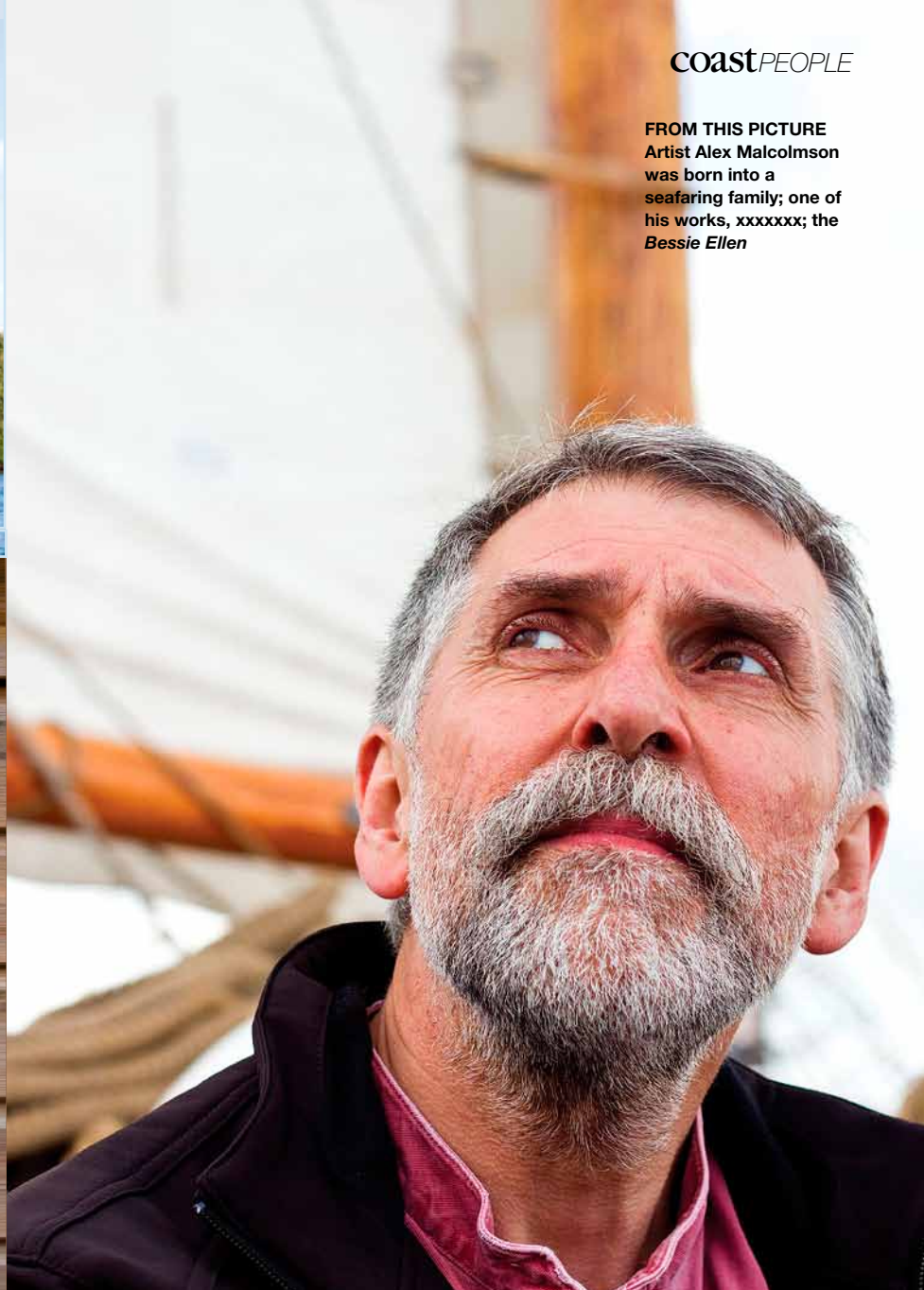


FROM THIS PICTURE  
Artist Alex Malcolmson  
was born into a  
seafaring family; one of  
his works, xxxxxxxx; the  
*Bessie Ellen*



# an artist of the FLOATING WORLD



The sea, boats and all things *maritime* inspire and inform the work of artist ALEX MALCOLMSON. So a beautiful *wooden sailing boat* in Falmouth seemed like the perfect place to meet him

WORDS *Ed Barrett* PHOTOGRAPHS *Greg Martin*

## Sail on the Bessie Ellen

*Bessie Ellen* is one of three remaining British coastal cargo ships that once plied their trade under sail, and the only one with a worldwide licence for charter. Built in Plymouth in 1904, she made regular journeys to and from England until 1947, when she was sold to a Danish captain. He renamed her *Forsget*, made various adaptations and sailed her until the 1970s, when she became unprofitable. After falling into disuse and disrepair, she was bought in 2000 by Nikki Alford, who lovingly restored her to her former glory – and restored her name. After three years of refitting with authentic materials, the ship took to sea again.

*Bessie Ellen* sails under the auspices of Classic Sailing, which was founded 15 years ago by Adam and Debbie Purser. They

offer hands-on holidays on a range of traditional craft and tall ships, travelling all over the world. Locations are chosen for their wildlife, natural scenery and beautiful anchorages.

‘Living together on a traditional boat as guest crew with only blocks and tackles encourages teamwork and brings the best out in people,’ say Adam and Debbie. To say nothing of the fresh air, adrenaline buzz and physical exercise.

