

Albert Hakvoort

THE CURRENT PATRIARCH OF FAMILY-RUN HAKVOORT SHIPYARD IS INVESTING IN THE YARD'S INFRASTRUCTURE TO ENSURE ITS FUTURE FOR GENERATIONS TO COME

BY FRANCES & MICHAEL HOWORTH

“I am not going to be photographed standing beside my father while he is wearing that!” Klaas Hakvoort is pointing at the horned Viking helmet that his 71-year-old father is wearing as he sits astride his Harley Davidson motorbike. We are trying to shoot a photograph of father and son to illustrate how Hakvoort is a successful family firm that has passed down the same ancestral line for generations.

The line of succession is strict. If Albert is running the family shipyard now, then Klaas will take over from him. It's been that way since the first shipyard owner, Albert Hakvoort, purchased the Monnickendam-based boatbuilders in 1919, then passed it onto his son Klaas. Now it is yet another Klaas who waits in the wings, together with his younger brother whose name is, of course, Albert.

Family is at the heart of the Hakvoort yard, and it explains why, after the photo shoot, we find ourselves sitting around the boardroom table with Albert senior. The table is inside Albert's section of the office, but here, instead of an ivory tower, we are conscious that we are part of an open plan arrangement where the father and his two sons sit within conversation distance.

Harley enthusiast

The clock on the wall is obviously from a Harley Davidson souvenir shop and every hour, instead of chiming bells, it emits a revving roar to remind all in the office that after superyachts — here at the Hakvoort office — the Harley reigns supreme. Motorbikes seem a good way of breaking the ice and starting the interview.

“In April this year we took our third motorcycle trip in America,” says Albert. “We started on the West Coast, visiting Arizona, Nevada, Utah and California, and rode for six or seven hours a day. And yes, before you



CAREER DETAILS

- ▶ **Current role:** Owner of Hakvoort Shipyard
- ▶ **Early experience:** Born in Monnickendam, Holland, in 1940, Albert Hakvoort joined the family business after graduating from school. Like his father before him, he has dedicated his life towards developing the shipyard that proudly bears his family name. He looks forward to the day when his grandsons take the helm at one of Holland's smallest superyacht shipyards, with the longest, and undoubtedly the most illustrious family history. When he is not building yachts he is sailing them, and if there is time left at the end of his working day, he loves nothing more than sitting astride his Harley Davidson motorbike.

Photo: Frances Howorth





TO THE POINT



Why are the Dutch so good at building superyachts?

The Dutch love boats. They love building them and they love using them. I think as a nation we build some of the best, and Hakvoort tries to better the local competition.

How do you approach the business of building boats?

We constantly watch the bottom line. I have learned that it is important to grow the yard slowly. We discovered there is a world of difference between a 44m yacht and one of 50m. Now we are discovering there is an even bigger leap when you up the size to 63m. If we had leapt straight into large yachts, we would have failed.

How would you describe your management style?

I am who I am, I am not special, but I listen to people. If I don't

know the answer to a question I am not afraid to ask. I try to avoid meetings — I endure as few as I have to — and we leave our office doors open so that we can talk to people from where we sit.

What does Hakvoort's reputation mean to you?

Our customers trust us. It's a family firm with our name over the door, and it is the heritage I want my grandchildren to inherit. If we mess it up now they will get nothing.

How important is continuing to invest in your yard?

We own an old established shipyard in the middle of an equally old town. If we do not invest in our own infrastructure, the yard — and ultimately the town — will fade away. We have invested a lot of money building our new slipway. Now we have

to move a dyke opposite the shed so we can launch. Investment is never ending but if we stop, the yard will come to an end.

How important is making money to you?

We have to earn money to live and to expand the business, but I am not a rich man and I do not really aspire to living the life of a rich man.

What is your view about offering transparency?

We are not transparent when it comes to telling our competitors who we are pitching too, but we are totally transparent with the client. If someone at another yard asks

us how we do things, we are transparent and try to help and advise them. Huisman gave us help when we began, so we want to continue that same tradition.

Where will future yacht owners come from?

Russia is an exciting market, and we are actively pursuing potential clients there. We have one yacht already in-build for Russian clients. Personally I am not sure if I believe in the potential for China, but maybe India will become a nation of superyacht owners in the next few years.

Is the superyacht industry in danger of over regulation?

I don't think so. Most owners realise that the regulations are there to enhance safety, and quickly learn to live within the new rules.

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ask, I was the oldest participant, but Albert junior came along to make sure I didn't get into too much trouble.”

He reaches for a box of photographs and spreads some out on his desk.

“Motorbikes are my hobby, but look at these,” he says, pointing to the prints. “This is my passion.”

In front of us are some old photographs of the winding cobblestone streets of Monnickendam, the village in which the Hakvoort Shipyard is located.

“I started working at the yard when I was 15,” Albert continues. “Back then I earned 10 guilders (€4) a week.

“The yard was already 600 years old when my grandfather and his three brothers bought it. It had a long and illustrious history, having built a great many ships and boats since 1780. Grandfather (another Albert) died in 1948 and my father (Klaas) took over running the operation, which was doing well and always in profit.

