

## CAMPER & NICHOLSONS

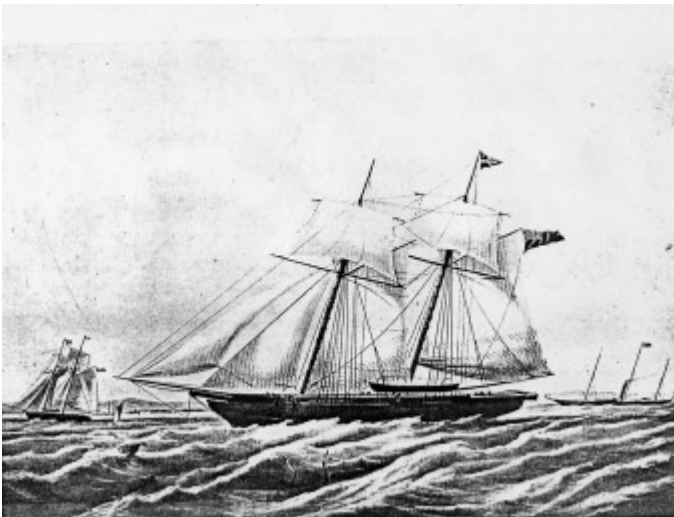
### 'A short History of Camper and Nicholsons 1782 - 2005'

With the news of the closure of Camper & Nicholsons Gosport yard and of the transfer of boatbuilding activities to the parent company, Nautor of Finland, the longest and most illustrious chapter in the history of world yachting has finally closed. Such has been the influence of this one English yacht building company on the development of so many aspects of boating, ranging in scale from the design of folding canoes and dinghies for an afternoon's club racing to the mighty J's, from small offshore racers to elegant steam yachts and the largest cruising schooners, that it is tempting to speculate on just how different things might have been but for the continuing presence of Camper and Nicholsons over more than 200 years of boating and yachting in all its facets.

The Company traces its roots back to one Francis Amos. Almost nothing is known about Amos's early career beyond the fact that he came from London and arrived in Gosport, situated across the harbour from the Royal Naval Dockyard at Portsmouth in 1782. There, he leased a small plot of land to set himself up as a boat builder. The beginnings were modest, probably confined to building and repairing small, open boats for local watermen and fishermen. However, the venture prospered and by 1821 Amos had expanded into the building of small trading ships. Amos had no children to succeed him and, in 1824, his great nephew, William Camper, took over the lease of the yard and began trading in his own name.

In the time of peace and commercial optimism following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, fuelled by the fortunes being made from trade and the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, yachting was beginning to flourish. Due in no small measure to his carefully nurtured contacts with members of the newly formed Royal Yacht Squadron, Camper was able to add yacht building to his activities. His first known yacht, *Breeze*, a cutter launched in 1836 for James Lyon whom he had canvassed for patronage and who was to become a staunch supporter, won the King's Cup of that year, thus furthering Camper's reputation with the Squadron. Buoyed up by technical help from the Master Shipwright of Portsmouth Royal Dockyard and the close co-operation of the Gosport sail maker James Laphorn (also a Lyon family protégé), Camper's reputation, and with it the demand for his vessels, blossomed. By the mid 1850's, the Camper yard had produced a string of successful yachts, mostly schooners, and, apart from racing successes, owners of his yachts were

undertaking ambitious cruises. The *Nancy Dawson*, built in 1847, recorded one of the first circumnavigations by a yacht and was the first yacht to visit the Bering Straights when she joined the hunt for Franklin's lost expedition. The Marquis of Dufferin made a widely publicised voyage to Iceland and Spitzbergen in *Foam* and the *Wyvern* recorded a fast passage to Australia to join the gold rush. Parallel to his yachting activities, Camper continued to build trading ships and to participate in trading voyages.



*Nancy Dawson*

In 1842, the then fourteen year old Ben Nicholson had joined Camper as an apprentice. This was to prove an event of great significance and the young Nicholson, after his successful apprenticeship and

further studies in naval architecture, became more and more involved in both the yard's design work and in its management. The outbreak of the Crimean war led to a temporary decline in yachting and it was not until 1860 that Nicholson was able to demonstrate his true potential with the design and building of the innovative racing schooner *Aline*. *Aline*'s outstanding success led to demands for a string of similar vessels and these, together with a smattering of cutters and yawls,

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were to supply the main thrust of the yard's production for the next twenty years. Some of these vessels were extremely long lasting and his last, the 161 ton *Amphitrite*, was still sailing in the late 1970s. Another long lived, cruising yawl, the *Florinda*, proved so speedy that she became famous as the Gosport Mistake.

