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In the corner of an enterprise devoted to high-tech composite boatbuilding stands a trio of rescued wooden boats that the yard workers have nicknamed

JURASSIC PARK

Why they are there comes down to a love that can't be justified or explained.

Words - Ivor Wilkins

Recently relocated in modern purpose-built premises, Yachting Developments in Auckland, New Zealand, bustles with activity. When I visited, two new composite superyacht builds were taking shape side by side in adjacent bays: one a 110-foot Germán Frers sloop (since launched) and the other, a 127-foot Michael Peters sportfish design. The sights and sounds of a busy yard are heartening in a superyacht construction landscape that has forced others to close their doors.

"Apart from these current projects, we are also seeing a very high level of inquiry recently," says Managing Director Ian Cook.

Walking through the modern construction hall, with areas sealed off for handling composite materials and workers clad in chemical-protective suits, I come across an incongruous sight. Nestled in a corner, dwarfed by the large projects under construction, are three vintage wooden yachts. It's an anomaly, a shrine to the past. Welcome to what the yard workers affectionately call Jurassic Park.

While directing a superyacht yard and steering a course through the troubled waters of a still-shaky world economy leave little time for distractions, Cook manages to reserve a small space for this personal passion.

"How to explain this love of wooden boats," he muses. "It is just that they are something to be cherished. I don't look on it as ownership. We are really just custodians, looking after them and preserving them so they can be handed on and somebody else can do it all again."

Boats were a big part of Cook's childhood. He remembers spending time as a small boy with his father on the waterfront, gazing at the elegant lines of slender Victorian and Edwardian gaff-riggers designed and built by the rival houses of Logan and Bailey.

Giving old classics new life is the calling of a few special owners. Endeavour's owner trusted Yachting Developments with her extensive refit, in part because of the managing director's personal passion for wooden boats.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF IAN COOK



Ian Cook, managing director of Yachting Developments in New Zealand, in front of Jurassic Park

As a young boatbuilding apprentice, he learned the skills of lofting and shaping wooden hulls. He inhaled the sweet scents of wood shavings and sawdust and grew to love the sight and feel of varnished timber, bent to follow the graceful curves and sheerlines of traditional design.

Steeped in the romance of wooden craftsmanship, he was, however, also quick to recognize the advantages of modern materials and techniques. Yachting Developments was one of the world pioneers in transferring leading-edge America's Cup materials and technology into composite superyacht construction.

Having embraced this futuristic technology, where

external construction is largely a function of chemical process, Cook's wooden-boat passion provides a counter opportunity for apprentices to gain a valuable hands-on insight into traditional boatbuilding. "They enjoy it and learn a lot from it," he says.

Of the three classic yachts standing in Yachting Developments, only one is currently in sailing condition: *Ranger*, a legendary 60-foot racer, which ruled Auckland's Waitemata racing fleet for 30 years, from 1938 to 1968.

At a time when large racing yachts were predominantly gaff-rigged and owned by the wealthy blueblood families of Auckland, *Ranger* was distinctly a blue-collar working-class hero. Designed and built by Lou Tercel, who worked as a crane operator on the Auckland docks, *Ranger* featured long, lean lines and a powerful Bermudan rig. She represented a new era, dominating the A-Class racing fleet and, with constant tweaking and improvement, resisting challenges from a succession of boats built with the express intention of being *Ranger*-beaters.

Cook bought *Ranger* from Tercel's estate and completely rebuilt her in time to be shipped to England to compete in the 2001 America's Cup Jubilee. This extraordinary yacht, designed and built in the backyard of an Auckland dockworker's home, was one of the smallest in the 50-boat Vintage Class, yet recorded the fastest time around the Isle of Wight in her division – beating some very notable aristocrats in the process. "It was one of those once-in-a-lifetime experiences," he says.

Cook still regularly races *Ranger*, which is only out of the water for annual maintenance. Next to her is *Erewhon*, a yacht shrouded in some mystique. She was built in Auckland in 1948 as a would-be *Ranger*-beater, but never lived up to



1938 *Ranger*, looking better than ever

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”

her potential and spent more time out of the water than in it. There was talk of her as an America's Cup contender and she was even featured in a novel. But, the reality was more prosaic. She stood unattended out of the water for many years and then disappeared from view entirely.

Erewhon resurfaced years later as a derelict hull in Australia. Cook, ostensibly in Australia for a family wedding, went to take a look and, of course, bought her on the spot. She has been standing in Jurassic Park for nine years awaiting his attention. "She is my retirement project," he explains.

On the other side of *Ranger* is 70-foot *Windhaven*, designed and built by Col Wild in 1948 for a wealthy paper merchant. She was the largest and most luxurious yacht built in New Zealand at the time and is sometimes referred to as the country's first superyacht. After 20 years in the U.S., she was returned to New Zealand, where an ambitious refit began in 2007 before funds dried up. Once again, Cook rode to the



Innismara, fire-damaged before and gleaming after Cook's restoration

rescue and *Windhaven* now reverberates to the sound of an extensive restoration.

That accounts for the vessels currently in residence at Jurassic Park, but its population changes from time to time. *Lady Shirley*, a beautifully restored classic launch, has been sold to a carefully vetted buyer, who was granted custodianship more on the basis of how well he could look after the vessel than the magnitude of his offer.

Currently in the water and being actively raced are *Innismara*, a 67-foot sloop whose lightweight construction and pencil-thin hull lines pre-date the Californian ULDBs by some 25 years, and *Rawhiti*, a gaff-rigged masterpiece from the pre-eminent late 19th-century boat designer, Robert Logan. *Rawhiti* is a relatively recent acquisition in a partnership arrangement with another enthusiast, Mike Malcolm. She was not a rescue mission, having been extensively restored by a previous owner five years ago.

