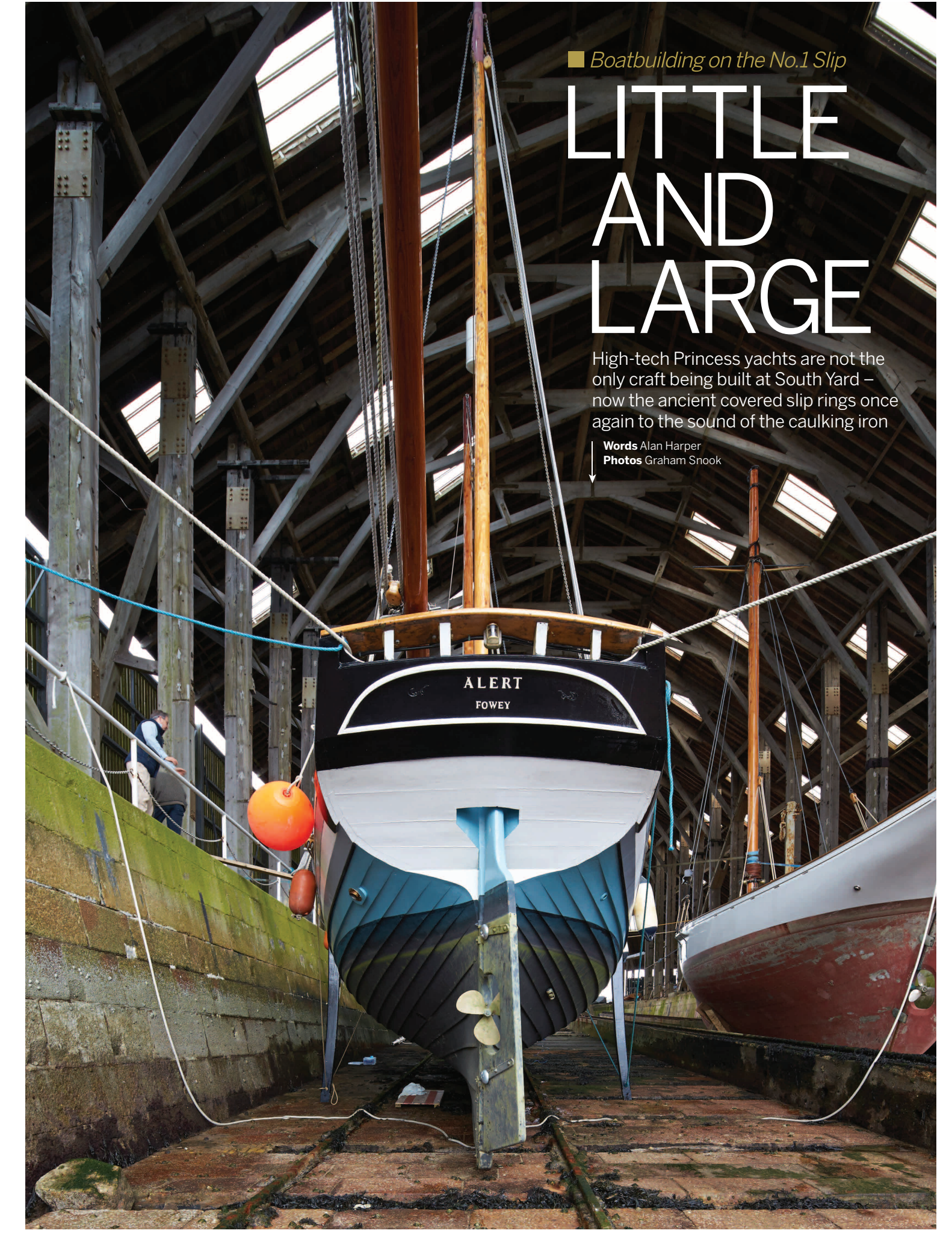




■ *Boatbuilding on the No.1 Slip*

LITTLE AND LARGE

High-tech Princess yachts are not the only craft being built at South Yard – now the ancient covered slip rings once again to the sound of the caulking iron

