



COURTESY/TERN BOATWORKS

Young Canadians

A Nova Scotia boatyard attracts new talent by offering unusual projects, training in traditional skills, and the potential for an enduring career.

by Melissa Wood

On a recent trip to Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, I met designer Laurie McGowan, who recommended visiting Tern Boatworks, in nearby Chester Basin; that's where the hot young talent is, he said. McGowan has been working with Tern's owner, Bruce Thompson, and his crew on the design of *Tari-Ann*, a 48' (14.6m) motorsailer now in build.

Talent finds them

In Nova Scotia, boatbuilders are experiencing a boom in sales thanks to the lobster industry's big catches and rising prices, along with a lower Canadian dollar that attracts U.S. boat

buyers. CBC News reports that Maritime boatyards are operating at full capacity, mostly driven by fishermen who spare no comforts in their new rides. These big, usually FRP fishboats can fetch from \$750,000 to \$1.2 million CAD, fully outfitted, and are in such demand that many boatyards have waiting lists of three to four years. The industry has climbed from a low of \$50 million in annual sales during the depths of the Great Recession, in 2008–09, to reach a record-high year of \$89 million in 2015, according to a report by the Nova Scotia Boatbuilders Association (NSBA). Sales were expected to grow another 12% in 2016.

Tern's prosperity, though tangential to the fishing vessel boom, is undeniable. Started in 2005, this small boatyard on Nova Scotia's South Shore is among the businesses that make up the Gold River Marina, about an hour south of Halifax and thus convenient for customers who fly in from southern locales. Though Thompson is open to projects of all types, his yard focuses mostly on the construction, repair, and maintenance of custom wooden recreational vessels.

Within its niche, Tern has also been growing, and Thompson shares the same challenge that neighboring builders of commercial fishing boats and

Above—Lucas Gilbert inside the hull of the 33' (10m) *Enigma* while under construction. The first wooden International One-Design built since the 1980s, she was Tern Boatworks' first new-build and an example of their willingness to take on unconventional projects.

boat manufacturers across North America are facing as the industry prospers: finding good help. But those who have come to work at Tern seem to be drawn here and they stay.

The company started as a solo mission run out of the back of Thompson's car. An avid sailor, he began building boats at age 16 with a trimaran in his parents' garage. Since then, he trained in night school and went on to work at several yards, including Covey Island Boatworks in Lunenburg and the boatyard at the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron in Halifax. He founded Tern while working for another yard in Halifax that was moving away from wooden boat projects. "It wasn't where I wanted to be going," he said. Then a customer asked him to build a galley after hours. He rented space for a short time and in 2005 built the shop in the Gold River Marina, which had new owners who wanted to cater to owners of wooden boats and saw the benefits of Tern being able to offer repairs to its customers.

"It wasn't my intention. It just kind of happened," said Thompson, who's now 41 years old.

The yard's first big project was the restoration of *Seneca*, a 1907, 46' (14m) LOA P-class sloop designed by Nathanael Herreshoff, built to compete in the longstanding match racing competition for the Canada's Cup, which must be sailed between a U.S. and a Canadian yacht club. *Seneca* had been converted into a schooner when the P-class fell out of favor, in the 1920s.

Her restoration back to original P-class configuration began when she was brought into the boatyard in Halifax where Thompson was working before starting Tern. However, after

the removal of *Seneca's* deck, lead keel, and deadwood, along with three-quarters of her shelf and deckbeams, the project stalled. During that time, Thompson had started Tern, where he was later joined by Lucas Gilbert, another former employee of the same Halifax boatyard. "I came a year later," remembered Gilbert, "as quick as I could get there." *Seneca* followed, too.

"They put together a syndicate, and



Tern's owner, Bruce Thompson, on the foredeck of the Laurie McGowan-designed *Tari-Ann*, a 48' (14.6m) motorsailer that fills the shop's main bay. Gilbert is visible working in the pilothouse.

installed new white oak deadwood and sternpost, and constructed a new mahogany transom. They also caulked all plank seams, replaced the sheerstrakes and one strake below on the topsides, and reattached her 10,000-lb (4,536-kg) lead keel with new bronze keelbolts and bronze keel strapping. Additional details included new hanging knees, rails, hatch, deck hardware, toerails, maststep, and bulkheads. In addition, her original gaff rig was changed to marconi to fit in with other local classic wooden boats.

