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## MARINE LIFE

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When you  
are building a boat  
you are always  
worried about the  
next job

Cornwall has a rich and proud marine heritage. And there's nobody doing more to keep that tradition going today than Dave Cockwell, MD of Cockwells Modern & Classic Boatbuilding, a business establishing a global reputation on the banks of Mylor Creek

# Dave Cockwell

## Have you been involved in the industry all your life?

I started employing people in 1996 in Bristol. Prior to that I was a private gun for hire, working for private clients and other boatyards all over the place.

I left school at 15 and went to work on a passenger ship because I didn't know what else to do. And then my dad made me take an apprenticeship with a mate of his who was a joiner/builder, which I did for a while.

Then one day a guy asked if I could repair his boat.

It's a long story, but at the weekends ever since I was a small child, I worked on boats, lifted

them out of the water in Bristol. I was well known around Bristol as the kid who could fix boats.

I lifted this boat out of the water and it was just a total wreck. And the guy asked me if I could cut it up for him. I said, that I thought I could fix it and he said how much. I said I think it would take about six weeks. At the time I was on about £10 a day as an apprentice, I said £20 a day, six weeks, about £600. And he asked about the materials. I thought about it, I didn't really have a clue, and said about the same. But what I've found in life is that if you set yourself a target, a goal and a deadline and if you are determined enough, you can meet it. And that was the first example of that. So, six weeks later the boat was finished on time and on budget and I had the next job waiting.

## Did your rates go up after that?

No, I've never been greedy in that way. You've got to keep it real; you've got to push to what you think is realistic. If you're greedy you might get away with it now and again, but it's short lived.

Most people understand you need to make a profit and are happy to pay a fair price.

## When did you come to Cornwall?

I came in 2002. I had first worked in Cornwall in the early 1990s, as a gun for hire, and I had a boat in Falmouth since the late 80s, so I had known Falmouth a long time. In 2002 I had a young family and my boat was here and Bristol had been changing in a seriously dramatic way from the place I had grown up in. The city docks wasn't a place for boating or sailing anymore. And my wife's family were in Truro anyway, so it was a bit of a no brainer really.

So, I gave up the business in Bristol, I basically gave it to the guys who were working for me and came down to Falmouth. I thought I didn't really want to employ anyone, I would just rent a shed and build a boat, which I had been wanting to do for some time. So, I did rent a shed, a big one, and to cut a long story short, the next thing I knew was I had ten blokes working for me, building boats! I did all the ferries for the park and float when that first started. Then those guys bought St Mawes Ferry, I refurbished all of those boats for them. At the same time, I was building a big pilot cutter and another guy came along and asked me to build a custom motorboat, which we did and then another one and it just grew from there. ►





**You became an employer straight away?**

Pretty much. Most of it was apprentice labour in the early days, but we bought on some good guys and some of those are still with us today. But apart from the ferry work, which was very seasonal, once we had rebuilt the boats there wasn't much for us to be honest. So, we were building new boats. We had two pilot cutters on the go but one of the owners went bust on me and didn't pay. It put me close to the line and I had to let half my staff go and that was pretty painful.

That was in about 2009, but we got through it. But when you are building a boat you are always worried about the next job. So, I thought I needed to do more refit work and ended up buying the boatyard here.

Then I had staff really busy in the winter doing refit work but needed things for them to do in the summer. So, I thought we would build a nice little motorboat which we could then sell at the boat show, use spare labour in the summer to absorb the excess and turn it into money. The idea was we build this little boat and it would be finished for someone to buy. But we never finished one before it was sold; it went really well. Then I bit the bullet and built a bigger one and we sold eight boats in the first 12 months. It was the Duchy 35.

**Are you surprised how well it went?**

It was a total punt. I designed and built the boat I thought people wanted in my mind, but I had done no proper research, but my gut feeling was that this is what people wanted. I was elated when we sold three boats on the first day of the first boat show we went to. But I believed it

was the right thing so I don't suppose I was that surprised in many ways.

**Is the Duchy 35 what identifies you as a boatbuilder?**

It depends on who you are. We have two very strong brands now, the Duchy brand which has a range of three boats, semi production, and we've got Cockwells as a brand, which is a custom boatbuilder. The two go well together and if you've been studying the Duchy motor launches, we're known as the Duchy brand but they also know it's built by Cockwells, which builds superyacht tenders and luxury yachts.

