



Top drawer

This man is one of Britain's most prolific boat designers, with a portfolio that includes many of the most popular motor cruisers ever. How did he get where he is, and what's his idea of a great boat? REPORT BY ROB PEAKE

Walk through the rows of gleaming new boats at the Southampton Boat Show in September and it won't take you long to come across the work of Andrew Wolstenholme.

The 51-year-old designer is the toast of the industry, as the draughtsman behind three of this autumn's major new launches. His is the pen behind Hardy's exciting new 50-footer, the classy new Aquila 27 and a

revamped Birchwood 350. Indeed, Wolstenholme is helping shape a new future for Birchwood, with their smallest boat for 15 years, a sporty 29-footer, due to be unveiled at the London Boat Show in January.

IMPRESSIVE PORTFOLIO

Wolstenholme can afford to have the odd bit of fun. From humble beginnings, with a drawing office in a rented flat in Norwich when he first branched out on his own,

His recent work has also included a host of other production and private craft, and we arrived at his Norfolk home to find him putting the finishing touches to a one-off yacht he's designed for a leading British architect.

"It's important to keep in touch with the roots of it all," he says. "And it's also great fun."

he's built up an impressive portfolio. No fewer than 94 of his designs have gone into build in just over a quarter of a century.

Friendly and unpretentious, he is equally ready to enthuse about his other hobby — he plays blues and jazz saxophone — as he is to talk boats. But when he does, you are left in no doubt that you're in the presence of a leading authority in leisure boat design.

Walking through a marina with Wolstenholme is a fascinating tutorial in the history and development of the motor cruiser. He is hilariously dismissive, although never rude, as he points

to elements where he believes a designer got it wrong. And he'll give a quiet murmur of approval as he passes craft (some of them his own) that he believes were designed particularly well.

"I honestly don't feel I've had one that's gone pear-shaped," he laughs, leaning forward hurriedly to touch wood. "But I've always been very critical of my own work, and aware of the fact that you're only as good as your latest design."

HAVING A CRACK

Wolstenholme is from Morecambe, Lancashire, where his father was

a photographer with a small picture-framing business. His life took a radical turn when Morecambe Grammar School built a 12ft Graduate sailing dinghy and the 14-year-old pupil was allowed out on the water. "I got hooked," he recalls.

So hooked, in fact, that he was soon putting the finishing touches to his first boat: a model of a trimaran that he designed and built from scratch, not from a kit.

Perhaps the future could have been predicted back then, but in reality Wolstenholme was all set for a career in aeronautical engineering, until he stumbled across a course in yacht and boat design at Southampton Institute, and enrolled for it. On such moments, the development of entire industries can turn.

The young graduate initially found work with Derek Kelsall, designing racing trimarans in Sandwich, Kent, and after 18 months went to work with sailing yacht builders Landamores in Wroxham, Norfolk in 1976.

Just a year and a half later, at the tender age of 24, he decided to "have a crack at it" himself, and set up on his own. "I don't like being told what to do," he offers, with a laugh, by way of explanation.

SWITCHED ON

At first he relied on the many boatbuilding yards in the Norwich area, and friends including top designer Rip Martins, to supply him with drafting and consultancy work.

"It's difficult starting out, because you haven't anything to show," he recalls. "You have to find someone who has confidence in you. Also, until you get better known, some of the builders like to keep your name quiet, to keep you to themselves. It can be quite frustrating."

His first design, in 1978, was the 16ft timber Catboat; only one was built. His second, in 1980, was a 25ft GRP Broads yacht; 30 were built.

It was in 1983 that his big break came, with a commission from Falcon for a 22-footer. It was to be Wolstenholme's first

complete powerboat design.

The head of the Falcon project, Ian Willgress, is now the managing director at Birchwood, working with Wolstenholme again. He recalls the early days: "We'd got everything on the line. It was quite nerve-wracking. But it never occurred to me for one second that Andrew would get it wrong.

"We didn't change the hull at all. We just went with his instructions, and it turned out to be an exceptional boat. We got used to turning up at boat shows and knocking the spots off supposedly much faster craft.

