

# The Oselvar from Norway



**Oselvarverkstaden**



## History

The Oselvar is a clinker built wooden boat from Hordaland with traditions dating back several thousand years. Archeological findings show large similarity to the Oselvar of today, in example the Halsnøy Boat and the smallest Gokstad boat. Rowing instead of paddling the boats has been common in Scandinavia since around 300 AD, at about the same time iron rivets became common. After 700 AD signs of sailuse are found in Scandinavia.

After 1500 up to 1860 written sources tells us that boats were exported across the North Sea to Shetland and Orkney Isles from several places around the *Bjørnefjorden*, about 30 km south of Bergen In Shetland and the Orkney Isles the boats were used for open sea fishing.

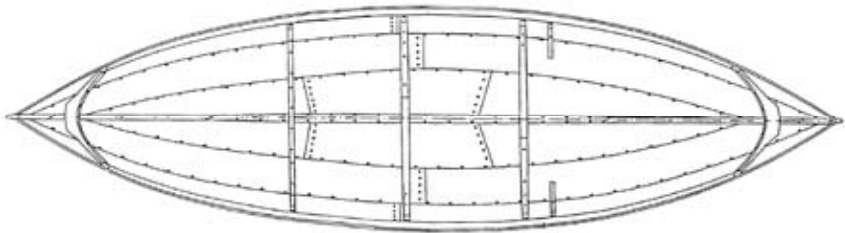


The term Oselvar was introduced around 1750 and points to the place where two boatbuilders had their work shop at the mouth of the Os river, entering the *Bjørnefjorden*. Since then the boats were named *Oselvar*-boats. From those two boatbuilders we can reconstruct and to a large degree document how the boatbuilders knowledge and skills was passed on from father to son during the following 250 years.

The son learnt from his father by joining the work in the boathouse at the age of 6-7 years. During his upbringing the son picks up procedures, and secrets. The son was considered fully educated by the age of 18-20 years. Then he often left his fathers work shop and began building boats on his own.

## Preparations

In order to build a good Oselvar boat the boatbuilder needs high quality materials. To find these materials the boatbuilder himself picks out the timber in the forest. He wants oak for the center section (keel, l t, & stem) and the row locks. Strakes, ribs, thwarts, floorboards and oars should be of pine. Trees for strakes must be large and straight while the ribs is made from grown knees. From the forest the boatbuilder moves to a timber saw where he must be careful with how he cuts his logs. If a careless mistake is made, some or all the timber can be damaged. The pine material is now stacked for drying. The oak is put in the sea at a spot were the tide runs dry twice every day and night, this to reduce tension in the wood and get rid of tannic acid.

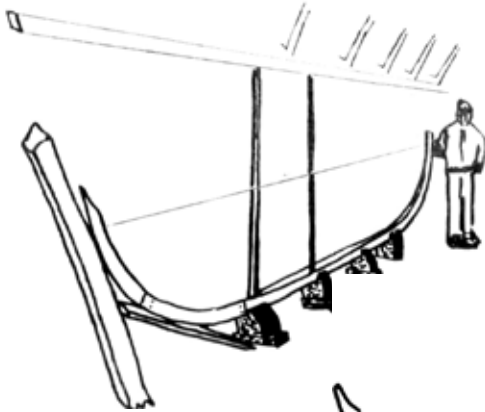


Years may pass between the time the boatbuilder fells and cuts his material until he actually uses it. This is why he needs a material stock in his workshop. In this way he is self supplied with materials for different use. The workshop also contains a lot of tools. Of special interest is a wooden stick, *the boat yell*, almost a meter in length with some cuts on. The boatbuilder has the building instructions for the complete building process on this boat yell.

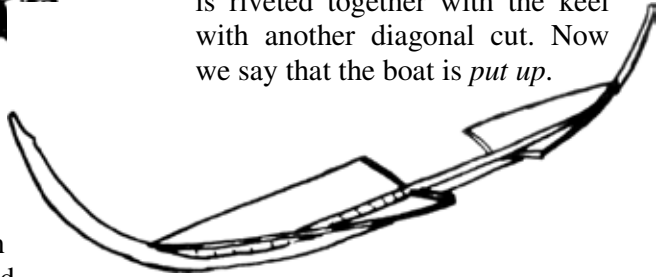


The building process starts with a conversation between the boatbuilder and the customer, who describes what kind of boat he wants, the size, what usage he wants it for and which characteristics are needed for that particular boat. After this conversation the boatbuilder knows exactly what kind of boat he is going to build.