It all seems to work well together. Cockwells has kudos because it's building a successful semi production boat and the Duchy brand has kudos because it's built by one of the most well-known boatbuilders in the world. We build three or four a year, all built to order. We have a two-year waiting list at the moment on both the Duchy 35 and Duchy 27. 27 is about 18 months and 35 two years. And we're just in the process of building the Duchy 45 which we've already got customers for, before we've built any.

**And then on the other side you have the superyacht launches?**

Yes. In terms of hours that go into the projects it's about 50/50. We started out as a custom boat builder, the semi-production boats are what we've been doing in the last few years, since we came to this yard.



**How many people do you employ in total now?**

We're running at about 70 at the moment, with about half a dozen sub contractors at any one time, but most people are fully employed.

You can safely say that you can go to most places in the world and they would have heard of us

**As the business has grown, are you still able to get your hands dirty or is that more difficult?**

I've just come in from the yard now. For me, I don't need to be out there building boats for other people anymore; I've got a very good, skilled workforce who are more than capable of building the boats. I've got knowledge and experience which I pass on and which helps them. But I feel that my main strength is probably in design and problem solving. I'm pretty good with the customers as well.

**And do customers come from everywhere?**

Every sort of person you could possibly imagine. I was brought up to understand that we are all equals and I think I get on well with my customers because on the whole we have a mutual respect. It's important to understand and know your customer, who they are and what they want.

**And do they have a very clear understanding what they want with the superyacht tenders?**

They usually know what they want, but it's down to us to interpret their thoughts.

**Do you need to get to know the mothership?**

We try to. But they never come to us with a drawing and a specification. They say they want a tender and they want it this big, to go that fast to carry that many people and I want it to look a bit like my big boat! I am not aware of any other industry which works like that. You wouldn't go to someone and just say I want a window. You would say I want it 78mm thick and this big. Superyacht tenders are not like that for some reason. It's a real pleasure when someone comes to us with a design and says can you build that. But what they actually say is I want a boat, how much? It's an interesting challenge!

**You recently launched the Scout tender. An impressive looking boat.**

Yes, that's a pretty impressive bit of kit. The brief behind that, behind all of the design features and the look of thing, is they really wanted a boat you could either be inside or outside. But being a superyacht tender, they wouldn't put up with a bit of canvas, it's got to be a like a Rolls Royce limousine. The whole boat opens up electronically at the touch of a button, in fact touch screen, not just a button. I enjoy all of the new challenges. It used to be a challenge choosing which bit of wood to use, and that still exists, we still saw our own timber, but the new challenges are which software to use and how are we going to program it, all of which is done in-house.

**You're known as a traditional boatbuilder, but is technology really coming into it more?**

Everybody says Cockwells is a traditional and classic boatbuilder, but the fact is that I'm a boatbuilder and I can build any boat, in any material you like. I was building boats

in carbon fibre when I was 16. I've built in aluminium and I've built in steel, and I've built in wood all my life. There are actually very few boatbuilders who can build a boat from scratch. I can do every single job, from the wiring right through the engineering, to building the hull in any material. And, I can even program the computer if I have to.

**And Cockwells is now known throughout the world?**

You can safely say that you can go to most places in the world and they would have heard of us. Most boat building companies are probably run by businessmen, this place is still run by me! And it seems to be working at the moment, so I must be doing something right. I've been lucky enough to get good advice over the years and I've always taken it when it's been given, or at least taken notice of it.

**What are the current challenges?**

The current challenges for us is that everything can change in ten minutes. We have a long order book, which is nice because we can pick and choose our work a little bit, but your workload and cashflow and all of those things can change just like that. You could still have someone, potentially, not pay their bill. It hasn't happened for a long time, but we have had people who have paid deposits and pulled on the contract in recent times. Then on the other hand, people walk through the door and buy a boat when I was not expecting them.

And things like the setting up this whole facility. We hadn't planned on doubling in size; I didn't know I was going to sell so many boats but by the same token I wasn't going to say 'no'. So, we kept our other facility which

we temporarily rented while we built this building. And if we lose that site we'll have to find another site so that might be a challenge, because this site we've already outgrown.

When businesses grow, they probably need to change the way they are run, and we're probably going through that a bit at the moment, looking for efficiencies where we can. And I think in this day and age when you get good people, you need to look after them and understand what they need.

