

Bill Dixon

TODAY HE ENJOYS SUCCESS AS AN AWARD-WINNING DESIGNER, BUT HIS SKILLS ARE BASED ON HARD LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE NOTORIOUS FASTNET RACE OF 1979

FRANCES AND MICHAEL HOWORTH REPORT

“It scares me to think that were it not for the fact that my mentor died whilst sailing his own yacht, I might never have forced myself into running my own design house.” Bill Dixon is recalling the terrible time in 1980 when his employer, Alex Primrose, was lost at sea while sailing *Demon of Hamble*, a 33ft Moody of his own design, 180 miles off the coast of South Carolina near Cape Hatteras.

“In order to keep the business going I had to immediately take on responsibility for designing the yachts and finding new business. But I was just three years into my career. Everyone had heard of my boss, but no one even knew who I was.” Two yards, Moody and Princess, had however begun to recognise his talent.

With the support of Primrose’s family and key clients, Dixon decided to acquire the studio of Angus Primrose Ltd, the firm which he went on to establish as Dixon Yacht Designs Ltd.

A year before Primrose died, Dixon had his very own close encounter with death on the high seas — an event that was to have a major impact on the young designer.

“The Fastnet is a gruelling 600-mile ocean race to Fastnet Rock off Ireland and back to England,” he explains. “In August 1979 more than 300 yachts took part but 69 failed to finish. Of those, 23 were lost or abandoned with 15 crew killed before the race was eventually called off.”

Dixon had set sail as crew aboard the Sigma 37 *Cheesecake* with David Thomas, the yacht’s designer, and David King, MD of Marine Projects.

Little did they know at the start line, that this Fastnet would become notorious. Winds developed into gale force 11 and *Cheesecake* was knocked down twice with King breaking his collarbone.

“The seas were awful,” remembers Dixon. “It completely changed my perspective of yachts and the way they should be designed. *Cheesecake* was well designed for the time, but it’s only when you’ve seen first hand what the elements can do to a boat, that you can fully appreciate the dangers of poor yacht design.”

That terrifying experience has stayed with Dixon ever since, and he uses the lessons he learned every day when drawing the lines of a yacht and considering her stability. It is this quality, coupled to his family background in yacht building, that helps to explain why Dixon’s work is in such great demand around the world.

The Dixon family come from Devon in the south-west of England and have been involved in boating for at least 200 years — designing and building wooden boats. And it was these custom-built craft that gave Bill his deep passion for the profession he practises today. ➔

Biography

Dixon grew up in a boatyard and his grandfather instilled an appreciation of the fine lines of a good hull. None of his forebears ever drew a plan or built a boat from a drawing — they simply hand-carved a miniature version of what it was they wanted to create, then scaled it up to create the finished article.

The traditional wooden boats they created were used for fishing and pleasure, and it was in craft such as these that he first found his love for the water — and respect for the sea. To this day he still has, and treasures, many of the original wooden carvings his family before him used as yacht designs.



TO THE POINT

What do you think is your greatest design strength?

I listen. It's the only way to find out what the client really wants. But it takes time and patience. I also believe that honesty pays even if I have to tell a client they don't need to do things elaborately and I end up talking myself out of extra revenue. I'd always want to be known as trustworthy.

How would you describe your management style?

Down-to-earth and easy-going. Because I've got a strong and hard-working team I don't have to be a slave driver. I have strong opinions and, as my staff will surely testify, I'm not shy about sharing them.

Who has been the biggest influence on your career?

I've never really worked for

anyone else so no one has really influenced me — except Angus Primrose before he died. Now it's always the client.

What's your business strategy?

Well, first of all, I never intended to have a business, I just wanted to be a yacht designer. Nothing has changed really except that I now have a company and instead of working from home I work with a team from a studio overlooking the River Hamble.

Where would you advise a client of yours to have their 40m sailing yacht built?

If price isn't an issue I'd say northern Europe or New Zealand. The engineering of a sailing superyacht is more complex than that of a motoryacht so it's incredibly important you work with the



best people with the most experience to get it right.

What is the secret of establishing a good working relationship with a client?

I never forget that I'm designing for them — not for me. It means that I have to look hard and deep into their mind to see exactly what they really want. And once you've established that, the rest is easy.

What's lies at the heart of business success?

It's the fact that I'm still enthusiastic about designing boats. I am also much better in the drawing room than I am in the boardroom. Fortunately, I've got a strong partner in Anders Berg and an excellent staff of first-class specialists.

As chair of the judges, how do you view the DAME Awards?

