

From successful raceboats to startling superyachts and ground-breaking production boats – Don Shead has done it all. But that doesn't mean he's taking it easy: his enthusiasm for 'things that go' remains undimmed

Don Shead

TEXT ALAN HARPER PORTRAIT SUZANNE GRALA

While Tommy Sopwith took his Hunt-designed Christina *Thunderbolt* to victory in the original Cowes-Torquay in 1961, the 25-year-old Don Shead was competing, with less success, at the helm of a 25ft (7.6m) Force 8, a Colin Mudie deep-vee built in Cowes by Clarks – “a very, very good boat,” Shead remembers. Along with Sopwith there were two other competitors in the line-up who were also to have a profound influence on the early career of this young mechanical engineer: the charismatic Sonny Levi, and American engineer Jim Wynne.

“Believe it or not I was a works driver for Perkins then, with a boat in the Paris Six-Hour race,” Shead recalls. “Just after the Cowes-Torquay I met Sonny there, and he persuaded me to have a new offshore boat for next year.”

This was the 23ft *Trident*, the first of several Levi designs that Shead raced; others included *Delta 28*, a very fast machine, built at Souters and packing 600hp Chevy V8s, which was especially tricky to drive, and the elegant *Thunderfish III* (Max Aitken's record-breaking diesel *Merry-Go-Round*) which, re-engined with Daytonas, caught fire and sank in the 1967 Cowes-Torquay-Cowes.

By then, Shead had become a boat designer, and the UK agent for Daytona, whose competition engines were based on the indomitable Chevrolet V8. He had left the family firm of Automatic Doors, and competing against him in the 1967 race were three of his own, Souter-built designs. “I'd had a lot of experience in other people's boats,” he explains. “I just felt I knew the shortcomings of the boats I'd been using, so it was a matter of trying to eradicate what I considered were the problems.”

The first of Shead's new Avenger 21s came fifth that day out of 39 finishers at over 44mph, driven by Mike Beard and navigated by Pascoe Watson, who backed the boatbuilding venture. Its two 100hp Mercury outboards gave away no less than 900hp to the winner, the Gardner brothers' mighty *Surfury*. At the London Boat Show a leisure version of the cold-moulded runabout was on offer from the Avenger Boat Company and Boat

Showrooms of London. There was a 19-footer too, for circuit-racing. Lady Arran ordered one of each.

Avenger built 30 boats in the first year, 25 for racing, before Shead decided he didn't want to be a boatbuilder: there was too much design work that needed doing.

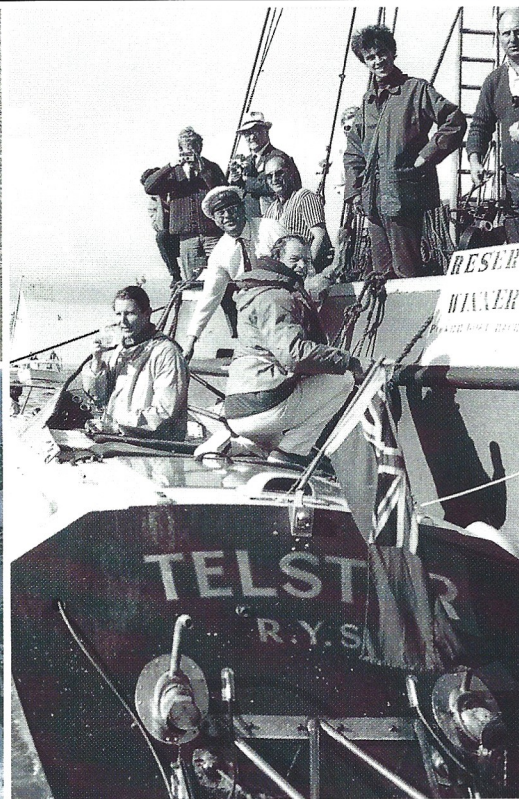
It was a time of transition as designers and engineers on both sides of the Atlantic tested their theories regarding the new deep-vee concept. Something of an aura had grown up around the subject. “One chap I used to talk to a lot was Jim Wynne,” Shead recalls. “Everybody was complicating shapes and trying to surround them with mystique, and he just said, ‘Look, half of this is bullshit.’”

The American engineer had turned to racing to prove his Volvo Penta Aquamatic outdrive leg, and after many famous successes in Ray Hunt hulls had begun designing his own, based on Hunt's principles. His boats became an inspiration, and the simplicity of his approach became a watchword to young Shead, whose own ideas on the deep-vee theme were beginning to take shape.