**Can recruitment be an issue?**

When you're recruiting a lot of people you definitely get through them, because you're trying to work out if they're right for the business. We have a good retention of people, but in order to get good people you need to get through a few. And it's not necessarily their fault, it's that understanding of what they're getting into isn't always there. We can all wing it, can't we? Sometimes people will say they can do things at job interviews and they can't. If you're ever going to wing it in a job interview, you've got to be able to carry it off, or at least learn quickly! We've had it, even in the most basic of trades, people come in and say they're a laminator or something, and you can tell within the first ten minutes that they don't know what they're doing.

**So, any advice going to a job interview with you, don't blag it!**

I'll employ anyone with the right attitude. You can teach skills, but you can't teach attitude. If you really want to work somewhere, what you do is you go in at a low rate that's irresistible to the guy that's going to employ you, which is how I started. And when you become indispensable, you can have a conversation about what you're worth. But if you go in and say to someone I want 'x' and that's the same as everyone who's brilliant in the workplace and you're not as good, people are going to think 'actually, you're a bit expensive really'. ▶

I feel that my main strength is probably in design and problem solving





### Is there a good supply of the skills you need, or do you need to train people up yourself?

A bit of both. We've found quite a few good people have come from other places. It's quite a nice place to work, a brand-new building helps, people here are nice, we still have a 'small company' feel here and we try and keep it that way. We've been fortunate, we've found some really, really good people.

### Has Brexit impacted at all?

Not really, although I don't like it. I think it's become an extremely useful excuse for someone who doesn't want to do something, not to do something. Everyone likes to have an excuse not to do something. It's a great excuse for the Government when they haven't got a clue what's going on, it's a great excuse for large companies who want to do a bit of restructuring. And it's a great excuse for customers who can't make a decision, so I suppose it can affect us in that way. It's a very annoying, ridiculous situation, where nobody is informed of the facts. That's my opinion.

**(Brexit) has become an extremely useful excuse for someone who doesn't want to do something**

### What gives you particular satisfaction?

I like solving a problem, which could be anything. For example, on the St Mawes Ferry I was on a really strict penalty clause for fuel consumption and draft, (how deep the boat is). And I think we beat that by more than double in terms of fuel consumption and I designed the boat, so I was pretty chuffed with that.

For pretty much every boat we have ever built I've got

a letter from the owner saying what a lovely job you've done, which gives me a lot of satisfaction. I quite like to see the youngsters come to us with nothing and a year down the line they are out there building boats.

### Have you ever had to turn things down because they're too big?

Yes. And it's important to know your limitations. Don't get me wrong, if you put me in a big enough place with enough people, I can build whatever you want! Even if it was outside my zone of comfort, I understand the process and know what I don't know, so I know what I need to ask. I would probably recommend them to go to someone who's done it before, but if they said I need you to do it, I would find out how. My knowledge is up to about 80ft I reckon, maybe 100/120 if it's a sailing boat, but 80ft motorboat would probably be the limit of my knowledge. And here in this yard, 60ft is really the limit, although we've had 80 footers in the drydock.

### Does work tend come to you because you're so well-known now?

I was fortunate enough to have the help of my wife when we were really looking for work and marketing the company. I would say one of the reasons we are so well known and have a good foundation is because my wife worked so relentlessly on marketing. And marketing isn't just advertising, it's hundreds and hundreds of hours work in the background and we still do that as much as possible.

### Having a long order book, would it be easy to sit on your laurels?

When I first started, my wife asked me what do I want to do with this company? It's important to know where you're going, you need to have a goal. I thought it would

be really nice to have a three-year orderbook and I don't know of many boatyards that have that, if they were really honest. But we are very close to it and have had it one or two times. And that's probably our goal, to have that little bit of comfort there. But if it's three years today, tomorrow it's three years minus one day. And next month three years minus one month! So, if you do nothing, you're going to run out aren't you? The only way you are going to maintain a situation is to maintain your marketing presence.

And what I try to make all my guys understand is that we're a service business. Except for maybe fishermen and ferries, no one really needs a boat. And to be honest with you they don't need a new one! So, for us it's about maintaining the level of service. They need to feel good about us and we need to feel good about them. It's about relationships.

### What do you see doing in ten years' time? Still growing?

I don't know if growing is the thing. I'm not really a big fan of this infinite growth that our economy and society seem to strive for; it's unrealistic and unsustainable. I'm looking for something much more sustainable. It's about getting the right clients that are willing to wait the right amount of time for the right product built by the right people. And for the guys that work for us to have a good quality of life, work really hard and want to come to work.

It's all about quality of life for me really. And if I stop enjoy it, I'll stop, that's the thing. ■

CEO Feature & Cover photographs by Toby Weller

