

Bernard Olesinski

He was designing motor boats for a busy Cowes yard at 16. And his phenomenal output since then has dominated British production boatbuilding for a generation

TEXT ALAN HARPER PORTRAIT SUZANNE GRALA

One of Bernard Olesinski's favourite stories concerns a man he met on the flybridge of a large motor boat at an Italian boat show – the boat's owner, as it turned out. There was a hoist and a tender up there and a lot of substantial-looking mouldings and Olesinski wondered if with all that weight so high up, wasn't the boat's stability affected at all?

"Ah, no," said the owner proudly. "You see, this is an *Olnski* hull."

Thanks to his work with two of the most successful boatbuilders in the business, Olesinski is about as famous as naval architects get. People who know boats know his name, even if they don't know as much as they think they do and find the name unpronounceable. Pinned to the noticeboard in his sunny Cowes office, Olesinski has a yellowed review from *Yachts & Yachting* of one of his earliest ventures as a freelance designer: a tidy-looking quarter-tonner. "I've bemoaned the fact that British yacht builders go abroad for designs before and now Offshore Yachts have signed up Bernard Olesinski (it doesn't need much imagination to see that he isn't English)," it snipes, before going on to praise the boat's looks, performance and accommodation.

In fact Olesinski is Cowes born and bred. His father was an officer in the Polish navy who came to the UK in the submarine *Orzel* at the start of World War II, in one of the most celebrated naval escapades of the day. His stepfather worked for Uffa Fox at the Medina Boatyard. He joined the busy Clarence Road yard of R & W Clark (Tel: Cowes 763) in 1961 as a 16-year-old in the stores and soon had himself moved into the drawing office – by the simple expedient of saying, "I can do that".

"The only things I was good at at school were maths and technical drawing," he explains. But the Clark brothers were quite exceptional employers. "They were very encouraging. They always said if you wanted to do anything, just do it. Great guys." So the young storeman set himself up in the drawing office as its sole occupant.

In places like Cowes in the early 1960s ancient and modern existed side by side. Long-keel sailing boats

jostled for space in the sheds with the latest deep-vee powerboats. But Clark's were ahead of the game, building traditional Arthur Robb sailing cruisers and Fred Parker motor boats, while also doing well with a vee-bottomed Colin Mudie 25ft (7.6m) fast cruiser called the Force Eight. When Sonny Levi's *'A Speranziella* came in for repair following the first Cowes-Torquay race, Clark's developed a relationship with the young Italian designer and were soon building his 23ft (7m) Tridents and other, later raceboats. There was also the Moreland 36, a vee-hulled express cruiser capable of 26 knots (Olesinski still regards this as one of his 'benchmark' boats) and even some early forays into the new fibreglass construction.

Thanks to the leadership qualities of his employers the young draftsman was soon in the thick of it, designing his first boats – a brace of 30-footers. "There were old guys there aged 60," Olesinski remembers, "and you had to explain why you were doing it like that. You know what boatbuilders are like: they're your sternest critics." The first Trident came in, a bit the worse for wear after trials: "It had a five-eighths ply bottom and small stringers; they asked me – aged 16! – what to do. I beefed it up a bit."

Showing considerable promise, the gangly young draftsman with the unpronounceable name was sent on day-release to learn naval architecture, first at Isle of Wight tech and later at Portsmouth. Before his 21st birthday Clark's had entrusted him with the design of a 97-footer, *Tamahine*, styled by the young Jon Bannenberg and built across the river at Groves & Guttridge.

The years at R&W Clark were the making of Bernard Olesinski. He learned his trade, and learned to be an achiever. And he also seems to have had instilled in him a sense of history, as sometimes happens when someone sensitive to such things becomes aware of living in a time of transition. Today the modern, computer-aided naval architect, who never knew his war-hero father – Czeslaw Olesinski survived the war only to die of a stroke in 1946 – points out the row of old draftsman's weights on the window sill, takes great delight in showing off a set of exquisite boat plans from the 1920s that will soon adorn





the walls of his and wife Jane's new home on Egypt Point, and talks enthusiastically and in great detail about the work of pioneers of his profession like Peter du Cane, George Selman and Sonny Levi.

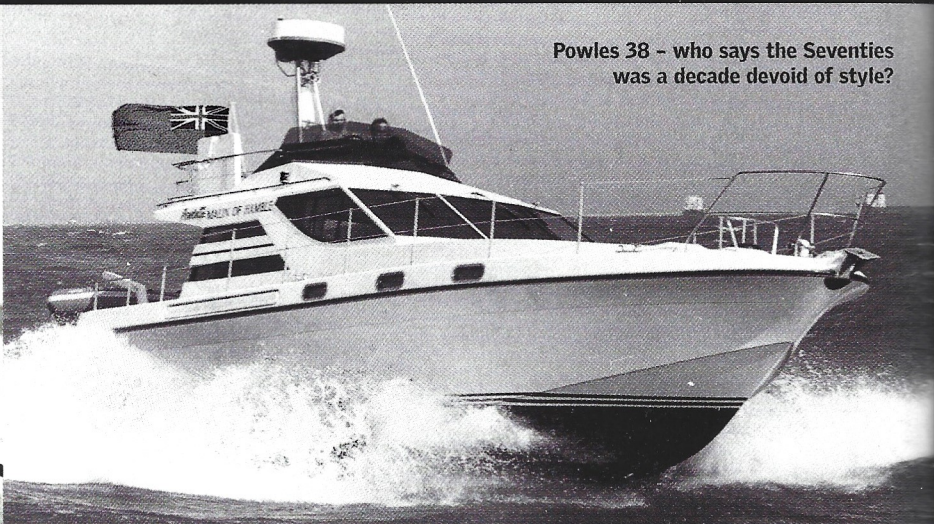
"Clark's was the best apprenticeship you could ever hope to have," he says. In 1971, at the age of 26, he set up in Cowes as Bernard Olesinski Ltd.

