

Two months ago we received an email from the Pacific islands of Micronesia. It contained this plea:

“We are interested in your Amatasi 27 design as a starter project to re-introduce sailing into the outer islands of the Federated States of Micronesia. The inter island transportation system here is almost non-existent and we are losing people due to lack of transport, HELP by responding.”

Why do these people come to us?

Two years ago we sailed the Lapita Voyage expedition in the Pacific. A 4000Nm voyage from the Philippines, through Indonesia, New Guinea and the Solomon islands to take two sailing double canoes of traditional Polynesian design to the islands of Anuta and Tikopia.

One aim of this expedition was to give these islands seaworthy sailing craft, so they could have autonomous sea transport to reach the next island group 250Nm away, where there is a hospital and airstrip.

The voyage was successful and the boats are now being used regularly for the transport of people and sacks of produce they have for sale.

During the Lapita Voyage we met many people in other remote islands, who immediately recognized the advantages of sailing craft over boats using outboard motors. (The rise in oil prices is being experienced all over the world). Seeing the simple Lapita Voyage boats brought back memories of a past where sailing to other islands was their way of life.

One such request inspired the basic design of the 27ft Amatasi. The design competition in Classic Boat magazine last winter for an Eco fishing boat was looking for the same design parameters.

The wishes of a European yachting magazine matched those of a man on a remote island in the Pacific.

This unusual design – for the Western World – in fact struck a chord with the Classic Boat competition judges. They described the design as ‘surprisingly radical’, but recognized its many advantages and awarded it First Prize.

I will return to our work in the Pacific later.

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Who am I? Though I am well known in certain circles in the sailing world, many of you here may never have heard of me.

In 1956 (54 years ago!!, yes I am old) Maurice Griffith, the then editor of Yachting Monthly wrote this about me:

“Last summer the double hulled canoe Tangaroa sailed from Falmouth across the Bay of Biscay to Spain to become the first British owned boat of this type to make the crossing.

“James Wharram, designer and builder of Tangaroa for some time has held the view that the Polynesian double canoe or Pahee, nowadays often called a catamaran, would make the ideal ocean cruiser.”

Since then, with over 10,000 catamaran designs sold, three franchised builders, one in America and two in SE Asia, I have fulfilled Maurice Griffith’s hopes, and my catamaran designs, as well as those by many other designers, are now considered the ideal cruisers by many.

During my 56 years of sailing and designing I have experienced two financial crises that affected yacht building, one in 1973 and one in 1992.

Compared to previous blips, the present financial crisis in Britain and other European countries, is likely to be a disaster because of the way yacht building has developed as an 'industry' in the last 20 years.

I will not go into a litany on how the shortage of easy access to cheap borrowed money and increased taxes will affect the yachting market. The question will be asked in many households: "do we need a yacht, can we afford it?" and the answer from a financial point of view for the foreseeable future, will be 'No'.

Why do we want yachts anyway? Why is there that compulsion in many people to get out on the water?

I believe that a newborn child carries within it an archetypal memory shaped by evolutionary development, an idea put forward by the famous psychologist Carl Jung.

Horse riding and the wheel were developed as a means of travel approx. 5000-6000 years ago. Long before this Man had developed another efficient way to travel – the use of watercraft.

We now have carbon 14 dating that shows that Modern Man arrived in Australia 60,000 year ago. The only way they could have got there is by watercraft!

On the Lapita Voyage expedition Hanneke and I sailed through the islands of the Solomons, which were settled by Man approx. 30,000 years ago, by watercraft.

Then there is the spine tingling dating of early Homo Erectus arriving on the Indonesian island of Flores some 600,000 years ago, again by some form of watercraft!

** There is this theory that Man 'walked' out of Africa, it looks to me that it was more likely he 'paddled' out of Africa and after that used the developing watercraft to reach all other parts of the world.

With this background of watercraft usage going back tens of thousands of years, I suggest that modern humans have an innate affinity / desire / instinct to get out on the water in boats. Therefore there will always be an innate wish by people to own a watercraft.

With this unconscious human NEED to get out on the water, we designers and boat builders will have to adapt to the present financial situation, to provide these people with watercraft, using 'innovation' to make them more economical to build and more environmentally friendly.

There are already signs of Design moving in this direction. At the beginning of this year Classic Boat's Design Competition for a sailing Eco fishing boat (that I mentioned earlier), was an exercise, by the magazine, in making designers think afresh.

This new approach to boat design has also spread to America. The combined Wooden Boat/Professional Boatbuilder magazines have this month set a design competition for a 'Fast Expedition sailboat'.

Their design parameters, like those in the Classic Boat competition, call for minimalist simplicity:

- The design must be fast, seaworthy and simple.
- Have Spartan overnight accommodation for a minimum of two.
- Accommodation must include a cabin or boom tent, a portapotty and limited galley.
- It must be trailerable
- The boat must have good sea-keeping attributes.

