

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.



I was warned that it was folly to put a modern canopy on a 28ft Twister, but it works well and looks good

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

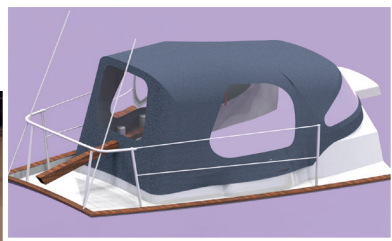
crane your neck out the side to see what the sails are doing.

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,

PHOTO: MAA/YM



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

PHOTO: MAA/YM



Making it

Tecsew's small factory uses hi-tech machinery alongside traditional skills



PHOTO: MAA/YM

PHOTO: MAA/YM



Fitting it

The new canopy was carefully designed to avoid any need to move Cleaver's deck hardware

tape and string, then taking measurements from that.

Size matters, too. A small-boat awning demands more thought and precision than a big one, yet the customer expects to pay less.

I was taken aback last year when John Bland, of Tecsew, agreed to give it a go. No sticks and string for him, though. John had hi-tech tricks up his sleeve.

A few years ago, John would have turned me down. Tecsew was working flat-out making canvas for brand-new boats (Beneteaus and Jeanneaus, among others), using AutoCAD design software and computer-driven machine tools. But when the recession slowed the flood of new-boat contract work, John's hi-tech operation had to go back into one-off jobs on older boats. The solution came from Europe, in a briefcase. (He asked us not to print a photo, as it's a trade secret.)

'It actually takes longer to do it this way,' John explained as he stood in *Cleaver's* cockpit, sketching a sprayhood out of thin air with a stylus connected by wire to his magic briefcase, which outputs the design as an AutoCAD file. 'The real benefit is that you can show clients exactly what you're doing and involve them in the design process.'

I felt very involved. To get the sprayhood right, we measured the extent of my field of vision



PHOTO: MAA/YM

from five helming positions and factored in the four-inch difference between my height of eye and my wife's. We considered how the view from the helm would change as the boat heeled. We traced the top of my head as I climbed

out of the hatch and measured my reach from cockpit to grabrails on the coachroof.

We discussed fabrics in depth – John was involved in a Portsmouth University research

project on UV degradation of marine canvas. We debated mainsheet arrangements, headsail sheet and furler leads, winch handle length, what to do about the tiller and the vexed issue, as always, of stowage.

So many variables... my brain began to backfire. But it all made sense when John emailed me some 3D graphics of the awning he'd designed, sitting atop *Cleaver's* cockpit, enabling me to ponder the design from all angles, inside and out.

It looked very impressive on screen but I was half-expecting to find something wrong with it during the first season of use – something that I'd failed to mention, or forgotten to consider.

I was wrong. It's practically perfect. We started cruising



Using it

With front, rear and side panels rolled up, it's as airy as a bimini. There's ample headroom inside

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 feels a lot less cramped when you've got an extra living room in port. When the weather is dismal, it's great. On hot, sunny days, with the side, rear and front panels open and rolled up, it's as



PHOTO: KIERAN FLATT/YM

airy as a bimini. Zipping up the windward side shuts out a cool breeze. I even sailed 20 miles with the awning up, just to see what it's like. I wouldn't bother again for coastal cruising but I 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

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.

RATING
10/10

PROS

- Customers get to be fully involved in the design process
- Reduced risk of getting it wrong
- Top-quality materials
- Reasonable price
- 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!