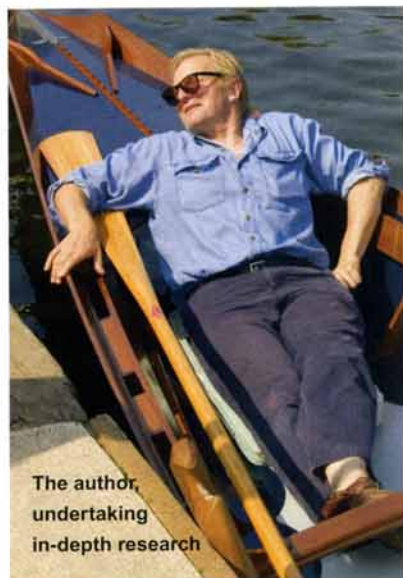


A sandolo in Stratford



The author, undertaking in-depth research

By Sam Llewellyn

It's a little bit of Venice – a very long, thin bit, which is rowed standing up, using the intriguing *forcola* – and created in Stratford for use by an actor on an English canal



Sandolo maestro Roberto Costa rows new owner Richard Heffer and companion in *Serena*



Two-man style
demonstrated by
City Barge
members

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It was a spring afternoon on the Avon at Stratford. On the bridge, several million excited Japanese tourists were off to meet William Shakespeare. At Avon Boating, Stratford's premier river boat hire establishment, Tom was issuing a skiff to a couple who smelt of beer, and Ed was putting a new spark plug in the generator that powers the yard's stop-me-and-buy-one ice cream boat. And Nick Birch, the yard's manager, was pointing out a fat rowing boat called *Thelma*. *Thelma* was built in Yorkshire in the 1950s, is licensed to carry 16 people, and, in pre-licensing days, carried 22, powered by a small, weary boatman rowing from the bow thwart.

Remember *Thelma*. She comes in later.

We marched across a closely-mown lawn into a boathouse and climbed some stairs into a loft. There were more wooden boats in the rafters and a smell of sawn timber and Stockholm tar. "Here you are," said Nick.

There, sitting on trestles, was a boat. A boat of a kind I had never until this moment seen on land or sea. It was 9m long – about 30ft – and 1.4m – or 4ft 6in – wide, with the lethal sheer of a dagger blade and the ram of a galley. This was a *sandolo*, as seen

on the canals and lagoons of Venice, in build by Avon Boating as a personal runabout for the actor Richard Heffer.

Heffer has been mixed up with boats most of his life – notably the Lynn shrimper *Rob Pete*, LN177, which he restored in the late 1980s. Nowadays he spends his time in Cambridge, by the marsh in North Norfolk, and by the Kennet and Avon Canal in Wiltshire. "All my life I've watched people in Venice doing this extraordinary standing-up rowing. I thought: this is a very sensible way of taking a narrow boat through small waterways."

Anyone who has seen a picture postcard from Venice knows about Venetian watercraft. Gondolas, innit? But gondolas are only part of it. There are dozens of Venetian boat types. They range from vast and ornate ceremonial barges like the *Bucintoro*, in whose ancestors new Doges used to be rowed out to conduct marriage ceremonies with the Adriatic, through fat maritime builders' lorries like the *peata*, to the burly six-oared canoe-shaped *caorlina*, now used by strong people for racing.

The *sandolo* is the basic Venetian rowing boat. Bog-standard examples occupy a niche somewhere between a white van

and a wheelbarrow. More refined specimens are Venice's favourite fishing, picnicking and mucking-about boats. Their eel-like slenderness makes them ideal for sliding round narrow canals, and their flat bottoms are handy for the shallows of the lagoon.

The ideal boat for the Cam and the canals and the marsh, reasoned Heffer. But how to get one built? He started asking around Venice's ancient rowing clubs for a builder. Venice became a tourist town in the 18th century and has had a quarter of a millennium to build up a powerful resistance to what Venetians think are silly questions. Heffer returned home, rather disheartened. Then the landlord of the Cambridge Blue, Cambridge's legendary rowing pub, directed him to a club called the City Barge. This is based in the Hertford College boathouse in Oxford and owns 'about 18' Venetian boats. Richard Bailey, a City Barge man, owns *Allegra*, a beautiful *sandolo*. Heffer took her for a spin, and was hooked. Bailey told him the boat had been built in Stratford.

