

British Dragon Builders

by Tim Wilkes

Following on from my article in the last edition of the BDA Magazine about the beautifully built Pedersen & Thuesen Dragons (more at www.pedersentandthuesen.com) I thought it would be interesting to have a look at which boat builders in Great Britain have turned their hand to building our yachts in wood.

Over the years there must have been many yards attracted to the lines and popularity of the Dragon. Some yards built only one or two, whilst others developed a name for themselves and turned out many more. I have endeavoured to identify most of these yards, but am happy to have any omissions pointed out to me! For a handful of yards I have been unable to track down any information. I do not pretend to have it all right, but I hope I have come close to it; again, I'm happy to hear from anyone who has additional information.

McGruer

Location: Clynder, Scotland

Dragons built: 46

Years: 1936-1951

The first yard to build Dragons in the 1930s; indeed, UK Dragon number 1 *Ta-Yen* was built by them in 1938 for Mr ASL Young. However, by one of those quirks that are now lost to the mists of time, the yard had already built numbers 2 to 7 and 9 to 11 in 1936! The last Dragon we know of built by them was *Bintyra* (K239) for Mr JM Miller & Mr D Moffat in 1951. The McGruers moved from Tighnabraich to Hattonburn at Clynder in 1914 to establish themselves for the first time in their own yard. Having access to powered hand tools slung from overhead cables must have made the work less arduous and uncomfortable. One of the most useful tools was a spindle cutter set in a workbench, on which planks could be cut out to conform to a pattern. This was operational when the yard started to build Dragons. They would cut complete sets of planks for a Dragon, three copies of each plank, so that they were always left with patterns for the next boat. The hulls were planked up on standard moulds, an early version of mass production. Although innovative, McGruers did not try building boats



in fashion, the hulls planked up, then the stringers and any steamed frames put in. Old-growth pitch pine, which is excellent for hull planking, was imported from Canada up to 1939, when supplies stopped during WW II and did not resume thereafter. Enormous teak and mahogany logs, up to four feet square, would arrive by sea and would be rendered into workable boards at Gilmour & Aitken's yard in Jamestown. Around the time the boats were built the workforce would have numbered about thirty permanent workers, local residents and usually the family of older employees. In spring local painters and labourers would swell the ranks to deal with fitting out the fleet of racing and cruising boats that wintered at the yard. Many of these were paid hands on the yachts. Although conditions must have been hard, working through the winter in sheds only partly protected from the weather, the workforce is reputed to have been extremely happy. When a boat was reaching an interesting stage everyone would be desperate to get in to work in the morning. Of course at the same time ship-building in the Clyde yards was going on entirely in the open, so perhaps McGruer's men felt themselves lucky. Both types of activity involved exciting creative work which sometimes had to substitute for proper pay. McGruers' workforce could also reflect that they worked for one of the best-known yards and even in bad times there would be a reasonable order-book and job security for the permanent employees at least. At one of the smaller yards in the area it was not uncommon for there to be no wages at the end of the week and the local publican had to offer an informal banking service. When the original company finally went into liquidation at the end of 2001, having not built any new wooden boats for about ten years, they were the last of the famous Scottish yards to shut down. (That company is not to be confused with a new company of the same name, which carries on surveying and other services.)

Robertson

Location: Argyll, Scotland

Dragons built: 5

Years: 1936-1952

Alexander Robertson started repairing boats in a small workshop at Sandbank, Argyll in 1876, and went on to become one of the foremost wooden boat builders on the Clyde. The 'golden

years' of Robertson's yard were in the early 1900s when they started building some of the first Metre Class racing yachts. Robertson's was well known for the quality of its workmanship and was chosen to build the first 15-metre yacht designed by William Fife III. In 1922 Alexander Robertson & Sons (Yachtbuilders) Ltd Sandbank, was formally structured. In 1929 designer David Boyd left Fife's of Fairlie to begin work at the yard. In 1934 they began building lifeboats for the RNLI. There is some discrepancy about a couple of the Dragons built by this yard and we haven't yet got to the bottom of the puzzle! Alexander Robertson died in 1937, aged 86. During WW II the yard built some of the fast Fairmile ML/MGB/



MTBs. Then in 1949 came the first of the one-design Loch Longs built at the yard. In 1965 the Robertson family sold the business.