In 1863, William Camper retired and Nicholson, with the financial support of the Camper and Laphorn families, took over the business and changed its name to Camper and Nicholson.

Underpinned by the success of the schooners, Nicholson launched into an ambitious programme of expansion and by 1880 had more than doubled the size of the yard, erecting sheds, joiners shops and a saw mill, as well as expanding laying up and maintenance facilities. Also, well aware of the precariousness of relying on his own designs, he made sure that he was in a position to offer the Camper and Nicholson reputation for reliability, build quality and maintenance to a new breed of independent designers then coming to the fore, thereby greatly reducing dependence on his own, fluctuating, reputation as a designer. The arrival of his three sons in the firm occasioned a final name change to Camper and Nicholsons.

His eldest son, Ben, had no interest or aptitude for design but was, nevertheless, to make a considerable impact on the English seascape in a wider and far more subtle way. His principal interest was in the supply of crews for yachts, a service which the Company was to continue to provide right up to 1939, and his most fertile recruiting ground was from the ranks of fishermen. These fishermen, yacht hands in the summer and fishermen in winter, took a keen interest in the vessels they sailed in and were well placed to evaluate innovation in hull form and rig. Within the limits of practicability, they had, from the beginnings of their contacts with the yachting world, absorbed and adapted useful features into their own boats. The result, most pronounced in the fleets of cutter and ketch rigged smacks working off the English east coast, was a fast, strong, handsome and supremely seaworthy boat, providing a steady platform for her crew to work their nets, speed to get the catch back to market and yet seaworthy enough to have saved hundreds of lives during winter gales among the ship murdering shoals of the English Channel and southern North Sea while the smacksmen pursued their secondary winter calling as salvagers. So great was the attraction of these vessels that several east coast builders took to building hulls on a speculative basis, to be finished either as yachts or as fishing smacks as demand dictated. Many of the resulting yachts are still sailing today.

The emergence of Ben senior's second son, Charles E., as a talented designer, heralded a further upturn of fortunes of the Company. Charles' design prowess took time to develop but, from 1887 onwards, he began to receive commissions for small racers and in 1892, the 5 Rater *Dacia*'s fourteen first places from fourteen starts shot him to prominence. Charles' burgeoning fame as a designer coupled with Camper and Nicholsons' reputation for quality eventually brought the wheel full circle so that, by the turn of the century, large yachts were once again being built to in-house designs.

The early years of the twentieth century saw further expansion with the acquisition of a yard in nearby Southampton and diversification into the production of a series of large steam yachts. Further innovation came in 1914 with the world's first large, diesel powered, yacht, *Pioneer*, which permitted a reduction in overall tonnage without reducing accommodation. Capitalising on this breakthrough, Camper and Nicholsons remained the world's leading builder of motor yachts right through to the outbreak of WW2. The largest of these, *Philante* 1,629 tons, was built for T.O.M. Sopwith, owner and campaigner of *Endeavour* and *Endeavour II* for the Americas Cup. *Philante* later became the Norwegian royal yacht Norge.

In both world wars, many of these yachts were requisitioned and armed by the Admiralty for various duties, including anti submarine patrols and, in *Philante*'s case as a convoy escort sloop.

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They were often manned by their peacetime crews and commanded by their peacetime skipper or owner. The toughness of the Nicholson craft was legendary. In WW2, the 67 ton *Esmarelda* was engaged in mine clearing duties and got too close to one. The resulting explosion threw her onto her beam ends, lifting her stern high into the air. She survived the incident with no structural damage whatsoever.

New thinking also continued on the sailing front with the introduction of a Marconi rig on *Istria* in 1912, Charles' first and resoundingly successful attempt to design a 15 Metre. However, of even greater, long term significance was her lightweight, laminated wood construction. This led to further developments and growing expertise in the use of lightweight materials which saw its fruition in the use of plywood in deck construction and in the building of high speed boats and launches, minesweepers and flying boats in both world wars. Among Camper and Nicholson's lesser known but vitally important contributions to the war effort in the 1940's, were the modified motor gunboats, used as blockade runners for the import of high quality, Swedish ball bearings.

Hard on the heels of *Istria's* triumph, Charles achieved a long held ambition with the commission to design and build the next America's Cup challenger, *Shamrock IV* for Sir Thomas Lipton, and, although his ultimate goal, the Americas Cup, continued to elude him, he designed and built all the subsequent challengers up to 1939. (It was Sir Thomas, of Lipton's Tea fame, who was alluded to in Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany's famous jibe about Britain's King George V '... going sailing with his grocer.')

