

# The Path of the Scratch



[Travelling companions: a Royalex Bob Special and wood-canvas Peterborough made by Mike Morris on one of Graham's building courses]

I recently read an article about how to finish a wood-canvas canoe. The author recommended filtering the paint beforehand, working in underwear to minimise the risk of any stray dust fibres and buffing the final coat to a flawless, mirror-like gloss. The canoe should be transported on thick carpet pads and tied down by the thwarts, rather than by strapping around the hull, to avoid any possibility of abrasion to the paintwork. The hull should be waxed and buffed prior to showing, and positioned to best advantage for viewing depending on the ambient light conditions. Very nice too, but this illustrates an approach to canoe-building fundamentally different to my own.

It is late October 2011; two canoes duck out of the headwind into a small bay at the western end of Loch Sionascaig in the Inverpolly wilderness. The roar of unseen water signifies an imminent need to portage. The paddlers are faced with yet another near-vertical bank which will have to be climbed to by-pass the

thundering falls leading down to the next loch on their journey. Out come the haul lines, and the canoes, one a wood-canvas Peterborough, are nosed up onto the bank and dragged to the top. The lighting conditions are quite advantageous, but a mirror-like gloss wouldn't last long here. This seems much more like part of the real heritage of the wooden canoe than grooming the boat for a showing.



[The portage at the end of Loch Sionascaig]

There are many signs that a failure to acknowledge the true character of wooden canoes is widespread. I have seen wood-canvas canoe owners painstakingly unloading their boats onto carpet strips to avoid contact with rough ground; details have been published of a cloth liner for your canoe to prevent soiling the gleaming interior woodwork during use, and when we were about to go down the Symonds Yat rapids (hardly the last word in moving water) in a pair of Peterboroughs, an incredulous canoeist accosted us with the words “Surely you’re not going down in *those*?”

*“Real men snigger when a wood-canvas canoe goes past”*

Largely to blame for this low opinion of the usefulness of wood-canvas canoes amongst “serious” canoeists in my view is the obsession with wooden canoe glamour photography. We see them reclining, naked of gear, on mirror-calm lakes, emerging sensuously from the mist, lying cheekily on manicured lawns, but almost never full of equipment and out on an adventure. Real men snigger and nudge each other when a wood-canvas goes past; “Look at the ribs on that”. Surely, we should not be exploiting their bodies, demeaning them, but acknowledging that they are actually real canoes in their own right and not just objects of desire.

When I built my first wood-canvas Peterborough with a friend, we made the decision from the outset that this was going to be a canoe to be used to seek out adventure, rather than to avoid it. There is a somewhat over-used stock quote from Sigurd Olson to the effect that stepping into a canoe connects you to all the past adventures that canoes have ever known. As far as I can see, these past adventures involved rather little in the way of waxing and buffing, and rather a lot of bangs and scrapes. If you pick up any of the classic stories of canoe exploration up to the 1950s then you will get a totally different impression of the wood-canvas canoe—the Old Towns of the Hubbard expeditions to Labrador and Patterson’s Chestnuts on his Dangerous River are just a couple of examples. These books tell of almost unimaginably bold undertakings, with total reliance on their rugged, dependable boats. Notably absent from these accounts are pictures of the sun glinting off pristine, unchallenged hulls.

*“The first scratch is the deepest”*



[There goes the paintwork! River Polly, Sutherland]

To initiate our “a wooden canoe is to be used” philosophy, we decided to take a deep breath and get the inevitable over with as quickly as possible. To christen our first Peterborough, which I must say seemed particularly beautiful and shiny, we chose a notably physical three-day round trip in North Staffordshire linking a lake, rivers and canals. One of the rivers was the upper Dane which has the consistency of broken grindstone fragments mixed to a paste with a little water. To cut a long story short (see <http://www.mooseheadcanoes.co.uk/The%20Canoe%20Paddle%20Page/Articles%20About%20Canoeing.html>), we never worried about scratches ever again.

The trip was a success and we gave considerable thought into making our future canoes as durable as possible. In the early 1990s, the traditional white cedar was quite hard to come by and it was suggested to me by a renowned canoe builder from Maine that we might try ash ribs, as used many Scandinavian canoe builders. This we did, and I have done so on every canoe since. I have replaced many white cedar ribs when restoring canoes, but try as I might, I have never managed to crack an ash one in my Peterboroughs. Apart from being readily available, and extremely tough, ash has other things going for

it. Because it is so strong, you can make the ribs thinner than the standard 5/16" used with white cedar, so the canoe ends up only slightly heavier than one with cedar ribs. Another real selling point for me is that the high abrasion resistance of ash means you can use an oil finish and so achieve that beautiful soft sheen on the wood which is so much nicer than varnish. Cedar ribs demand a varnish finish because the wood is so soft that it would quickly scuff up under the feet with any but the lightest of usage. Ash has two drawbacks. It really requires small pilot holes for the planking tacks to avoid the possibility of splitting, and unlike white cedar, ash is not naturally rot resistant. This latter point worried me at first, but 18 years on, there is absolutely no sign of rot in any of my own canoes, and the ribs look good as new.

There are other things you can do to build even more durability into your canoes. I mainly use a traditional oil-based filler with a rather high percentage silica. I have also tried a glass bubble filler which gives a 5lb weight saving and as far as I can tell little loss of abrasion resistance. I like to use a heavyish grade of canvas, anticipating that the canoes are going to see plenty of action. Glassing the outside of wooden ribbed canoes with the aim of increasing durability is not a sensible option because of the damaging effect of unequal hydrocycling.

Durable as they are, you cannot pretend that wooden canoes are anywhere near as impervious to damage as plastic ones. They just aren't, but this isn't all bad. A plastic hull insulates the occupants from the environment; a wooden hull involves them in it. For me this is a positive selling point. Plastic hulls encourage a technique whereby it doesn't really matter, within reason, if you bounce off a few rocks on the way down a rapid. In a wood-canvas, the aim is to avoid serious impacts. There is a premium on developing a fine judgement about your own abilities; we get out when we suspect that a clean descent is beyond us. The biggest vice of wood-canvas canoes is that they put on weight (I imagine like most glamour models), because water is absorbed through the inside of the canvas. I don't revel in this extra weight on a portage, but I compensate by using lightweight camping gear.

*"The advent of wood-substitute canoes"*

The entry requirements for tapping into Olson's stream of canoe folk memory have over the years been progressively been relaxed. Initially, you needed to be able to make your own canoe and paddle, and be adept at the daily re-gumming routine of a birchbark; later it was essential to carry a canvas repair kit and be able to split out and fashion a new rib. Until the advent of

wood-substitute canoes, every canoeist would carry and use at least a roll of duct tape. Now no degree of self reliance at all is needed. Along the way something has surely been lost. The connection with all that canoes have ever known is now, for most, extremely tenuous.

There's no way around it, if you use your wood-canvas canoe it will get a lived-in look. You can follow (to borrow a phrase) the path of the mirror-like finish, or the path of the scratch. I chose the latter and have learnt to embrace the consequences. So, to finish, here is a brief history of my first canoe, as told by its rather unglamorous bottom:

