

GOOD DAY AT BLACK ROCK

Last Christmas, it looked all over for the UK's best-known builder of gaff-rigged boats. Yet by January's London Boat Show, Cornish Crabbers was back in business. Alice Driscoll went to Cornwall to ask: Where did it all go right?

With photographs by Peter Chesworth



In September 2008, the world of finance and commerce was in turmoil. The US House of Representatives had voted down a \$700 billion plan aimed at bailing out Wall Street, Lehman Brothers had filed for Chapter 11, there was a global share plunge, and unemployment in Europe was at its highest for a decade. So the news that 20 jobs had been lost in Cornwall as the effects of the credit crunch hit the UK went

relatively unnoticed. At the end of the Southampton Boat Show, after what the then Managing Director called "an awful show", the Select Yacht Group of Wadebridge, Cornwall went bust. Best known as the company that designed and built the Cornish Crabber and Shrimper, the group also sold the British Hunter range of boats, Diva powerboats and had launched the Links 30 at the show.



With its well proportioned gaff cutter rig, wood-finished coachroof and very shapely multi-chine hull, the 30' (9.1m) Pilot Cutter really looks the part from the outside. Down below, traditional details combine with creature comforts to create a light, modern interior.

As international markets reeled over the revelations of global billions of debt, one man in the east of England, Philip Langsdale, was being pursued for the money he now owed the liquidators of Select Yacht Group. And from that phone call, a whole new chapter started for the company that had once

been called Britain's most successful and prolific production builder of an internationally popular classic.

Philip Langsdale is the Chief Information Officer for the British Airports Authority and a classic boat enthusiast, who had bought his Crabber 22 a couple of years earlier. Owing just £40 and intrigued to find out more about the company, he asked the liquidators to send him the sale details. "I know it sounds like a cliché," he says, "but these are just the nicest boats in the world." So nice you bought the company? "Well, yes," he says. Now I am intrigued. I ask Philip if he has ever been involved in manufacturing or if he manages other companies. "Oh no," he replies, "I just couldn't see such beautiful boats going out of production."



So to find out just what is so good about these boats, I head off to Rock to see the factory and to Falmouth to sail the boats and to meet the two most important people in the business after Philip Langsdale, Sales Manager Peter Thomas and Works Manager Roger Cox. I want to find out how this company was saved and what the future holds for it now.

Cornish Crabbers came about after building architect Roger Dongray asked Westerley Boats – no, not that Westerly; this was a dinghy-building business run by Peter Keeling recently moved down from the north – to build a 24' (7.3m) plywood gaffer he had designed for his own use. The first 'Cornish Crabber' – no, no connection with real crabbers; just a name – might well have remained a one-off but for the fact the BBC filmed part of the build for their first ever television programme in colour in the west country. When technical problems caused a delay in the launch of colour tv, the cameras went back, so viewers finally saw the pretty little boat with its funny 4-sided tan sail on the water. Next day at Westerley Boats, the phone began to ring.

By 1978, when Roger Dongray designed the next boat for his own use, the 19'3" (5.9m) Shrimper, Westerley Boats had become Cornish Crabbers Ltd. The stylish design of this weekend gaffer, with her low profile cabin and just enough space for

two adults to sleep, cook and eat, appealed to people looking for an affordable trailer sailer. Before long, Cornish Crabbers switched to GRP construction. The traditional look of the one-design, its high quality production and all-weather sturdiness

seemed to hit the spot with buyers and before long, the factory at Rock was building them at a rate of around 50 per year. There are now well over 1,000 Shrimpers all over the world, with significant fleets in Cornwall, Devon, along the East Coast, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The boat is so popular in France and Holland that they even have their own class associations and there are strongholds in Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and the USA.

Over the years, the designs were re-thought and new boats added to the range. A smaller sister, the Crabber 17 came along, as well as a series of larger boats from the Crabber 22, Crabber 24 and Pilot Cutter 30. As we arrive at Mylor Yacht Harbour, I can see a whole range of these very distinctive multi-chine craft out on moorings, on the hard and on trailers in the car park. I wonder what went wrong.