Credit for a great yacht usually goes to the designers and builders and there are plenty of ceremonies. But the designers of vital equipment have less opportunity to receive recognition. The DAME Awards demonstrate that all parts of the industry are incredibly innovative — and that it's not just the naval architects who are responsible for everything.

“My family’s advice was don’t get involved in boats, there’s no money in it. But what youth ever believes in the words issued by the wise?”

“In the 1970s, the advice from my family was don't get involved in boats, there's no money in it. But what youth ever believes in the words issued by the wise?”

The young Dixon ignored their cautions and enrolled on a course in yacht design at what is now Southampton Solent University. He then managed to secure holiday work in the studio headed up by Primrose who, at the time, was principle designer for the Moody range of sailing cruisers. Primrose was also well known, having designed both *Gipsy Moth IV* and *Galway Blazer II*.

“Alex was of the old school. He didn't like college kids and had little time for science. But he did recognise talent and when he got it cheaply, he was delighted. Having me on the drawing board in the office gave him more time to enjoy his passion for blue water cruising.

“He gave me a great deal of freedom and one of the first tasks he set me was to design a 30ft OSTAR that could be built by single-handed trans-Atlantic racers.

“When I graduated in 1977, Alex took me on full-time, left me at the drawing table, then went off to look after his clients — and sail his boat.”

After Primrose's death, Dixon moved the company from compact offices overlooking the Hamble to his home in Bursledon where he set up headquarters in a converted chicken shed. It was from here in 1985 that he designed two schooners — both Malaysian-built 21m yachts launched in 1988 — which were considered massive by the yachtbuilding standards of the time.

Breaking into the Asian market

Then, in 1985, Dixon flew to Taiwan on a whim. It was to be an important turning point for the young designer.

“Back then Taiwan had 60 yards building recreational craft and I felt sure I could get a slice of the action.”

He was right. Dixon would quickly establish himself as the first European designer to succeed in the region. And it was on that trip that he began his long and fruitful association with Johnson Yachts, a relationship that continues to this day.

“One of my first jobs for Johnson was a 63 which was a radical design, but it went on to sell more than 100 hulls, surviving the recession of the late 1980s.

“The next decade was equally exciting. I designed the first of my many superyachts, the 27m Johnson 87. It was the first superyacht to feature vertical windows — a design feature with built-in safety because of the reduced light reflections encountered during darkness.”

Dixon also designed steel yachts for Croft Marine back in the UK, a blue water cruiser much loved by yachtsmen eager to sell up and sail away.

“I then designed a 20m steel schooner that was built

in Greece and an 18m sailing yacht, *Ceil V*, which was built in Hong Kong for an owner who fell in love with the lines of a Moody 58 and wanted something bigger.

“In the same period I created a whole line of production craft for Moody yachts and this allowed me to expand my design team.”

A 22m Taswell was drawn up for Ta Shing, a respected Taiwanese builder with whom Dixon got on well after designing a range of much loved centre cockpit blue water cruising yachts for them.

The early Dixon superyachts

“In the early 1990s I drew the lines of *Craftsmans Art*, a 24m cedar core schooner built for blue water cruising by SYS in Southampton. She was built for the same man who owns her today and was a forerunner of this type of superyacht construction which remained popular right up to and including the 35m *Yanneke Too* — another boat still under her original ownership.

“It can be very frustrating at times for yacht designers when owners fall in love with their yachts and never want to sell them. The businessman in me always wants to design another one for them — one that is even larger and more expensive — but my human side

Disdale, Andrew Winch, Rhoades Young and Ken Freivokh. The yacht *Y2*, the follow up to *That's Why*, is a perfect example of this sort of co-operation, where we worked again with John Mumford.”

It is work like this that has led to Dixon winning the contract to design the range for Performance Yachts whose first offering, *Liara*, made her debut at Monaco in 2010. So successful has this range been that Dixon has already drawn her bigger sisters.

He hasn't, however, lost his association with the Asian market and was one of only two European designers to exhibit recently at the Shanghai Boat Show. Chinese builders have been quick to catch onto the value of the Dixon brand and a series of designs are in production with many boats designed specifically to stay in Asian waters for an expanding local market.

“You have to understand the mindset of Chinese people to do business with them successfully,” he says. “It's critical that you get it right, and that is why I've maintained contact with my agent out there who I first met in 1985. He has proved to be so valuable that I can now say that there is one Chinese builder who has no less than five of my designs in production.”

Nor has Dixon abandoned motoryachts. He was



always kicks in and I feel hugely rewarded that they think so highly of the yacht I designed for them.”

“*Yanneke Too* was the first superyacht to be built by Camper & Nicholson's but also, sadly, the last.

Pendennis in the UK then built *Jaquelina*, the largest aero rig to date and yet another yacht still owned by the man who commissioned her.