Stratford is one of the few towns never to have been described as the Venice of the Midlands. But off to Stratford Heffer went. And this is where *Thelma* comes in. At the turn of the 20th century Stratford was the

*"A kind of boat
I had never seen
until this moment"*



Roberto (also inset, right) demonstrates the two-oared *valesana* ('knitting') style of rowing

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home of the bestselling novelist Marie Corelli, the Jilly Cooper of her day. Corelli was on the eccentric side of completely normal. "I never married," she said, "because there was no need. I have three pets at home which answer the same purpose as a husband. I have a dog which growls every morning, a parrot that swears all afternoon, and a cat that comes home late at night." (Another reason may have been that she was a lesbian.) *Thelma* is called after Corelli's most successful novel. A romantic novelist without a husband obviously stood in need of a gondolier, and a gondolier is nothing without a gondola. So Corelli got one of each.

Nick Birch, having become a partner in Avon Boating, saw the archive photographs, emigrated to Venice, learned to row Venetian style and went and worked at the Tramontin yard, most distinguished of gondola builders and inventors of the asymmetric hull. He also rowed for the Querini rowing club. When he returned to Stratford it was with a gondola, which now lives in a boathouse beside the *Swan of Avon*, the immaculate steam launch that has been in the yard's pos-

session for 100 years. Patrizia, his wife, is from the Veneto. And when Nick is not running the yard, he tends to be building a sandolo in the loft of his boathouse.

From bow to stern, a sandolo goes as follows. At the tip of the bow is a trefoil iron tipped with an acorn done in stainless steel. On the foredeck are the *massa*, bulwarks, which shoot off any water that has found its way aboard. The foredeck terminates in a pleasing

ogee. This, and a similar termination of the after deck, are signs that this is a subspecies of sandalo called the *mascareta*. According to Nick, these are small, light and eminently suited for racing. According to some heavy-breathing Venetian tourist literature, this same lightness made them ideal for rowing by courtesans responding at full speed to romantic emergencies.

The passenger-and-rower compartment is braced by two powerful laminated beams; an afterdeck, again

with an ogee forward edge, runs up to the narrow, steeply-raked transom.

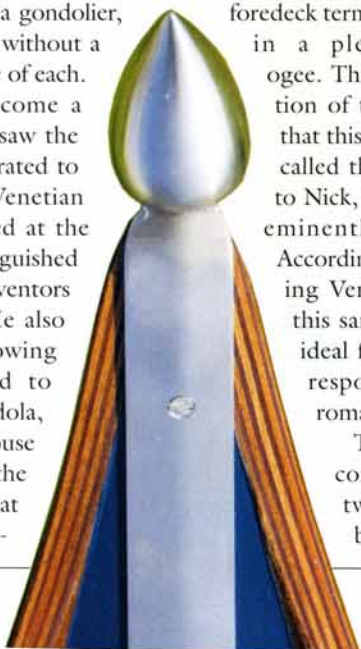
Gondoliers stand on the aft decks of their boats. In a sandolo, the rower stands on the boat's bottom. In all Venetian boats, the fulcrum for the oar is the *forcola* – a crook roughly the shape of a bent human arm, hewn from walnut, an object of such sculptural power that there is one in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Five different oar positions are available

for the *popier*, the helmsman rower at the sandolo's stern, and three principal styles: a simple forward stroke, with two or three other rowers; traditional solo rowing, in which the oar is feathered through the water on the return stroke rather like the canoeist's J-stroke, and the fiendishly difficult two-oared *valesana*, or 'knitting', in which the oar handles overlap by a foot or so.

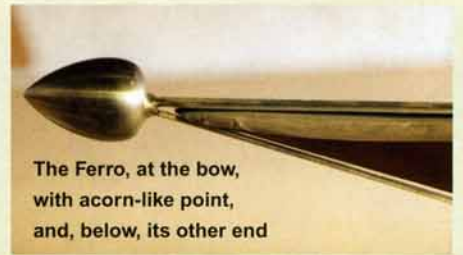
Watching beginners row Venetian style is a fine spectator sport, partly because the boats are long and narrow but mostly because the oar-notches in the *forcola* have no backs. It is not unlike using a single oar in a rowlock with one horn ground off while standing in a Canadian canoe.

