

FISHERS – THE START AND FIRST TEN YEARS and Beyond June 2014

My name is David Skellon. I started the FISHER business as a hobby in 1969, when I was a young Airline Pilot for BOAC (now British Airways). My UK home was Hamble on the South Coast close to Southampton, and my then wife Jo and I lived in a house called FAIRWAYS overlooking the marina. In 1967 I had bought a lovely old West Country fishing boat from a friend of mine: an original 1898 built Looe Lugger named "GUIDE ME".

In those days of long haul Airline flying the BOAC work pattern was a civilized round the World type trip, usually 3 – 4 weeks away, then 3 – 4 weeks at home. So I had plenty of spare time to work on this old 34ft lugger which had a long with a straight stem, straight keel and a very heavy displacement. I finished the conversion into a yacht with cabins, toilet, shower and wheelhouse, painted in the traditional colours: dark green hull, black bulwarks, red strake, grey superstructure. The original rig was a loose footed gaff sloop, which I changed to Ketch – brown sails!

When finished, Jo and I, now with young baby Katherine, started cruising the Solent, South Coast, France and the West Country. Everywhere we went fellow Yachtsmen greeted us with great enthusiasm, like owning a vintage car. Time and again came the remark "what a lovely old ship, if only there was a modern fiberglass version".

I had already set up a small company – David Skellon Yachts Ltd – trading as FAIRWAYS MARINE, based in the annex to our house. I had been looking at boats to sell as a business and had sold the odd motor-sailer and motorboat etc. So the idea of creating a modern fiberglass version of the old fishing boat GUIDE ME really appealed. I started searching and researching mould tool and design costs, but realized they were out of my financial league at that time. I even sold GUIDE ME at a sizeable profit to finance the proper start of Fairways Marine now the summer of 1969.

The following year, I was visiting the London Boat Show at Earl's Court and came across a small stand exhibiting a model of a pretty little sloop – the FREEWARD 30. The exhibitors were FREEWARD MARINE, operated by two Partners, Gordon Wyatt and David Freeman who were both naval architects working in Cowes for a workboat builder. They had designed this boat the Freeward 30, and had even started to make the moulds for her. I suggested we collaborate whereby I would do the marketing and selling etc. and they would concentrate upon the production. And so a commercial partnership between us was formed.

The Freeward 30 was based upon the traditional Colin Archer style of hull. A double-ender, sloop rig, long straight keel over stern hung rudder. She had a small sloping wheelhouse/cuddy, open at the aft end, and was a very pretty little boat. When finally built, the bulwarks were clad in varnished teak (solid not strake planked as now). Eventually the prototype Freeward 30 was launched, with success.

My company, Fairways Marine advertised and promoted the Freeward 30 and I sold a few. The production was set up in New Milton, near Lymington with Robert Ives mouldings supplied to the builder, Pennington Yachts. This initial success prompted Gordon and David to talk of other sizes.

But, at the same time, I had been quietly thinking of my “dream boat”: the modern fiberglass version of GUIDE ME. I had a vision in my head the Freeward 30 hull and deck but ketch rigged instead of sloop, most of all with an enclosed proper square “FISHER” wheelhouse,.

Gordon Wyatt was my closer working partner in the area of marketing and selling the boats, while David Freeman looked after the commercial aspects of our agreement. Eventually I managed to persuade them to see my “Fisher vision” which they respected and agreed to try. So we erected a Freeward set of mouldings in the Pennington workshop.

First we cut off the sloping “cuddy”. Next we started a wooden mock-up of the classic square Fisher wheelhouse. I controlled every line and detail visually using the workshop’s all round walkway. I “sculpted” this new wheelhouse mock-up visually from every angle, as with the forward sloping screens, curved roof, side window shapes and proportions, it is very important to ensure every element is right. Finally from this mock-up the wheelhouse mould was made.

This took some time to complete, but by then everyone accepted the need for perfection “to get it absolutely right” and accepted my artistic temperament. I also changed the over-stern rudder to the current under-slung one and the rig from sloop to ketch. Most important of all, I gave this model its name: - **THE FAIRWAYS FISHER 30**

It was agreed that my FAIRWAYS MARINE would have the World sales exclusive distributorship of the FISHER 30 and all derivatives. I reasoned that to do the job properly, I had to re-invest everything into making the venture a success, and thus it needed to be under my entire exclusive control – and so it came to pass.

The first FISHER 30 built by Pennington Yachts was finally launched at Berthons Yard in Lymington. I remember getting it photographed from all angles. The photographs needed to be perfect for the expensive necessities of brochures, marketing, advertising and boat shows and all Publicity. We displayed this first Fisher 30 at the Southampton Boat Show amidst an enormous flurry of press and media interest, and most important of all, resulted in a number of orders. This must have been the September 1970 Southampton Show – which for us all was successful.

It was at this Boat Show that I was approached by a Mr Bryan Moffat who had a shipyard at Itchenor. The Fisher was a real success from that show onwards. Although Freeward were developing other models: the Freeward 25 and later a beamier version of the 30 hull, which became the Northeaster, it was really the Fisher 30 that turned all heads and the orders started pouring in.

Production was carried out by Robert Ives and Pennington Yachts, but as the order book expanded faster than production could at the time, I started to search for other builders. So when Bryan Moffat introduced himself, I listened with interest.

He had a shipyard on the water at Itchenor in Chichester Harbor named Itchenor Shipyard and a moulding factory at Havant near Chichester. This was quite a rare useful combination in those days. Furthermore Bryan “sold” me his mass production skills, without compromising quality, and finally convinced me to take him on as a sub-contractor to Fairway.

Thus Itchenor shipyard, later to become Northshore Yachts contracted with Fairways to build the Fisher 30's, leaving Ives and Pennington to concentrate upon the Freewards and Northeasters. I even started talks with a third supplier based at Hayling Island, and other prospective builders capable of quality yacht production.

So Fairways Marine grew in size and reach. Helped by my "day-job" piloting the VC10 at BOAC, I had started to establish dealers in other Countries. Already Fishers were selling to European dealers, the early ones being German, Dutch, Belgian and French. I had engaged a secretary, a formidably efficient lady called Lynn Fletcher. Lynn had formerly worked as PA to the famous former Fairey Aviation test Pilot, Peter Twiss at Fairey Marine of Hamble and so she was very experienced in the business of building and selling both sailing and power boats.

I also engaged a salesman, Jim Wilson, who was able to do the acceptance trials from the builders as well as conclude sailing demonstrations and order taking during the times when I was away flying. The Fairways "offices" were still in the annex to our home FAIRWAYS, and as the business grew more and more, it became clear we needed to find suitable premises. Subsequently I took on an office suite in Leonard House, Rope Walk in the heart of old Hamble village – right opposite the famous Bugle pub and the Royal Southern Yacht Club, of which Jo and I were Members. (And still are)

Meanwhile Gordon and David of Freeward Marine, which was now also beginning to prosper from the inflow of Royalty payments, had developed a larger version of the Fisher 30, this being the Fisher 37. Freeward Marine owned the moulds of all models so far, and Fairways was the exclusive marketing and distribution "hub" around which everything flowed.

Fairways established stocking dealers who were required to maintain an order book at all times. These dealers were all exclusive to a defined territory, usually their Country, except for the USA, where eventually I established five in total. The Dealers placed orders with Fairways who controlled the retail pricing – such that Worldwide price was the same no matter which currency.

Fairways in turn took the Dealer orders and placed them with the appropriate Builders depending upon the models etc., Fairways paid the Builder in stage payments, and as each boat was delivered, Fairways paid Freeward the pre-agreed "Royalty". I remember even treating our own retail sales offices as if they were also one of the Dealer network. So it was quite a disciplined overall operation.

I also worked very closely with Gordon on the development of each product. I designed the FISHER 25 wheelhouse. And it was on a flight back from Rome (as a Passenger) I developed and drew on writing paper the POTTER 25 having my Father in mind, who being retired wanted a simple day boat to "go fishing!".

A very important part of my work was the marketing and advertising. Having "given birth" to the FISHER name, concept, and development, plus the wheelhouse and superstructure part of all of the designs, it was vital to me to ensure all of this was presented properly – worldwide. I loved the advertising challenges and ensured that the advert style was maintained globally by the Dealers so as to maximize.

I remember an Owner had sent to me a lovely picture of his Fisher taken into the setting sun with a girl drinking from a bottle standing in the pulpit, all very calm and almost silhouetted – and I was sure we had to use this in the advertising. But I couldn't find the words to suit. Until – on a transatlantic flight from the US back to London I stole the lines from a Flight Magazine advert for Concorde – which was perfect. So we used this lovely photo – with the words simply saying: “SOON THERE WILL BE TWO KINDS OF YACHTSMEN IN THE WORLD – THOSE WITH FISHERS – AND THOSE WITHOUT”. I seem to remember this even won advertising prizes!!

As all of this developed, Fairways took on more staff, Dealer and Export Direction, after-sales management, more retail sales staff, production liaison with the sub-contractors, especially upon pricing and delivery control. Product cost control of the various models played a key role. Fairways bi-annually contracted with each of the sub-contract builders in batches of each model at a fixed price and delivery. These contracts were reviewed regularly depending on supply capability and sales demand.

Inevitably, one day there was a conflict. When one of the sub-contract builders started to play the “tail wagging the head” by creating inter contract bargaining over pricing, I decided to gain more control over the actual building and thus pricing of the boats.

Therefore, the next day! - I negotiated the purchase of a factory based boat building business at Havant, named Langston Marine Ltd. This became Fairways Marine Production as a wholly owned subsidiary of Fairways Marine. So Fairways set up its own production, training the handful of boat builder employees quickly into building Fishers, and recruiting others. Paying higher than standard rates we soon gathered the best skilled craftsmen in the region.

Bryan Moffat and Northshore had also expanded their facilities and needed to keep the main contract work supply. So despite our earlier pricing differences we negotiated and agreed that he could build the 30's and 25's – and also supply us, Fairways Marine, with the mouldings as he had the moulds also at Havant.

This was now circa 1972. From the Hamble based sales headquarters, the overall business was planned and run. I engaged a brilliant Dealer/ sales Director whose sole responsibility was dealer sales and support. All the accounting and administration was based here including our own in-house retail sales unit with sales staff and disciplines all working upon the same terms as our overseas dealers.

My wife, Jo typed all of the daily customer enquiries from an office she set up at home. Consequently over Dinner I would get the up to date feed back

Production settled down to basically our own unit at Havant, and Northshore as sub-contractor. Pennington Yachts started to phase out to mould making rather than production assembly. Our own Factory was set up upon the same terms as sub-contractors. Each sector of the business had to be individually profitable.

During the next few years the Business steadily developed. The Marketing was a big investment in terms of boat shows, advertising and promotions Worldwide. The Dealers were required to fulfill their part in the same way in their Territories or Countries. Meanwhile I was still flying the VC10 for BOAC who had introduced what was then known as the Bid Line scheme for aircrew. This meant I could “Bid” monthly for how

much or little I flew (within limits), but most usefully where I wanted to fly. This helped me to serve our then substantial dealer network most effectively.

My dear Bank Manager, Brian Palmer, Manager of the Midland Bank in Southampton, was becoming slightly more relaxed as in those days local Banks helped local businesses to expand and develop. He was always nervous about my going into Production but realized it had become a commercial necessity.

I divided my time between sales and factory visits, dealer visits when flying or overseas boat shows, and of course helping develop the boats. Gordon Wyatt of Freeward Marine was developing the Fisher 46 - so I became closely involved with this.

When time permitted for Jo and I with our Children, we would “commandeer” a boat for the weekends or holiday times as much as possible. This was for me the most enjoyable part of the work because following each time usage or voyage- especially holidays – I had the practical input which helped develop models at all times, and in all conditions. After each voyage there were production changes – even very minor.

I also enjoyed the time at the Factories: getting inside the boats on the factory floor and working with the men, always with a view to improving both detailed design as well as quality.

I had for some time started to sense a gap in the market between the F30 and the F37. I also wanted to achieve a better sailing performance - so, hence the idea of the Fisher 34. I had not discussed this with Gordon or Freeward but quietly drew and sketched the F34 basics, helped by one of my Factory guys, Ted Unsworth who worked for me at Havant.

Together we completed the F34 design – I still have the original lines plan skin in my office here in France. We then started the tooling of the hull and deck moulds at the back of the factory. I took an order for the first one from the then Commodore of the Royal Southern Yacht Club, Derek Stevens who bought her from my drawings, and commissioned a new pale blue hull colour. She was part way through production when Gordon and David visited the Factory to discover it.

“What’s this?” they cried, so I told them of my plan. They were amazed but could only agree the subtle changes should improve performance etc. I also allowed them to take credit for the F34 design even though I actually did it myself with Ted. Fairways Marine, however, owned the moulds.

So this is the real story of the first Fisher 34. She was launched with a great naming ceremony at the Royal Southern Yacht Club as the Commodore’s new yacht. She was named FINLANDIA and is featured in the range brochure published later. FINLANDIA was eventually sold and re-painted green and renamed KINGFISHER.

Mid 70’s the business steadily grew and grew. All models were selling well in most of the territories including our home UK. Bryan had developed Northshore into quite a big production unit in the lovely old shipyard, and was also developing other yachts of his own. These were built alongside the Fishers that he was contracted to build for Fairways.

Meanwhile our own Langston plant was running at maximum capacity. I had engaged a Managing Director to help me run everything, but basically we needed more production capacity. Then suddenly out of the blue came an opportunity. An enormous Factory 80,000 sq. ft. had become available for rent in Southampton next to the River Itchen. Furthermore the Factory had two heavy duty overhead travelling lifting cranes running the full length of the factory. In short, a boat builder's dream!

But - this time Midland Bank said NO.

However, I previously met and be-friended a Barclays Southampton Area Director (via Golfing, shooting and Fishing etc) who was also an ex-Spitfire pilot, so I asked him, showed him the Factory and he said YES – go for it. Consequently, another major stepping stone was embarked upon as we set up this enormous unit for Boat production.

Our main assembly workforces were at Havant and lived in that area. So we bought a dozen or so VW minibuses and transported daily the main workforce to Southampton. Havant was transformed into our main moulding plant. The move proved effective quite quickly as the production efficiency improved.

Also we recruited more skilled boat builders from the Southampton region. I remember two old boys who were experts at veneering, so we bought our own press such that they could match the complete interiors of each boat.

Meanwhile, I had been to Rome to tender for a major Fishing Fleet program for Sri Lanka, thinking a commercial version of the Potter might work. It was during this time I met and be-friended a charming Sri Lankan businessman and boat builder, Neil Fernando. He invited me to visit Sri Lanka, and so although we never won the Tender, he agreed to build some of the Fisher 25s. So we shipped out a set of moulds and two of our best boat builders, and trained some of Neil's men in the Southampton Factory.

The result was successful. He produced superb quality basic boats which were shipped back to Southampton to be rigged, engined, and finished. This worked well because before we had difficulty to make production profits building the Fisher 25's down to its then marketable price.

So the mid 70's were very busy. The Managing Director structure didn't work, so I took a major decision to quit flying and continue to run the Business myself. Fairways Marine won The Queen' Award for Exports in 1976 which I proudly accepted with Jo at Buckingham Palace. Meanwhile Gordon Wyatt and Freeward had developed a motorboat (as a commercial Fishing boat) with a very pretty hull. I designed the yacht version interior, superstructure and wheelhouse which heralded the First of the TRAWLER 38's.

This was promoted heavily in the marketing and via the Dealer network and the orders started flooding in. Production took place at Southampton with the mouldings coming from Havant. Boats of all sizes were coming through the Factory literally upon a production line basis, and then launched at the River end into the water for sea trial around to Hamble at the Stone Pier Yard at Warsash on the Hamble River.

Eventually, I recall that one boat per working day was going through the system. The biggest production headache was dealing with extras. So we moved all of this to the Warsash Yard. We had also grown out of the Hamble sales offices which I had sold to help finances. Temporarily, sales were conducted from the Southampton Factory until I eventually bought the Warsash Yard where we based all of the sales, extras fitting, rigging, hand-overs and warranty items etc.

During 1977 sales of all models were good, but later in '78 and '79 they started to slow down. Once again my pilot friend at Barclays helped with cash flow as generally the business overall was quite profitable. We were by then one of Britain's larger boat builders. I was also approached by all sorts of opportunists. One whom was the American Express Bank who had financed Colin Chapman with his Lotus Car Company. They seemed to regard myself and Fairways as the maritime equivalent.

My pilot friend at Barclays was retiring and his replacement, regrettably made it clear he didn't like me – or boats!! Therefore I thought it useful to get Amex involved. This went all through the negotiation stages and was finally agreed – simply waiting to be rubber stamped by the top brass Director. They asked me not to say anything to Barclays until this happened, when they would then re-pay Barclays the overdraft outstanding, modest by today's standards.

This was almost achieved when Barclays, without any warning and without any notice to me, put Fairways into receivership appointing Cork Gully as the receivers. Naturally I was furious and went to see the Barclays Manager circa 09.30 hrs to demand an explanation. He was astonished that his service system had not functioned properly. I told him about Amex but he said it was too late. He did get Sir Kenneth Cork to agree a stay of execution until midday that day so I demanded use of an office, got my PA over and we set to work upon making fast final contact with Amex.

It turned out that the Top Director to rubber stamp the deal was actually on a flight to Hong Kong – a BA one. I called the operations headquarters and managed to get a call through to the Aircraft speaking directly to the Captain who was a friend of mine. He responded that he was on the final approach in bad weather “you know what it's like here, David, but I will get you man to call as soon as we are in the Terminal” he said.

By then we had only fifteen or twenty minutes to the deadline. The call didn't arrive in time, so Fairways receivership was crystallized. I lost ten years of hard work having given up an Aviation career. Fairways was doing everything the then Government wanted: Employ: nearly 250 people; manufacture: nearly a thousand boats; and export: we were at 97% exports due to the dealer network. But I lost all thanks to the Barclays Area Director and his change of attitude from his Predecessor. He also closed two other Yacht building Companies of consequence at the same time.