We start our sail on the largest in the fleet, the Pilot Cutter 30. I'm introduced to owner Richard Picking of Cornish Blue Sailing, by Peter Thomas, the Sales Manager at Cornish Crabbers. As I leave my coat below, I take a moment to

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With her wide sidedecks and generous headroom down below, the Crabber 22 is the latest example of the winning Crabber concept.

appreciate the lovely light wood interior, blue striped fabrics, and famous Cornish Blue china stacked in the plate racks. Something else catches my eye: this is the first boat I've sailed for *Water Craft* with a framed print on the bulkhead! She's a lovely size. Easy to handle, and comfortable enough for a group of friends or family to charter, there's room for six to sleep on board. Richard offers skippered charters on this boat, and also has two Shrimpers, which he charters to potential buyers for elongated test sails. I get the impression he's a good as a salesman for the company and Cornish Crabbers even pays back the price of the charter if people subsequently buy a Shrimper or Pilot Cutter.

While we're sailing, I get the chance to find out a bit about Peter. It turns out he's been with Crabbers for around six years and was taken back on by new owner Philip Langsdale when the company sale went through. He also comes with a pretty good boating pedigree: his father is David Thomas, the yacht designer and race winning sailor, whose successes include the Sigma range, the Sonata, Impala and Hunter 707, as well as the steel boats first used for round the world racing in the British Steel Challenge.

I'm really interested now to find out what went wrong: it obviously wasn't the sales and it doesn't seem to be the product. Peter tells me that in addition to the 1,040 or so Shrimpers built and sold, there's been about 65 Crabber 22s, 135 Crabber 17s and some 80 or so Crabber 24s. A key factor in their success is that these boats seem to really hold their value. "If you keep your boat for a few years and look after it, you'll easily get back what you paid for it," he says. The company only builds around 40 boats per annum, so the demand against supply also helps keeps prices high.



We're sailing by Black Rock into Falmouth Bay but before I can delve any further, more boats are heading towards us. The smallest is a Shrimper, helmed by Works Manager Roger Cox, universally known as Budgie. Sailing alongside is a brand new Crabber 22, helmed by owner Nick Kitson. We've not got too long and there's the factory to visit, so I jump aboard the Crabber 22.

Nick is another long term fan of the company, having only recently upgraded from a Shrimper to this new style Crabber. She seems to me an ideal small family boat: clever and cute. There's a double berth up front, with ingeniously hidden toilet. The chart table hides the two double ring cooker and grill, with sink located beside it. The side bunks are lengthy and wide and there are ample stowage areas. She's a nice blend of traditional boat on the outside, while the light wood panelling

and stylish soft furnishings make her modern and airy below.

The cockpit offers plenty of space for three or four adults, with comfortable seating and a deep, self-draining well. All the lines lead back to the cockpit, so she's easy to sail short-handed. With full sail up, the new Crabber is easy to handle but lively enough to be fun. She feels very stable and as Nick will mainly sail her single-handed, I think he's made a very good choice. He says that though she's only 3' (0.9m) longer than his Shrimper, the clever interior layout makes a huge difference.

By now, we've been joined by the baby in the group, the original Shrimper, sailed by Works Manager Roger Cox. As the wind picks up a little, we manage to get all three boats sailing along together. It's a great sight and once the pics are completed, Chesie motors up alongside and I hop over to



Budgie aka Works Manager Roger Cox helms his own boat, the enduring Shrimper. Facing page: Boatbuilders reunited; back with his team at the Cornish Crabbers workshops in Rock.

the Shrimper. I'm immediately aware of the size difference between this boat and the Crabber. Lovely though she is – and owned and sailed by Budgie, she's in great condition – I've been spoiled by the new Crabber though; to me, the Shrimper seems a daysailer with enough space to bunk down for night or two. I can't believe Budgie has been with the company for 40 years; he doesn't look old enough. As the wind drops and we slowly drift along to meet the others up the Fal, it seems like the right time to ask the burning question: What happened in 2008 to make it all go wrong?

"It was simple," said Budgie. "We took on too many different boats and lost our focus. We are Cornish Crabbers. It's a well established and respected brand but people were allowed to forget it.

As we moor all three boats beside each other and stop for a welcome cup of coffee, I get the chance to talk to Cox and Thomas together. They seem to have a very good working

relationship: "I manage the build of the boats and he does the sales," says Budgie, "And I'll do the sales if he's away."