Other innovations of this period included the first bermudan rig on a large racing yacht and the three masted staysail schooner rig on the giant 689 ton TM *Vira*, later renamed *Creole*. *Vira* was built for the famous American yachtsman Alexander Smith Cochran and, on his first visit to her, Cochran, by this time a sick man, took fright at the height of the masts and had a total of 30 feet removed from them, followed, at the conclusion of her first Mediterranean cruise, by the removal of too much lead from the keel in compensation for her cut down rig. Somewhat unsurprisingly, her performance suffered but it was not until she had twice changed ownership that she was restored to her original condition.

For all his successes, it is perhaps for the few, fragile, over-rigged and utterly outrageous J class



*Launch of Endeavour*

yachts that Charles E. Nicholson is best remembered. He designed and built four; *Shamrock V*, *Velsheda*, *Endeavour* and *Endeavour II*. Two of his earlier designs, *Astra* and *Candida* were altered to conform as closely as possible to the rule and Camper and Nicholson's also undertook the alterations and re-rigging of King George V's yacht, *Britannia*. It is a tribute to the standard of Camper and Nicholson's original build quality that, with the exception of *Endeavour II* and *Britannia*, which was not originally built by Camper and Nicholson's and which was scuttled after the King's death, all of them are still sailing.

This was an expansive era with larger than life characters and grand gestures. One commission illustrates this perfectly. At the end of a day's racing, dominated by a Fife designed schooner, Charles was approached by a prospective, titled buyer.

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'Nicholson! I want a boat to beat that one.' Indicating the victorious schooner. 'I want all white paint and red upholstery. Good Day!' Charles next glimpse of his client was on launch day.

It was also a period in which the courtesies were properly observed and, in 1932, the new owner of a motor yacht which had cost less than the quoted price to build, received a cheque for the difference along with his new yacht, handed over at the commissioning lunch.

Charles predilection for the grand manner probably also cost him the Americas Cup. His conviction was that yacht design was an art not a science and, at the end of Endeavour's Americas Cup challenge, defeated by management failure despite the agreed consensus that she was the faster boat, he initiated an exchange of plans with *Rainbow's* designer W. Starling Burgess. *Endeavour II*, the next challenger was simply a larger development of the original *Endeavour*. *Ranger*, the defender, designed by Starling Burgess, in collaboration with Olin Stephens, was the end result of extensive tank testing and analysis, not only of their own concepts but also of the original *Endeavour's* hull form. The result was, as the saying goes, 'Not pretty but highly effective' and *Endeavour II* was comprehensively beaten.

Despite the glamour associated with the big racers, cruisers and motor yachts, smaller classes were not neglected and a number of successful racers to the 6, 8 and 12 metre rules were commissioned and built. The trend away from big racing yachts, accelerated by the death of George V and the disappearance of *Britannia*, was also mirrored in the world of offshore racing, where smaller boats sailed by mostly amateur crews were coming to the fore. Charles was also successful in this field. So great was his influence at this time that, in the 1937 Cowes Week, which came to be known as Charlie Nicholson's Regatta, all the J-Class, three quarters of the 12 Metres, half the 8 Metres and many of the ocean racers were from Charles' board, as were many of the motor yachts in the spectator fleet. One of his cruising yachts, the 20 ton yawl *Ilex*, built in 1899, took part in every Fastnet Race between 1925 and 1939, winning the 1926 race. Other successful offshore racers from Charles' board were the sister ships *Foxhound* and *Bloodhound*, both built for the English based American, Isaac Bell. Bell's request was for a really comfortable cruiser. What he got was a repeat of the Ben Nicholson designed *Florinda*, with *Bloodhound* (Olin Stephens designed her rig) winning the 1939 Fastnet Race and both vessels going on to have long and successful racing careers with the resumption of offshore racing after the second world war. *Foxhound* was still being campaigned as late as the 1974 Admirals Cup as part of the Portuguese team. And yet, in spite of being at the forefront of racing for so long, at the end of his career Charles calculated that less than ten percent of the Company's output during his time in charge had been racing yachts.

It was during this golden period that the next, third generation of Nicholsons started to make their mark in the Company and Charles' son, John, began to help his father with his designs. It was he who, in 1939, sowed the seed for what was to become the next significant development, with the design and building of a "batch" of six 30 foot sloops. John remained under the shadow of his father, who never really retired and remained Chairman until he died in 1954, aged 86. It was only then that John could bring himself to acknowledge that he had, in fact, designed some of the yachts which had appeared under the Charles E. Nicholson design banner.

His cousin, Charles A. Nicholson, universally known as Young Charlie, working out of the Company's Southampton premises, did not suffer from the same shadow and launched his successful design career with the offshore racer, *Yeoman*, in 1937. After the war, he went on to produce a series of successful designs.

