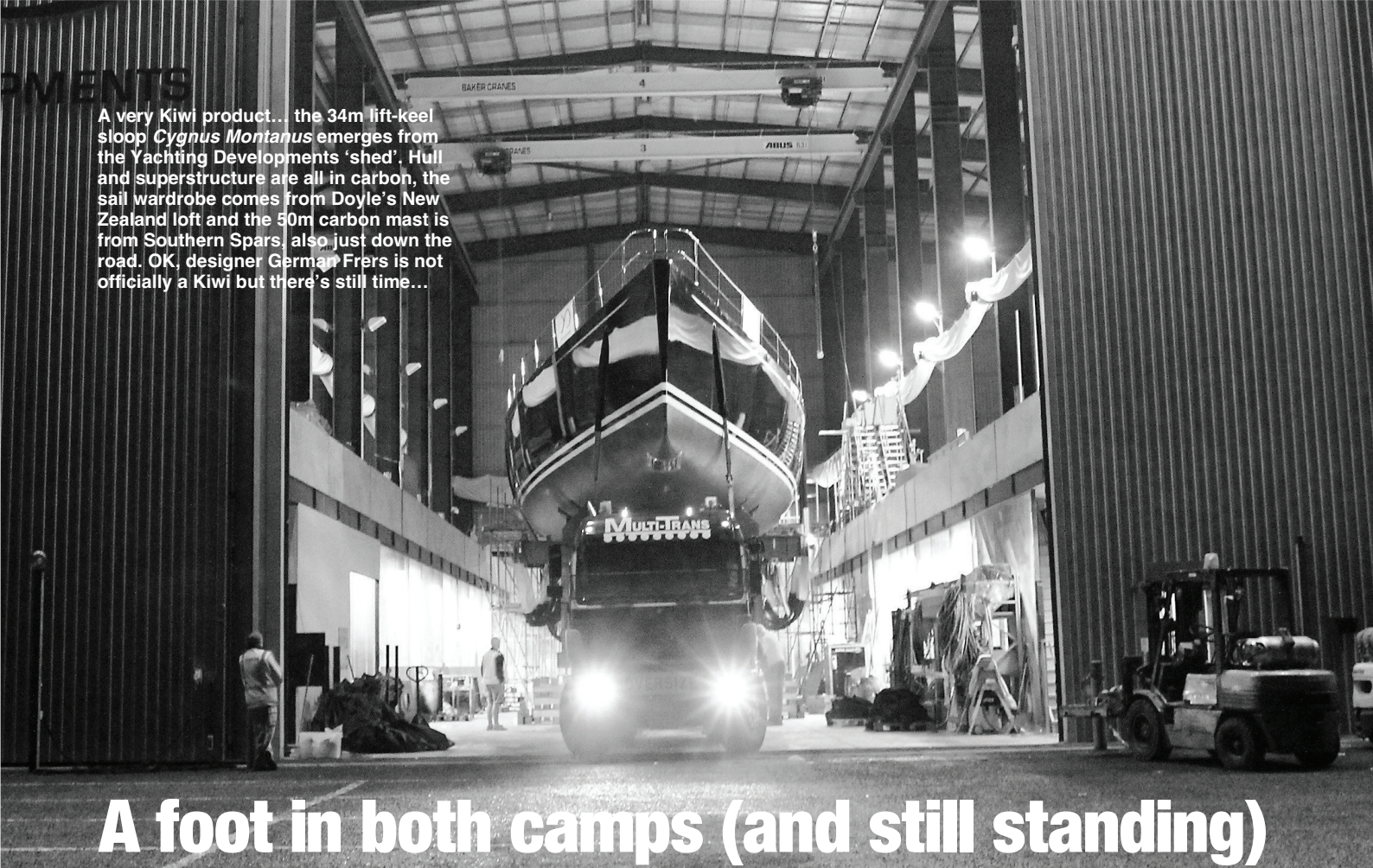


A very Kiwi product... the 34m lift-keel sloop *Cygnus Montanus* emerges from the Yachting Developments 'shed'. Hull and superstructure are all in carbon, the sail wardrobe comes from Doyle's New Zealand loft and the 50m carbon mast is from Southern Spars, also just down the road. OK, designer German Frers is not officially a Kiwi but there's still time...