I ask Peter Thomas what went wrong with such a proven and popular brand. "In a word, motorboats," he says. "We over-diversified. We had large tooling costs for the Link 30, the Mystery 35 and then the Diva range of motorboats. The costs become too big and our overheads were massive. It then started to affect the Crabber and Shrimpers, as we had to raise their prices to cover the losses from other boats."

Knowing how close-knit the marine industry is, I question Peter about how bad the fall-out was when the company went bust. "It was a shock but we worked with the liquidators to ensure that anyone who had paid deposits got their money back or if they had boats in build with us, we got them finished." What about your trade suppliers? "Well, we're working again with most of them, so I think that says a lot. We got a fantastic reception when we got back again at the London Boat Show in January 2009. It was the most incredibly tense time. We were up at the show, the day before it opened, waiting for the paperwork to be signed with our new owner. I've done many boat shows but that was the best one ever. We had so much support. It's great to be back."

I ask about the laid-off work force. How do they feel? Budgie smiles. "We got most of them back. There's not much else going on down here and almost all of them were happy to come back."

Peter Thomas has ambitious plans. He's looking to expand the workforce, to double production and reach a turnover of £1 million "We're halfway there already," he says. "And we've plans for some new boats. Watch this space."

But our time is whiling away and I still have to go to Rock, on Cornwall's north coast, to see the factory. It's all part of the Cornish Crabber experience, Peter explains: "Once people have had a sail and then visited the factory, they almost always buy. They just can't help it." And what about Philip Langsdale, the new chairman, who went one step further and bought the company? "He's been great. We're in touch every week and he's really helping us develop our plans. The next step is to buy the freehold of the factory and then develop our service to customers. We'll offer an online sales and spares service and make more use of the facilities we have at the factory for boat repairs, renovations, an over-wintering service for hulls and spars and boat storage."

At Rock, across the River Camel from Padstow, the Cornish Crabber factory is huge – and really, really tidy. I am impressed. Peter explains that over the years the company has gradually expanded and developed, so it now has plenty of GRP lay up space; joinery, fitting out and paint shops; and rigging and repair areas. It even has its own wood store where cedar, mahogany and teak are seasoned. For a boatyard, it is exceptionally neat and clean. I sense this is Budgie's influence. "For sure," agrees Thomas. "We like to use this as a showpiece for our quality of build and we encourage people to drop by. It's a great asset."

It's also an asset that can help contribute to the company's success, as Cornish Crabbers plan to encourage more boats to come back for repair or cosmetic attention, engine maintenance and standing rigging services. Peter adds that the experienced workforce has the skills to not only build new but repair other traditional or modern craft.

As we walk around, I am impressed with the obvious build quality of new craft under construction manufacture. At the moment, each boat is built to its owner's specification but Thomas explains that they might do some standard hull mouldings in popular colours just to be able to keep up with

demand and achieve the doubling in production they have forecast. Even though the factory is empty on this Saturday afternoon, I get the feel of a happy workplace and it's easy to sense the pride of workmanship and the years of sensible advice that is available from the team. Peter shows us the range and I know we are being hooked in. As we sit down and look through the fabric options, I ask about pricing.

Thomas agrees that one of the issues that badly affected Cornish Crabbers before September 2008 was the increasing costs. He says the company saddled itself with debt, resulting in price rises that were out of line with inflation. The new Cornish Crabbers, under Philip Langsdale's guidance, has developed a robust and ambitious business plan, and has already reduced prices significantly. There are also plans for a new mid-sized boat in the fleet. Exporting is also a key objective, with a new distributor already established in France; Philippe Mourvain, of Saint Briac Nautic says: "It's a niche market. You're looking for a very discerning owner, who appreciates the build quality, performance and image of a boat such as the Crabber 22. Our marketing plans will evolve around creating a 'desire' factor for this type of boat. I am completely confident we can achieve it."

So with the French market underway, Peter plans to rebuild markets in Holland, Spain and Germany and also sees Scandinavia as a good opportunity. Langsdale agrees, adding that his expertise will be beneficial in helping the company develop its e-commerce. Buyers will be able to configure their own boats online, and specify interior design and colours. The range will increase but Langsdale and Thomas both agree on one thing. "We won't over-diversify," says Langsdale, "I believe in focus". A good day – again – for Cornish Crabbers.

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