“Just seven years later disaster struck when the family was woken with the news that the shipyard was

on fire. Despite the efforts of everyone in the village the fire went out of control and the whole lot burned down. Not a single building was saved — and even worse — the partially completed boats on the slipways were lost. Very sadly for all of us, the yard was uninsured.

“The fire changed everything in our family life. My ambition to become a tugboat captain was snuffed out like the flames of the fire. It was clear that the whole family were going to have to pull together to rebuild the shipyard. All we had left was the land it once stood on.

Rising from the ashes

“We are a hard-working family, originally from the island of Urk in the Flevoland province of Holland, which has a fine reputation for shipbuilding.

“At the time of the fire we were building fishing vessels from steel. They were sturdy shallow draught boats, ideally suited to the IJsselmeer lake. Our first job was to clear the debris. We built small sheds to house what little we salvaged in the way of equipment and tools. Because the fire was so widespread, and had destroyed some of the villagers' homes, we had to rebuild those as well. It was not easy.

“In those days we had no cranes to lift the steel plates, nor did we have gloves. Frequently it was so cold that my hands stuck to the steel plate. Back then I promised myself that I wouldn't have to do this all my life. Now, despite the fact that I am 71, I'm still doing it

— but I do find it easier now I can afford the gloves.

“By 1965 we built what is now the main building shed and we used that to construct the hulls for Danish fishing boats. We were building around 70 hulls per year. My dad bought his own fishing boat, which he used to tow the hulls to Denmark, where they were fitted out.

“At the time, demand for these hulls was enormous and we were building them for fishing boats that would be finished by shipyards in Ireland and Scotland. The trade died off in 1975, and when it did, we were forced to rethink the company’s strategy.”

Expanding the build

“In 1968 we built *Storm VI*, a 28m (92ft) motoryacht with a beautiful round bilge. We built her for a Bahamian client who paid us 700,000 guilders (€317,000). He was delighted with her and told everyone how great she was, but we soon realised that millionaires don’t come knocking on your door.

“We hoped we were about to become yacht builders but the ugly commercial truth was that we were forced to revert back to building fishing boats. This time around however we built the complete boat, including the

Albert describes motorbikes as his hobby, and building boats as his passion



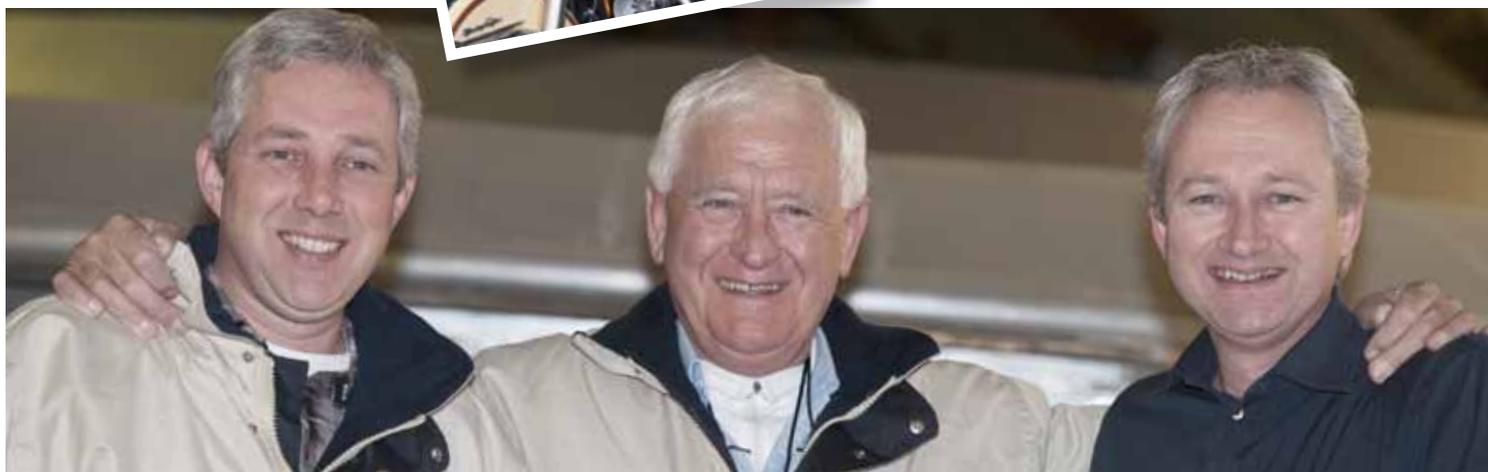
even suggested that we hire someone to teach us how to weld in aluminium.

“We hired a specialist welder and he taught me what to do. I headed up production in the shipyard and my brother headed up office administration and sales. The first yacht we built was the 20m (65ft) *Striker*, *Much Too Much*. We built the complete boat and launched her in 1982. Halfway through building her, we got orders for more. By 1985 we had expanded the yard to the point that we had three sheds and were employing 45 people.