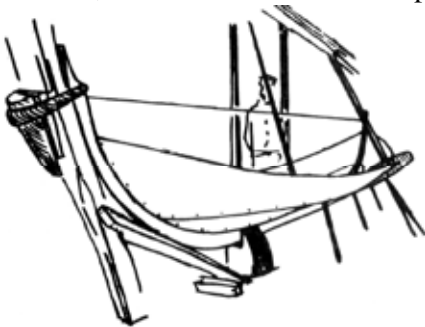
## Bulding the Oselvar

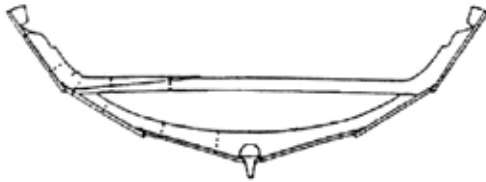


The first step in the building process is to make the keel, where the cross section looks like a T. Step two is the making of the *lõt* and stem, which is marked after template, then cut. *Lõt* and stem are connected with a diagonal cut and then riveted together. The *lõt* is riveted together with the keel with another diagonal cut. Now we say that the boat is *put up*.



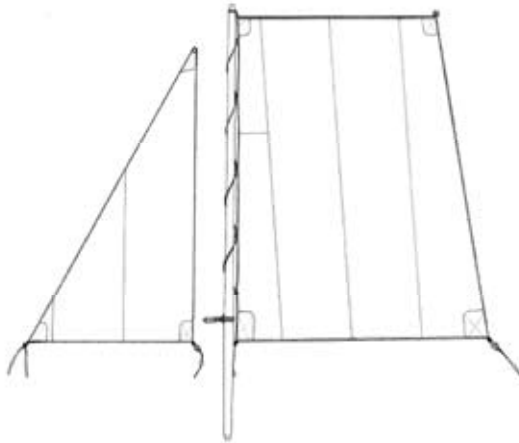
The bottom is made of three strakes on each side of the keel: forward garboard, bottom board and aft garboard. The garboards have a twisted shape, almost like a propeller blade. Today Oselvar garboards are mostly shaped by axe. With garboards in place, the bottom board is riveted to the garboards. Now the boatbuilder puts up wooden sticks from the roof and down, and from the floor and up. This is to shape the strakes. By giving the sticks different pressure, the boatbuilder is able to decide the shape of the strakes and this is how he gives the boat certain characteristics. The second strakes are very wide boards kalled *børabord*. During the building the boatbuilder uses the boat yell frequently to make sure that the boat is even on both sides of the keel.





It is now time to put in the lower rib in the middle, then the forward lower rib. The next step is the third and upper strake. After this, the rest of the ribs are put in.

Then comes the gunwales, which end where a grown V-shaped knee called *rong* is put in. Further outfitting to the boat depends on for what usage the customer has ordered the boat. Some people only want to row, others only want to sail and some prefer to have both options.



If the customer wants a row boat, the boatbuilder puts row locks on top of the gunwale and makes oars. If the boat is a sailboat the boatbuilder makes helm, mast and outfits with sails and ropes. Finally the boat builder puts on all necessary fittings.

Now the boat is treated with either tar, boat varnish or paint. Tar was the traditional method, but today lacquer is most common and is used to make the wood stand out. After approximately 300 working hours the boat builder can deliver the boat to the customer.

## Traditional usage of the Oselvar

The landscape in Hordaland changes from open sea to narrow fjords. To be able to travel in this landscape you had to have a boat. Traditionally, every little farm used to have at least one boat, often several. Boats were used for everything – fishing, transport of goods, animals, going to the church and the city. A four oared boat can carry around 950 kg.



The Oselvar boats were built in different sizes and shapes, all depending on what usage they were built for. The most common size is the four oared boat, over all length is normally between 5,5-6 meter. Six oared boats are normally 7-7,2 m. Larger boats – eight oared boats and cargo boats, which can be as long as 10 meter – are very rare.

The Oselvar is easy to row and was often named *strileboat* after the fishermen living around Bergen – the *streels*. Racing was quite common when the streels rowed to Bergen to sell their fish. The «prize» was the best position to sell the fish from and hence the best price. After usage the boats were placed in the boathouse for drying. When a boat was out worn, it was burned at the bonfire celebrating Midsummer's Night.