Bute Slip Dock Co

Location: Argyll, Scotland

Dragons built: 2

Years: 1947-1949

In 1912, Alfred Mylne and his brother Charles Mylne took on a small yard at Ardmaleish Point which was to serve as the main build yard for Mylne yachts for the next 65 years. It was close to their family home on the Island of Bute. Alfred operated his design business from Glasgow, supplying designs to yards around the world, but the Bute Slip Dock was where the alchemy could take place, where new ideas could be developed and put into practice. Though no longer connected to the Mylne design business, the yard continues in operation to this day as the Ardmaleish Boat Yard, and serves both commercial and yachting interests.



Woodnutt

Location: St Helens, Isle of Wight

Dragons built: 18

Years: 1938-1959

In 1899, Alfred Westmacott formed a new boatbuilding and engineering firm, Westmacott Stewart & Co, with premises on the Duver at the site of an established yard, Kirby Bowen. After three years Westmacott formed a new company to run the yard and to buy out the old-established sailmaking business of Woodnutt. The new firm, Woodnutt & Co designed and built craft and marine engines, continued sailmaking and established a chandlery store. Seaview Mermaids, Sunbeams, Victors and X-One Designs were all designed and built by the remarkable Alfred Westmacott. After the war Woodnutts closed their St. Helens' yard and moved to Warsash (where they suffered a disastrous fire), and finally sold out and closed down. In the course of these events many of their records were lost or destroyed. A year before WW II began, Woodnutts built the prototype Fairmile ML. During the war, employing about 200 workers, they built 26 Fairmile classes A, B, C and D fast patrol boats. The timber was pre-cut on the mainland. They also built the Uffa Fox designed Airborne Lifeboats which were carried underneath aircraft and dropped by means of drogue chutes into the sea. These ingenious boats saved the lives of over 600 Allied airmen during WWII. The other yards in the harbour were involved by either sub-contract from Woodnutts or by their employees moving over to Woodnutts to work.

Camper & Nicholson

Location: Southampton

Dragons built: 19

Years: 1947-1959

This yard dates back to 1809, when Amos Nicholson took on his great nephew William Camper, a young London shipwright. Camper took over the yard in 1824 when Amos died. When the 41 ton Breeze won the Kings Cup in 1836 it consolidated Camper's position and led to him becoming known as "Yachtbuilder to the Royal Yacht Squadron". William Camper died in 1863 but just before that the yard had become Camper & Nicholson. When yachting recovered in the 1920's the years leading up to World War II marked the heyday of Camper & Nicholsons. The America's Cup campaigns of 1930, 1934 and 1937 brought international fame with the design and build of *Shamrock V*, *Velsheda*, *Endeavour* and *Endeavour II*. For all his successes, it is perhaps for these few, fragile, over-rigged and utterly outrageous J class yachts that Charles E. Nicholson is best remembered. Camper and Nicholsons also undertook the alterations and re-rigging of King George V's yacht, *Britannia*. It is a tribute

to the standard of Camper and Nicholsons' original build quality that, with the exception of *Endeavour II* and *Britannia*, which was not originally built by Camper and Nicholsons and which was scuttled after the King's death, all of them are still sailing. In spite of racing successes and the production of such high profile boats as the Dragon *Bluebottle*, the company's situation was precarious and it received a further blow when the Government's demand for minesweepers and other small craft dried up in the late 1950's.

Nunn Bros

Location: Waldringfield, Suffolk

Dragons built: 10

Years: 1947-1964

Harry Nunn along with his brother Ernie Nunn started Nunn Bros Boatyard in 1921 at Waldringfield on the River Deben. The firm has remained in the family and now trades as Seamark Nunn. It took over from Nunn Bros in 1961, emerging as a boat building and chandlery business to support the sailing community on the Suffolk and Essex coast. From its inception, the company built a solid reputation for fast racing dinghies in wood and later GRP, and during the late 1960s and 1970s was a favourite builder for the OK Dinghy, Solo and Optimist.

