

Ed Dubois

Ed Dubois' first-ever yacht design trounced the competition. Today, he is the man behind one of the most prolific superyacht design studios in the world Alan Harper

Photographs by Graham Snook and from Ed Dubois' personal collection



Ed Dubois is a lucky man. Don't just take my word for it – take his. "I was blessed – very lucky, because it was an extremely light-airs summer. A big high came and sat over north-west Europe, and it didn't rain from May until early September."

We are sitting in his large, sunlit office at one end of Dubois Naval Architects located on the South Coast, and he is talking about 1976. "It was a proper drought, with standpipes, and the boat was pretty average in a breeze, but very good in light airs," he says. In that hot, still summer, when the sternest test of a helmsman was whether he could coax a tenth of a knot from a whisper of breeze, the Dubois three-quarter-tonner *Borsalino Trois* won the Solent Points and RORC championships, and the British team trials. It was Ed Dubois's first design. He was 23.

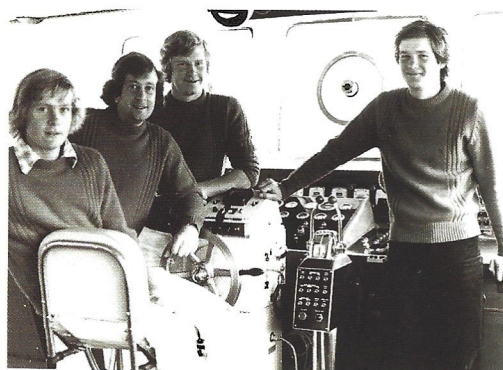
This was an era regarded now with nostalgia – a final flourish of yachting's Corinthian spirit, before the sport went properly professional. Rich owners would commission new boats on virtually an annual basis, eager to employ the designer du jour. "In those days the secret for designers was to become a fashionable name by winning some races," continues the designer, whose clients today might never have jostled for supremacy at the windward mark, but they know what they want in a superyacht. "Then you'd be asked by the production boat companies to design some boats for them because you could, demonstrably, design a good boat, and you had a name."

This mechanism duly clicked into place for Dubois, who immediately received orders for three more racing boats: the Admiral's Cup racer *Vanguard* for a Hong Kong owner; another three-quarter tonner *Nadia*, for a Swiss client; and the quarter-tonner *Enigma*. He set up Dubois Naval Architects Ltd in September 1977, as production boatbuilders Westerly Yachts came calling. This was the stuff of dreams. He had only graduated from Southampton College of Technology in 1974, and had spent less than a year working for Alan Buchanan in Jersey, before moving as an editorial assistant to *Yachts & Yachting* magazine. "I took Rob Humphreys's job," he laughs. "I walked into his shoes, and his company car – an electric blue Ford Escort – and in the evenings I would design yachts for fun."

Dubois worked well for Westerly. Nearly 1,000 of his Griffon and Fulmar designs were eventually built, and there were many other models. French boatbuilder Wauquiez also sought him out. Royalty income provided financial stability and allowed him to take on staff. His company and its reputation grew.

Today, he runs a nine-strong team of designers and support crew from his studio in a beautifully converted red-brick stable block, hidden away among ancient farmland and oak forest just inland from Lymington. Yacht photographs adorn the walls, and tank-test models dangle from the roof beams. In reception, piles of carefully indexed glossy magazines splash the latest Dubois yachts across their pages, while parked outside is the sort of Mercedes that is impossible to ignore, complete with personalised number plate.

It has been a long journey for a little boy from Surrey, whose father would take him to sail his model boats in Kensington Gardens. He first sailed an actual boat aged ten in nearby Regent's Park, and as a teenager spent several idyllic summers learning sailing and



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seamanship at the Able Boys camp in Milford Haven. "I went to a very sporty school. My dad had been there with his five brothers, and their names were all over the walls – I think there was one of them in the 1st XV for rugby and the 1st XI for cricket every year from about 1925 to 1939," he remembers. "I never got into those teams. My father never made me feel guilty about it, but nevertheless I did feel I was letting the side down. So when I found something I could do, which was sailing, I absolutely loved it."