“They were nothing revolutionary,” Shead concedes. “I decided that the boats should have the maximum running length, a running area of constant section, and the minimum amount of shape at the front to do the job. It was very simple.” This set of priorities was clearly influenced by Shead's racing experiences, which had set him on a quest for improved longitudinal stability and less dramatic cornering, particularly after *Delta 28*. If Levi's ‘Delta’ shape can be characterised as triangular in plan, Shead's hulls were rectangular. “Exactly,” he agrees. “It's a four-wheeler approach, rather than a tricycle. Like comparing a Mini to a Reliant Robin,” he explains, with a mischievous glint in his eye. Nevertheless, the fine styling and rakish profiles of Shead's boats owe little to the bluff shapes of Hunt or Wynne and echo, perhaps unconsciously, the unmistakable look of the Levi boats.

Following the success of the Avengers in the 1967 season and at the 1968 boat show, Tommy Sopwith ordered a new offshore boat from Shead: *Telstar*, a single-engined 25-footer in which he won the rough Cowes-Torquay-Cowes outright that summer. Sopwith's famous tactical gamble paid off inshore around Lyme Bay while *Surfury* pounded across the middle – only to find the





Top: the first Avenger 21 arrives in Torquay, 1967. Above right: winner's berth, Cowes 1968 (the young man with the hair is a future editor). Above: the all-conquering 38ft hull.

'impudent Class 2 boat waiting in the winner's berth.

It was a sensation – and the making of Don Shead. That summer Sopwith asked him to design *Philante VI*, a 90-footer to be built at Camper & Nicholsons. "That year was my breakthrough," Shead acknowledges today. High rollers know other high rollers, race-winners attract attention, and large motor yachts built for English heirs at world-famous shipyards do one's reputation no harm at all. Still only 32, Shead suddenly found himself a rising star of international offshore racing.

Nine Shead designs lined up for the 1969 Cowes-Torquay-Cowes, including a new boat for Sopwith, *Miss Enfield*, built of aluminium at Enfield Marine. And victory for the 28ft (8.5m) triple-Mercury *Avenger Too* in that year's Round-Britain race marked the start of a string of successes for Shead-designed raceboats, stretching well into the 1980s.

Sopwith scored another Cowes win in 1970, with the 32ft 6in (9.9m) Class 1 aluminium *Miss Enfield II*, a design that, via *Enfield Avenger*, led to the legendary 38ft (11.6m) Picchiotti and CUV-built aluminium monohulls. These dominated Class 1 in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the hands of such maestros as Francesco Cosentino, Renato Della Valle and Alberto Petri, world champions in 1978, 1982 and 1984.

Another high roller Shead found himself working for was Don Aronow, who had built a Cigarette sportsboat for King Juan Carlos of Spain. When the American introduced him to Shead the result, in 1979, was *Fortuna*, the most radical royal yacht ever seen: 85ft (26m) and 50 knots, with a triple waterjet installation driven by twin 1,050hp MTUs and a Lycoming gas turbine. This led to

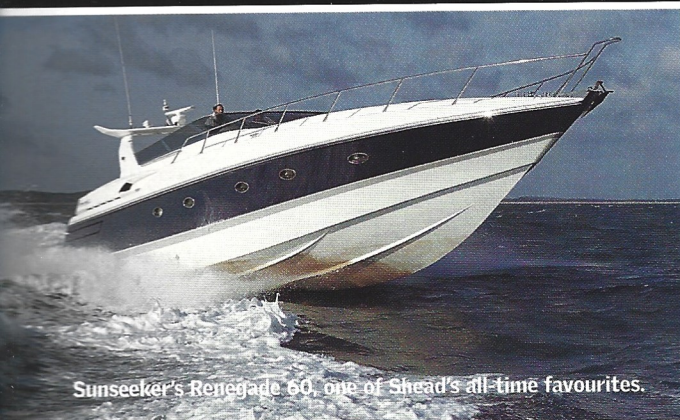


Don Shead, whose boats were winning everything, at Cowes in 1984. Below: the Offshore 31, a development of the 28, the first Shead-designed Sunseeker.

