

Made in Britain
**BRITANNIA
RULES THE WAVES**



Cockwells

A seafaring nation with a great naval heritage – from transport and trade to pleasure and performance - the British boatbuilding industry has commanded respect for five centuries. And, as the desire for skilled craftsmanship and boating for pleasure continues to grow, Emma Johnson meets some of the major players of the waves.

“Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing -absolutely nothing -half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing, he went on dreamily.”

AS RATTY AND MOLE WEND their merry way down a stream in Kenneth Grahame’s beloved novel *The Wind in the Willows*, Rat puts into words the inexplicable draw that boating has for so many...
A 500-year-old British industry - started by King Henry VIII who was the first monarch to dedicate considerable time and money into growing the British fleet - British boatbuilding soon expanded beyond naval vessels and those used for transport and trade, into something that celebrated boating for pleasure. During the late 1800’s and early part of the 1900’s punts, canoes and rowing boats became very popular, together with steam and electric launches. In 1920, a preference for petrol-powered launches gave rise to elegant motorboats; followed then by the boat industry’s biggest shift throughout the 50’s and ‘60s, when the introduction of fibreglass in the construction of boats, particularly cabin cruisers, saw the launch of numerous yachting brands, and a desire for larger seaworthy vessels that has refused to wane.

Pleasure Boating

Today the boatbuilding world encompasses two camps – those who favour modern machinery and materials, as well as a penchant for technological wizardry and sheer size; and a return to classic wooden boats, typified by highly skilled craftsmanship, clean lines and heritage styles. “Britain is steeped in maritime history,” says Richard Freebody, whose company, Freebody, designs, builds and restores every type of launch from the smallest dinghy through to electric canoes, motor launches, saloon launches and steam launches from 8ft to 50ft. “My father, Peter Freebody, resisted the 50’s and 60’s fashion for fibre glass. He stuck with the restoration and building of traditional wooden boats, which resulted in the resurgence of interest in wooden launches - something which continues to go from strength to strength today.”

It is the company’s depth of knowledge of boatbuilding, built over many generations, whilst still keeping up to date with modern technology, that sets it apart. “We use modern machinery and techniques where applicable, but in the main, we stick to traditional methods and techniques which have been proven over many centuries,” says Richard. “Ultimately, it is the skill of the craftsmen which creates these wonderful boats.”

To still be building wooden boats in the traditional way, at a time when the boating sector is full of plastic, is something British boatmakers are very proud to be championing. “Wooden boats are sustainable, recyclable, handle better out to sea, look beautiful and are each totally unique,” says Alex Mears, director of H.J Mears & Son, which has been operating for 73 years on the Devon coast, and is known for its keen eye for design, sustainability and longevity. “Like a fine watch, boats can be passed from generation to generation. The way we build traditional wooden clinker boats, the materials and the techniques, has not changed since my grandfather founded our business at the end of the war in 1945. We build boats by eye, without plans, so each boat is unique. Our boats are built to withstand the rigours of beach launching, years of abuse and hard work from fisherman, and have to cope with all the great British weather can muster.”

Mears goes on, explaining how much the building of boats is linked to location: “Our boats are a direct response to our region. Our steep shingle beaches, shallow tidal harbours and short choppy seas have made our boats the way they are today.” >

Richard Freebody echoes his thoughts, explaining how the company also owes a lot of its success to its location, in his case, to keeping production on the Thames. “Our location on the Thames is so important to our identity, as we are very much a gateway into the beautiful reaches, hotels and restaurants of the middle Thames,” says Freebody, whose passion for the river is strong. Freebody’s workshops are situated on a quiet millpond, complete with resident ducks, kingfishers, moorhens and swallows, and offer up a classic boatyard scene, with dozens of beautifully-crafted launches, gently bobbing together against the jetty. Working here with highly skilled craftsmen to polish and perfect a range of beautiful boats is what has kept the company going for over three centuries.

“I think it is important that British boats excel in terms of function as well as form,” says Dave Cockwell, founder and managing director at Cockwells, which designs and produces custom-built craft from its creekside headquarters in Cornwall. Cockwells seem to epitomise the bridge between the two boatbuilding worlds, at once classic and modern. Renowned for tailormade boats and yachts with a real focus on design as well as build, Cockwell’s boats look and feel like they are built by a craftsman with a bag of hand tools working at a bench - and to some extent they are - however the company also have in-house tools including a CNC machine and 3D CAD operation, and they also use the latest carbon fibre and composites technology to meet strict weight requirements and use modern GRP production methods, to minimise maintenance and optimise performance. Cockwells has recently won both a 2017 ShowBoats Design Award for its Limousine tender, and a 2018 Motor Boat of the Year Award for its Duchy 35, that was designed and built entirely by the Cockwells team. “We design beautiful bespoke boats that are built to last, combining the time-honoured skills of the shipwright with modern luxury and excellent seakeeping,” says Cockwell.