The firm has become synonymous with sailing superyachts ever since Dubois landed the contract in 1985 to design the fast cruising sloop *Aquell II* for American printing magnate Bob Millhouse. At 122ft (37m) it was a phenomenal size for its day. "He wanted something different – hidden winches, hidden ventilation, something very streamlined. It got noticed," says Dubois. This was just as the market for racing yachts was starting to dry up.

The most important person to note, for Dubois at least, was Australian Alfa Romeo importer Neville Crichton. "He is a big name in our history – we're on our eighth project with him," confirms the designer. The first of this long and pioneering series was *Esprit*, a 32-metre aluminium sloop built in New Zealand at Tony



Top left: Ed (right) with (from left) Malcolm McKeon, design leader at Dubois, David Sharpe and Mark Dagge. All four crewed on *Vanguard*.

Top right: *Aquell II* was the beginning of Dubois' superyacht involvement.

Above: The 141ft fibreglass motor yacht *Slipstream* was built in 2001 at Dave Warren Yachts.

Left: To relax, Ed escapes on his pride and joy, his Sparkman & Stephens sloop *Firebrand*.

Hambrook's Alloy Yachts. "Alloy were then 30 people, and now they have 450," says Dubois. "You could say – in fact it is the case," he corrects himself, "that the expertise of Tony Hambrook, the money and vision of Neville Crichton, and my design work, have built that company over the last 20 years into arguably the best sailing superyacht builder in the world."

Dubois projects undertaken to date at Alloy include power as well as sail: the sleek, 41-metre motor yacht *Como* is one, with twin 1,550hp diesels and an interior by Redman Whitely Dixon, which was the focus of an impenetrable quayside throng at the 2007 Monaco Yacht Show. There was also the 38.5-metre contemporary classic *SQN* in 2003, with a 16.5-knot top speed and a cruising range of over 4,000 miles. Slightly longer, *Ad Lib* was based on the same design. Then there were other shipyards, and new clients with different ideas: *Slipstream*, a 43-metre fibreglass motor yacht, was built in 2001 at Dave Warren Yachts in Australia, in the same year as the 50-metre three-decker *Mosaique* launched in Turkey for a British owner.

Elsewhere, the spectacular 53-metre ketch *Nirvana* has recently been launched at Vitters in Holland, displacing over 500 tonnes. Not far away at Royal

Huisman another ketch-rigged leviathan, *Twizzle*, measures 57.5 metres and will launch next year. Both of these high-technology giants sport the latest feature for big sailing yachts, a flybridge.

Dubois keeps his own yacht, the 1965 Sparkman & Stephens sloop *Firebrand*, close to home on the Beaulieu River. Built in Cowes, she is a beautiful example of a classic ocean racer, 43ft (13m) long, from a design studio that he rates above all others. "Olin Stephens was the best designer of the 20th Century, I think everyone will agree to that," he declares.

He discovered the yacht, characteristically, by chance. Returning from a design meeting with a prospective client in the BVIs, he had time to kill in Miami and picked up a copy of *Wooden Boat* magazine to read over a cup of coffee. "And there was *Firebrand* advertised," he remembers. "I rang up, thinking she'd be in Boston or somewhere, not Florida, but she was in Fort Lauderdale. I jumped in a taxi, and an hour later I was sitting on her deck with the owner." The meeting in the BVIs had gone well. The Englishman felt he was in with a good chance, and decided that if he got the contract he'd buy the boat. He got the contract.

For family boating – the youngest of his four children is just two – he recently acquired a 65ft (20m) motor boat designed by another iconic New York naval architecture firm, C. Raymond Hunt Associates. She was constructed in aluminium by Royal Huisman, and is also kept on the river. "She's a very nice boat – very American looking, and beautifully built," he says.