“These were great times, we were profitable and the company was growing. The one problem we had was that we were still limited by the size of yacht we could build, so the main building shed had to be enlarged each time we got an order for a bigger yacht.

“In 1985 we built 31m (102ft) *Tonga*, our first custom yacht. Her American owner trusted no one. He built an office on-site and insisted that we work on a time and materials basis. It gave us the opportunity to show him and the rest of the yachting community what we could do. It took us two years to complete, and once launched, she went on to circumnavigate the world 10 times, and has become a very famous bluewater cruising boat.

“In 1986 we built the 38m (125ft) *Lady Alice* for another American customer who brought his interior designer with him. It was a new experience for us — one we would learn from.



engines, accommodation block, and fishing gear. Frequently we had so many orders for this class of vessel that we couldn’t build them all ourselves and were forced to subcontract the work.

“In 1981 my father announced that he was thinking of retiring. To make matters worse — from my point of view — my uncle Klaas also felt impelled to retire at the same time. This coincided with a slump in the fishing market, so with orders for our turnkey fishing boats dropping off, we were forced once again to consider what else we might build.

“We looked at the work of builders in Holland, and could not help but be impressed by the deliveries being made by the Feadship yards of Van Lent and De Vries. Royal Huisman and Heesen were both building yachts out of aluminium, so we went to visit Franz Heesen and Walter Huisman. They were both a great help. Walter

Continuing the line of succession, Klaus (right) and his younger brother Albert (left) will take over when their father retires

“Both *Tonga* and *Lady Alice* are still around today and are well respected in the industry, despite their age. I like to think that it was *Lady Alice* that helped confirm our reputation as quality yacht builders capable of building at a world class standard. We built her interior through close co-operation with Struik and Hamerslag.”

The next generation

“In 1991 we built *Lady Duvera* a beautiful 44m (144ft) superyacht, and later built *Lady Marina* (now *Lady M*) another great lady of her era. During that time we got the order to build *Quasar*, another 31m superyacht, and when we built her she was the largest sports fishing boat in the world.

“Klaas came into the business during that time and his younger brother Albert joined a year later. Both had been to technical college in Holland, and they

immediately took on project management responsibility.

“My brother decided to retire in 1991 and, because he handled everything to do with the office, the next few years were not so good for us because we — and I mean particularly me — had to learn some new skills. I knew exactly what I had to do on the shipyard floor but when it came to the office work I was less sure of myself.

“By 2005 the company was 85 years old and we were employing 85 people. We had also expanded by creating a new interior company in the town of Purmerend, just a few minutes north of here.

“Unlimited Interiors is our own joinery workshop in an industrial unit with 2,500m² of factory space. We employ 30 skilled carpenters whose eye for detail helps us create perfect superyacht interiors. Their skills are

get them to do what you want. Most of the Dutch builders remain members of the same group and I do not see much advantage to belonging to both an international group and a national association, which may at times have different agendas.

Looking ahead

“We have recently expanded the yard yet again, investing more than €4m of our own money. We have always been self-financing, and have never needed to involve bankers in what we do.

“We know that we cannot afford to stagnate when it comes to the size of the yachts we build, so we set about expanding facilities here to the point that we can now build superyachts up to 63m (207ft). We raised the roof of the main construction hall by 2m in 2009 to enable us to build four-deck vessels.

“This year we opened a slipway, which gives us the opportunity to build 1,000t deadweight, up to 63m overall, with a beam of 12m. We have also created flat surface concrete walkways and dock flooring. A heating system creates an even temperature throughout all sections of the hall, which enhances exterior paint and finishing. To support the construction of larger yachts

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Expansion is ongoing to support the construction of larger yachts

available on a sub-contractual basis to other yards as well as our own, and we let them work independently on custom-built interior projects for other shipyards.”

Talk turns to marketing and we ask why Hakvoort is not a member of SYBAss. Albert’s face crinkles into a smile as he answers — and it is obvious that he is trying to be diplomatic.

“We have been invited to join SYBAss many times of course, and easily qualify to become a member, but I prefer not to join. They want shipyards to commit a lot of money to their marketing programmes, but once you do so, you lose control. We are known for not wasting money, and for making less money from a build than other yards, and I believe customers respect us for that. I think not being a member reflects well on Hakvoort.

“We are members of the Holland Yachting Group, which is part of HISWA. It is not perfect — no association ever is — but if you are proactive you can

we now have to upgrade the main power supply and infrastructure to triple the current capacity.

“The strength of the Hakvoort brand is the resale value it bestows on the yachts we build. Take a look at our boats and you will see that very few have ever lost money. In fact they take just 10 years to revert back to their build price. I believe that if you build something very special it will always maintain its value.

“Our customers choose Hakvoort because we never hold back on quality. We believe face-to-face relationships are the basis of our success. We will never be the biggest yard, but we promise that every boat we build will be the very best that we can do at the time.

“Currently in build we have one 45m (148ft), a 40m (131ft), and are quoting to build two 55m (180ft) superyachts. Until a year ago we hadn’t seen any new customers for two years, but now things are changing for the better again.” **SB**