Today he is the naval architect behind both Fairline and Princess, two of Britain's most successful boatbuilders. It has long ceased to be a source of curiosity to the trade – or envy to his contemporaries – that he can supply these two rival concerns with exclusive design services, but it is nevertheless a unique situation that must require some diplomatic skill. "It's no more difficult than being a one-man band," he suggests, smiling – "or riding two horses at once."

In fact he maintains that there have been enormous advantages for both of his clients. "There are two sets of knowledge; each new development helps the next design along, and enables them to move forward. It has to be managed with integrity, but I like to think I've got a bit of that."

Certainly Adam Greenwood, head of design at Fairline's Oundle headquarters, is unequivocal. "Bernard is the best in the business," he says. "He provides us with consistently excellent hulls. And I expect Princess would say the same."

The relationships between Olesinski and his two clients differ, with Fairline operating a large design department



Powles 38 – who says the Seventies was a decade devoid of style?



Princess V52 and, right, Fairline 36 Turbo.

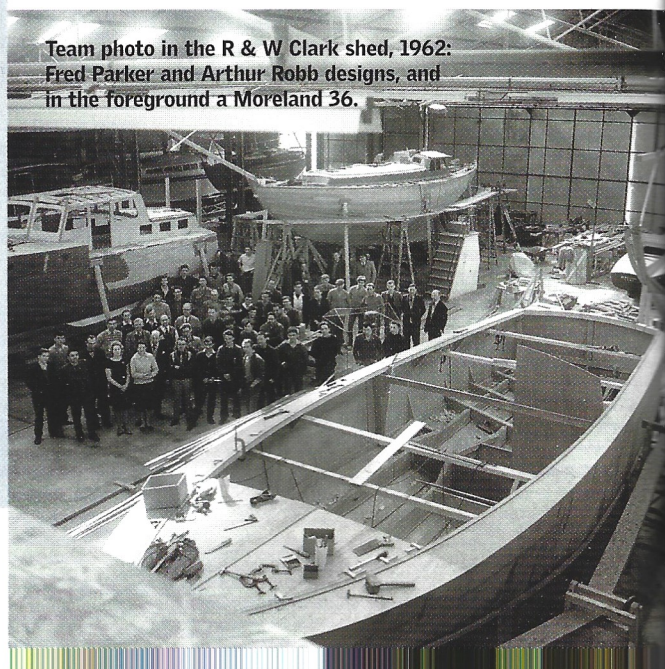


Milestones

- 1945** Born, March 5, Cowes
- 1961** Joined R & W Clark Ltd, Clarence Rd, E. Cowes
- 1965** *Tamahine*, 97ft, styled by J. Bannenberg
- 1971** Started Bernard Olesinski Ltd
- 1971** Azimut 43
- 1972** Tarquin 60
- 1975** Powles 46/50/53
- 1978** Fairline Fury
- 1980** Princess 30DS
- 1982** Princess 45
- 1982** Fairline Turbo 36
- 1984** Fairline 31 Corniche
- 1985** Princess 415
- 1986** Fairline 50
- 1986** Princess 55
- 1987** Fairline Targa 33
- 1988** Fairline 43
- 1988** Princess 435
- 1990** Fairline Phantom 38
- 1990** Princess 48
- 1991** Fairline Squadron 62
- 1993** Princess 58
- 1994** Princess V52
- 1995** Fairline Targa 48
- 1998** Fairline Targa 30
- 2000** Princess 25M
- 2000** Princess V65
- 2001** Fairline Squadron 58

which – fairly recently – took charge of superstructure styling and interior layouts. Meanwhile the designers at Princess Yachts work with Olesinski on all aspects of the boat bar the hull lines.

"He came to us at Earls Court in 1978 with a design for a 30-footer and asked if we were interested," recalls David King, boss of Princess Yachts International. Olesinski had established a solid reputation with Powles, Azimut and others during the Seventies, designing capable cruisers with remarkably durable styling – compare the Powles 38 with a Moonraker or practically anything else of the time to see how good design doesn't date. At the time Marine Projects (as was) were building a range of boats from various designers, including John Bennett. "John's hulls were fantastic up to about 20 knots," says King, "but once over that they didn't handle as well. Bernard's hull looked interesting." The 30 became the Princess 30DS, and Projects went on to build more than 350.