Words Alan Harper
Photos Graham Snook

ITS OAK-BEAMED ROOF STRUCTURE, WHICH WAS ADDED TO THE SLIP IN 1814, IS EVEN SHAPED TO ACCOMMODATE THE BOWSPRITS OF THE GREAT AGE OF SAIL



Wooden boatbuilding is once more under way on the No. 1 Slip, a stone's throw from Princess Yachts' high-tech production facilities in Plymouth. The shipyard that produces Princess's largest flybridge boats and M Class superyachts is now also host to Stirling & Son, an award-winning small business that specialises in traditional boat construction, restoration and repair.

Dating from 1763, No. 1 Slip is a listed ancient monument under British law, and as part of the old South Yard naval complex, it now comes under the custodianship of Princess. Stirling & Son moved into its new premises, the oldest covered dockyard in the world, from an old barn in Tavistock last March. "It's perfect for what we do," commented 34-year-old boatbuilder Will Stirling. "There are no alterations necessary – we just need to replace the existing rails and put in a new winch."

The 174ft (53m) limestone and granite slipway has lain unused since the 1960s, but it will give Stirling the capacity to work on the largest wooden yachts. Its oak-beamed roof structure, which was added to the slip in 1814, is even shaped to accommodate the bowsprits of the great age of sail.



Stirling himself can claim a kinship with the place – an ancestor of his, Eliza Barlow, launched the 80-gun warship HMS *Foudroyant* from the dockyard in 1798 – but the Eton-educated craftsman never intended to enter the yachting profession. "I wanted to work outdoors," he explained. "I considered thatching, but couldn't find an opening there. Then a friend suggested I have a look at the International Boatbuilding Training College." He signed on for a one-year course at the famous traditional boatbuilding school in Lowestoft in 2000, and hasn't looked back.

Stirling & Sons' stock in trade is attractive clinker-built rowing dinghies of nine-foot (2.75m) and upwards, built in mahogany and lustrously varnished, which sell for £575 per foot plus VAT. But the company has made its name with several more ambitious projects. *Alert* is a stunning 35ft (10.7m) replica of an 1835 smuggling lugger, in which Stirling undertook a voyage to Iceland soon after its launch in 2007. Like many of his vessels it was built of larch planking on oak frames, with copper and bronze fastenings. Another commission was a 26ft (7.9m) yawl for the museum ship HMS *Victory*, while *Integrity*, the young company's biggest yacht to date, is a 43ft (13m) replica 'gentleman's cutter' of the 1880s era, which was designed



The replica 19th-century lugger *Alert* shares the slip with the graceful *Integrity*. Far left: Will Stirling.

Once it was warships, now it's yachts: Plymouth's old No. 1 slip dates from Nelson's day and is a listed monument. The roof was added just before Waterloo.



by Stirling but based on contemporary concepts from such august naval architects as Fife, Watson and Nicholson.

Perhaps the company's most quixotic creation was a 12ft (3.65m) traditional mahogany-on-oak dinghy which was built in 2011 as a wedding present for Prince William and Kate Middleton. The date of their big day was carved into the transom in elegant Roman numerals, highlighted with gold leaf.

In addition to the new-builds, meanwhile, Stirling has kept his small team busy with restoration and refit work on numerous classic craft, including the 100-ton trading ketch *Garlandstone*, built in 1909 a few miles upriver at Calstock, *Tectona*, a 65-ton Colin Archer design built of teak in India, and even *Idler*, a 20ft (6m) Beer lugger – which is of course nothing to do with beer, but a traditional beach-launched fishing boat design named for the Devon seaside town.

The first contract undertaken on the old naval slipway was a topsides renovation of *Pierrette*, an 27ft (8.3m) Fairlie-built Fife design from 1899. She has gone off sailing now, but will be back soon for some more work on her deck. "That was the first time the ring of a caulking hammer has been heard on the old slipway for some time," Will Stirling recalled with a smile. But we can be sure it won't be the last.