



PLAIN SAILING FOR BRITISH BOAT BUILDERS

Everyone dreams of owning a boat, and there's something undeniably romantic about the sea. Hand crafted to the best possible quality and designed and built in Norfolk, Neil Thompson Boats Ltd creates beautiful ocean-going vessels with modern design and traditional service. James Ball finds out more about these truly British boat builders.



“BOATS HAVE DEFINED THE BRITISH WAY OF LIFE FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS”

Britain has historically had an immensely strong relationship with the sea, and as a small island we learnt quickly how to travel on the oceans. Boats have defined the British way of life for hundreds of years, their influence has filtered through into English language in everyday phrases such as ‘batten down the hatches’, ‘close quarters’, ‘loose cannon’ and ‘plain sailing’ to name but a few. Crafted on our shores and completely hand made, Neil Thompson Boats upholds this powerful British tradition, from its Norfolk home base.

Neil Thompson is the man whose name heads the company. Norfolk born and raised, Neil’s love for all things boating started early: “I always loved boats since I was very young. Living near the sea, I was always messing around in the water. When I was a bit older, I started to draw the boats I saw.”

The seed was planted. Neil had his path set before him and before long was apprenticing at the local boat yard, Norfolk

Boats. “I began learning my trade at Norfolk Boats, owned by Charlie Ward. My first job was servicing and maintaining, and this is where I learnt the ins-and-outs and the fundamentals.”

However, Charlie had to lay off many of his staff, including Neil. Although this was not an ideal situation, it turns out it was just the push Neil needed to get started on his own. Setting up his own boat yard in a barn, he began his own business maintaining and servicing.

A few months down the line, Neil and his ex-workmates were offered their jobs back at Norfolk Boats. However, having developed his skills and set up his business, he felt he had more to offer: “I actually ended up working in partnership with Charlie, carrying out the varnishing and eventually the servicing, too.”

The two companies worked well alongside each other until Charlie Ward decided to retire, offering to sell the rights to the Norfolk Boats line-up. “Charlie is

a good friend of mine and asked if I would buy the rights, so I did!” It was a mutually agreeable passing of the Norfolk Boats torch, and Neil was delighted to move the company forwards.

Starting the boat trade from the ground up, Neil felt he was ready to take on this role: “I started on the workshop floor, which is a great place to learn the trade. Working on the servicing of the boats, you learn every little detail of their construction.” Utilising his thorough knowledge, Neil Thompson Boats was launched.



“THE TIME SPENT GETTING THINGS ‘JUST SO’ IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A GREAT BOAT AND A PERFECT BOAT”

Although largely a leisure pursuit today, the traditional way of sailing is still important to us Brits, as Neil confirms: “It’s very important to the British and there is still a demand for a traditional British boat. We’re never short on orders and it’s all word of mouth. It’s integral to us that we keep the boats made here, for us and our customers.”

From the design stage, to the initial frame, right through to the finishing touches, everything is done in-house and by hand. “Anything that’s bought in,” Neil explains, “is sourced as locally as possible, it just makes sense to use the people close to us. That face-to-face communication is essential – you have to use suppliers you can trust to keep the consistency of quality that we need.”

Within a struggling, although reputedly recovering economy, with an often-reported lack of skilled workers, you might think it would be difficult to find a work force capable of completing such

projects. However, Neil tells a different story: “Training is quite straightforward and only takes a couple of years. It starts with servicing boats, like I did, then we go from there. It’s important to have a strong team, and we’ve got that here.”

Although they have historical roots, and focus on some traditional materials, the Norfolk Boat range uses very modern construction methods. Using a special gel-coat finish, the boats can look as good as new for up to

20 years. “With the proper servicing, our boats are built to last. Our materials are modern, but our service and aftercare is very traditional.”

Paying close attention to quality takes time and effort, but it pays off. The finish of a Norfolk boat is stunning; everything from the finish on the wood, to the movement of the sail is just as it should be. The time spent getting things ‘just so’ is the difference between a great boat and a perfect boat. ➔



Taking their time, getting things right and looking after the customer is all part of what Neil Thompson Boats are about. The result is a product which actually appreciates in price, drawing customers in for the long term, who then develop a close relationship with the company. "Our customers usually come back for their boats to be serviced every year, with people further afield seeing us every 3-4 years. We've had people come back to us regularly from places as far as Scotland, Wales and France!"