Team photo in the R & W Clark shed, 1962: Fred Parker and Arthur Robb designs, and in the foreground a Moreland 36.

Bernard's noticeboard

The framed drawing of the Princess 45 behind his chair provides a suitable tone of corporate high seriousness in Olesinski's office. But partly hidden behind the door is a crowded noticeboard with a slightly surreal scrapbook quality to it. Here pictures of George Selman and Jon Bannenberg jostle with the pompous cutting from *Yachts & Yachting*, a photo of Azimut boss Paolo Vitelli, and one of those marvellous mis-translated Japanese boat advertisements. "This says it all in terms of our aspirations," says Olesinski, deadpan. It reads:

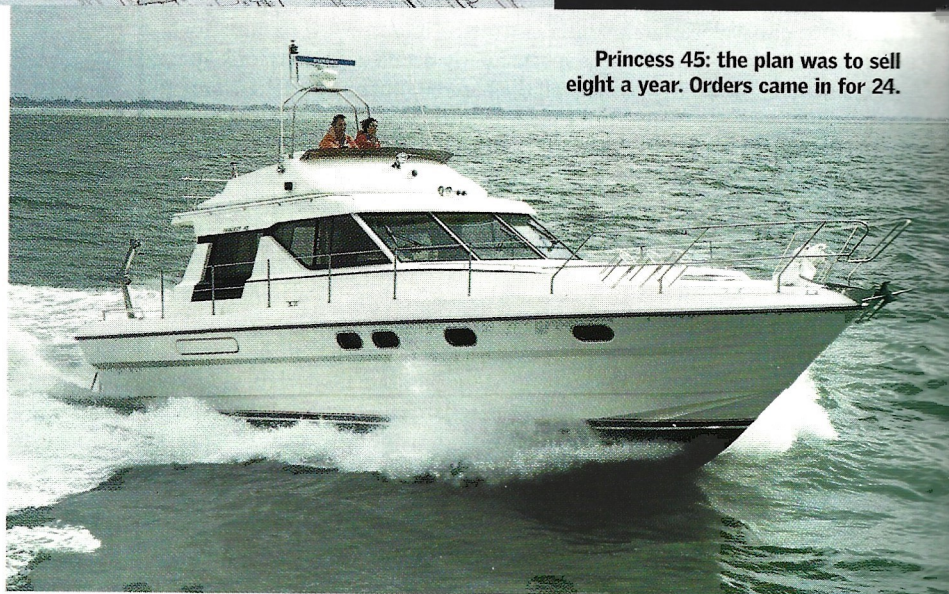
"Yamaha STR-25HT – Finest quality sporty model Rocking Chair on the Sea with Which Loins Relax."

Olesinski had already made a successful approach to Fairline, starting with the 26ft (8m) Fury and following up with successful 21 and 23-footers. His next designs were bold moves: the enduringly popular Fairline Turbo 36, and the classic and ground-breaking Princess 45. Each provided a firm foundation for the companies to build on.

"Remember that in those days if the weather cut up rough you used to have to turn into it and try and edge over towards where you wanted to go, keeping your bows into the seas," says King. "But the 45 could handle a cross-sea, and was fine in a following sea as well. It was superb. And it saw us through that recession – we took enormous market share."

If pressed, Olesinski will include the 45 in his shortlist of 'benchmarks', boats which he finds himself using as a measure of others. "It worked very well with small engines," he admits. "And it was successful right from the start, which was the main thing: 24 boats a year, when they had planned on building eight." But he criticises the firm head-sea ride. Subsequent designs have had deeper bow sections and less pronounced chine flats. Prop tunnels are now routine. Radius chins and spray rails were introduced to reduce drag and counter what he refers to, with mock gravity, as 'plip-plop' – the deafening lapping of ripples around the bow that keeps us all awake at night. "Actually it's plip-plip-plop," he corrects himself: "two spray rails and the chine. It didn't work," he says sadly.

The process is continuous. The clients never get the same hull twice – not since the Princess 35 hull was used for the 36 Riviera. And Olesinski himself is never satisfied. The Princess 360, for example, happens to be the best sea boat for its size that this writer knows, but even it is not perfect: "It's sensitive to trim: if you go along with empty fuel tanks and a full water tank – some owners do..." he tails off with a pained expression. "The



Princess 45: the plan was to sell eight a year. Orders came in for 24.

"Every boat I've designed I always think I can improve. There's always somewhere to go"

forefoot is rather deep." He keeps an unrecognisable Ribtec RIB with an inboard TAM61 which serves as a test bed: steps, jet-drives, surface drives, even hydrofoils have all been tried.

"Every boat I've designed I always think I can improve," he adds. "There's always somewhere to go." This Arthurian pursuit of perfection is perhaps a clue as to how Olesinski has succeeded in keeping two such high-profile clients for so long. "I saw a nice little 21-footer the other day and thought how fantastic it looked. Then I realised it was one of mine – it was a Fairline 21 – and instantly thought how awful it was." He muses for a second. "Don't you think that's a bit strange?" **MBY**

NEXT MONTH Fabio Buzzi