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WMN

Westcountry

life

At the helm

Master boatbuilder
Dave Cockwell **P4**



People

Boat
builder
Dave
Cockwell



Right man at the tiller



Simon Parker talks to boat builder Dave Cockwell about his plans for the firm he started twenty years ago. Pictures by Emily Whitfield-Wicks

Successful people will often tell you that the secret of their good fortune is having been in the right place at the right time. For Dave Cockwell, that voyage started when he was just eight years old – and has continued ever since. As we all know, however, serendipity is not enough; it's what you do with it that matters, along with having the personality to make the most of any situation.

Climbing a spiral staircase to reach a converted wheelhouse that doubles as Cockwells' boardroom, Dave looks out over Mylor creek and considers the steps that brought him here. It's now 20 years since he began the firm that bears his name and today provides employment for 30.

The last time we met, Dave was based in a waterfront shed at Ponsharden, on the outskirts of Falmouth. He'd just completed a wooden ferry, *Duchess of Cornwall*, and was working on the first of what would become Cockwells' trademark vessel, a cedar motor yacht built along classic lines. In 2010, he moved the operation to larger premises on Mylor Creek, where he and his growing team of skilled craftsmen have continued to specialise in wood and fibreglass new-builds, repairs and refits, including a bespoke range of cedar, epoxy and carbon composite superyacht tenders. Only this week two superyacht tenders designed and custom-built by Cockwells were shortlisted in the Tender & Support Vessel Design category of the prestigious international 2017 ShowBoats Design Awards.

Tracing the trajectory of his career to date, it would appear that Dave was always destined to be a boat builder. But like all the best stories, there are twists and turns, opportunities grasped, disappointments overcome, and that persistent "being in the right place at the right time".

It all began when, as a small boy, Dave used to hang around the docks in Bristol, where he and his family kept a boat.

"My father was a builder by trade, but he had a love of boats, and he got himself an old converted ship's lifeboat from the 1940s. He worked away at it throughout my childhood. On the quay, right in the middle

of the city docks, there was an old hand-operated crane that people, including us, would use to lift their boats out of the water. You had to wind it by hand and I'd been doing this job since I was a very small child. People would come along and hire this crane – but you had to do it yourself and most people didn't know how to. So the bridge driver, who had the keys to the crane, would say to them, 'you want to find this kid, he knows how to do the crane – bung him a fiver and he'll lift your boat out of the water'."

Dave was that kid; his first paid work at eight years old. Leaving school at 15, Dave went to work as a deck-hand on a small passenger boat and also began an apprenticeship as a carpenter-builder.

"I had a little boat at this time, and Bristol was full of wrecks and old motor boats," he said. "I'd tow them to the crane with my little dinghy and one day, when I was 16, a guy asked me to lift his boat out. It was a 26ft plywood river boat and it pretty much fell apart when I craned it on to the hard. The owner said he only wanted it for the engine and was planning to throw the rest in a skip."

Recognising an opportunity, Dave offered to fix it up.

"At the time I was on £10 a day, so I told him the price was £20 a day. He agreed, and six weeks later it was like a new pin."

Borrowing equipment from old hands around the quay, he set aside half his wages to buy tools and, by the end of that first refit, had a basic kit.

"The local shipwrights had a bit of laugh at me trying to rebuild this old wreck, but I got my head down and my ass up and I watched what my dad had done to patch up the lifeboat, and just went from there."

By the time that first boat was ready to

go in the water, Dave already had his next refurbishment lined up.

"And that's how it's been ever since," he says. "But it only ever works if you're able to deliver."

That summer, Dave completed five more renovations, before taking a job building multi-hulls.

"It made such a change to be working in the warm and under cover. I went in as a sweeper and labourer, doing a bit of sanding, and within a month they gave me drawings and I was making stuff."

Still only 17, he moved on to working in a variety of yards, tackling everything from catamarans to steel hulls, aluminium powerboats to superyachts.

"I carried on being a self-employed 'gun for hire' with a bag of tools for several years. I liked to work hard from September to June and then go sailing for the summer, come back with nothing, and then find out where the work was – and there was never any shortage of work. If you're good and you can work on boats, you can get a job anywhere, because there are never enough people doing it. And that's still the case today."

In 1996, he was offered a small space at the historic, but at that time neglected, Underfall Yard in Bristol. Before long, he was part of a team involved in restoring the facility, including rebuilding a late-1800s slipway capable of taking 200-ton vessels.

Building the business up from scratch, he and his staff refitted barges, won a contract with Bristol Ferryboat Company and built a fleet of houseboats.

Then, looking for the next challenge, Dave and his wife Jo then headed for Falmouth.

"I gave my Bristol business to the lads who worked for me, along with all the

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contracts for the ferries, and moved to Falmouth. I'd always wanted to build a boat of my own and while I was at Underfall I started amassing timber to build a Bristol Channel pilot cutter. When we moved to Falmouth I rented a shed at Ponsharden and used the wood I'd been collecting to build *Polly Agatha*.

"Then it started again. Someone came in and wanted some new ferries for a new 'park and float' scheme. So we did that. Then another guy wanted a motor boat – and so it went on."

That first motor boat, along with the frames and keel of *Polly Agatha*, found its way, thanks to a series of lucky breaks, on to a stand at the 2006 Southampton Boat Show.

"At the time there were no wooden boats at all at the boat show," he said. "I only had such a big stand because another firm had gone bust and I was offered a good deal. Well, we were inundated – and sold the motor boat for the asking price of £170,000. So we built another and another and then moved into making small, bespoke, high-end, custom-built tenders for the superyacht market. This is still a major part of what we do – and this year will be our ninth year at Monaco Boat Show."

Leading me on a tour around the Mylor yard, Dave takes an active interest in every process, giving advice to his shipwrights as he goes. It is a part of the job that brings him enormous pleasure.

"It's never been about the money for me. My satisfaction comes from doing the very best job I'm capable of, and watching apprentices progress, often from nothing. I help, if needed, from a knowledge point of view. I know how to do most trades so if people are stuck I can help. When I see youngsters develop, under your guidance, into these real assets, it gives me a lot of enjoyment."

Success is no accident for Dave Cockwell, and whether he is talking about training

apprentices or dealing with mega-rich customers, the same philosophy applies: you have to produce the goods.

"When you learn a trade, the challenge is to learn a trade. Then you get as good as you can be and you may or may not be better than anybody else, but you've reached your own pinnacle. Once you're there and know it's right, the only thing you can do then is to get faster and ensure that the quality is sustained. And if you say you can do something, you have to be able to deliver."

The next phase of the Cockwells story is a £1m investment in new buildings at Tregatreath in Mylor, the yard he bought from legendary boatbuilder Martin Heard. With planning permission in place, Dave hopes construction of the purpose-built facility will begin this summer.

"When it's all up and running, we'll need keen people to join us, people who want to be a part of what we do, who have the same ideology and long-term view. And as well as the apprentices and skilled people, we need people who can teach them."

As MD of Cockwells Modern & Classic Boatbuilding, Dave's role includes that of managing director, financial director, head of design and head of marketing.

And with such a busy and demanding working life, you'd be forgiven for thinking he doesn't have any time for anything else – but with four children and a passion for boating, it couldn't be further from the truth.

"Time is an issue, but I make sure I make time for all the good things," he says. "I enjoy 99 per cent of what I do on a day to day basis and I implement systems and embrace technology to achieve things efficiently. I like to use my mind to make a job better, faster and to earn more money for the time spent on it. But I also make time to sail every week and have plenty of time with the family."

For more details visit cockwells.co.uk