

# COUNTRY LIFE®

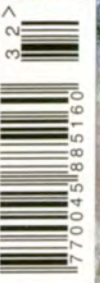
AUGUST 10, 2016

EVERY WEEK

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# Voyage of discovery

*Malahne, Portsmouth*

An outstanding restoration project has rescued an important historic yacht and created a magnificent series of new interiors in the spirit of the 1930s, as **John Goodall** reveals

Photographs by Paul Highnam





**Fig 1 left: *Malahne* weighs anchor. The yacht is 165ft long and accommodates 10 guests and 11 crew. She has a gross tonnage of 440 tonnes and a maximum speed of 15 knots. Fig 2 above: The upper deck with a hoist for the launches**

**A**T her moorings, *Malahne* looks strikingly different from the surrounding superyachts, with their sharp lines and shining finishes of plastic, metal and glass. Her classic lines proclaim her to be a survival from another age of yachting: *Malahne* was commissioned in 1937 by William 'Bill' Lawrence Stephenson, the managing director and, from 1931, chairman of Woolworths. During the 1930s, he emerged as a prominent figure in the sailing world, winning the King's Cup in 1936 on a J Class yacht built for him by Camper & Nicholsons in Portsmouth. This was named Velsheda after his three daughters, Velma, Sheila and Daphne.

The victory was perhaps the catalyst for the commission of a new motor yacht the following year, designed by Charles E. Nicholson from the same yard with another composite name. This time, he used the end letters of each daughter's name: *Malahne*.

The idea of pairing yachts—one with a motor, the other a sailing boat—began in the late 19th century. Sailing yachts were essentially pleasure boats for racing. In order to combine sport with comfort, therefore, it was necessary to sail in the company of a motor yacht. By contrast, these were luxuriously appointed vessels suitable for entertainment and the accommodation of guests, so a day of racing could conclude >



**Fig 3 above:** The games table in the main saloon. By mechanical releases, it is possible to draw a backgammon or chess board onto its surface. If both boards are folded away, however, a magnetic covering for cards can overlay the table. Behind it is the screen over the stairs.  
**Fig 4 right:** The upper saloon. The desk is a 1937 prototype for Heal's by Serge Chermayeff



with the home comforts of good food and comfortable beds.

Crucially, motor yachts could also sail independently on long journeys. Before the age of the aeroplane, therefore, for the rich, they were the means of foreign travel for pleasure and business.

In the two years following her construction, *Malahne* cruised in the Mediterranean and made at least one transatlantic business voyage to New York. When war broke out in 1939, however, she was immediately requisitioned—along with all other large motor yachts—by the Admiralty. As HMS *Malahne*, she was lightly armed. In a 2005 interview recorded by the Imperial War Museums, the former signaller P J. Little recalled that she possessed two machine guns and depth-charges. According to photographs, she

was also armed at some point with a light gun on the forward deck.

In June 1940, HMS *Malahne* was involved in the Dunkirk evacuation, towing small boats laden with soldiers away from the beaches. Then, from January 1942, she was based at Lamlash, in Arran, and classed as an Auxiliary Vessel for Flying Training. She also served as a ward ship. Among her wartime crew was the future Prime Minister, then Able Seaman Jim Callaghan. By a happy coincidence, he was also later the MP for the Cardiff constituency, where the present owner of *Malahne* grew up.

After the war, and in common with most other yacht owners, Stephenson released *Malahne* in return for a government payment. The aircraft was now reshaping international travel and, between 1949 and 1960, she passed through the hands of several private owners. She also

briefly changed name twice, first to the *Lev III* and then to *Narcissus*.

In 1960, she was refitted and reverted to her original name shortly before being purchased by the Nalman Steamship Corp of Panama for the film producer Sam Spiegel.

*Malahne* was initially acquired by Spiegel as floating accommodation for the film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). Thereafter, however, he used it as a place for entertaining, bringing to the yacht a glittering array of guests from across the world, including many Hollywood stars. A facsimile of Spiegel's guestbook is preserved onboard. The yacht was described in *Life* in July 1965 as having been 'mod-



ernised with stabilisers, automatic steering, short and long range radar and a 24-foot speedboat tender for waterskiing'

Latterly, however, Spiegel fell behind with maintenance and, in 1978, *Malahne* was suspended from her class. He was eventually compelled to sell the yacht, which was refitted in the 1980s and lost any obvious outward appearance of its age. Even after this transformation, however, *Malahne* was not forgotten. Survivals of this kind are a great rarity and Nicholas Edmiston, chairman of the superyacht brokerage firm Edmiston, followed its fortunes closely. In 2009, with G. L. Watson & Co, he prepared designs for the restoration of the

yacht and, in the meantime, kept an eye open for someone to buy and restore it.

The opportunity came when a British philanthropist arrived in search of a yacht to restore. He saw the potential of the vessel despite its parlous condition. Fortuitously, *Malahne* had a special resonance for him: the year its keel was laid down, 1937, was the year his mother had escaped Germany and arrived in England. On the foundation of this association, others have been built, so that the vessel's restoration has developed in one sense as a homage to the owner's family and its experience.

