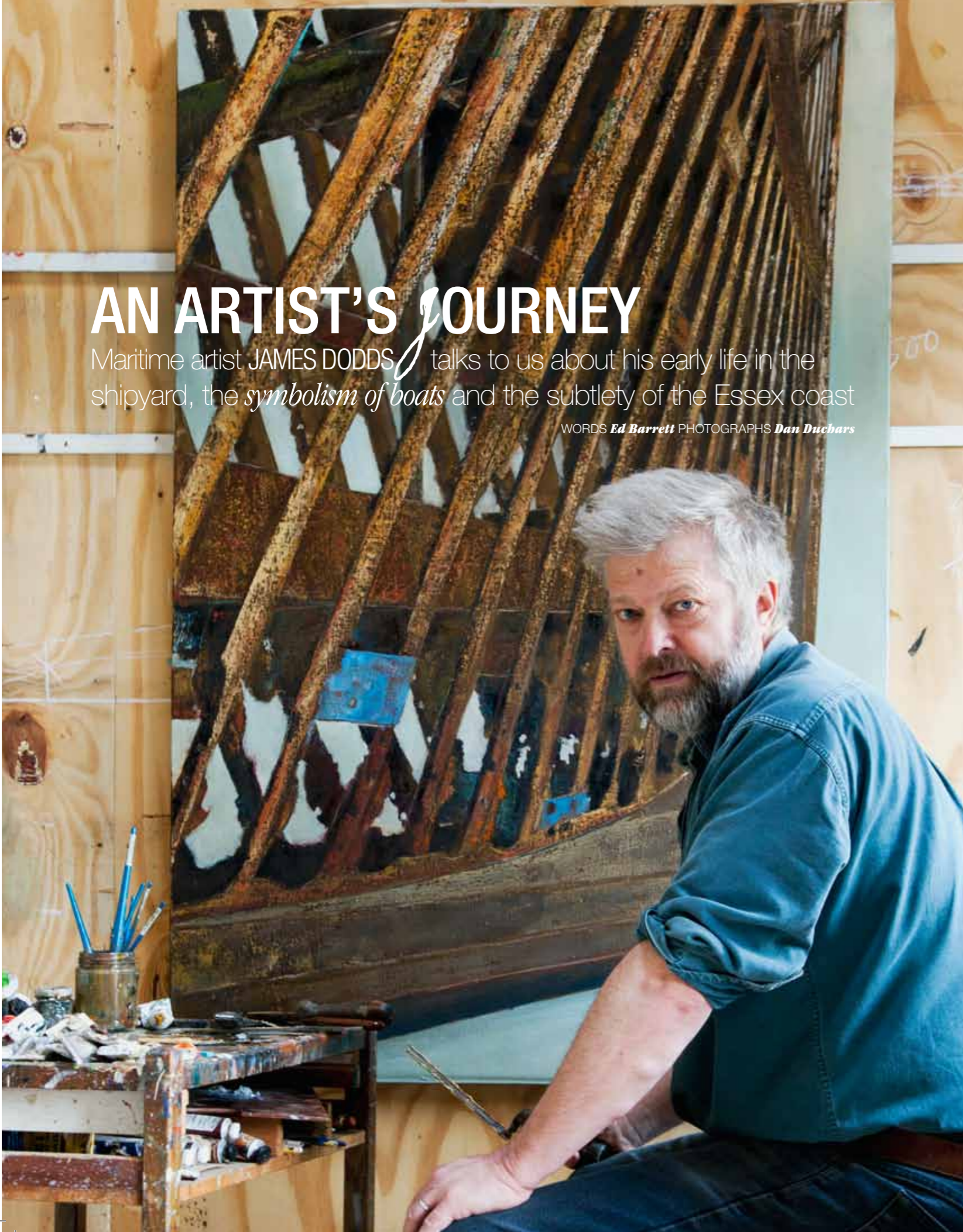


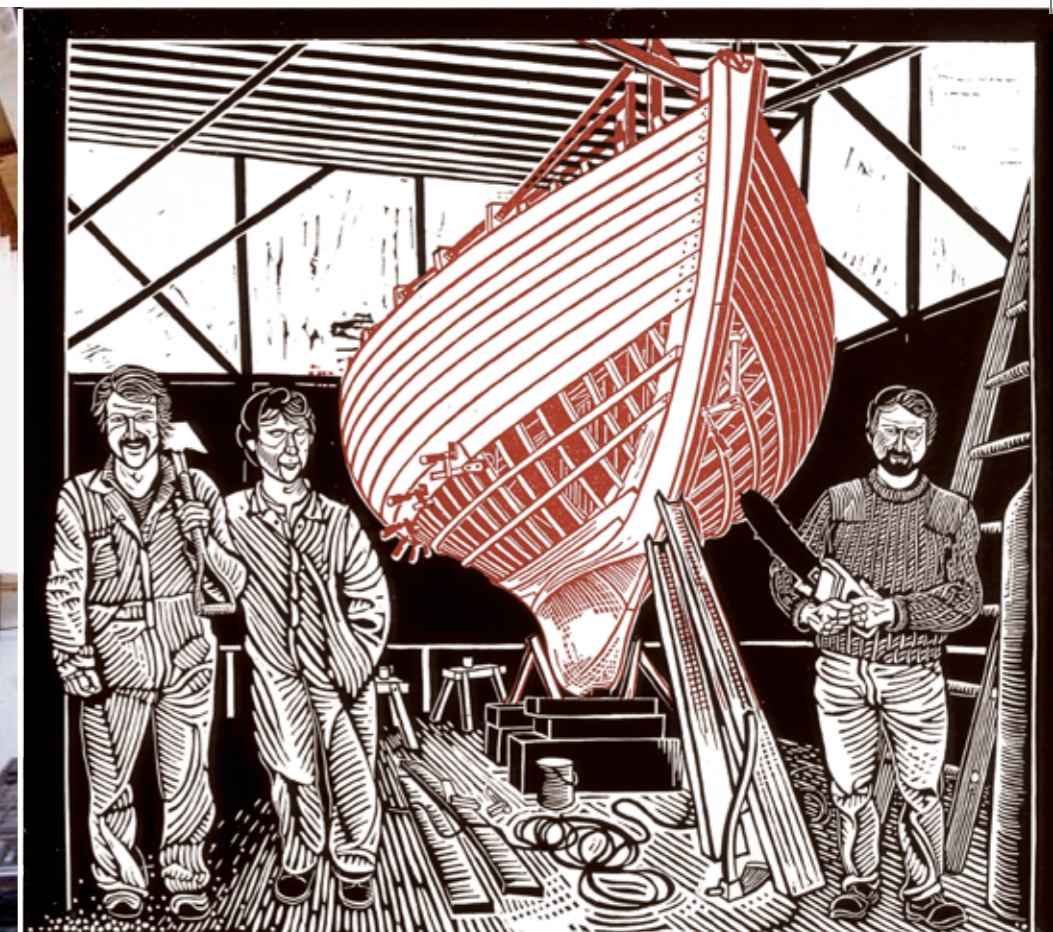
# AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY

Maritime artist JAMES DODDS talks to us about his early life in the shipyard, the *symbolism of boats* and the subtlety of the Essex coast

WORDS Ed Barrett PHOTOGRAPHS Dan Duchars



LEFT James in his studio in front of the painting *Cutty Sark*, commissioned by a trustee of the National Maritime Museum ABOVE Hanging a linocut print of *Southwold* upside down to dry



FROM LEFT Sketching a Colchester fishing smack; *Building Eleanor Mary*, a linocut showing shipwright David Patient (right); cutting linoblock for an American boatyard print

James Dodds was born on the Essex coast in the fishing town of Brightlingsea, and lives and works a few miles further up the River Colne in Wivenhoe. For most of his life he has been immersed in the traditional maritime culture of the region.

He studied painting at Chelsea and the Royal College of Art during the mid-1970s and early 80s, and has since earned a reputation as both an artist (predominantly paintings and linocuts) and a publisher (the Jardine Press, which he runs with his wife Catherine). His riverside studio houses an array of traditional antique presses, with which he produces his exquisite prints.