"It was definitely a signature project," said Thompson. So much so that the rebuild caught the attention of Neil Joyce, a Nova Scotia native and graduate of the boatbuilding program at the Apprenticeshop in Rockland, Maine, who had worked at a couple other boatyards before finding Tern.

"He approached us," said Thompson, "and he's been here ever since." When Joyce arrived, Tern had just been commissioned to work on a 38' (11.6m) lobster yacht whose bare hull needed to be outfitted with an engine and drivetrain, systems, interior, and deck hardware. Joyce is now the lead hand, managing outside projects, but he still works on new-builds as well.

For Joyce, going to Tern was not just about the quality of the construction. "Bruce was closer to my age," said Joyce. "He was

someone I thought I maybe could build a career with. I looked at Bruce, and I thought, "There's a lifetime of work." It turned out to be right."

Another crew member, Nick Bigeau, initially came on board during the construction of the lobster yacht after working at a big yard in Scotland. He left, moving to Montreal to work in aerospace, but he and his wife missed Nova Scotia, and he missed the work, so they came back. "I like working here because we're roughly the same

they approached us to do a rebuild because we worked on it before, and we knew what was needed," said Thompson.

In 2006-07, Tern converted her back into a P-class sloop. It was a complete rebuild based on original drawings from the Herreshoff Marine Museum in Bristol, Rhode Island. Along with her new deck with mahogany covering boards and new deck structure, with skylight and new cockpit and rebuilt coamings, Tern

age,” said Bigeau. “Everybody’s on the same page, I think.”

That’s no accident. Thompson is careful about who he hires. “To get in a trade you’re not going to get rich at, you have to have passion about it,” he said. “Passion goes a long way,” though Joyce added that he has to weed out the wooden boat dreamers, who think

it’s going to be all hand planes and chisels. During interviews, he warns, “There will be weeks of you sitting under the boat, grinding.”

Ten crew members work at Tern now, including Jeff Robar, who worked at Covey Island Boatworks for 20 years (“a traditionalist,” said Thompson); Nathaniel Stabenow, who worked on

rigging for the fisheries museum in Lunenburg before coming to Tern; Robby MacCallum, a marine systems technician who works as a subcontractor; and shop intern Ellen McLaren. One of the most recent hires is Jonathan Martel, a carpenter from British Columbia. After moving to Nova Scotia, he approached the NSBA, which pointed him to the yard because he wanted to continue to work in wood. He was not interested in building big fiberglass lobsterboats; Tern was where he wanted to be.

“I hassled Bruce here for a month or so, called every week, and now here I am,” he said.

They take on unusual projects

In 2009 came *Enigma*, a 33’ (10m) open-cockpit daysailer and Tern’s first new-build.

Significant not just as the yard’s first new construction, *Enigma* was also the first International One-Design (IOD) sloop to be built in wood since the 1980s. To be permitted to build her, Thompson had to apply to the IOD World Class Association (www.internationalonedesign.org), which required that Tern adhere faithfully to original 1936 drawings. “We had to put a résumé together and get approved,” said Thompson.

Enigma was built with a white oak backbone and framing, and quarter-sawn Douglas-fir planking, and fastened in bronze. Her cabin sides, covering boards, transom, and hatches are mahogany. Broomfield & Sons (Providence, Rhode Island) cast her 4,200-lb (1,905-kg) keel to IOD class measurements, and Kilburn Marine (Chester, Nova Scotia) completed the rigging. She was launched in August 2009 and remains in the local Chester fleet, which comprises eight IODs. (According to Thompson, they were all wooden until an FRP boat joined the fleet in 2017.)