The second world war was a frantic time with both yards working flat out on various Admiralty projects. Southampton was engaged in repair work and Gosport, despite the destruction of nearly 80% of capacity in air raids, continued with prototype development, building MTBs, MGBs, landing

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craft and even folding canoes for commando units.

Immediately after the war, a shortage of wood precluded a swift return to yacht building and the yards were forced to rely on repair work and a continued programme of government contracts. Gradually, restrictions were eased and new orders started to trickle in. In spite of racing successes and the production of such high profile boats as the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh's Dragon class, *Bluebottle*, the Company's situation was precarious and it received a further blow when the Government's demand for minesweepers and other small craft dried up in the late 1950's.

By this time, the fourth generation of Nicholsons was coming to prominence, with Young Charlie's son, Peter, assuming a leading role. Peter was well aware of the looming dangers to the Company occasioned by the tailing off in demand for large motor yachts, lack of continuity in orders from the defence sector and the declining market for one off boats. He fully realised the need for a range of standard boats, foreseen by his uncle John in 1939, and clearly understood the potential of the new wonder material, GRP, for this type of product. Camper and Nicholsons, however, was not equipped to handle GRP construction and, in 1960, Peter turned to Halmatic Ltd..

Halmatic, part of the Hunting Group of Companies, was an expert in the field of GRP hull construction and had already been approached by the American designer, John Alden, with a view to building hulls for the Alden 34, 36 and 38. Camper and Nicholsons' first co-operation with Halmatic was the Nicholson 36, the hull being moulded by Halmatic and finished in wood to a very high standard at the Camper and Nicholsons' Gosport yard. Some twenty boats were built and such is their popularity to this day, that whenever one appears on the market, it is quickly snapped up.

However, both for Camper and Nicholsons and for Halmatic, the Nicholson 36 was only a first step. Halmatic needed an improved and smoother flow of work and Peter Nicholson was wedded to the concept of a 32 ft. yacht, which he termed 'The People's Boat', to be built entirely of GRP and needing only final touches at Camper and Nicholsons' Southampton yard. She had to meet three conditions: she should be around 32 ft. overall 24 ft. waterline, she should be easy to build and must cost no more than £5,000.

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Thus was born the Nicholson 32 and her appearance was to prove a defining moment in the development and marketing of small sailing yachts at a time when the only other GRP production sailing yacht available was the Van de Stadt designed Pioneer class, a concept which made no attempt to disguise or soften its "plastic" origins. Based around a design to Peter's concept and accommodation plan and his father's Lines Plan, agreement with Halmatic was quickly reached. Camper and Nicholson's would finalise the design details and market the finished boats, Halmatic would tool up, mould the hulls and decks and complete them. The heads compartment was designed as a one piece moulding - another design first - and the wooden interior, cockpit coamings and deck trim were to be of a high standard. Her lead keel was encapsulated within the hull moulding. By the time stock production had finally ceased in 1981, 369 boats had been built, most of them finished by Halmatic and Camper and Nicholson's, although some were bought as kits and finished by other yards.

Additionally, a set of moulds was exported to Australia and at least ten boats (possibly as many as twenty) were built there.



*Nicholson 33*

Following the successful launch of the Nicholson 32, further production boat designs appeared at a rate of roughly one per year, ranging in size from the Nicholson 70 down to the tiny Nicholson 27, the size and opulence at any given time, mirroring the roller coaster nature of the British economy. Highlights were the Nicholson 35 with 228 built, the Nicholson 38, based on the Alden Mistral design, with 134 boats and the Nicholson 33 with 120 boats built. In all, over 1,400 production boats emerged during this period, along with one offs and a stream of prestigious restorations.

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*Nicholson 43*

However, in spite of the unblemished high standing of the Camper & Nicholsons name, and a continuing run of successful yachts, the Company was struggling. At the end of WW1, even with 1,700 employees, the management structure had been adequate for the control of the two yards. Subsidiary companies such as the Gosport Aircraft Company which were not crucial to the core business and which brought no profit, were quickly axed and by the beginning of WW2, there was only one subsidiary, a chandlery in Southampton.

