



Rob Humphreys turned his youthful passion for yacht design into a hugely successful family business. Mike Taylor discovers the secret to that success



A design for life

Lymington in Hampshire has a delightful profusion of elegant properties including stylish Georgian-type houses, the town being located on the west bank of the Lymington River facing Yarmouth and the Isle of Wight. For sailors there is a wealth of facilities including boat yards, a marina and the prestigious Royal Lymington yacht Club.

Appropriately, when yacht designer Rob Humphreys set up his studio he located it on the waterfront of this charming community. In 2009 Humphreys Yacht Design moved to a spacious ex-farmhouse close by and today is run by Rob and son Tom.

Youthful enthusiasm
Yacht enthusiast and designer in equal measure Rob's life began

ABOVE
Kingfisher, a Rob Humphreys design that found fame with Ellen MacArthur at the helm

surrounded by sailing. "Much to my parent's dismay from the outset I was clear that I would become a yacht designer and by university age I was pretty much fixated on this as my career," says Rob smiling. "In those days there were no courses on yacht design, only naval architecture more akin to large commercial ships. The alternative was taking an industrial design course as boats are just another



An unforgiving road

During the 1970s the main (though rather unforgiving) route into yacht design was through racing yachts. These were principally designed under the International Offshore Rule (IOR), ensuring commonality of craft under a measurement guideline. “You lived and died on your last race success,” asserts Rob. “Even then wins didn’t guarantee orders. Moreover, I had no clearly defined business plan, it was all in my head. Inevitably there were several set-backs with a fairly barren work period over the next 2-3 years before taking on the commission for *Conquest 23*, a Mini Tonner in 1978. Then followed *Gem 18*, which was a successful, production-built day race boat.” Both of these craft helped establish Rob on his road to success.

“There have been several times in the company’s history when a commission represented a pivotal point in its evolution,” reflects Rob. In 1979 he penned the lines for a half tonner called *Roller Coaster*. Together with *Conquest 23* customer Gordon Hoyle, it became the first Humphreys’ boat to make a major statement on the international yacht racing world, the entire programme being achieved at breakneck speed to coincide with the start of the Half Ton season; it came home first in the Round the Island Race and took second place in the world championship in Holland.

For any yacht designer the Ton →

form of design architecture. However, I became something of a rebel as I concentrated only on drawing boats.”

University over, as part of his passion for yachts Rob was always buying yachting magazines. Rather than find a job as a designer in a boatyard as a stepping stone toward his goal Rob’s plan was to apply for a post on *Yachting World* magazine which always carried extensive design reviews. “However, on my way to participate in an off-shore race to Ireland I bought a copy of *Yachts & Yachting*. Turning the pages I saw an half page advertisement for an editorial vacancy. My course dissertation was entitled, ‘The Evolution of the Offshore Yacht’, I quickly re-

addressed my letter and sent it in. Luckily, I got the job and stayed with the magazine for about three years.”

He still harboured dreams of yacht design, however. Yet with no track record or reputation, commissions for designing boats were thin. However, in 1974 Rob completed his first work with sail maker, Eddie Hyde of Musto and Hyde for a Quarter Tonner named *Midnight Special*. “I realised that in order to progress further I needed to move into the design world permanently so in 1972/3 I left the magazine, continuing to work for them as a freelance contributor for 5-6 years while I became established,” continues Rob.

ABOVE RIGHT
Rollercoaster, an early Humphreys design



Cup Championships and Admirals Cup represent huge milestones. “For the One Ton World Championship in 1985 I designed *Jade*, a 40 footer and despite being one of the most competitive events ever staged *Jade* was crowned as world champion. Significantly, following a series of second and third finishes *Jade* was the first Humphreys design built to achieve world champion status.”

Dare to dream

Another project which placed Humphreys’ studio in high esteem among its peers was *Apriori*, designed for John Dare, Commodore of the Royal Ocean Racing Club. “It was the perfect

antidote to the extremes of the IOR. *Apriori*’s success (twice RORC Yacht of the Year) was a catalyst for a more sympathetic direction in yacht design. She bucked the IOR trend over disposal once a craft was no longer racing. Over thirty years on John Dare is still happily cruising his yacht extensively around Europe and the Mediterranean.”

On the world stage of racing and commissions Rob’s business began to attract the attention of established yacht builders. “At the time I became involved with companies such as Sigma and Contessa, and later I began to work for Richard Matthews of Oyster. “Initially, he and I were racing in

ABOVE LEFT
Apriori, a breakthrough design for Humphreys

ABOVE RIGHT
Humphreys’ work on America’s Cup yachts helped cement his reputation

BELOW LEFT
The Humphreys designed Oyster 885 *Lush*

BELOW RIGHT
The OceanTec 50 in build

competition,” Rob explains: “In the world championship of 1985 Richard was competing in a boat designed by Holman and Pye while I was racing in *Jade*; fortunately we won. Then, as Holman & Pye began winding down, Richard started investigating other designers and he came to me for the next generation of Oyster. Now, over a twenty five year period we have designed more than twenty Oyster models, which represents some 5-600 individual boats.”