Following the launching, Tern was again subjected to the scrutiny of the IOD association, which needed to certify the boat had been built to class measurements and specifications in



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COURTESY TERN BOATWORKS



Thompson (left) stands with his two longest-serving employees in front of Enigma: Neil Joyce (center) and Gilbert. Joyce said Tern caught his eye with its rebuild in 2007 of Seneca, a 1907 Herreshoff P-class sloop.

order for it to qualify for competition in IOD races. "The biggest discrepancy was 1/8" [3.175mm]," Thompson said.

While Seneca caught the attention of other boatbuilders, and Enigma made local news and was heralded internationally in the marine press, Tern has likely received the most public exposure for a build that will never be launched.

In 2010 the Halifax Waterfront Development Corporation put out a proposal to build a submarine-themed playground to replace an old wooden tug playground.

Thompson applied, working with Laurie McGowan of McGowan Marine Design (Mochelle, Nova Scotia) for the design.

"I had met Laurie and liked him right away," said Thompson. The two began shooting ideas back and forth. Unlike the proposals submitted by their competitors, who were playground manufacturers, theirs would be built following the same methods they used for building boats.

"We basically sent a letter and said this is our skills base," said Thompson. After "a whole bunch applied," the competition was narrowed down to four or five proposals, including Tern's. "We didn't fit in the box of what they were expecting," said Thompson. Still, they got the job.

Construction began in the winter of 2010-11, and was a mixture of composite wood, fiberglass, and metalwork. A consulting playground specialist from

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YARD PROFILE: *Tern Boatworks*

Ottawa, Ontario, ensured that the project would comply with numerous safety specifications. “We outsourced bits and pieces,” said Thompson. The playground opened in fall 2011.

Like so many custom and semi-custom builders, Tern has relied on a steady flow of storage, refit, repair, and maintenance jobs to fill in around bigger builds and long-term projects. A sampling of boats in the yard for repair during my visit included a mahogany runabout to be rebuilt, a production boat whose owner wanted to drop its keel, and a Grand Banks that may be getting a new electrical system.

Sometimes Tern will also assist other yards. In 2010, for example, they completed the deck for *Farfarer*, a 58’ (17.4m) wood/epoxy schooner designed by Nigel Irens and built by Covey Island Boatworks.

They also started a foundry for aluminum and bronze castings.

Tern built a submarine-themed playground for the Halifax waterfront following standard boatbuilding methods. The main body is wood-epoxy strip-plank construction, while the conning tower and fins are fiberglass.



COURTESY TERN BOATWORKS

Thompson and Gilbert, who was in school studying machining at the time, began the after-hours endeavor after having difficulty finding parts during *Seneca’s* restoration. They made all the castings for *Enigma*, ensuring that they matched the 1936 IOD drawings. Gilbert now runs it out of his home shop as New Dublin Ship Fittings. He’s making all the metal hardware for the current build, *Tari-Ann*, and serves as a subcontractor

for other local boatshops.

“It’s all over the map,” said Thompson. “If we just focused on traditional boatbuilding and repair, we wouldn’t be as busy as we are.”

Part of this work includes an ongoing maintenance and storage program for the area’s wooden boat fleet. Locally there’s a high demand for inside storage, according to Thompson.

As lead hand, in late October Joyce was making the transition from outside

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The yard supplements new-builds and major rebuilds with a steady flow of repair and maintenance work. That includes ongoing upkeep and winter storage of the local fleet comprising production FRP power and sailboats and classic wooden boats.

work to inside the shop, going over the maintenance and repair jobs to be done over the winter. Daily, Joyce handles projects as they come in the door, which includes pricing, quoting, and purchasing. His management helps free Thompson from worrying about the maintenance side of the business. That day's to-do list included managing a paint job, a windlass installation, a toerail repair, winterizing several boats, and extensive maintenance.

"I take care of a lot of the little stuff that could slow down the main project," Joyce said.

They're ready to grow

There was no need to point out the boat under construction when I visited. It filled the shop.