After the war, the picture had become much more complex and, behind the public face of successful, high profile yachts and newsworthy clients, the situation was much less clear-cut. On the positive side, the defence contracts of the 1950's had spawned C & N Electrical Ltd, originally set up under the Gosport yard's, foreman electrician, Roy Taylor, to fill a gap in the supply of



*The Gosport yard in the 1970's*

control boxes for minesweepers. By the early 1970's, still managed by Taylor, it had grown to employ 1,250 people in five factories and had, in its turn, spun off further developments such as Dialled Despatches which manufactures pneumatic tube systems. Other successful acquisitions and start ups were instigated, including the first marina, constructed on old Admiralty premises, adjacent to the Gosport yard and which became a separate company, Camper & Nicholsons Marina Ltd.. Set against such successes, the Gosport yard had come under intense pressure from the town to

relinquish part of its premises for post war redevelopment and the sale of the waterside premises known as the Beach Street Site, a few hundred yards from the main yard had greatly reduced the capacity for laying up, repairs and refits, always one of the most profitable sectors of the Company's Gosport activities.

Camper & Nicholsons (Holdings) Ltd., as it now was, had remained a privately owned company and, as such found it impossible to raise sufficient capital to sustain the level of investment needed

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*Building shed in 1979*

to ensure its survival. In 1972, a deal was struck with Crest Securities Ltd., a house building company with ambitions to expand into the leisure industry and a new company Crest Nicholson was formed. The timing was propitious and, initially, everything looked rosy: a successful London Boatshow, over £2 million worth of exports and much improved profit margins. Shortly after, C & N Electrical, which did not fit into the new mix, was sold for cash.

It was not to last! By the end of the following year, the country was being crippled by strikes, subjected to spiralling inflation and beset by IRA terrorism. The whole British market for new boats was stopped dead in its

tracks when the government raised the VAT on yachts from 8% to 25%. Crest's shareholders were becoming panicky over the labour intensity of boat building and Gosport was under serious pressure to widen the client base with smaller, cheaper boats. A further setback occurred when a new bridge was built over the River Itchen, seriously affecting access to the Southampton yard and, in 1979, it was sold off and the design facility closed.

In 1981, a management buyout, financed initially by Tony Taylor, the then Managing Director of the yard, broke the final ties with the Nicholson family. He was given further financial and moral support by several of the yard's clients including Nick Maris and the Company became Camper & Nicholson's Yachting Ltd. Production of stock boats at Gosport continued until 1989 and the yard continues to build both motor and sail powered luxury yachts. The following year, Camper & Nicholson's Yachting Ltd., but not Camper & Nicholson's Marina Ltd., was bought by the shipbuilding organisation Cammell Laird and in 2001 they sold it to the Nautor Group, whose ultimate owner is the Italian industrialist Salvatore Ferragamo. Stock production restarted in Gosport in 2004 with a 42 foot motor yacht.

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From the very earliest days, laying up, repairs and brokerage had been an integral part of Camper & Nicholson's activities and, traditionally, most of the Mediterranean based yachts had returned to Britain at the end of each season. However, after WW2, good, cheap living, the Mediterranean climate and, above all, the chance to avoid paying British taxes, had given many of the British professional crews a powerful incentive to persuade their owners to keep their yachts permanently in the Med. The resulting loss of business persuaded Young Charlie to send his second son George to the South of France, ostensibly to help a family friend run a brokerage business there. George's real mission was to try to persuade the errant yacht crews back into the fold.

Given the quality of life on the Cote d'Azur, compared to the austerity of post war Britain, this plan was never likely to succeed but, by 1961, George was generating enough business to be able to persuade his father to buy the brokerage, which became Camper & Nicholson's International. Over the years, other offices were opened and a very successful business was built up, both on the brokerage side and with a stream of prestigious building commissions for the Southampton yard.



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George, however, was not happy with the impending merger with Crest and in 1978, shortly before details were finalised, he resigned to form a separate company, Solidmark, which he also built into a successful business with brokerage, consultancy and yacht management as its principal activities. Then in 1992, in a further turn of the wheel of fortune, Nick Maris, by now the controlling shareholder in Camper & Nicholsons Yachting, proposed a merger between Solidmark and Camper & Nicholsons International, which resulted in George resuming control of the company he had left some twelve years previously. He has now retired and Camper & Nicholsons International SA, which has offices in many parts of the world, including the US, Mexico, France, Italy, Germany and Britain, is part of the French Rodriguez Group.

Camper & Nicholsons Marinas Ltd. continues under the ownership of Nick Maris, specialising in all aspects of marina and waterside real estate development.

All three companies continued to uphold the name and, although no longer bound by formal ties, continued to cooperate closely, each conscious of the unbroken tradition begun so many years ago when the young Francis Amos left his home on the banks of the Thames to seek his fortune.

In December 2005, 220 years after Francis Amos first opened his yard, the last direct link with yacht building has finally broken.

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**Note:**The body of the above article first appeared in *Good Old Boat*, [www.goodoldboat.com/](http://www.goodoldboat.com/) in July 2004. )