In 2001 came another example of Rob Humphreys’ involvement in yacht design on the international stage, working on an Open 60 for Ellen MacArthur and her solo Vendée Globe entry sponsored by





Kingfisher plc in which she finished second. “Our office was responsible for all the naval architecture and hull design,” says Rob. “And despite the risk I could see in Ellen the same tenacity and huge drive I have in myself. I related to her ambition.”

Other notable round-the-world projects included some Whitbread/Volvo racing yachts, and the rugged Global Challenge fleet for Sir Chay Blyth’s Challenge Business. “We calculated that this fleet covered over one million sea miles, 300,000 of them in the Southern Ocean, battling ‘the wrong way’ into the prevailing winds, some of this distance being attributable to Dee Caffari, as the first woman to sail non-stop, the ‘wrong’ way round.”

A family affair

So what influenced son Tom to join the company? “I have always been very close to my dad’s business and grew up fascinated by all the grand prix and round-the-world race yachts dad was designing,” Tom explains. “After taking a degree in biology and spending a few years working in a London-based sports marketing company, I went out to New Zealand in 2002/3 to witness the America’s Cup when dad was one of the principal designers for the GBR Challenge. That cemented my interest in yacht design, I went back to University and joined the company full time in mid 2006.”

What has been the secret behind the company’s success? “From the

ABOVE
The Challenge 72 was an interesting commission for Humphreys as the brief was for a yacht that was bulletproof with strong upwind performance

BELOW
Father and son at work

early days, even with the large Grand Prix racing boats, I always tried to give my designs the capacity for a second post-race life in cruising.” Rob reflects: “Today, it is more about rationalizing an owner’s requirements.” Adds Tom, “Before starting work on the computer it’s vital to listen to the client and form a mental picture over how their ideas will materialize.

“Yacht design is a series of compromises; when you enhance one element, invariably this will impact on another aspect of the project.

“Balancing all these often-conflicting requirements is crucial in the design process.”



Breaking new ground

Moving on to the evolution of incorporating powerboats into the HYD product portfolio how did this come about? “At the outset I become pigeon-holed as a race yacht designer,” explains Rob. “This morphed into designing yachts for cruising. Significantly, there is a common factor between sailing yachts and motor boats; that of reducing fluid resistance and making the hull shape move through the water more efficiently, it’s a common principle shared between both sail and motor boat disciplines.”

Tom interjects saying, “The design for powerboat *ERMIS 2* was a key project for the company. It’s a 38m luxury yacht, built by McMullen & Wing and delivered in 2007. She is powered by triple MTU 4000 Series diesel engines with a maximum speed under trials of 58kn. Her owner had high aspirations for her performance and we utilised considerable race yacht technology in its design and engineering, with comprehensive tank testing analysis to produce the kind of results the customer demanded. For HYD it was certainly a ground-breaking project.”

Clearly, the introduction of computers as a platform for all aspects of the work at Humphreys has been crucial to their evolution. Says Tom, “Design technology is constantly evolving encompassing developments in the software and tools which allow us to investigate more potential options and



investigate increasing levels of detail at the design stage than would have been possible even ten years ago.”

Adds Rob, “I’ve always had a big appetite for computer technology and it’s been a privilege to bridge the period from pad and pencil to using computers as an everyday work tool. We were one of the first companies in the UK to have an Apple and one of the first to have an Apple Mac. Even so, I still carry a notebook and pencil around to make the occasional sketch.”

“Keeping aware of the latest design trends is fostered by our natural interest in boats and boat design,” asserts Tom. “For example the America’s Cup sees a continuous evolution of innovative principles for sailing yachts while there is a huge drive to minimize the use of fossil fuels for propulsion systems and improve efficiency of motor

ABOVE
Tom Humphreys at the helm while Rob looks on

BELOW
A couple of their latest commissions; *Arksen* on the left and *Ernis 2* on the right

yacht designs. We are working on an ever-increasing number of projects with clients looking to harness greater levels of renewable energy in combination with hybrid and pure electric propulsion systems. It is a hugely dynamic time to be involved with the business.”

“My natural aptitude is always to look to the future and consistently Tom and I are always facing the next challenge. As I hand over to him I know HYD will be in good hands,” Rob concludes.

Finally, Tom says, “Today, we are incredibly diverse with many different strands to the business for both sail and power; it’s an extremely exciting time.”

Many thanks to Rob and Tom for their help. For more information on the business, go to www.humphreysdesign.com