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Technological Wizardry

While tradition and handed-down skills are paramount, elsewhere in the industry a passion for technological innovation is driving great change. “The boat building industry is still rather antiquated in its process when you compare to the automotive industry and aeronautics, but recently the trend has definitely been towards much larger superyachts with enhanced technology,” explains Fiona Pool, CEO of Hunton Yachts, which first came to prominence in 1980 making powerboats, and is renowned for a combination of performance-driven engineering and a keen design eye. ▷





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In 2016, the brand (previously Hunton Powerboats) restructured and reformed as Hunton Yachts, a huge turning point in the company's history as it now focuses on luxury performance boats. “I take most inspiration from the car industry,” says Pool. “The traditional craftsmanship method of hand-laying hulls is over for us, we have moved into newer techniques and are installing more and more technology into the boats to enhance user experience.” This approach can clearly be seen in Hunton's classic XRS43, a design that has withstood the test of time and remains one of its bestsellers.

And it is this outlook overall which is increasingly seeing British brands at the forefront of the market. At Fairline Yachts' new manufacturing site at Hythe, Southampton Water, on the south coast, due to open this summer, work is underway to create a modern space that can cope with building boats over 60ft long. Founded in the mid-sixties, Fairline's first launch was the Fairline 19, a delicate river cruiser which blended handcrafted techniques with the latest GRP boat construction practises of the time. From here, it has developed its offering immeasurably, and its revolutionary Targa 63 GTO – with extended cockpit options and vast outdoor space – is testament to Fairline's now global client base. Its decision in 2016 to collaborate with celebrated Italian designer Alberto Mancini and Dutch naval architects, Vripack, as well as the move to expand to Southampton, has been seen as a bold gesture by a British brand to take its name to a global market. Providing over 200 local jobs, the Southampton site is part of the brand's commitment to British boatbuilding and engineering. “There is a global recognition of quality boats being built in the UK,” says Russell Currie, managing director of Fairline Yachts. “We have always remained committed to our rich history of building timeless, classic yachts, our dedication to exceptional British craftsmanship, the exquisite materials we choose, our investment in cutting edge innovation, design and technology and the attention we pay to ensure every perfect detail,” he added.

It is this kind of commitment to design and style that is starting to set British yachtbuilding apart. Sunseeker, for instance, which started as Poole Powerboats in Poole in 1969, was one of the UK's first big builders of boats for the sports and leisure markets, gradually adapting its

models from the dainty Sovereign 20 and Sports 23, to its now renowned, flagship 155 Yacht. Today the brand is a world leader, employing over 2,000 highly skilled designers, engineers and master craftsmen at its Poole headquarters, exporting around 140 yachts a year to more than 45 countries.

Still proudly based in south west England, and launched in 1965, Princess Yachts is one Britain's most well-known and innovative British boatbuilders, and its yachts are some of the most technically-advanced in the world. In 2017, it won a Motor Boat Award for ‘Sports cruisers over 45ft’ for its much-celebrated V58 Open yacht, which judges said was “a truly intoxicating mix of style, sophistication and speed, with a party boat deck layout.”

A year before, its Princess 35M won a Superyacht Awards for its contemporary yet ageless interior. Judges found “a high quality of construction and excellent technical, service and crew areas. A well-balanced yacht indeed.”

Of course, when it comes to boats, balance is quite literally essential. And treading the fine line between wooden, hand-crafted beauties, whose gentle lines and quintessential approach conjure up a real sense of heritage, and sea-conquering super vessels, complete with space-defying modern technology, takes real skill. Crucially though, whether party yacht or pleasure boat, the true essence of being on the water, of messing about in boats has not been lost from British boatbuilding.

As Richard Freebody says: “Being born and bred here in the Thames Valley, I would say that from a relaxation point of view, there is unlikely to be anywhere better on a summer's day than gently cruising along the river and exploring the many idyllic backwaters in a beautiful launch.” He certainly paints a tranquil scene – of a beautifully-crafted, wooden vessel, pattering quietly along the smooth waters, sunlight glinting from the riverbank, and a sense of calm in the air. Indeed, perhaps old Ratty was right, there simply is nothing better in life than messing about in boats. □