So this is the story of the first ten years of Fisher. The Receivers sold the Goodwill and bones of the business to an Arab financed consortium whose representative insisted upon having all of the Fisher name and design rights from me. I sold this for £1. They moved from the Southampton Factory and set up production and sales from Port Hamble Marina, with Northshore supplying the mouldings. This organization was apparently a disaster which consequently went bust after a year or so. By now we are in the recession years of the early 1980's.

So as Northshore had possession of the moulds they eventually took over the Fisher design and building rights and continued to build Fishers alongside their other projects. I believe that Bryan Moffat only really built to order from then on, but certainly they developed the same models still further. I saw a F37 being built there in June last year, and when invited by Northshore's new owner, Mr Lester Abbot - (Bryan Moffat had sold), to look over there was one of my former craftsman working upon her.

Bryan Moffat was also very careful about the design rights, and worried that I may financially attack him for them. Hence the reason there is no mention of my name in any of the Northshore Fisher literature. He need not have worried, as I even developed another boat with him – the SUPERMARINE SWORDFISH several years later. We built and sold circa a dozen of these lovely fast powerboats, this project stopped in the early 90's recession. Same story: Bryan and Northshore ended up with the project no mention of my name anywhere.

I have, however just bought the moulds and design rights of this boat back from the New Owner of Northshore and am now sorting out an update and production sourcing.

January 2014 Press Release

Dear Mr Hamilton

I write to you following up the web addresses of the FOG – and would ask you kindly to read the following Press release issued in London last January at the London Boat Show – and, If possible – I would be delighted if you are able to send this – or forward to all FOG Members – to save me typing each address !! My objective is to:

1. Inform all Owners Worldwide of the current – and future situation
2. Invite a serious search for suitable Sales and Service Agents – Countrywide – all inputs welcome
3. Invite Owner comment and input for updating all of the main three models 25, 34 & 37.
4. What about a brand new fully updated F46 ? – eventually – it seems more and more folk want to get away !!

As may be known the last Builders – Northshore – my former sub-contractors, went down last year, so this for all of us here now is a serious new re-adventure.

But – I need input and enthusiasm – which inspired the beginning – and then this re-start.

**FISHER YACHTS INTERNATIONAL – PRESS RELEASE – JANUARY
2014**

FISHER YACHTS – INTERNATIONAL - The new home of FISHERS, the World Class Motor-Sailer Yachts.

Fisher Yachts Ltd was recently founded by David Skellon, the man who first started Fishers. It has just bought the existing Fisher moulds and project in partnership with Neil Fernando of Neil Marine in Sri Lanka.

David was founder of the original Fairways Marine in the late Sixties. He started the Company - when he was still a young Airline Pilot - to satisfy his passion for sailing after converting a classic fishing boat into a yacht. Fairways built and sold several hundred Fishers around the World during the following decade.

Later, David moved to the West Mediterranean becoming Ferretti Group's top Distributor, gaining further first-hand experience of real quality production, design, styling, and engineering excellence.

Neil Marine not only builds top quality yachts for European Suppliers, but also built some of the original Fishers in the old days for Fairways.

As these very well loved vessels have now become Worldwide Icons, David, with Fisher Yachts, plans to update and re-introduce the Fisher Yacht Family with Neil Fernando as Builder, in harmony with David Freeman of Wyatt and Freeman who are the original Naval Architects.

Fisher Yachts will appoint suitable Sales and service Agents Globally; co-ordinate the overall marketing and production planning programme; co-ordinate all on-going design updates, and in time introduce some new models.

A UK appointed Agent is Mr Roger Barrow of the Fisher Boat Company, based in Chichester.

Roger successfully sold the Freeman designed Yarmouth 23 for several years. This is also built by Neil Marine in Sri Lanka. He

also has worked at considerable length to help re-introduce the updates for the new Fishers. Consequently, Roger's experience will be invaluable within the future programme.

The first new model – updated – is the FISHER 25 which will be available by the summer of this year.

Revised layout; more space; better ketch rig; latest electronics, engineering, and interior styling.

FISHER YACHTS INTERNATIONAL --- INVITES:

1. Enquiries from any prospective Buyers – from wherever in the World.
2. Enquiries from suitably interested professional Sales and Service Agents - Worldwide.
3. Input from existing Fisher Owners – re updates, design improvements etc.
4. Collaboration with the Owners Associations and Press - Worldwide.

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NOW – THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF YACHTSMEN IN THE WORLD – THOSE WITH FISHERS – AND THOSE WITHOUT

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