Tucker Brown

Location: Burnham on Crouch

Dragons built: 6

Years: 1948-1959



Tucker Brown was founded in 1906 by Andrew Bigmore, George Brown, Joe Cole and Stan Tucker, who bought land adjoining the sea wall. The firm then

supplied moorings in the river and fitted out yachts. Many of the best know local characters were connected with this boatyard. After World War I Stan Tucker left the firm to found Crouch Engineering. In the 1930's Tucker Brown absorbed J King who were neighbouring boat builders and began boat building and design. The business continued to expand taking in Coronations Hall as well as small units in Coronation Road and Kings Road. During WW II the original partners retired to be taken over by Sonny and Bob Cole. The yard were well known for building many of the Stella class cruiser/racers. With the arrival of fibreglass the traditional shipwrights and their expertise were no longer in demand; in 1980 this led to the sale of the firm.

Lallow

Location: Cowes

Dragons built: 20

Years: 1949-1969



Clare Lallow's was established in 1867 and even now combines traditional techniques and craftsmanship with modern materials and technology. They continue to be specialists in the restoration of classic wooden boats such as Ted Heath's *Morning Cloud*. The yard also built many well-known boats including X One-Designs, being one of only two yards left with a licence to build the class.

Robson

Location: South Shields

Dragons built: 1

Year: 1951

Robson Boat Builders Ltd, were a well-respected shipyard in South Shields. At their yard in Commercial Road in this photo can be seen the framework of a coble fishing boat being built.

Burnes

Location: Chichester

Dragons built: 8

Years: 1952-1964



Burnes Boatyard was based in Bosham. Before the war they built the Chichester Harbour 18, first launched in 1939. They became the lead builders for the popular South Coast One Design cruiser/racers, with more than half the SCODs built coming from their yard, 62 in total between 1956 and 1967. The yard was well respected for their quality of construction and attention to detail and their yachts are still considered amongst the best of the SCODs. They also built National 12 dinghy's with the renowned Charles Curry actively building them in the yard, where it is rumoured he put in a few tweaks of his own. Later they built some early Nicholson 26 to a high quality finish, the hulls of which were moulded by Halmatic.

Autoyachts

Location: Gillingham

Dragons built: 1

Year: 1958

Autoyachts Ltd was started by Ron Parham in 1953 as a car garage and marine engineering



upside down, which is much easier than right way up. Shadow moulds would be set up in traditional

business. The premises were built a few inches above the level of the highest tide to ensure they were not flooded. The firm is still in existence at Pier Road.

CH Lavis

Location: Exmoor

Dragons built: 2

Year: 1959

CH Lavis & Son are still listed as a boatyard, run by a Lavis family member. They describe themselves as yacht, launch and boat builders with winter storage facilities and the ability to carry out repairs in wood and GRP. Although we only know of one Lavis Dragon, on which I had my first sail in the class, I recall being told that the yard had built 2; so I'm hoping this might jog someone's memory!

Fairlie Yacht Services

Location: Scotland

Dragons built: 1

Year: 1959

Despite having a name that has been around a good while, this yard has no connection to the current well-respected Hamble based Fairlie that I can find.

R & W Clark

Location: Cowes

Dragons built: 1

Year: 1960

R & W Clark must be one of those yards that come and go, set up by brothers or father and son, which turns out good work but is not commercially successful. It would be unkind to call them hobbyists, but we must assume their enthusiasm for boatbuilding outweighed their business ability. However, they have left behind some wonderful craft for us to enjoy.

Danegeld was conceived and built in 1958 by David Cheverton for Bobby Lowein, a well-known Cowes sailor with an enviable race record and later Max Aitken's sailing master. With her long overhangs, she was hailed by the yachting press as one of the "nicest and most shapely vessels produced in this country" and "something of a wonder boat." With the success of the design *Danegeld* was promoted as a class of its own. Only four other boats were built, including *Soraya* for Richard Carr and built by R & W Clark. Allegedly Clark's built her to such a high standard that she bankrupted the company. We also know the yard built four Trident motor cruisers; some dozen Force 8 class built in 1960 to 1962 with cold moulded hulls; Robb 38 sailing cruisers; Vertue 32 Aux Sloops and a Moreland 38, powered by twin 300hp Cummins diesels, which raced in the 1966 Cowes – Torquay.

