. Fair enough, but I didn’t want any of that. Sitting headroom is plenty for lounging at anchor and I had no intention of sailing inside a plastic canvas cocoon. And I’d spent enough time shivering under a tarpaulin in Cleaver’s cockpit to know that I wanted an enclosure, not a boom tent.

The truth is, there are other reasons for a canvasmaker to turn away this sort of job. It’s easier to produce canvas for a yacht that was designed on a computer and built in a factory than for an old boat that was drawn and built by hand and eye. Without a decent set of plans, the job must be done the old-fashioned way: spending a day on the boat, building a mock-up with bamboo,

Designing it

John tweaks the design for the umpteenth time. It’s much easier to do this if you can get an AutoCAD file of the boat from the builder

Making it

Tecsew’s small factory uses hi-tech machinery alongside traditional skills
The new canopy was carefully designed to avoid any need to move Cleaver’s deck hardware.

‘Cruising feels a lot less cramped when you’ve got an extra living room in port.’

Pros
- Good craftsmanship
- Reasonable price
- Top-quality materials
- Good craftsmanship

Cons
- This design process is unique to Hampshire-based Tecsew at the time of writing
- You’ll need a new sprayhood, too. It’s impractical to adapt and re-use an old one
- You will have only yourself to blame if the design’s not right!

Our Verdict
After a full season of use, I’m completely convinced. John Bland’s new way of designing complex, custom-made cockpit enclosures may not work out cheaper for the customer, but in my view it’s certainly better. And judging by this commission, and the other canvaswork they’ve done for me since, Tecsew’s craftsmanship is beyond reproach.

Early this season and plan to keep going till Christmas. We’ve spent less time in marinas and more time at anchor. It takes one person five minutes to deploy, or to pack up into a neat 4ft x 1ft 6in sausage, which stows easily in the forepeak when we’re under way. Winter maintenance is less of a chore with a bright, dry space to work in, and leaving the main hatch open to ventilate the cabin reduce condensation and mildew. On the water for a gear test in February, it was snug inside the awning and the view from the helm was actually OK. It works well in summer, too. Four people aboard a 28-footer would for a downwind passage offshore, under twin headsails. There’s plenty of headroom, but the extra windage hasn’t made Cleaver skittish at anchor or on moorings. A heavy boat with a keel like a barn door, she still lies to the tide, even in a stiff crosswind.

Price £4,078 including VAT
Contact Tecsew
Web www.tecsew.com