"Andrew's very switched on. He keeps an eye on current trends, and he can do most types of boat."

JACK OF ALL TRADES

Indeed, Wolstenholme's portfolio is a vast mix of motor cruisers, sportsboats, sailing boats, barges, electric river cruisers, wooden yachts and even rowing skiffs.

"Most designers tend to specialise," he admits, "but I genuinely enjoy going out in all sorts of boats myself. I take each commission as it comes. In sailing, buyers will favour a particular designer, but in motorboats it's more about the brand."

He's also a strong advocate of maintaining a flow of one-off designs, amid the mainstream production models that dominate the market.

So what makes a good boat? "A good boat is simply one that meets its brief in all aspects," he replies.

"You're well on the way to that when you get a good working relationship and mutual respect between the designer and the builder. I've had that with the Falcon guys, and with Broom. I have been lucky to have worked with some very good builders."

"I've always been very critical of my own work, and aware of the fact that you're only as good as your latest design"

"It's important that the client has a clear idea of what he wants to achieve. I could show you examples of boats where the goalposts have moved part-way through the development, or where the designer has not been kept involved throughout the project,

resulting in a less than satisfactory design."

FORM & FUNCTION

Among the boats he's most happy with have been the Falcon 27, the Hardy 42, the Broom 36 and the Broom 42CL. "They met the brief, they performed well, they looked good and they sold well," he says. The 42CL, indeed, is Broom's current best-seller.

"I believe very firmly in form and function. I don't believe in styling for styling's sake, like adding go-faster lines down the side. A boat's got to have elegance through form."

"I like to think my boats are as simple as possible from a design point of view, and also that they stand the test of time. I would love it if one of my designs were regarded in future years in the same way as the Faireys are regarded now."

Interestingly, ask Wolstenholme which fellow draftsmen he admires most and he comes up with a list of sailing yacht designers. But he also mentions Paolo Calliari, the man behind a host of classic Italian powerboats in the 1980s.

MADE IN THE UK

Inevitably Wolstenholme's work has been influenced by the trend among British manufacturers to build bigger and bigger craft.

"Because there are now so many secondhand boats on the market, and competitively-priced imported boats, it's difficult for UK builders to keep producing small boats."

"There's an interesting model to follow in the Dutch, who found they couldn't competitively produce their sloops (traditional launches). So they commissioned their own designers to draw the craft, but had them built overseas. Doing that, they maintained control of their market."

"We are seeing this sub-contracting out to overseas builders more and more. It's a delicate issue, but some of our smaller builders could go in that direction, to maintain the bottom end of their range, while concentrating on building the bigger craft themselves."

DRAWING THE LINE

Wolstenholme has weathered a few changes in the boating



above Back to the drawing board. Wolstenholme's office has framed magazine covers featuring boats he designed.

industry, but says the biggest change in his own profession came with the advent of computer-aided design (CAD).

"The most obvious influence of this is the ability to create very curvaceous shapes, and transfer that to reality," he says. "If you look at some of the more exotic shapes in modern motorboats, it would have been very difficult to draw some of them by hand and transfer that information successfully to the builder."

"But," he adds pointedly, "the computer is still only a tool. Just

because you can use a word processor, it doesn't mean you can write; in the same way, just because you can use CAD, it doesn't mean you can draw."

PERSONAL SATISFACTION

Wolstenholme, it can be said with some certainty, can draw. And even now, with thousands of his boats on the water all over the world, his enthusiasm for the job remains undimmed.

"It's brilliant," he says without hesitation. "There's no question about that. I get huge satisfaction

out of people enjoying boats I have designed."

Does he himself own a Broom, a Hardy or a Birchwood? No. He has just a couple of sailing dinghies (self-designed, naturally), in which he has fun with his wife Rosemary and his daughters Joanna, aged 10, and Kate, aged 7.

"The whole thing about boating is you can pitch it wherever you want, whether you're in a luxury superyacht or a tiny dinghy. I'm unimpressed by people who say otherwise."