He exhibits regularly at galleries, such as Messum's Fine Art in London. The book *Tide Lines*, written by Ian Collins, tells James's story and shows work from his whole career. We visited him at home in Wivenhoe, where he talked about his unusual artistic journey.

## BOATBUILDING ORIGINS

'My father was an illustrator for the *Radio Times*, and my mother was a potter, so I grew up in a household where being an artist was the norm. But as a child I was desperate for my dad to be a shipwright – it was obviously a deep-rooted thing! I wasn't academic at school, and I started working on a traditional sailing vessel at

weekends. I left school at 15 and did a four-year apprenticeship at Maldon, including a year at Southampton. Boat building was my identity and gave me independence. I started working with a lovely man who was 75 and lived in the house he had been born in, and I began to think, "There's more to life than this." And it was something I could always go back to.'

## SHIPYARDS AND ART SCHOOL

'By this time I had been drawing around the boatyard and doing life-drawing

classes, so I thought I'd give art a go. I promised to study for the necessary qualifications at evening classes but got into art school without them on the strength of my work.

'Although I was the same age as the other students, I'd had four years in the shipyard, so I felt very mature and worldly wise. I was at art school for seven years, which was too long really. I had a few exhibitions, and I would work in the shipyards during the holidays. Curiously, two of the younger shipwrights had been to art school, too. One of them, David Patient, started his own yard and I worked there. I did linocuts of the boats I worked on, so it fed into the work as well. I could pretend I was the "artist in residence"!



## THE SYMBOLISM OF BOATS

'At art school I was quoting this or that artist, and my work was getting more and more complicated. I did things back to front really: I started off with hard-edged abstracts and they became more figurative. I made my own acrylic paints, and used sawdust, iron filings and newspaper in collage-type paintings.

'Then in 1984 I entered a Folio Society competition to illustrate *Peter Grimes*. My father had started to illustrate it and never finished, and it spoke to me. They were my first real linocuts, and although I didn't win the competition I decided to publish it myself, and this got me a show at Aldeburgh Festival. I now had a set of prints and paintings, and a book, and thought: "I could make a living from this." I made £600 profit – a year's income – and did the same thing every few years.

'The boats came about because about ten years ago I was offered a big show at the local arts centre, firstsite, and had the lovely opportunity of a big space to fill. I had this problematic painting that was full of all the troubles of my life, and I painted a big boat over the top of it. I let go of all the justifications of my earlier paintings, and it was so enjoyable. It said all the things I wanted to say. And it brought the two sides of my life – boat builder and painter – together. It felt like coming home.

'Boats are so symbolic – of death, of community. I see some of my curved



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE *Out Of The Marvellous*, named after a verse in the poem *Lightenings VIII* by Seamus Heaney about a medieval flying boat; painting *White Lifeboat*, oil on linen; traditional letterpress type RIGHT James hangs his curved panorama of Southwold out to dry

panoramas in the linocuts almost as squeezing the town into a boat shape. The curves lead back on themselves; the eyes are taken back into the composition.

'It's important to me that I physically print my own prints and paint my paintings. It's an old saying, but the head, heart and hands have to be in some kind of balance. If it's all head, it's missing out on being informed by the making.

'There's a cycle leading up to a show. It's like the children's story *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*: every day you're chomping through things, absorbing, then every two years you have to become a butterfly and show off what you've done. Then you come down from the exhilaration and attention, and start chomping again.'

## A SENSE OF BELONGING

'The feeling of belonging to a place is very important to me – a sense of community and knowing the history. The coast here is very subtle. Marshland, creeks and saltings – no dramatic cliffs. The light is subtle, too.

'I moved to Wivenhoe in 1991. It's close to Essex University, so you get interesting people living here – it's a cosmopolitan and tolerant place. It has a well-established artistic community that welcomed me in. I was back by the water and got a boat. Once again, I felt I was coming home.'

*Tide Lines by Ian Collins (Jardine Press, £35). For further information, see [jamesdodds.co.uk](http://jamesdodds.co.uk).*

Go to [coastmagazine.co.uk](http://coastmagazine.co.uk) for more features on people around the UK coast