"Eel-like slenderness, ideal for sliding round narrow canals"





Builder Nick Birch, left, discusses *Serena* with owner Richard Heffer



The Ferro, at the bow, with acorn-like point, and, below, its other end



Forcola base carries signature of Saverio Pastor, the maker

The construction of a sandolo

Prior to the 1960s *sandoli* were planked in fir on elm and oak frames. Since 1960 it has been standard practice to build them in ply.

Frames are built in three parts. Originally, the bottoms (*piane*) were elm, the sides (*sanconi*) oak. The chine log was elm. The 100mm clamp (*corbolo*) that links the frame ends is the principal fore-and-aft structural member. It also provides the sockets for the *forcole*.

Planked sandole are now regarded as obsolete – the thickness of planking required to take caulking makes them too heavy. *Serena* is built of 9mm ply on 24 sapele frames, *piane* 50mm deep x 25mm, screwed and glued with epoxy resin to *sanconi* 50mm x 15mm, linked by sapele chine log and *corbolo*. There are two crossbeams: sapele laminated with cedar ‘for interest’.

The boat is painted in Flag blue, with battleship grey scalloped floorboards, all in International yacht enamel, brightwork finished in International Schooner varnish. Nick has paid minute attention to detail, as can be seen by the charming little chamfers at the chine log/frame joints. “I know you don’t see them because they’re under the floorboards,” he says. “But even if you don’t see it, it’s got to be right.”



Forcola base carries signature of Saverio Pastor, the maker



Crossbeam in iroko, with cedar laminate for decoration

The greatest *forcola* maker of Venice is Saverio Pastor. A pair of Pastor oars lay here half-swathed in tissue paper in their long wooden box. They are made of hemlock with beech splines on the leading and trailing edges of the blades. The blade is more radically curved on the top than the bottom. This shaping of the oar blade is to make sure that the blade has just enough downward pressure to stop it leaping out of the *forcolo* on the return stroke, without diving or rising.

On launch day Heffer presided over bottles and Venetian snacks on the boathouse lawn. Among the straw hats and print dresses stood a dark man with a cynical eye and a blazer bearing the badge of the Querini rowing club. This was

Roberto Costa, Nick’s Venetian mentor, over for the launch. The boat’s new paint gleamed Oxford blue in the sun. Four beautiful girls christened her *Serena*, using prosecco from a Burano jug, and she slid over the roller into the glassy Avon. Her sister ship *Allegra* was already there,

sporting a house flag and some Moroccan carpet cushions.

Nick has built these boats 4in (100mm) wider than the Venetian norm, but they still have the skittishness of race-horses. Roberto was rowing bow. He shoved the nose off the raft with a small sculling movement against the base of his *forcolo* and sized up the traffic. Perhaps his mind was in Venice, where the rules of the road dictate that motor traffic uses the right-hand side of the canal, and rowing traffic the

left. Or perhaps he had racing on his mind, conducted in no-prisoners style, the boat in front chopping up the boat behind. Both oars push and *Serena* shoots ahead. A

“The fiendishly difficult valesana or ‘knitting’”

small plastic rowing boat wobbles out of the way and into a bridge pillar. Roberto rows on, his feet balletically arranged, the front penny loafer rocking heel to toe, heel to toe. “Just one Cornetto,” cries a passerby.

“I’m so fed up with them doing that,” says Alex from the City Barge.

In Venice gondoliers nowadays commute to work in Ferrari Testarossas, and someone is apparently building plastic gondolas. But here in Stratford, *Serena* and *Allegra* are things of beauty, from chamfered chine-logs to Heffer’s hat-ribbon.

“Will you please ask Signor Roberto,” I say as they come ashore, “whether this Stratford sandolo is up to the standard of the ancient and august Venetian yards?”

Nick draws breath to interpret. Roberto raises a magisterial hand. He has understood. “Certainly,” he says.