But it's clearly *Firebrand* that makes his heart beat faster. "My wife isn't a sailor," he explains. "But she says, 'you feel totally free on the water, don't you?' Absolutely. If you have the courage to turn your mobile phone off, and not look at your blimbling Blackberry, then you can be free. I am a sociable sort of bloke, but I occasionally take off on my own in *Firebrand*. And once I drop the mooring and I'm off, it's just like heaven."

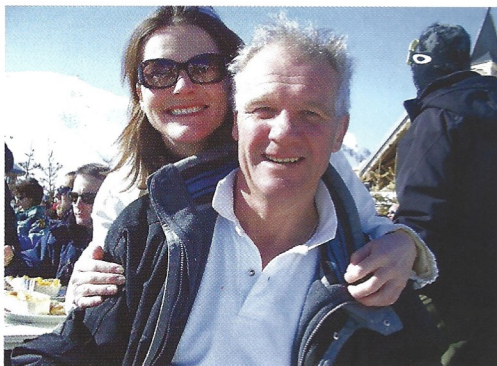
But business must come first, as anyone who has to work to finance his boating will wearily acknowledge. If his studio was busy in the boom times, it's probably even busier now that things have tightened up.

"We've got 14 boats under construction at the moment: six in New Zealand, four in Holland, one in the UK and four in Turkey," he ticks off without a pause. "I don't know what the average value is, but they're all big projects, between 30 and 70 metres. And there are a couple of things which are now emerging, from people who are thinking this could be the right time to build a boat, or at least to plan one, because even the well-known shipyards are running out of work, and owners feel they can get a good deal."

Meanwhile, there are another five big yachts in design and development, as well as several production projects. Two new models for the English yacht builder Southerly, the Oyster 100 and 125 semi-custom performance sailboats, and a 23-metre fast motor yacht for Windy Boats in Norway.

It seems a prudently diverse portfolio, calculated to help weather the current financial storm after several years of unprecedented boom in the big-yacht market. "This is a different period, there's no doubt about it," he agrees. "But we're a small office, with small overheads, we're not carrying stock the way boatyards do, and we don't have any debt – we're very fortunate."

To hear Dubois tell it, his life has been one stroke of good fortune after another – as if his success is all



Top left: Ed Dubois and wife Honor.

Top right: The Oyster 100 is one of several current production projects.

Right: Ed Dubois at work in his studio in Lymington.

Below: Dubois Naval Architects currently has 14 boats under construction. Bottom: Lead weights were used in pre-computer days to hold down thin splines to generate the hull lines.



career – *Borsalino Trois* owner George Skelley, his first client, and Neville Crichton, his biggest, both of whom became friends long before they became customers. Later, the business was saved by the arrival of the sailing superyacht concept, just as the racing market was starting to disappear. Today, the business thrives in the face of global adversity thanks, he says, to its manageable size, low overheads and lack of debt – all, no doubt, happy accidents.

No one could begrudge a talented young designer an outrageous stroke of luck to kick-start his career. For Ed Dubois it was that summer of '76: hot, dry, windless and ideally suited to his first-ever design. It put his name in lights, and then the hard work started. Fame and fortune duly followed. End of story.

Not quite. Three years later, it happened again. "We did an Admiral's Cupper for Australia called *Police Car*," Dubois remembers. "That boat was very good in a breeze, and rather mediocre in light airs. And it blew like hell in 1979 – *Police Car* was the leading boat in the Australian team, which won the Cup that year. Lucky? No question about it."

Well, maybe. Wasn't it Thomas Jefferson who said, "The harder I work, the luckier I get"? It should have been Ed Dubois. **SYW**

down to chance, and nothing to do with personality, character, talent or determination. He will admit to a powerful streak of ambition, though he seems to doubt whether that on its own is enough, or even necessary: "It does get you what you want," he muses. "But it's quite a tough road at the same time. When you don't feel you're moving on as fast as you want to, it's quite frustrating. But when I look back, it shouldn't have been frustrating, because things happened very fast."

Luck gets all the credit, as in his tales of chance meetings with people who turned out to be vital to his