I suggest that in the designs of Ian Oughtred, Nigel Irens, Swallow Boats, my own designs and others like Francois Vivier in France, we already have some of the necessary designs for a new stripped down to basics, affordable yachting scene.

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If I can do another jump back into Man's early history. Don't forget, as well as a designer I am a Marine Archaeologist.

All the countries represented here at this conference are situated round the Atlantic seaboard of Europe. Recent DNA studies show that Man at the end of the Ice Age moved North from Iberia along these coasts – again using watercraft – to settle the Western coasts of Britain and Ireland.

There has been a long period of contact and trade by sea between all the Celtic areas along the Atlantic coast, from Galicia, to Brittany, Cornwall, Wales and Ireland all the way up to Western Scotland.

There is a long tradition in Cornwall and in all the coastal areas of Europe, of small boatbuilders producing hand crafted boats to fill the needs of local fishing, trade or leisure. When sailing along the coast of Spain and Portugal in the 1950s I studied these boats and the boatyards they were built in.

Compared to the high cost of mass production industrial yacht building, with expensive overheads, advertising budgets and planning decisions, small boatbuilding teams using barns, sheds and small industrial units can spread work opportunities over a wide area, employing students from boatbuilding schools and other craftsmen.

The financial collapse of one individual small unit will not devastate the finances of a wide surrounding area. Craft schools like Falmouth Marine School will be able to point their pupils to a wide variety of local boatbuilding opportunities.

I suggest 'Innovation' in boatbuilding in Europe, in this financially tight era, lies in going back to small units, developing simple, ecologically friendly, boatbuilding techniques. Units that have the ability to adapt quickly to new design ideas.

Some here may remember the book 'Small is Beautiful' by Schumacher, written in the 1970s. Schumacher's ideas are as applicable today as they were when they were written.

Unfortunately European bureaucracy stands in the way of the small boatbuilding unit. In the last 12 years the red tape and increased costs created by the Recreational Craft Directive have killed off most small boatbuilding firms that existed in places like Cornwall.

To comply with the RCD means that each New or Different design has to be individually approved at high costs, hence the RCD is the biggest killer of 'Innovation'. Maybe this conference can be the start of new discussions on how we can deal with the high, added costs of the RCD, or how the RCD can be adapted to accommodate the small boatbuilding unit.

In the last 10 years we, at James Wharram Designs, have established franchised yards outside Europe to build Wharram catamarans professionally. One reason for this are the restrictions created by the RCD.

Our yards in Thailand, Philippines and Florida all build in wood and epoxy, a building technique that lends itself to quick design changes and innovations. It is also an innately beautiful material, more eco-friendly than chemical composites, and gives work to people skilled in traditional woodworking crafts.

Our yard in Thailand has built many beautiful catamarans that are now being used for charter, some have gone through the RCD classification system (at high cost) and are now operating in Europe.

The Florida yard produced this exquisite 30 footer and is concentrating on boats suitable for trailing and for use by hotel beach charter.

The yard in the Philippines is run by the former manager of the boatbuilding yard we had in Devoran in the late 1980s. His yard built the two double canoes we sailed on the Lapita Voyage, in strip planking, but they are also the builders of the Islander 65.

The Islander 65 was our first design to help with transport in the Pacific as she can carry a 10 ton load. She was originally designed for a famous navigator in Micronesia, Mau Piailug, and was very Ethnic and simple to suit the islanders lifestyle.

However, due to lack of finance in Micronesia, the first Islander 65 that was actually built was for aid work in the Indian Ocean, to take medical supplies and school materials to Madagascar. She is built in double diagonal ply strips covered in glass epoxy sheathing, giving an interior finish that requires no lining, making the boat lighter and more economical to build.

The people in Micronesia I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, also wish to acquire several of these large boats to work in combination with the smaller Amatasi for their new inter-island transport network. Other requests for this design have come from the Marshall Islands.

There are clear signs that over the next 10 years there will be big changes and hopefully many innovative, eco friendly sailing boats in the Pacific, replacing the ugly, outboard motor driven GRP skiffs that have been the legacy of the 1980s.

With one foot in Cornwall and one in the Pacific we are using the disciplines in simplicity we learn from people on remote islands and are applying them to Eco-friendly boats for the new meagre economy of Europe.

Over the next winter we will be building the prototype of the 'Western' version of the Amatasi here in Cornwall. We will be using quick growing Northern latitude Poplar plywood and will be trying out a French water based epoxy that is less toxic to the environment. The build will be recorded by Classic Boat.

We hope the design will attract a new approach to sailing in this financially compromised world and perhaps be adopted by sailing schools to train their pupils in 'back to basics' sailing.

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To sum up:

A future of many small boatbuilding units incorporating the new developing Eco philosophy can be made to work.

We have in our Atlantic Marine sector designers who can design appropriate, simple but exciting small sailing craft. We have the recently mislaid tradition of small boat builders that can be quickly redeveloped.

We have sheltered waters. We have rough waters. We have beautiful ancient towns and villages to sail to. We have space for many sailing schools. There is hope for the future.