A foot in both camps (and still standing)

A history of developing aggressive composite build techniques for the latest superyachts running alongside a family passion for classic boats have served one New Zealand boatyard rather well... Ivor Wilkins

The two yachts sharing a construction bay at the Yachting Developments yard in Auckland were so different in shape and form that it was hard to believe that both were designed with the sole purpose of winning a race around the world.

The 80-footer, with its narrow beam and deep, rounded bilges looked diminutive compared with the 65-footer, a hard-edged, flat, wedge-shaped surfboard. Separated in space by just a couple of feet but by 32 years in time, *Lion New Zealand* and *Vestas 11th Hour Racing* provided a striking study in how far offshore racing design has evolved.

That the two yachts found themselves united at Yachting Developments during the Auckland stopover of the Volvo Ocean Race was entirely appropriate, because the connections between the event and the Cook family, which owns the composite yard, run deep and wide.

In the period before he established Yachting Developments Ian Cook worked with the Southern Pacific team that built

Lion New Zealand for Peter Blake's 1985-86 Whitbread Round the World Race campaign. He also worked on the construction of Blake's *Steinlager 2* for the race in 1989-90, famously won by the big red ketch in a clean sweep of every leg.

Both *Steinlager* and *Lion New Zealand* are now run by the NZ Sailing Trust, which provides experiences for young Kiwis, fostering leadership, self-confidence, courage and teamwork. *Steinlager 2* recently had a major refit at Yachting Developments and its older sister was now in for the same treatment, including a new keel and carbon fibre mast.

Vestas 11th Hour Racing, meanwhile, was of course having a whole new bow section grafted in place following its collision with a fishing boat on the approach to Hong Kong. Then as *Vestas* was being relaunched, white-suited workers at the same yard were busy laminating composite interior modules in preparation for the start of a new superyacht build. This is now the core business of the company, which was one of the pioneers of composite superyacht construction.

Yachting Developments was founded in 1990, following the *Steinlager 2* build and a period of overseas contract work helping build America's Cup yachts for both the Japanese and Spanish teams for the 1992 regatta in San Diego.

Returning to New Zealand, the Cooks acquired premises in Auckland and Yachting Developments started by building two Luca Brenta race yachts – before taking on more substantial projects in the exacting world of superyacht construction.

With the huge investment involved in

large custom boats, the superyacht world remains inherently conservative, always with a keen eye on resale value. Consequently, the yard had to overcome initial resistance against switching from tried and true steel and aluminium, but it steadily built a reputation as an award-winning builder of reliable, high-quality superyachts in composites. It now boasts a portfolio of more than 70 large yacht projects, mostly new-builds – and mostly sailboats.

Coinciding with their business getting off the ground, Ian and Blanche Cook were also starting their family. Daughters Bianca and Paige grew up around boats at the family waterfront home, which is easily visible from the family boatyard just across the narrow reaches of the upper Waitemata Harbour. From the family jetty the young girls embarked on all manner of boating adventures and also watched as their father and his friends engaged in boisterous impromptu dinghy races.

So, instead of the customary Kiwi passage through the highly structured and competitive dinghy racing ranks, the Cook girls gained their confidence and love of boating through informal fun on the water – the proverbial messing about in boats. Now both young women are closely involved in the family business.

Paige continues to work with Blanche in the commercial side of the operation, while Bianca's role looks set to evolve through a busy racing career, forging links with owners, skippers and project managers. But Paige too stays busy racing when not at her desk in Auckland.

Bianca, born the year *Steinlager 2* raced to victory, is currently racing in the VOR



Left: eclectic... the Farr Whitbread maxi *Lion New Zealand* patiently awaits her refit hemmed in by a string of classic motor and sailing boats in various stages of restoration, a custom fast-cruiser off the bow and a large motoryacht getting prepped for spraying to port. And then *Lion's* recent offspring *Vestas* arrived (above) to purchase a new front end...

with Dee Caffari and Brian Thompson aboard *Turn the Tide on Plastic*. Younger sister Paige did a pre-race delivery trip from Lisbon to Alicante on the same yacht, and regularly races TP52s in Auckland and with the PAC52s in the USA, as well as skippering the 67ft pencil-thin wooden classic *Innismara*, part of the Cook family's generous fleet of classic boats...

For Bianca the highlight of the Volvo so far was the arrival in her home port of Auckland, after a nail-biting match race down the coast of New Zealand's North Island. 'I am loving the race,' she says, 'although there are definitely moments that leave you wondering what on earth you are doing there.'