Milestones

- 1936** Born, May 22, Stratford-upon-Avon
- 1956** Begins hydroplane and runabout racing
- 1957** BSc Mech Eng, Birmingham College of Technology
- 1961** Enters first Cowes-Torquay race in a Force 8 (Colin Mudie). Later races Levi-designed *Trident* (1962-3, 23ft, 3 then 2 × 120hp Volvo); *Alto Volante* (1964-5, 27ft, 2 × 400hp Ford Interceptor); *Delta 28* (1966, 28ft, 2 × 600hp Daytona); *Thunderfish III* (1967, 38ft, 2 × 600hp Daytona). Wins 'best British' trophy in Paris Six-Hour race (Yarecraft)
- 1963** Enters Paris Six-Hours as team with Wynne and Sopwith in Wynne/Volvo runabouts. Class win
- 1965** Class win and lap record in Paris Six-Hours (Levi/Volvo)
- 1967** First design, Avenger 21 (5th in Cowes-Torquay)
- 1968** *Telstar* (26ft, 1 × 500hp Daytona) wins Cowes-Torquay-Cowes
- 1969** *Avenger Too* (28ft, 3 × 125hp Mercury) wins Round-Britain Race
- 1970** *Miss Enfield II* (32ft, 2 × 425hp Mercruiser) wins Cowes-Torquay-Cowes
- 1971** First motor cruiser: DS 110; First motor yacht, *Philante VI*. *Enfield Avenger* (37ft, aluminium, 2 × 500hp Mercruiser)
- 1972** *HTS* (33ft, 2 × 250hp Sabre diesels) wins London-Monte Carlo race
- 1973** *Marauder 46*, JCL Marine; drives *Unowot* (ex-*Enfield Avenger*) to win Cowes-Torquay-Cowes
- 1974** *Tramontana*, 68ft sportsfisherman, interior by Heal's; *Enfield Neorion*, 78ft motor yacht: prototype patrol boat for Greek navy; *Miss Embassy*, gas-turbine raceboat
- 1975** Drives *Uno Embassy* to win Cowes-Torquay-Cowes; British Class 1 champion
- 1976** British Class 1 champion
- 1977** *Solitaire of the Isles* (138ft, steel, w. Jon Bannenberg)
- 1978** Francesco Cosentino world Class 1 champion (*Alitalia Uno*, 38ft Picchiotti, 2 × 600hp Mercruiser)
- 1979** *Fortuna* (85ft, MTU/gas turbine, 46 knots); Sunseeker Offshore 28, Poole Powerboats; David Hagan world Class 2 champion (*Apache*, ex-*HTS*)
- 1981** *Revenger 25*, Revenger Boat Co
- 1982** Renato Della Valle world Class 1 champion (*Rothmans*, 38ft CUV, 2 × 600hp Mercruiser); Sunseeker Monaco 12M
- 1983** *Shergar* (153ft, MTU/gas turbine, 40 knots, w. Gilgenast)
- 1984** Alberto Petri world Class 1 champion (*Miura*, 38ft CUV, 2 × 800hp Mercruiser); *Philante VIII* (105ft)
- 1986** Sunseeker Portofino 31
- 1988** Sunseeker Tomahawk 37
- 1990** Sunseeker Renegade 60
- 1991** *Philante IX* (140ft)
- 1992** *Chamar* (186ft, aluminium, 8,325hp MTUs, waterjets)
- 1993** Sunseeker Manhattan 58
- 1996** Sunseeker Predator 80
- 1998** *Sussurro* (162ft, 46 knots, w. Disdale, De Voogt)
- 1999** Sunseeker Predator 75; Linssen DS45
- 2000** Sunseeker 105 Yacht; Australian Motor Yachts 45m (148ft)





Sunseeker's Renegade 60, one of Shead's all-time favourites.

