

A Brief History of Vancouver Yachts in UK

This is an edited version of an account written by Andrew Dandridge in a letter to Cor Laan in October 2006.

My father started Pheon Yachts Ltd in 1974 building a Hurley 24 as a one off. I was at college studying for a degree in Interior and Three Dimensional Design at that time. Having completed the Hurley he then started building a cold-moulded 20-foot Vagrant. In order to build these yachts he had to demolish an old scout hut and use the materials to build a boat building shed in a quarry at South Heighton near Newhaven. The shed was built large enough to contain a Hurley 38, which was to be a future project. Hurleys then went bust so he looked around for another yacht to build and saw the design drawings for the Vancouver 27 in Yachting World.

The yacht had been designed by Robert Harris for a Canadian couple that wanted to sail from Vancouver to New Zealand. Father contacted Bob Harris and was given the rights for the wooden version in Europe. He started construction immediately, even though the Vagrant was not finished. The first Vancouver 27 was completed and went to an owner on the River Orwell. It was called "Strider" and was very much as Bob had designed her.

The interest at the time of construction was huge and it was clear that GRP was the only way forward so as "Strider" was being built a mould plug was started for the GRP version. When "Strider" was launched it was discovered that the boat was very tender and had a tendency to roll a lot. Bob was over here for the launch and it was agreed to fill out the mould plug by three inches each side at waterline level to stiffen her up. Only British Vancouvers have this. The Canadian builders had already gone too far for this correction. That is why our Vancouvers have that distinctive and very attractive look about them. The original design did not have the tumblehome look.

The first GRP V27 was launched in June 1976. I had just qualified as a designer and took this yacht, called "Sunrise", up to Denmark with the owner, Kristian Lambertson, spending three weeks on board. It gave me the opportunity to see how she performed and what reaction there was from other people. Upon my return I started working with my father, introducing refinements to the design. This became my role for the next eleven years, constantly developing ways to improve the design and construction techniques.

The second V27 was sold as a shell for home completion to Bob Isherwood in Uckfield. The third was called "Trinity" and was featured in the first brochure. It was sold to Oscar Klerx from Holland and was the last yacht to be built in the shed at South Heighton. After that we moved production to Cantell's Boatyard in Newhaven. During the construction of Trinity we were visited by Martin Barr, lead guitarist of the rock band Jethro Tull. He placed an order for a V27 to be called "Sossity". Valerie and I got to know him very well and he put "Sossity" in our care while he was away on tour. Sossity was later featured in a glowing article in Yacht and Boat Owner July 1978 with the quote "As with the Vancouver 27 or a Rolls Royce, anything at the top of its market is a fail-safe investment".

In Cantell's yard we were launching one V27 every week. Articles such as that in Yacht and Boat Owner really boosted demand and our order book was long. Streamlining production was even more important and new and more efficient construction methods had to be found. I developed layout variations such as the forward double cabin with an amidships shower compartment. The cut away bulkhead was introduced fairly early on. Interior styling was improved and new finishes introduced.

The Vancouver 32 was built upside down in the South Heighton boat shed using foam sandwich on frames. The mould was then taken off it and shipped to Northshore whilst the deck plug was made. Many refinements learnt from the V27 were incorporated into the V32 deck design to aid production. While all this was going on work was started on fitting out the inside. I was given a blank canvas to design the interior. This was a combination of lessons learnt from the V27 and new ideas but still keeping the Vancouver philosophy.

The result was the forerunner of what is now in the V34. The first Vancouver 32 was exhibited at the London Boat Show. Whilst my father was on board three gentlemen came on board to look around. At the end they said to him. "We are from Nautor. We build the Swan. We give you second prize as we must take first prize!"

In 1981 I completely re-modelled the interior of both the V27 and the V32, going back to the beginning and introducing the styling you see today in all Vancouvers with what we called the three bar moulding theme. Up to this point the interior had evolved in the workshop with ideas being introduced piecemeal. I draughted detailed construction plans to unify the whole design. "Sula Sula" was the result and she was entered in the 1981 Yachting World "One of a Kind" Rally. She was declared outright winner in all categories with a full write-up in Yachting World. Yet again our order books were dramatically boosted. A new purpose-built factory had been built for us during 1980 along side the old Cantell's yard with five production bays, mezzanine workshop and offices.

A new layout had now been introduced; the 27F (F for family), with four berths to broaden our market share. Additionally I had the concept for the Vancouver 32 Pilot. Having seen the Seastream range of yachts at the Southampton Boat Show I felt there was a market for such a yacht in the Vancouver range. I drew up the basic design but the idea floated about for a year before we could "persuade" a customer to take the plunge. "Hoodwink" was the result, still owned by John Gratwick, and now in Eastbourne. The pilothouse was built in mahogany. The layout was quite a challenge but has pretty much stood the test of time, as the current V34 Pilot is virtually the same inside. We later built a GRP pilothouse version but only one was built. The investment in the GRP version nearly broke the company at this point as the project seriously over ran its budget.

Sometime around this point, I cannot quite remember exactly when, we decided to update the V27F. I had always been advocating the introduction of a GRP sub structure to speed production further. We wanted also to break into the US market more. We used this opportunity to introduce the first GRP floor pan and the Vancouver 274 was born. The very first one was sent to a customer in America and was exhibited at the Annapolis Boat Show.

We also wanted to go larger and develop a 38-foot Vancouver. We did not have the finance for moulds etc. so decided to build a steel yacht. We asked Bob Harris to draw up the lines and I designed the deck structure and the interior. The result was a fantastic yacht, immensely powerful. It was again sold through an agent in America but before that we exhibited the Vancouver 38 at the Brighton Boat Show. Regrettably we only built one. Pheon Yachts was financially much stretched and the market was very difficult at this time. It was realised that we needed external financial input if we were to survive and grow further.

It took some time before a backer was found. A number of avenues had been pursued but it finally came down to a very enthusiastic V27 owner, Kevin Seymour, to continue the fortunes of Pheon Yachts. He bought into Pheon during 1985 and we had the means to redevelop the three-berth layout with an internal floor pan as for the V274 - something

I had wanted to do for a long time. It was also decided at the same time to extend the V27 to 28 feet as the original V27 moulds were coming to the end of their useful life. This would bring it into line with the V32 stern arrangement with a similar rudder configuration. Bob was once again asked to draw up the necessary lines. We had to build the plug using a V27 hull and deck so they could then be used to fit out and sell as a V27 after the new mould was made. I came up with the new name of "Vancouver Islander" as the new mark of the boat. Kevin had the first one out of the mould and it was called "Islander". I also re-modelled the interior styling into what you see today. The design has remained unchanged since that first one.

Northshore bought out Pheon in April 1986 and I went with the Vancouvers to "show them how it was done"!! Brian Moffat asked me to draw up the designs for the new V32 GRP floor pan. Having done that I found I was having less and less to do with the Vancouvers, having my own design business elsewhere. I also became involved in designing the Northshore sales offices. I then left Northshore at the end of 1987 to join an architectural firm in London.

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