Innismara, on the other hand, was considerably damaged in a fire and Cook bought the remains, largely to supply parts and equipment for *Erewhon*. However, his incurable passion for taking on lost causes would not allow him to trash *Innismara*, so here she is – alive and well and in gorgeous condition. Parts for *Erewhon* will have to be sourced elsewhere.

Even Cook looks a little embarrassed by the extent of his enthusiasm and offers no argument against the diagnosis of his wife, Blanche, who reckons he needs psychiatric attention. By the same token, without people who pour heart and soul into the preservation of beautiful, old yachts, current and future generations would be the poorer for their loss.

And, in Cook's case, his wooden boat obsession did serve as a useful commercial spur in winning the prized contract to undertake the extensive 2012 refit of the J Class yacht *Endeavour* – which Cook rates as another highlight of his



Lady Shirley

PHOTOGRAPHS: IVOR WILKINS (THIS PAGE TOP, BOTTOM); COURTESY OF IAN COOK



Erewhon (right) and Windhaven (below) await restoration in Jurassic Park.



career. Sometimes referred to as the most beautiful yacht ever built, *Endeavour* came to the yard with more than 200,000 nautical miles recorded on her log in the 21 years since her total reconstruction by Elizabeth Meyer. “To be entrusted with the opportunity of carrying out that refit was incredible,” Cook says.

The weekend before this conversation, both *Innismara* and *Rawhiti* competed in New Zealand’s premier classic yacht regatta. *Innismara* was under the command of Cook’s daughter Paige with a crew of fellow graduates from the renowned Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron’s Youth Training Programme, which has produced a veritable parade of America’s Cup and Volvo Ocean Race luminaries.

In a triumph of youth over experience, *Innismara* took the top honors in the regatta. Cook grumbles about the light-air conditions and how he has yet to master the art of *Rawhiti*’s demanding gaff rig, but his pride in his daughter’s success is plain to see.

The New Zealand classic yacht fleet is raced regularly and hard all year-round and in all conditions, sometimes causing onlookers to wince at the sight of the country’s maritime heritage being subjected to such harsh treatment. Cook, who is a keen racer, is somewhat torn on the subject – knowing as he does firsthand the amount of work it takes to keep these old vessels in pristine condition.

“A lot of these yachts are now in better condition than they ever were originally,” he says. “Are we doing the right thing putting them out on the water and racing them, or should they be just put on display somewhere? It is a bit of a shame to knock them around the way we do.”

From a practical viewpoint, however, it is probably the fact that these yachts are regularly used in a community of like-minded enthusiasts that keeps them well-maintained. The notion of gathering dust in some museum environment is less appealing and somehow seems less respectful.

A more pressing debate that runs through this classic yacht community is whether to take a purist approach to maintaining absolute originality, or using some modern methods to help preserve them. In this sense, Cook is decidedly pragmatic. With *Ranger* and *Innismara*, he sheathed the hulls in epoxy fiberglass, which does nothing to detract from the original design, but does a great deal to keep the water out.

“When I first got *Ranger*, she stood in a shed for eighteen months and every morning when I came in, there was a puddle of water underneath as the hull slowly dried out. You could see that over the years the waterline had been raised several times as she became heavier and heavier,” he says.

“Now, she floats back on her original lines. After spending so much effort to get the water out of the hull, I saw no point whatsoever in letting it all back in again. My view is that if epoxy resins had been available to the original designers and builders of these yachts, they would have used it. It is a question of striking a balance between what is the right thing to do and what is best to make maintenance easier – which, in the end, will ensure these yachts last even longer.”

1905 Rawhiti is a perfect example of the enduring power of kauri construction, a wood with an incredibly long lifespan.



This does not mean a totally *laissez-faire* approach is tolerated. For instance, carbon fiber masts and powered winches would no doubt make handling these boats easier, but are totally forbidden for racing.

One reason for the enduring health of New Zealand’s classic fleet is the incredible properties of native kauri timbers predominantly used in their construction. Its resistance to rot is legendary. Carbon dating of logs hauled from swamps has put them at 50,000 years old with no deterioration. A museum devoted to kauri has in its collection a piece of wood thought to be 30 million years old.

“New Zealand has been extremely lucky in this respect,” says Cook. “It has allowed these yachts to survive. We still really don’t know what their natural lifespan will be. Nobody has been around long enough to find out. These yachts are a century old and more, and the timber is mostly still sound. Time will tell.”

The big question, though, is whether the next generation will care about these historic yachts. “Nowadays, there is a need for excitement in younger people that these boats maybe don’t offer,” he says. “The modern generation is blasting around on foiling catamarans and adrenaline machines.”

He pauses and then adds hopefully, “Maybe later they will show an interest in these older boats.” Daughter Paige is not so sure. Her contemporaries enjoy their time racing and cruising on *Innismara*, but their hearts are in TP52s, foiling

catamarans and the like. “I think these classic yachts are possibly a lost cause,” she says sadly. “It is a great shame.”

She and her sister, Bianca, share their father’s passion. “They have already earmarked which boats they want to inherit,” says Cook with a laugh. “They argue about that around the dinner table.”

He has a telling way of halting these debates: “I tell them I am going to have a Viking’s funeral and take them with me.” ☞



It was a triumph of youth over experience when Cook’s daughter Paige sailing *Innismara* beat her dad sailing *Rawhiti* at the 2016 Trillian Trust Classic Yacht Regatta.

PHOTOGRAPHS: IVOR WILKINS (TOP RIGHT, RAWHITI INTERIORS); COURTESY OF IAN COOK