“But at least he has also commissioned a 30m yacht to my design, the third of mine he will have had built.”

Meanwhile, the range of Premier Yachts — custom built to a high standard in England — were to a Dixon design as was *Freya*, a 24m yacht built by Alloy Yachts in New Zealand for an experienced owner.

Now well established as a designer of superyachts, Dixon went on to design the 40m *Antares* built by Royal Huisman and *That's Why*, a 30m from Vitters.

“We do quite a lot of interior design ourselves in this office but we are well acquainted with other big names in the designer world and have worked with Terry

responsible for the stunning line created for Royal Denship (now ceased following that builder's demise). More successfully he has also been responsible for the naval architecture of Peri Yachts' range and seven motoryachts built by Notika, both companies based in Turkey — as is the 28m *Peer Gynt*, a very contemporary yacht that carries a special hand-built Porche 911 inside her tender bay. A more traditional design is a 28m tri-deck yacht being built of steel and aluminium at the Gdansk shipyards of Conrad Yachting.

Looking to the future

“The rise in popularity of semi-production and production yachts in recent years is significant,” he says. “I don't see their popularity diminishing any time soon.”

Production boat contracts continue with Hanse Group, Azimut and Pearl Motoryachts, with whom he is designing a stunning new 23m craft.

“We've also got a 52m motoryacht on our drawing ☺

“The companies that come out stronger when the market recovers are always the ones astute enough to invest in new products during the downturn”

boards at the moment. She’s long and sleek to be ultra efficient and economical to operate. We developed the basic design four years ago and I’m confident that the right client will snap her up shortly.

“Our motorboat design work tends to come from the yards that build them, but finding clients to design sailboats for is very different. It’s a networking thing. Sailing clients see something that they like on a yacht then come to you and ask you to do it even better.

“That’s how and why I came up with the idea of the telescopic keel — a Dixon Design original.

“Boat shows don’t actually bring in that much work but it’s very important that we’re there to see what’s going on, and to be seen. If we weren’t there, people — my clients included — would wonder why?”

The DAME Awards

While Dixon has received many design awards around the world, he now finds himself elevated to the position of chairman of the DAME Awards judging panel.

“I was delighted to be chosen” he admits. “As designers we’re always looking for the associated equipment to be incorporated into our designs.

Innovation and design are key elements in the development of new products. The production boat sector is seeing ever closer co-operation between suppliers, builders and designers — with equipment makers being involved much earlier in the development of new boats — and it is these awards that highlight why innovation is so important.”

The financial turndown of recent years has caused many upsets, some affecting clients of Dixon Yacht Design, but Dixon takes a philosophical view, having survived an earlier recession when his company was first taking off.

“These are interesting times for the industry, with a lot of challenges ahead. I’ve already been through more than one of these economic cycles and in my experience the companies that come out stronger when the market recovers are the ones who were astute enough to invest in new products during the business cycle downturn.

“Recession allows opportunities for companies to emerge in a stronger position. The key is to have the right products as the market recovers. New products and yacht designs will attract buyers.

“There are many business questions that need to be answered at a time such as this, but the most important have to be — will this recession change the way owners are going to use their yachts, and will any design trends emerge or thrive?

“As yacht designers we are excited to see all of the many differing strengths of innovation in our industry and never has this been so obvious as during the boat and equipment shows around the world this year.

“It is this kind of innovation that will see superyacht businesses succeed in the future.” ●

TOP DESIGNS

Yacht Name	Yard	Client
Moody 41	Moody	Moody
Moody 58	Moody	Moody
Taswell 49	Taswell	Ta Shing
Ciel IV	Custom	Private Client
Johnson 63	Johnson	Johnson Yachts
Craftmans Art	SYS	Private Client
Dynasty 72	Dynasty	Ta Shing
Yanneke Too	Camper & Nicholsons	Private Client
Lady Kathryn	McMullen and Wing	Private Client
Jaquelina	Pendennis Shipyard	Private Client
Hanseat IV	Austral Yachts	Private Client
That’s Y	Vitters	Private Client
Moody 64	Moody	Moody
Clarity	Centaurian	Notika
Johnson 87	Johnson	Johnson Yachts
YII	Holland Jachtbouw	Private Client
Antares	Royal Huisman	Private Client
RD 82 open	Royal Denship	Royal Denship
Liara	PY 100	Performance Yachts
Peri 37	Peri	Peri Yachts
Moody 45DS	Moody	Hanse Yachts
Magellano 74	Magellano	Azimut



The 27m Johnson 87 was the first superyacht to feature vertical windows



The Bill Dixon-designed Holland Jachtbouw YII