

RULE, BRITANNIA!

British-made boats still command the high seas. **Simon de Burton** takes a deep dive into our nation's best shipyards



FROM LEFT: Plymouth-based Princess Yachts' 40m superyacht is top of the range; the interior of Princess Yachts' V40 vessel; Peter Freebody specialises in elegant 'slipper' launches at its Hurley workshop

Our country might be in a bit of a state right now, what with a government in disarray and no one knowing whether we're coming or going over Brexit – but there's one thing you can't take away from us, and that's our proud maritime heritage. Just think about all those magnificent British-built ships of the past: Francis Drake's Golden Hind, Admiral Lord Nelson's Victory, the mighty Ark Royal, RMS Titanic... well, maybe not that one.

The point is we have an enviable history of creating some of the greatest vessels in history and now, after a period in the doldrums brought on by the financial crash of 2008, Britain's boatbuilding industry is once more riding the crest of a wave.

Only last week I was aboard the 62-knot Hawk 38, the latest creation from Sunseeker, which starts at £535,000, plus VAT, and harks back to the type of craft built by the firm when it was originally founded

as Poole Powerboats in 1969 by the late Robert Braithwaite, an enthusiastic racer who worked on the Hawk 38 design – it now has a limited edition named in his honour.

Nowadays, Sunseeker is best known for the type of large, white, ocean-going cruisers that are often referred to as 'gin palaces' by those who don't approve. But moneyed buyers who care little for such disdain are once again filling the firm's order books, as well as those of other British builders such as Princess Yachts of Plymouth, whose range-topping V40 (130ft) superyacht could be in your berth for as little as £16m, plus VAT.

The recently-revived Oyster Yachts is also back on course after being bought from administrators a year ago by gaming software tycoon Richard Hadida.

And business is really booming in the field of the more traditional crafts being created around the country in all shapes and sizes by Britain's burgeoning



network of classic boat builders. Peter Freebody & Co is a 300-year-old family firm now making fabulously elegant Thames 'slipper' launches at its exquisite boathouse in Hurley, Berkshire – the 'slipper' term relating to the boat's sloping stern. Using woods such as mahogany, cedar and teak, the Freebody team handcrafts each boat individually and can create bespoke interiors to suit all tastes (especially those that appreciate plenty of wine and a decent picnic on board).

Now run by the founder's son, Richard, the classic appearance of the firm's vessels – starting at around £250,000, plus VAT – belies the fact they are powered by the latest eco-friendly electric motors and can comfortably cruise for an entire day on a single charge.

Up at Lochgilphead in Argyllshire, A & R Way Ltd was founded by husband and wife team Adam and Ros Way, who have spent more than 20 years restoring, upgrading

and building traditional (and poetic-sounding) wooden boats, from sailing skiffs to historic luggers like Reaper, a 1902 Fife Herring Drifter, or 50ft blue water cruising cutters, capable of taking entire families around the world.

Similarly, Ben Harris Boats of Fowey in Cornwall will knock up a beautifully finished sailing dinghy or full-sized, clinker-built yacht that fulfils your nautical dreams. His Auk tender (with sailing option), is offered at seven foot six inches or ten foot, made with traditional, copper-ripped larch on oak construction for strength, durability and swimmingly romantic *Swallows and Amazons* looks.

Indeed, Cornwall seems to be the place to go these days for a handcrafted vessel, one of the most renowned builders being Dave Cockwell, whose boatyard at Mylor Creek in Falmouth is famous for its Duchy motor launches. They range from the open 21ft day boat, at £36,000, to the elegant, twin-engined, 45-footer that's



FROM TOP LEFT: Cockwells' Titian Tender is made from Burmese teak and copper-infused caulking; hand-finishing a Cockwells boat; Suffolk's Spirit Yachts are pushing the boundaries of eco-friendly design

capable of up to 32 knots in open seas, at £800,000. (The prices don't include VAT.) A Duchy 60 is in the pipeline.

Perhaps the boat that best exemplifies Cockwell's skills is the gorgeous 10.5m (34ft) Titian Tender – a day boat that combines futuristic hull design with the best of old-world craftsmanship. With planking of rich Burmese teak and copper-infused caulking to the deck, the Titian Tender is as beautiful as it is practical, with capacity for up to a dozen people, thanks to a fold-out table in the cockpit. There's space enough, in fact, for a couple to enjoy an intimate overnight stay – assuming they can raise the starter price of £750,000, plus VAT.

For sailors on a less extravagant budget, who want the old-school look of a clinker-built boat (that's one with overlaid wooden planking) at an affordable price and without the need for careful hull maintenance, nothing beats the tried and tested products of Cornish Crabbers,

which makes a range of GRP (glass-reinforced plastic) vessels at a yard in Rock near Wadebridge, Cornwall. The smaller 17ft Shrimper open sail boat starts from below £20,000, with the range rising to the 26ft Crabber, starting at £114,950 (both prices include VAT).

Sailing is already eco-friendly, but one British firm aims to make it even greener than the sea. Early next year, Suffolk-based boatbuilder Spirit Yachts is launching an ultra-sustainable boat with no hydrocarbons on board, at a starting price of £700,000, plus VAT. The Spirit 44E will have colour-matched solar panels integrated into the aft deck to charge the 16 batteries required to power her electric drive system, which uses 'hydrogeneration' via the propeller to top them up while sailing. Ultra-thin solar panels may also be built into its recyclable sails, while winches will be manually operated – and cooking done on a non-petrochemical spirit stove.

Make mine a mackerel and chips... ■