Morgan Giles

Location: Teignmouth

Dragons built: 3

Years: 1960

I found an enthusiastic following for this yard: 'It has been over 40 years since the Morgan Giles shipyard in Teignmouth has been in operation and yet interest in the yard and its products remains high. This is because of the singular quality of the designs and boats produced and because of the number of boats still in use today. Francis Charles Morgan-Giles was born in 1883. He became a keen and competent sailor and a boat designer and builder of note. Even before he started up the Morgan Giles shipyard in Teignmouth in 1920 he was a household name in the dinghy world, particularly in the West of England and West of England Conference classes. The



yard was extended in 1939 with new sheds and slipway, mould loft, steam kiln, drawing office

and administration offices. The Admiralty chose Morgan Giles Ltd. as one of the firms that could carry out construction and repair work to naval craft. "With the death of Morgan Giles, the world of yachting has lost one of its best known characters. He was perhaps the last survivor of the almost legendary band of great English yacht designers from the early years of this century - from the days of Fife, Nicholson and Mylne." His son, Captain Michael Morgan-Giles, became Managing Director on his father's death and the yard was run by him for a few more years. The yard closed in 1969. The name of Morgan-Giles however, lives on in the many superbly crafted boats which he and his highly skilled staff designed and built. The yard built many cruiser/racers, Dragons, Eight Metres, Salcombe 'A' Class, Six Metres and West Channel One Designs. Teignmouth and Shaldon Museum holds an extensive archive of the many boats designed and built by the Morgan Giles yard as well as other items such as photographs and tools.'

Cowes Boatbuilding

Location: Cowes

Dragons built: 2

Years: 1961-1962

The Cowes Boatbuilding Co. Ltd was based in premises that became the Cowes Corinthian Yacht Club. It is known they built three of Uffa Fox's Flying Fifteens and a well-known classic, long keeled wooden sloop Franz, still being raced, having been designed for JOG races in the 1960s. The firm closed in 1968.

Over the years there have been several books produced that concern our beautiful yacht. But not everyone currently sailing a Dragon may have heard of some of them. In an effort to help fill your library with more excellent Dragon related bibliographies, here are some suggested titles for you. If you know of other books not on this list, please let us know.

The Royal Dragon by RL Hewitt, first published in 1958. *Bluebottle* (K192) is perhaps the best known Dragon of all. She still belongs to HRH Prince Phillip, though she is now at the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth. After she was given to the royal couple by the members of the Island Sailing Club in 1948 as a wedding present, she was raced on a regular basis throughout the 1950s, winning a Bronze medal at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. A succession of Royal Navy Sailing Masters were responsible for the yacht, Hewitt being one of them. His easily read book is a wonderful evocation of Dragon sailing in the 1950s, both on home waters and abroad. Many other famous Dragons and their owners are frequently mentioned. This is a must-have book for any keen Dragon racer.

Gerda's Sea Saga Cruising in a Dragon Yacht from Scotland to Norway by Morin Scott, first published in 1950. In 1948 Morin Scott and his friend Cornelis van Rietschoten hatched a plan to sail *Gerda* (K15) from the Clyde, around the south coast to Harwich and thence across the North Sea and up the European coast to transit the Kiel Canal and reach the Danish and Swedish waters of the Kattegat. There they went racing, turned around and came back. The book is an interesting insight into the disregard that Scott's generation had for danger and discomfort as well as being a fascinating story of a small boat cruise, sometimes in very rough weather. Coincidentally, every entrant at this year's Gold Cup at Medemblick received a reprint of this book in their goody bag.

Dragon by Bernard Cadoret, first published in 1996. This slim photographic book was produced by the organisers of the Douarnenez Regatta to celebrate the class racing there. There is limited dual French/English text giving a brief overview of the history of the class. Most of the photos are from the Regatta that year. They do capture the excitement of close one-design racing and show an interesting mix of Dragon yachts competing at that time.

Dragon Seventy Five Years of Tradition and Development by Bent Krebs & Helle Bak Klausman, first published in 2004.