Neil's had a lot of business in recent years and has driven the company forwards: "We've been very busy over the last eight years, even through the recession. Our older boats are selling for more than our newer ones! I think, like Morgans, they are an investment." We can see the similarities there, right down to that desire to buy something for the pure enjoyment of it.

Buying a boat can be a good investment, but it's much more than that: "There's something romantic about sailing," Neil explains, "it's something you dream about – somewhere you can really relax." Just hearing Neil's passion as he talks about it evokes images of drifting on the sea, with the water lapping against the hull.



With prices starting at £12,500 for their smallest boat, the Urchin, and topping at £122,500 for their biggest boat, the Smuggler, these are high-end products. But, of course, you get what you pay for, and you won't find anyone else like Norfolk Boats. "There isn't really anyone else doing what we're doing," Neil says. "We have a very small yard and we only make five boats per year. We are looking to increase production, but only up to ten per year, so we can keep producing our boats as we always have." Neil goes on to explain how anything more than ten would stretch the workforce and they would have to start looking abroad to source parts, as other

companies have, which runs against the Norfolk Boat's ethos.

Although Neil has taken the company forwards, he expresses how important heritage is to him: "The history we have with Charlie Ward, the founder of the Norfolk Boat range, is key. We are good friends and we work closely with him, using the same designer as he did, to keep that continuation."

With so much emphasis on manufacture, it's sometimes easy to overlook the design, which is also done in-house. Neil and Charlie design the boats and a local Naval Architect, Andrew Wolsentholme, draws out their ideas. The title 'architect' gives a real sense of how these boats

aren't just vehicles, but floating houses. Inside the bigger vessels, the cabins are luxurious. These really are fully functional homes, complete with kitchen area and cosy sleeping arrangements.

However, unlike other 'mobile homes' such as the canal-going longboat or the much-derided caravan, these ships are works of art. Sweeping curves and sharp points create an attractive silhouette – a far cry from the boxy and unappealing proportions of the travelling abodes mentioned above.

These boats aren't just for looking at though, they are designed to perform, and perform well. "A key part of our boats is their performance; they're made to be fantastic to sail. Steady in the water and enjoyable to use." For most of the range, the Norfolk Boats are sold as 'trailer sailable', meaning it's possible to transport them easily by car and trailer, ready to enjoy wherever you might stop.

The Norfolk boats can be seen as performers; for enjoying the sport of sailing, homes to live aboard, or simply a delightful mode of transport. But what does Neil see as the most important aspect of the brand? "I see them as a work of art," he states, "I love seeing our boats out on the water. They look pretty and they sail nicely, and that's what we do."



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Looking forward, there are always new materials becoming available, and rather than sticking to what you know, Neil's looking to take advantage of new technology, interweaving it into their traditional crafting philosophy. "We have a few ideas for the future; we are looking at introducing carbon spars to reduce weight – making it easier to get the mast up and get sailing." The spars are supporting members to the rigging and reducing their weight improves the usability of their 'trailer sailable' boats.

Like Morgan, Neil Thompson Boats has a set range, which is the core of the business. Anything that's introduced has to be done so with an understanding of the current range, to fit in with the existing family. "Any new boats we develop will complement the line- up. Recently we've designed a motor version of one of our

boats. When we introduce a new model such as this, we redesign the ship to accommodate the motor." Neil explains. The phrase 'if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing properly' couldn't be truer here: "I love the development process, it's very enjoyable. We'd never just tack on a motor, or add anything gimmicky."

Going forward, the Norfolk Boat range, captained by Neil Thompson, will continue to improve on its already top-notch quality and performance. These boats have a sense of grandeur about them; they're a fantastic investment and a celebration of our nautical past.

Like Morgan, Neil Thompson's boats find a wonderful balance of art and performance, with a splash of heritage and Britishness thrown in for good measure! When it comes to beautiful hand built boats, Britannia rules the waves indeed. **MOG**