Tari-Ann is a 48' (14.6m) shallow-draft motorsailer, designed by McGowan and her owner, Tom Goodwin. Built for cruising in the Bahamas, the design

was inspired by the 83-year-old Chesapeake Bay buy boat belonging to Goodwin's brother, and has a layout that accommodates guests in cabins fore and aft. Construction is mostly cold-molded wood/epoxy. Much of the interior is finished in cherry. It's Tern's biggest build and is barely contained by the yard's 25' x 60' (7.6m x 18.3m) main bay. An adjoining smaller bay measures 40' x 18' (12.2m x 5.5m).

Working from McGowan's Mylar drawings, the crew began by laying out the bulkheads, which were glued and laminated. Once the cold-molded hull was finished, "I pulled it out of the shop and flipped it with two cranes," said Thompson. "This way it's completely controlled. Once we set it up, it was less than 10 minutes."

The design and build have been a three-way collaboration among the Tern crew, McGowan, and Goodwin. An artist, seaplane pilot, and longtime

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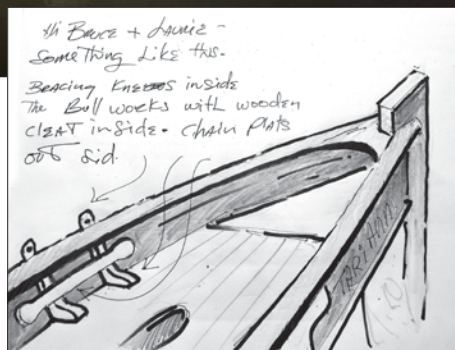
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COURTESY, TERN BOATWORKS (RIGHT) AND TOM GOODWIN (BELOW)



As work progressed on the Tari-Ann (above), Thompson was in continual contact with designer Laurie McGowan and designer-owner Tom Goodwin, an artist who provided detailed sketches, such as this one of her bow (right), to illustrate the thoughts and components he wanted to incorporate.



sailor, Goodwin had previously worked with McGowan on the 27' (8.2m) solar/electric ketch *Czarina*, built by Covey Island Boatworks. "He's got an amazing aesthetic eye," said Thompson. "He has a lot of good ideas. When he was younger he built a Bahamian sloop. He was always a sailor."

Goodwin has continued to be involved during different stages of the build. "He would do sketches on a pad and e-mail them to us. For me, that's a lot of information.... It gave us a lot of details to go by," said Thompson. "He'd sketch it, and I'd give input, and Laurie gave input. I think it's important that everyone on the shop floor has a say."

Goodwin does not want it to be too fancy. "He wants it to be subtle," said Thompson, in the spirit of the classic workboat the design is based on. Power will be provided by a rebuilt 155-hp (116-kW) Detroit 471 diesel engine, with 400-gal (1,514-l) fuel capacity,



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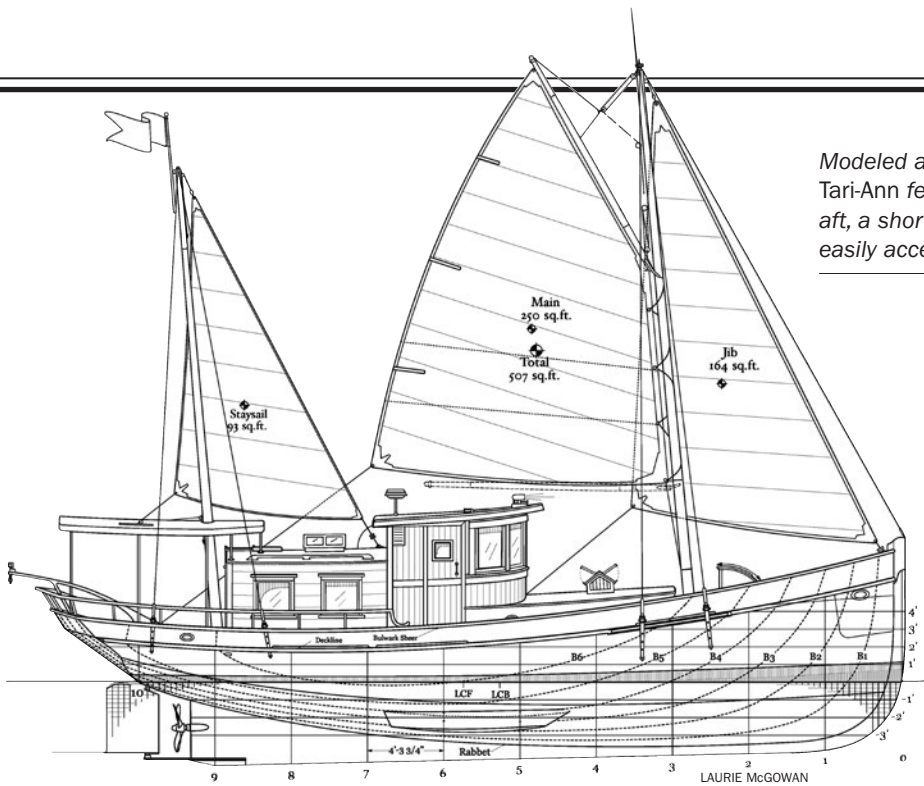
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Modeled after a classic Chesapeake buy boat, Tari-Ann features accommodations in cabins fore and aft, a short gaff ketch rig, and systems that can be easily accessed for repairs.

