

Business Working life

AT THE COALFACE For a maritime nation such as Britain, careers in the boatbuilding industry hold an enduring attraction, reports **David Waller**

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE



Combining work with a love of sailing has paid dividends for David Tydeman, who has swapped “building a block of flats” for designing and fitting out luxury yachts

This Oyster card is a ticket to living the dream in real luxury

David Tydeman tours his workplace with the enthusiasm of a boy showing off his Airfix models. However, his creations aren't held together with super glue, which is just as well, given their scale.

Mr Tydeman is chief executive of Oyster Yachts and his half-finished fibreglass boats fill their cavernous build bays, suspended elegantly in the space as if the only part left to attach was the ocean.

His job is all about delayed gratification. Mr Tydeman's clients generally have spent their days leading listed companies or banks and now are finally ready to splash a fortune on steering something more fun.

“We build lovely boats,” Mr Tydeman says, “but it's what people do with them that makes it exciting.” One couple, Cheryl and John Ellsworth, recently returned from a round-the-world trip in their 56-footer. They'd been gone 11 years. Another client kitted her yacht out with a stove and chimney, put a ski rack

under her bed and went traversing the ice floes of Hudson Bay in Arctic Canada. “Mostly our clients are very adventurous, self-made people. It's a real privilege hearing all the great stories of things that most of us would just love to do.”

When Mr Tydeman joined Oyster in 2008, it was his own reward after a career spent in engineering, in which he oversaw everything from oil rigs to the Heron Tower in London. Here he could finally engage his passion for sailing and apply the naval architecture degree that he'd earned here in Southampton back in the early 1980s.

Oyster employs 400 people across two shipyards and turns over about £45 million a year. As chief executive, Mr Tydeman navigates through the finances, delivers returns to shareholders and stands in a boat in the Caribbean firing the starter's pistol for the company's annual regatta. Not surprisingly, “that's the best bit”.

Out in Southampton's marina, he grins proudly at a finished

vessel, the £2.5 million *Babiana*, an Oyster 675 named by her owner after the white wine he shared with Mr Tydeman when they signed the contract. One of the 15 boats Oyster will build to order this year, the 69ft craft sat awaiting her big moment, an unveiling at the Southampton Boat Show.

Beyond the sleek structure, everything on board an Oyster

‘It's a real privilege hearing the stories of things that most of us would just love to do’

yacht is tweaked to the owner's taste. “Choice not compromise,” is the company mantra. Changes can be relatively prosaic, such as raising the ceiling height of the saloon or reconfiguring the cabins to keep the crew at arm's length, but others are more dramatic.

One client decided on a 100-litre stainless steel rum tank, which could be filled straight

from the deck. A Swedish customer insisted on having a crow's nest built on his 56ft boat, so that he could “stare down at the reefs in the clear water” as he sailed around Scandinavia.

For Mr Tydeman, this is where the joy is, but not everyone agrees. He recalls a sailing trip with his wife. Where Mr Tydeman looked out on the open ocean and saw total freedom, his wife, an athlete, felt stuck on a boat for three weeks.

And there's a downside to making your hobby into a job. “On our summer holiday, my daughter said: ‘Daddy, you're always meeting somebody and talking about boats. Can't we just have private time?’”

Mr Tydeman reckons that, of the last 300 boats he's sold, only 20 per cent have a permanent mooring, which means that the vast majority of his customers, freed from the shackles of work, are busy exploring. Given that he's now 60, it won't be so long until he's retired himself. And then, presumably, he will be able to go sailing, too.

Life at the helm

The job Boss of private yacht builder

Working hours 7.30am-6.30pm, and “lots of weekends”

Qualifications First-class honours in naval architecture from Southampton University and an MBA

Salary “It's six figures,” David Tydeman, chief executive of Oyster yachts, says, “but considerably less than I was on in my previous role at Skanska”

Best bit “Handing over a new boat to the customer, knowing they're going to enjoy an adventure. That's what it's all about: the handshake, the naming ceremony, the crack of the Champagne. Here are the keys, it's yours”

Worst bit “In some ways I've lost my hobby, because I'm always Mr Oyster. I don't get to mess about in boats like I used to”