This large book was produced in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Dragon. It is very well produced and researched, with English, Danish and German text. Alongside the comprehensive history of the class, the boat builders and the racing competition there is an excellent selection of modern and period photographs. A copy was given to each of the 250 boats that took part in the unforgettable 75th Regatta at St Tropez and included a list of all those boats as an insert in the brown coverall slip the book comes enclosed in. This is a superb addition to the bookshelf.

75 Years of Dragon by Heinrich Hecht & Jochen Halbe, first published in 2005.

This is another large book published with backing from Hanseatic Lloyd to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the



Dragon. Over 150 fine illustrations alongside German text fill its 200 pages, making it a superb book to leave on your library coffee table.

Tuning a Racing Yacht by Mike Fletcher & Bob Ross, first published in 1972.

This volume has a chapter devoted to getting the best from a Dragon rig... in the 1970s! Things are a bit different today.

Johan Anker Master of Yacht Design by Elin Kragset Vold & Ole Engen, first published in 2013.

This review courtesy of Classic Boat magazine: "This beautiful book offers a complete and detailed technical account of Johan Anker's life's impact. It is illustrated with images from the great Edwardian photographers and they are works of art in themselves. The narrative is often told through the diary of his second wife, Nini, whose insight and affection shine through. This is the best gift you could give to a sailor who has read everything. For technical detail and fascinating yachting tales, it is a cracking read. I couldn't put it down and have returned to check a thought a hundred times since. The book is so many things: reference work, biography, a sensitive romance and a history of yacht racing. Be warned, it has such broad appeal that you might find someone else in the family walks off with it. I have already had to retrieve my copy twice!"

Classic One Designs by Jack Coote, first published in 1994.

A book that looks not just at the Dragon but at a number of beautiful one design racing yachts, some of which will be familiar still to Dragon racers in Burnham, Aldeburgh and Cowes. Furthermore there is a strong Dragon connection with the author, who for many years sailed his classic Dragon around East Coast waters gathering information to publish many editions of his river pilot and cruising guide. In another link, his daughter Janet Harber, who often accompanied him, helped edit the BDA Magazine for several years.

Wooden Boat Building: How To Build a Dragon Class Sailboat by Nick Loenen, published in 2012.

Recounts the joy of acquiring new skills, such as working with brass flat bar and stainless steel; how to melt 2,400 pounds of lead wheel-weights to pour the keel; how to roll a hull effortlessly and craft beautiful blocks, almost entirely out of wood, yet strong enough to take an enormous load. Practical advice and helpful hints gathered over a life time of wood working and illustrated with professionally drawn sketches and pictures are useful to all who love to work with wood, whatever the project.

Please help to invigorate Dragon *Bluebottle*

Well known Dark & Stormy Dragon racer and bon-cocktailer Buddha is a trustee of the National Maritime Museum Cornwall (NMMC) and keeps an eye on *Bluebottle*. This special Dragon has been reported as being in a somewhat sad state. Recently Buddha was fortunate enough to be able to speak directly with HRH Prince Phillip, who declared it his express wish that *Bluebottle* did not sail again. Buddha has been tasked with raising £10,000 to restore her into showroom "display" condition and has agreed to start this process by making a generous £1,000 personal donation. On behalf of the NMMC Buddha would be delighted if the BDA, some of its members or indeed any IDA members would consider making a contribution towards the appeal goal.

The NMMC has a permanent loan arrangement with HRH Prince Phillip regarding *Bluebottle*. However, since HRH The Princess Royal is a Patron and regular visitor to Falmouth, Buddha believes this arrangement will continue for many years to come. The NMMC now has the responsibility for the upkeep of *Bluebottle*. As far as we are aware, *Bluebottle* is the only Dragon class yacht on display in a museum anywhere in the world. She thus has an important educational value, a reference value to the class and boats of her time, as well as being representative of Great Britain's successful Olympic sailing heritage.

So it is time for all Dragon sailors to do their bit to keep an important part of our class heritage in the best condition, the better to show off her beautiful lines to the many visitors to the NMMC. We should be seen to care about her; it is the right thing to do for future generations. Buddha has provided us all with a very fine example by making his wonderful donation; let us now resolve to make our own.

Donations can be made directly to the BDA Treasurer, who will forward them to the NMMC.



Bluebottle being transported in the approved manner in the 1950s



Bluebottle at AAM Cowes Week 2011