“It’s as simple as it can be, but it’s modern, too,” said Thompson. That’s to ensure that Goodwin can handle his own repairs and maintenance while cruising in the Bahamas. The Tern crew also made sure everything was easy to access. “A lot of the sole is removable to access certain things,” said Thompson. “I think it’s always good to be able to get a motor out of a boat. Tom was on the same page.”

Though the mantra is “not fancy,” Goodwin has added some distinctive touches, such as custom-designed windows and in the forward cabin a built-in desk with a swing-out stool underneath it. Gilbert, who was working on framing the deck, observed that some

assisted by a gaff ketch rig, with roller reefing on the jib and mizzen. Systems are simple. Consisting of an inverter, a generator, and a solar panel, the

electrical system can be easily added to as needed, without having to be completely reinvented. She will also have an autopilot but no watermaker.

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YARD PROFILE: *Tern Boatworks*

of it has to be figured out as they go, to meet Goodwin's specifications.

"The whole cabinhouse is all on the same plane," explained Thompson. "The shape is a compound curve. Tom is big on the flow of lines. All the windows are curved." Getting this just right required laying it out in tape, and sending pictures to Goodwin. "After three or four tries, we got it," said Thompson.

There have been some modifications along the way. "Little add-ons here and there," said Thompson. One was the change from a box keel to a bilge keel so it could be beached. Another was the addition of a Sardine-model woodstove to the pilothouse.

Thompson estimated that she'll be launched in mid-May, and that they may also build a dinghy for her over the winter.

With *Tari-Ann* nearing completion, Thompson was pulling crew off the build to address the yard's winter work list. One of those projects is a shop building for Tern on a new site in nearby LaHave, which includes a four-acre (1.6-hectare) cleared lot and a house. Thompson said a bigger shop there will accommodate new-builds. He'll keep repairs and maintenance in Chester Basin. Thompson was also looking forward to his next hire, his first-ever office manager, who was due to start in November. He hoped the addition would allow him to spend more time boatbuilding.

"It just got to the point where we had to pull back or move ahead," he said.

The house at the new site will also provide the opportunity to hire interns from more far-flung places. Tern has always had one or two apprentices, some via the NSBA as well as two who have come from Women Unlimited, an organization that trains women in local trades. In 2016, however, Thompson had to turn down a would-be apprentice from Denmark because there was no place for him to live.

Another advantage of the new site is that it would eliminate Thompson's daily hour-and-a-half commute. He lives in LaHave with his wife, Sadie, who promotes healthcare initiatives, and their two young children, Eamon and Enid.

Sadie's family owns a business in LaHave too. Thompson said that when he started Tern, he followed the example of the popular LaHave Bakery, run by Sadie's mother.

"I modeled it off her style. It's not profit-driven," he said, but "obviously it has to work. To us, it's more important to have good-quality work going out the door. She always thinks about people first." **PBB**

About the Author: This is Melissa Wood's last story as Professional BoatBuilder's associate editor. She continues to work as a writer based in Portland, Maine, and Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. View her portfolio at www.melissafwood.wordpress.com.