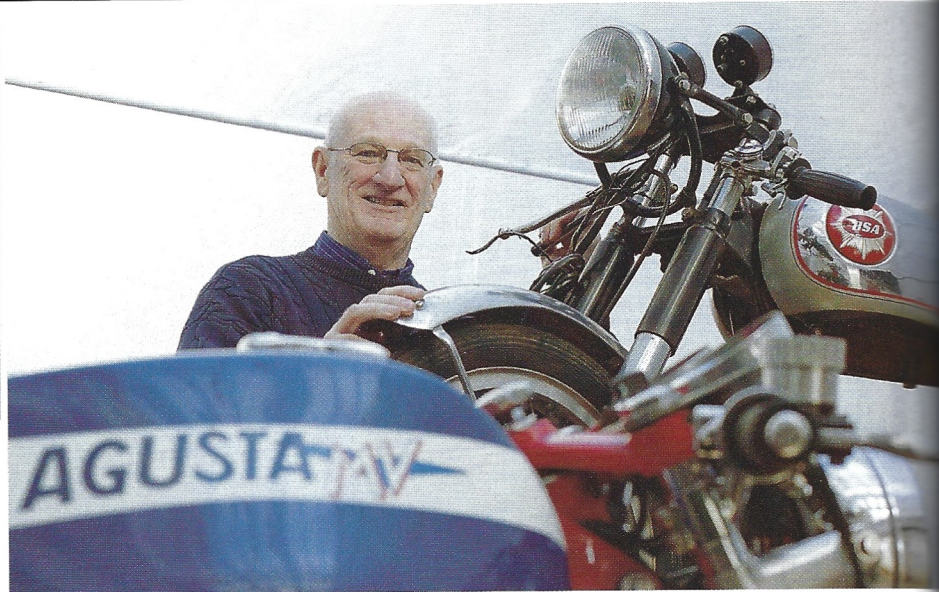
the 153ft (47m) *Shergar*, a collaboration with Gerhard Gilgenast for the Aga Khan, giving a 40-knot speed – unheard of for such a large yacht.

There was still one thing missing from Shead's CV. The designer of world-beating raceboats and glamorous motor yachts still didn't have a range of production boats to his name. True, there had been the Avengers, and in the early 1970s a short run of Halmatic-built DS 110 34-footers, deep-vee diesel cruisers good for 27 knots. A brief association with Colin Chapman of Lotus led to the advanced Marauder 46 for JCL Marine back in 1973. But the mainstream boatbuilders had not yet caught on.

Then the phone rang. It was Sunseeker – Poole Powerboats, as they were then called. "It's every designer's dream to get a big production boatbuilder," says Shead now, "but they were nothing then – a very small company." Though small, they had big ideas, and the Braithwaite brothers, Robert and John, knew they needed to buy in talent to help realise them. As John Braithwaite recalls: "We needed someone who could do the type of hull we wanted, and Don at the time was leader in the field."

They were distributors for Volvo parts and a range of imported boats – Owens from the US and Coronet, Draco and Windy from Scandinavia – but they had also begun building 17, 20 and 23-footers based on Owens hulls. "We knew that kind of boat and we knew what customers wanted," says Braithwaite. "We'd also learnt that you had to have a range of products. You can't just sell two models. And that you can't just focus on the UK and hope to grow. We were looking at the Med."

The call came at an opportune time for Shead. A deal had fallen through with Henry Taylor in the South of France for a 28ft (8.5m) production cruiser based on the hull of *Avenger Too*, the Round-Britain race-winner. "When we went to see him he already had some ideas of his own," says Braithwaite. Shead's sketches showed exactly the sort of thing they were looking for, and it became the Sunseeker 28, launched at the Brighton Boat



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Show in the summer of 1979. "Everything just clicked. You only work well with people you get on with."

It was the start of an outstanding professional relationship that continues as strongly today, with a team of three from Shead's company based permanently at Poole as part of the Sunseeker design office. "It's quite incredible," remarks Shead. "After all these years Robert and I can still smile at each other and get on with designing new boats. It has been fantastic."

The flow of work for Sunseeker continues, including a forthcoming 130-footer, and there are new projects for Seastar of New York building in Thailand and Australia. Linssen plan to follow their DS45 with a 53, and the 162ft (50m), 46-knot *Sussurro* was one of the highest-profile superyacht launches of 1998.

At the age of 65 Don Shead appears to have no intention of stopping. As well as the vintage motorcycles there is of course the racing car, an insane 190mph machine in which he still competes, powered, inevitably, by Chevrolet. "Oh yes," he asserts. "It's always been the same. Unless there's a Chevrolet V8 around the place somewhere I get very fed up."

Behind his rambling Stockbridge house, chocked up and cocooned in blue plastic sheeting, lies *Thunderbolt*. The winner of the first Cowes-Torquay race is in surprisingly good condition, though she is something of an orphan: since Shead rescued her from the now-defunct motor boat museum in Bordeaux he has been waiting for the right person to take her off his hands.

"It would be different if she'd been one of mine," he declares breezily. "I'd have restored her myself. But there must be an Avenger 21 lying about somewhere..." **MBY**



Above: *Uno Embassy*, winner at Cowes in 1975. Left: blue hull, curved screen – an early Sunseeker? No, *Telstar*, 1968. Right: Peter du Cane's Vosper *Flying Fish*, 1966. "I've always tried to employ ex-Vosper people," Shead says. "They're the best."