Would-be sailors can book a voyage on the *Bessie Ellen* to Cornwall, Scotland, Brittany, Tenerife, Canaries and Azores. Prices range from £725-£780 for six nights and £295-£395 for three nights, inclusive of food, instruction and accommodation. For more info, see [bessie-ellen.com](http://bessie-ellen.com) and [classic-sailing.co.uk](http://classic-sailing.co.uk).

THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT xxxxx, one of Alex's boxworks inspired by dioramas; on board the *Bessie Ellen* – he enjoys drawing the ship's finer details such as the bell (above); at the helm



FROM LEFT The *Bessie Ellen*, a West Country wooden sailing ketch built in 1904, now takes holidaymakers on voyages; sailing aboard the tall ship has given Alex a new pastime; a ship's block; Alex's box construction, *Oyak* (The *Bessie Ellen*), like his others, is made from found materials

Every vessel has to have its registration number indelibly marked, so it can be identified if it sinks,' explains Alex Malcolmson. We are standing in the hold of the century-old sailing ship *Bessie Ellen* and looking at her own number, which is beautifully engraved into the wood. It's almost a work of art in its own right, which is hardly surprising, as Alex carved the numbers himself. He is an artist whose life and work has been shaped by the sea, and this particular ship has been a regular inspiration. During this trip he will sketch to his heart's content, creating the catalysts for future work.

'I always wanted to go on a proper solid wooden ship,' he says, remembering his first voyage on *Bessie Ellen* in 2007, 'and, living landlocked in Harrogate, I felt the desire growing.' The effect was dramatic: 'It was the most wonderful experience, sailing around the islands of Denmark and Sweden. We visited places you could never visit in any other way. A ship becomes your world, a sort of parallel universe. Nothing else matters.' Alex regularly returns to the *Bessie Ellen* to sail and gain inspiration from the ship's details.

The ship's owner, Nikki Alford, fetches a prized possession: a three-dimensional *Bessie Ellen*, set in a curved slatted frame that emulates the body of a ship. It is immediately recognisable as

Alex's work, and, like most of his pieces, it reveals a distinctive – and probably unique – array of influences and experiences.

### A SEAFARING ARTIST

Alex's relationship with the sea goes back to his childhood in the Shetland Isles, where he was born into a seafaring family. Rays from the Bressay Lighthouse would sweep across his bedroom at night, and by day he was surrounded by the artefacts of maritime life – birds, boats, ropes and buoys – that would become familiar motifs in his work. Art had its place, too. 'There was no Alfred Wallis where I lived,' he smiles, 'but there were people who made decorative objects – ships in bottles and things like that – and one or two local artists.'

Above all, Alex was fascinated by one very particular art form: the diorama. These half-ships, often with wooden sails, were set against a nautical backdrop and mounted in frames. Constructed by sailors with no formal training, they constitute an artistic tradition in themselves. 'I feel that dioramas are some of the highest forms of art,' Alex declares. 'They are as powerful to me as Picasso is. My work refers to that of the originals and tries to capture their spirit and quality. I actually like the perfect ones less





'A ship is the *perfect environment* in which to sketch, but these sketches won't "become" anything. They are a *parallel process* – a *meditation* —



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE  
Although he lives in Harrogate, Alex's life and work has been shaped by the sea. His sketching trips on the Bessie Ellen are a vital source of inspiration



than the ones where the artist is struggling to get it right. The tension expresses a truth.'

It comes as no surprise to learn that Alex admires avant-garde American artist Joseph Cornell's framed boxes, US painter and sculptor Robert Rauschenberg's use of unusual materials and objects, and 'that lovely period of Picasso's work when he seemed to find everything he needed lying around on the studio floor'. Less predictable, but equally interesting, is his love of Guy Taplin's decoy birds and the multi-faceted Siberian Yup'ik masks that so fascinated the surrealists a century ago. These disparate strands come together in the wooden birds and framed boxes that Alex makes today and sells on his website and in galleries such as St Jude's in Norfolk. 'I like the idea of a box,' he says. 'It has its own boundaries and it contains another world. I like objects that you can hold, that have a domestic scale or a relationship to the body.' The tactile qualities of his work cannot be emphasised strongly enough, evoking as they do the textures of rope, sail and wood. His model birds are not just beautiful representations of the creatures themselves; they also resemble boats, with their carefully crafted, slatted bodies. They cry out to be picked up and cradled in the hand.

### SKETCHING ON A SHIP

Although Alex doesn't distinguish between 'art' and 'craft', it is worth pointing out the painterly aspect of his work, with its subtle and clever use of colour and composition. He studied the Impressionists as a young man, but says he could never understand the French light in their paintings, which was so different to that of Shetland. Then he saw the pictures of German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, with their striking rendition of Nordic light, and felt a profound connection. Visiting Scandinavia on the *Bessie Ellen* made a similarly powerful impression: the light, the local art, the churches with boats hanging from their ceilings... and, of course, the sailing.

'A ship is the perfect environment in which to sketch,' he says, 'but these sketches won't "become" anything. They are a parallel process – a meditation. They are like notes, and I never show them.' He declines to ascribe a definitive 'meaning' to his work, preferring to describe it as 'hints, rather than something clearly explainable'. Maybe so. But here on the deck of the *Bessie Ellen*, surrounded by blue sky, green sea and creaking ropes, it all makes perfect sense. For more information, see [alexmalcolmson.co.uk](http://alexmalcolmson.co.uk) and [stjudes.co.uk](http://stjudes.co.uk). For more features, see [coastmagazine.co.uk](http://coastmagazine.co.uk).