Until 1850 the Oselvar was sailed with a square sail, which works very well downwind and with the wind in from the side. During 1860-1880 most of Oselvar fleet switches from the square sail to the sprit sail. The sprit sail is easier to handle when sailing against the wind.

Traditionally the Oselvar boat is used both for rowing and sailing, depending on what paid off. The boat is very light, the weight of a four oared Oselvar boat is normally just over 100 kg. When sailing the crew must act as working ballast and move from side to



side as well as longships. The crew is therefore a key factor when it comes to how much weather the boat can take. When the engine was introduced early in the 20th century, an inboard engine was placed in some boats. To make grip for the more common outboard engine, many cut off the stern on the boat. Oselvar boats were in daily use until after 1960, but then much of the transport in Hordaland shifted from sea to road.

## Racing by sails

The first regatta with the Oselvar was arranged in 1871 in Bergen. Bergens Seilforening was founded the following year. The first regatta rules were applied in 1889 and the Oselvar boat has been racing every year since, only with an exception during WWII.



The yacht club *Båtlaget RAN* was founded in Bergen in 1894. During 1898-1910 *RAN*-sailors were experimenting with rig and sail size. The largest boats were rigged with 30 m<sup>2</sup> of sail and a crew of 8-9 men!



Rules defining size of crew and sail area for the different classes were applied in 1911 and these rules are still the basis of today's rules. During 1915-1938 several Oselvar sailing clubs are established around Bergen. Today's racing activity is centered around Austevoll, Tysnes, Os, Milde, Hjellestad and Litle Sotra.



In 1945, the *Bergen and Hordaland Sailing Federation (BHSS)* was founded for the purpose of taking care of class rules, race schedules and jury work for the Oselvar boats. In 1974 BHSS was renamed *Oselvarklubben*, class association for the Oselvar boats.



Since 1978 there has been arranged official Norwegian Championships for the Oselvar. The championship shifted between four different classes the first six years, but since 1985 the Norwegian championship has only been sailed in the sprit sail class (8 m<sup>2</sup> sail area). The record is 48 boats at the starting line!



During a hundred years of racing both boat, rig, sails and other equipment has seen a large development. Today the Oselvar is raced with modern sails and equipment. To control this development, *Oselvarklubben* has made internationally acknowledged class rules which clearly defines what is allowed and not in regattas.



### **Racing by oars**

Racing by oars has a tradition dating back to the 17th of May, 1847 in Bergen. The first rowing clubs were established around 1880 and at this time rowing was a large sport in Bergen. 50 years later an extreme light-rowed racing edition of the Oselvar boat was developed. In flat water, a good crew of three can reach speeds of more than 8 knots. The interest in racing with the Oselvar disappeared around 1970, but the boats still exist and are sometimes used for display gatherings.

### **The rescue operation**

Many Oselvar boats were destroyed as a consequence of the fact that the Oselvar no longer were in daily use after 1960. For the boatbuilders it was no longer profitable to build such boats and many find themselves other work instead. For a while it seemed like the Oselvar boat is going to completely disappear. Luckily some people saw the dangers and made efforts in taking care of the boat and the culture and knowledge around the Oselvar boat. During 1980-82 a course in boatbuilding were arranged with some of the last boatbuilders alive as master teachers. Two of the students, Harald Dalland and Nils Olav Solbakken, continued professionally as boat builders. Both soon realizes that it is not economic profitable to be an independent boatbuilder of such boats.



## The *Oselvarverkstaden*

In 1997 the *Oselvarverkstaden* opened, this is a publicly funded (tax money) workshop that aims to secure the knowledge of building Oselvar boats. Dalland and Solbakken passes on their knowlegde to new generations of boatbuilders.



The young boatbuilders in the *Oselvarverkstaden* learns boatbuilding by building new boats, repairing old boats, doing documentation and research.



In addition to this, a lot of voluntary communal work is laid down by privatees and voluntary organisations in taking care of, and stimulate in practical use of the Oselvar boat. Some places are the usage of the Oselvar boat a part of secondary school, where new generations of boat users are trained.

## Contact information

Questions about the Oselvar? Please not hesitate to contact us!

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Questions concerning building and repairs?  
Please contact the *Oselvarverkstaden!*

[www.oselvarverkstaden.no](http://www.oselvarverkstaden.no)

Phone + 47 56 30 54 86



# Oselvarverkstaden

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Questions concerning sailing and rigging?  
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## Welcome to Norway and try out the Oselvar!