'But coming into Auckland was a massive high and, as always, the turnout of boats to welcome us was incredible – even at 2am. Unfortunately while I was on a huge adrenaline rush to be coming home the rest of our crew were feeling devastated at missing out on a podium right at the end...'

After a brief rest much of Bianca's Auckland stopover was then spent back at her desk helping with business. Reflecting on her own recent VO65 experience compared with *Lion New Zealand* currently in residence, she remains slightly incredulous about the extent to which the two generations of round-the-world racers represent such totally different worlds... although she does concede that the speed of the current yachts comes with its downsides. *Lion's* more stately pace would definitely be a drier (or, at least, a less wet) ride.

For those who know Yachting Developments this juxtaposition of new and old is a familiar theme. Although the yard has a world reputation for its modern composite work, like many other of today's designers and boatbuilders Ian Cook himself retains a passion for classic boats.

A corner of the yard, affectionately known as Jurassic Park, is reserved for the restoration of wooden boats – although Ian, clearly belabouring a hard-won undertaking, insists that those projects are now at an end... The Cook women smile knowingly and remind him of the wooden shell that has stood wrapped and awaiting a

major restoration for the past 12 years. At least one more then.

This passion for classic yachts has been passed on to the next generation and both Bianca and Paige are frequently out racing in the very active wooden boat fleet in Auckland. While Paige runs *Innismara*, Ian campaigns *Ranger*, originally built by an Auckland dockworker and famous for ruling over the elite class of Waitemata racing for 30 years. He is also part-owner of *Rawhiti*, an aristocratic and beautifully maintained Edwardian gaff-cutter designed and built by the famous Logan yard in Auckland.

Blanche, wearing her financial controller hat, adopts an official attitude of disapproval for these financially irrational projects, but is quietly tolerant of the family affliction. Particularly since this love of wooden classics did turn out to be a distinct business asset in 2010 when Yachting Developments won the high-profile contract to do a major refit on the J-Class *Endeavour* – regarded by many as the most beautiful racing yacht ever built. The owner was impressed by the company's personal commitment to classic yachts and said it played a significant part in his decision to entrust them with the refit over stiff competition from other international facilities – many of them arguably much better known in this high-profile arena.

Turning to the future, the New Zealand defence of the America's Cup looms in 2021 with widespread anticipation for the new foiling monohull class created by Emirates Team New Zealand. Could that technology perhaps transfer to foiling superyachts?

Weight, as always, is the issue. 'To get a boat foiling is all about weight,' says Ian. 'Given that we have come from building raceboats to superyachts, our advantage is that we have been able to build lighter and better-performing boats than our steel and alloy counterparts by virtue of our experience of composite technology.'

'However, to combine foiling ability with all the hotel facilities of a superyacht, that is an awful lot of service weight that you have to carry to perform all those functions.'

He believes a more likely shift would be where somebody interested in a 100ft foiler

would build a raceboat of that size and then tie it up alongside his large motoryacht – just as owners used to do with their J-Class yachts in the 1930s and still do today.

However, he concedes a more achievable performance gain could come from quasi semi-foiling, utilising some of the technology and experience gained through the America's Cup. There is, for example, a new 142-footer equipped with DSS foil technology now under construction at Baltic Yachts in Finland.

And displacement weights in large composite superyachts are certainly coming down as the price of carbon continues to reduce. 'It used to be that carbon fibre was prohibitively priced because it was all being taken by the aerospace industry.'

'Now supply is more plentiful, which makes raising the carbon content more feasible, which creates a virtuous cycle. It takes less carbon to achieve the equivalent strength and stiffness of lower-modulus composites, which in turn saves labour costs with less laminating. The end result is significant weight saving and greater efficiency.'

'The last big motoryacht we did ended up being seven tonnes under the weight budget because of an increased carbon content. That represents a significant saving on fuel costs alone,' says Ian. That trend, taken to its logical conclusion, could at least bring 'foil-assist' into the frame on large cruising yachts.

Like so many other large custom yards, New Zealand's Yachting Developments has had to think nimbly to stay afloat in a changing world. For example, following the financial crisis of 2007 the company deftly returned to its racing roots with several smaller builds, including a new fleet of 7m training yachts used by the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron's renowned Youth Training Programme, where both Cook girls had also graduated. It has also taken on an interesting spread of architectural projects.

Whether or not the future lies with high-tech foiling projects, it seems a sure bet that the Cook family business will live up to its name and continue to be at the forefront of boatbuilding development for another generation or two... at least. □