

wood on water

COCKWELLS BOAT YARD IN FALMOUTH IS DEDICATED TO MAINTAINING TRADITIONAL BOATBUILDING TECHNIQUES →

Words by **Philippa Mina**, photographs by **Ed Martin**

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She's beautiful, stunning, the perfect shape and with the perfect style. You could be talking about a super model or perhaps a glamorous film star. In fact, what's causing all of the fuss is a traditionally built wooden boat.

Since setting up just over 10 years ago, Falmouth based Cockwells boat yard has crafted perfectly formed vessels to fulfil the dreams and wishes of its customers. Over the past decade, the company's reputation for building and restoring bespoke wooden sailing and motor yachts has grown at home and abroad.

Dave Cockwell's passion for boat building began as a young boy spending many hours working on his father's boats. At 16, there were few opportunities for formal training, but Dave persevered and honed his skills by working as a joiner's apprentice, and gleaning help and advice from local shipwrights. Now with his own highly trained workforce, he's never looked back.

Dave is convinced that it's the combination of fine craftsmanship, high quality materials and attention to detail that makes his boats so special. "Wood is a natural material, so it always makes naturally pleasing shapes. If you get it right, it will be a naturally beautiful thing. Obviously, the material itself is beautiful in its own right, and if the craftsmanship is good, which clearly it has to be, then the product stands out for itself."

In today's mass-produced manufacturing environment, it's rare to find such commitment to quality. Every Cockwells project is special, and there isn't a single piece of wood that doesn't matter. "The processes are reliant on the guys' skills. In modern production, you would try to remove the amount of skill required so it would be more a question of assembling components. Our guys have to get a lump of wood, work out how to make it the right shape, and then fit it."

Visiting Cockwells is like stepping back into Cornish history. The company is dedicated to continuing traditions and keeping the old techniques alive, in a county which once boasted some of the finest and most famous boat builders in the world.

Most of the work is based on individual commissions and one-offs, many of which are replicas of traditional vessels and designs. The team is currently putting the finishing touches to a 45 ft Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter, designed and built for a private customer. They have also been commissioned to build the new St Mawes passenger ferry, which will be the first wooden ferry to be built in the area for many years, and is due to be launched in spring.

So how does a business so steeped in the values of the past compete financially in the modern commercial world? It doesn't - or certainly not on price. Its selling point is the quality of the product and meeting the customer's exact

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COCKWELLS

requirements. "The only restrictions are size and budget," says Dave.

"I'd say it's a growing market for people who appreciate quality - something that's a little bit special, admired, and stands out from the crowd. It doesn't necessarily follow that these handcrafted vessels are more expensive than modern production vessels."

Cockwells is also managing to hold its own on an international stage. The team were recently invited to attend the Monaco Yacht Show, the main exhibition stage for luxury

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yachts and super yachts, and a fantastic opportunity for the company to expand its horizons. "We found the show very inspiring and met up with some excellent contacts. It was great to talk to so many renowned designers and naval architects, all of whom seemed genuinely interested in what we're doing. I am very confident that our visit will result in

some new business for us in the near future."

But it's more than just business for Dave, who believes strongly that a healthy respect for the heritage of the boatbuilding industry and for the individual nature of the boats themselves is crucial to Cockwells success.

The company is almost an anachronism in today's disposable society; Dave is keen that his customers share this sense of continuity and investment. "You buy this boat and you think that you own it, but really you're only the custodian. You're going to hand it down to your kids or sell it - it's not going to just go away. This is a very, very long-term purchase."

Ensuring that the boats last lifetimes takes more than just the skills of the build. Cockwells owns its own sawmills and sources all raw materials to ensure both high quality and sustainability. The majority of the timber used in the boats is taken from mature stock due for felling, or from plantation stock planted specifically for the purpose. For its part, Cockwells works with the Sylvanus Trust as part of a tree-planting scheme. "We've probably put back about ten times the amount of wood that we take out," says Dave.

Whenever possible, wood is sawn well in advance to allow plenty of opportunity to check that it's not likely to deteriorate. However, not all customers appreciate the time and preparation needed in wooden boat building to ensure →

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high quality. “Our main mission is to try and get people to commit, to book a slot,” says Dave. “The difficulty we have is that people come and they want a boat, and it just can’t work like that. They’re not on the shelf.”

Another problem for a busy, thriving business which relies on the skills of its workforce, is actually finding that workforce. In an era when on-the-job training largely a thing of the past, Cockwells has initiated its own apprenticeship scheme to meet the demand for the skills among the next generation.


There’s certainly no shortage of people wanting to get involved. The company is inundated with enquiries from potential trainees, not only school leavers but also professionals and academics looking for a career change.

Amongst the lucky ones is 16-year-old Joe Coles, who has just begun his apprenticeship and is getting a lot of practical experience working with the team. “It’s better than school,” he says. “I’m not very academic and I’m dyslexic, so I’m better with my hands than I am with using my brain to work things out. I like doing this more.”

At 23, Billy Lambert came into the trade a little later. He’s always loved sailing and having completed a course in

traditional boatbuilding, he wanted to take it further. He joined Cockwells five years ago as an apprentice after the company relocated to Falmouth from Bristol. He says this was the perfect opportunity to hone his skills working on “the old bangers” of the boat world which were coming in for repair.

Having completed his training, Billy is certain that it was worth all of the hard work and sacrifice. “There are a lot of people crying out for it for what I’m doing, and I get a lot of satisfaction and pride. Last Thursday we launched our pilot cutter that has been four years in the making, and everybody was in such a good mood. It was great to see.”

Dave is constantly inspired to learn more, and each project brings its own rewards. “It is extremely challenging, because they’re nearly all one-off projects and as such they’re all different, so you don’t have the luxury of learning from the last one. Bored isn’t something that happens. I’ve been working with wood all of my working life and I’m still surprised on a daily basis, usually in a nice way.” 

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