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THE BOATBUILDERS

Steve White ’77 and Jock Williams ’62 have built international reputations for their classically inspired yachts

By Matthew P. Murphy ’87
The first thing you notice upon entering the hangar-like construction building at Brooklin Boat Yard in Brooklin, Maine, is the smell: scents of fresh local cedar and cherry mix with the exotic aromas of teak and mahogany. Then there’s the hushed, quiet focus of the place.

These days, most of the company’s 60-plus employees—carpenters, cabinetmakers, and mechanics—are engaged in the construction of a 90-foot sailboat, Bequia, for a New York businessman. This is the yard’s largest (and priciest, though the cost is a closely kept secret) project to date, and the place is swarming with workers. By launch (set for June 27, 2009, after this magazine had gone to press), they will have spent some 80,000 hours over three years: measuring, cutting, bending, and gluing wood, fabricating metal, and installing a suite of systems befitting a spaceship.

The end product will be one of the world’s finest sailboats.

That’s no hyperbole: Brooklin Boat Yard, tucked away on a quiet harbor on Maine’s midcoast, has garnered an international reputation for the design and construction of wooden yachts.

ABOVE: Steve White ’77 is owner of the Maine-based Brooklin Boat Yard, a world leader in the design and construction of wooden yachts. White is pictured here aboard his company’s largest project: a 90-foot sailboat that was scheduled for launch in late June.
“I never expected it,” said the yard’s proprietor, Steve White ’77, of the size of his talented workforce and the scale and quality of his projects. “In the late seventies it was really pretty grim for wooden boat building.”

As a young builder back then, however, he would tap a new technology and over the next 30 years would launch a fleet of classically styled boats that perform like modern thoroughbreds. And he isn’t alone.

A short sail up the coast—at Somes Sound, the stunning fjord that slices through Mount Desert Island (home of Acadia National Park)—is John Williams Boat Co., owned by Jock Williams ’62. Working in fiberglass, rather than wood, Williams has done for powerboats what White has done for sail, taking traditional form and converting it for modern function. With one foot planted firmly in the heritage of Maine’s iconic lobster boats, Williams took a big step forward technologically and aesthetically and built an illustrious reputation.

Williams’s career in boats began when he was 14 years old and went to work in a shipyard on Martha’s Vineyard. In those early years, he said, “I was working in the boatyard and I was sailing.” In the process he was getting a classic education in the marine industry, and he was rubbing elbows with New England yachtsmen—his future clientele, though he didn’t know it at the time.

He graduated from Colby with a degree in history. “I never intended to make a career of boats,” he said.

With the Cuban missile crisis in mind, Williams decided that, rather than be drafted, he’d enlist. In three months Williams was a commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy. After doing survey work off the coast of Vietnam (“a lousy assignment”) he was appointed sailing officer at the Naval Academy. “That’s where I really got into the marine trades.”

As his four-year obligation to the Navy was coming to an end, Williams skippered the U.S. Navy’s entry in the 1966 trans-Atlantic race, a 44-foot yawl, to Copenhagen. In Denmark he met Paul Molich, a boatbuilder whose wooden sailboats were popular with American sailors. “I was there for a little over a year. I was paid thirty-five dollars a week. It was just fascinating. I saw every phase of boatbuilding.”

Upon his return to the United States, Williams took a job with the Henry R. Hinckley Co. in Southwest Harbor, Maine, a world-renowned yacht builder, where he was put in charge of the fiberglass shop. Until that time his experience had been with wooden boats, but he “was fascinated with the possibilities presented by fiberglass. It was adaptable to various shapes. It was durable.” A well-built boat of fiberglass came out of its mold with a mirror-smooth finish and required none of the annual sanding and painting demanded by its wooden forebears. Over the next few years, Williams managed the Hinckley shop’s growth and increasing sophistication and in the process deepened his own understanding of fiberglass. Around the time he decided to leave Hinckley, a man came to him with a wooden dinghy he wanted replicated in fiberglass. “That,” said Williams of this first boatbuilding commission, “was the start.”

Armed with a boatload of optimism, Williams brought one of these dinghies (he ultimately built 20) to the inaugural Newport Sailboat Show in 1971—and “didn’t sell a damn thing.” He returned to Maine dejected, but within days a buyer called wanting to purchase the boat he’d seen in Newport. “That was enough to keep me from giving up,” Williams said.

Soon Williams had moved into production of a fiberglass version of a classic wooden lobster boat designed by Maine boat legend Lyford Stanley. The first boat sold quickly, and “practically on the same day, I sold the second.”

“Then,” Williams said, “it just took off.”
John M. Williams Boat Co. was a going concern, though it would be a decade before Williams realized his ambition to build fiberglass yachts—not workboats—with a classic look.

Williams builds seven models from 26 to 44 feet, with prices ranging from $225,000 to $1 million, and has launched around 300 hulls. All are custom built to owners’ specifications. With the exception of a few custom orders, most have been built to stock plans. “I did achieve my goal,” Williams said. “We took the workboats and we made them properly. Then we shifted to pleasure boats—we really wanted to build something that represented traditional workmanship.”

White’s career choice may have been more predictable. His father, Joel White, a renowned yacht designer and the son of writer E.B. White, took over Brooklin Boat Yard in 1960, a few years after its founding. Still, Steve White’s future as a world leader in custom wooden-yacht construction was anything but certain when he graduated from Colby with a degree in environmental studies. Fiberglass, by then, had all but eclipsed wood as a boatbuilding material, and a craftsman would have been ill-advised to stake his future on wooden sailboats.

Three decades later, White has never looked back—and has rarely built the same boat twice.

Most Brooklin Boat Yard customers want a one-of-a-kind boat. The process begins with an idea and progresses to the company’s in-house design office. Wooden boats were traditionally built of heavy, solid wood, screwed or nailed rather than glued. These new high-tech wooden boats are built using a method called cold molding—hulls are composed of several layers of thin, pliable wood glued together. The cold in cold molding comes from the fact that the epoxy glue used to hold the boats together cures at room temperature (earlier hot-molded construction required baking in a giant oven). The result, when well-built and expertly painted, is a surface that rivals or exceeds the mirror-finish of fiberglass. Brooklin Boat Yard’s hulls are very well built and long lasting.

White’s first sizable boat was a racing sloop called Vortex. “I built it knowing that I might not be able to sell it, so I thought it had better be something I like.” Despite several offers, he still owns it. Vortex showcased Brooklin Boat Yard’s potential, and orders followed. Since the yard started keeping records in 1997, 46 boats have been built there—many of them multiyear projects consuming tens of thousands of man hours. And the in-house design office recently incorporated as a separate entity—Stephens Waring White Yacht Design—offering its services to other boatbuilders.

Over the past three decades the yard’s workforce has expanded with new projects. In 1978 there were four full-time people on the payroll. White thought there was a lot of potential at the yard and sought to grow it. By 1986 there were 10 employees, and by 1998, when the yard launched its biggest boat to date—a 76-foot sloop, Wild Horses, designed by Joel White—there were 25. The workforce has more than doubled since.

While the 90-foot sailboat currently under construction is Brooklin Boat Yard’s largest project ever, there have been recent inquiries for similar-sized and larger boats, despite the global economic downturn. (In June White was discussing building of a 120-foot sailboat with a European client.) White is amazed at his company’s growth from a small, traditional boatyard to a world leader in technologically advanced boatbuilding. And, like Williams, he feels fortunate to have found success doing what he loves.

As Williams put it, “I could not have anticipated the pleasure of being so immersed in boats.”

Matthew Murphy ’87 is editor of WoodenBoat magazine.