There are two inextricably related aspects to the restoration, of which the first is ess-

entially technical: it was necessary to re-create within the original hull of the vessel a state-of-the-art motor yacht with modern engines and technical infrastructure. So, for example, *Malahne* today incorporates a full IT system and air conditioning as well as such features as modern engines, stabilisers and a forward-turning propeller termed a bow thruster.

The second aspect of the work was to create a sumptuous new interior. Photographs of the original vessel show that its main cabins were relatively austere. Again, rather than re-creating these, the interior designer Guy Oliver of Oliver Laws was charged with reinventing them in a 1930s idiom. It is a period with which ➤



*Fig 5: The dining room and its table set on a single star-shaped leg. The pattern re-emerges on the table surface and in the light shade*

he has a special affinity, having worked on, among other prestigious projects, Claridge's.

This new interior had to be designed within the constraints imposed by the yacht as a functioning vessel, most importantly, concerns of weight—to avoid imbalance or instability—and to make the most of space. It is part of the delight of *Malahne* today that these constraints have not been treated as problems, but as disciplines to be mastered and turned to ingenious—and sometimes marvellous—purpose. Indeed, every room possesses at least one object that was effectively a design project in its own right. Even

the lettering on the yacht is in a specially designed font devised with the owner.

Renovating a 1930s vessel has demanded a completely different kind of expertise from that employed in the refurbishment of modern yachts. As a Portsmouth-built ship, moreover, the owner was keen that as much work should be done in Britain as possible. In the event, the yacht was restored by Pendennis Shipyard in Falmouth, Cornwall. The restoration took 30 months to complete and *Malahne* was relaunched on March 14, 2015.

The entire body of the yacht, with all its interiors, sits inside the steel hull and aluminium

superstructure under the weight of gravity and is cushioned against the metal with rubber. This is to prevent the vibrations of the engine from destroying the internal structure. The physical separation of the hull and the internal frame demands a very exacting system of design and construction, which was undertaken by naval architects BMT Nigel Gee. So too does the geometry of the hull, which creates curves running through the length of the yacht and across its width.

The interior shell of the yacht was constructed by Ruiters Quality Interiors. To make the most of the space available, the internal



Fig 6: The glittering master bathroom

Fig 7: A desk with views of Cardiff Docks

Only when the complete design was agreed could the interior be assembled. The furnishings include many period pieces, collected for the ship and the paintings have been selected from the owner's private collection. Much besides, however, has been specially commissioned from specialist craftsmen and women.

The interior is laid out on three principal decks of which the lower, with portholes just above the water line, comprises a series of guest cabins with en-suite bathrooms. Each one is distinctively finished with panelling and, in one case, this is strikingly decorated in black and white with illustrations of Cardiff Docks by Rebecca Perry (Fig 7).

On the principal deck above this are the dining room and main saloon, the latter partly screened from the main stairs and a spacious sun deck by an elegant lattice of glass, metal and painted panels. Just beside the screen is a games table by Jerome Cordie, that exemplifies the ingenuity of the newly commissioned furniture (Fig 3). It is a work of joinery as compelling to play with as to play upon.

The dining room is dominated by another large fixed table, which stands on a single star-shaped leg (Fig 5). This figure of a star not only determines the pattern of the floor, but is inlaid in the surface of the table and appears in the shape of the central light fitting. All the crockery and cutlery is stored in beautifully designed cabinets that secure each item against the movement of the sea.

To either side of the dining room are narrow side decks that run like open corridors with views over the sea. These connect to the master bedroom suite that extends the full width of the vessel and incorporates a magnificent bathroom (Fig 6) that brilliantly evokes the fashion for dazzling interiors

of this kind between the World Wars (COUNTRY LIFE, March 23, 2011).

On the upper deck is the bridge and, behind it, another saloon (Fig 4) with some particularly fine period furnishings. These include panels of the signs of the zodiac made for the lifts of the Selfridges store on Oxford Street in 1928 by the Birmingham Guild of Metalworkers, incorporating work by Walter Gilbert and his assistant, Louis Weingartner. Here, the portholes can be covered by shutters, operated by turning handles.

**‘The delight of Malahne’s interiors is that the constraints of a functioning vessel have been mastered to ingenious purpose ;**

Stored at this level are two launches (Fig 2), with that for the owner built by Cockwells of Falmouth. It is overlaid with mahogany and capable of 35 knots.

Walking on the immaculate decks of Malahne today, it is impossible not to feel that the recent restoration has been an unusual achievement. The re-creation of its period interiors has been full-blooded and correspondingly spectacular. What makes them exciting, however, is the way in which they have been thoughtfully shaped to modern needs.

This classic yacht (Fig 1) has not been so much re-created as improved by the 21st century. Hopefully, its example will help win other historic yachts a similar future. 🐾

configuration of the vessel was adapted in some particulars. The modern engine, for example, is much smaller than its predecessor, yet more powerful and efficient.

All the furnishing and internal finishes were planned concurrently with the construction of the internal skeleton. A full-sized model of each room was created to allow for the layout of full-scale drawings and then mock-ups of the fittings within it. Exact allowance had to be made for the opening of drawers and the passage of people. Vertical measurements were no less important: in some interiors, the legs of tables and chairs have been shortened in order to preserve an illusion of space beneath low ceilings.