



The Brin Wilson story

Part I



THE LATE Brin Wilson is regarded as one of the best boatbuilders of the modern classic era, a man who left behind a legacy of fine timber boats and a boatbuilding company that continues to operate successfully today. This is his story.

Born in 1923, Wilson grew up in Onepoto Street in Devonport, just up from the Wakatere Boating Club (WBC).

Fascinated by the boats at the WBC, Wilson was befriended by Jack Brooke, who took the youngster sailing on his keeler, an experience which decided Wilson on a boatbuilding career then and there. He built his first boat, the Z class *Caradoc*, before he was 15 years old.

Wilson left school soon after and commenced his boatbuilding apprenticeship with Joe Wheeler, a Bayswater-based boatbuilder who specialised in small clinker dinghies and runabouts. During his time with Wheeler, Wilson built several 18-footers, a class he became passionate about. He owned the 18-footers *Jeanette*, *Macushla*, *Tarta*, then bought *Komutu* from boatbuilder Jack Logan. Later, after the war, Wilson represented New Zealand in the 18-footer class in *Macushla* and *Komutu*.

Wilson met fellow boatbuilder Fred Lidgard's daughter Marie through yachting and the pair started dating. Marie was a

“Brin Wilson left behind a legacy of fine timber boats...”

really good sailor and mainsheet hand on her father's 18-footer *Athena*.

At the beginning of World War II Wilson joined the Air Force and was about to be shipped out to Fiji. But his mother intervened and informed the authorities he was a boatbuilder and therefore exempt from call-up. Bitterly disappointed at his mother's intervention, Wilson spent

most of WWII working with Associated Boatbuilders and helped build 34m Fairmiles for the Navy.

Wilson married Marie after the war in 1947 and they moved to Kawau Island, where he built a house and wharf on a block of land they'd bought at Speedy Bay.

At the time Fred, Roy and Mike Lidgard were trading as Lidgard Bros Boatbuilders at Hamer St, Auckland, but they'd recently opened a branch at Smelting House Bay on Kawau, which was run by Fred.

Wilson, John Lidgard, Sam Mason and Tim Lees worked with Fred building all manner of boats: dinghies, yachts,



Wilson's first boat, the Z class *Caradoc*

launches, ferries, and the first three Flying Fifteens built in New Zealand. Wilson loved living on Kawau and often went deer shooting to augment the family dinner pot.

The Wilsons had two sons while they lived on Kawau – Bob and Richard – who both fondly recall their early years on the island and helping Fred with his boatbuilding.

Although passionate about Kawau, in 1952 the Wilsons decided to move back to Auckland for its better business opportunities, moving into a house in Hurstmere Rd, Takapuna owned by Boris (Borie) Beachman.

Wilson's first boatbuilding contract in Auckland was building a 9m, Bill Couldrey-designed motorsailer for Beachman in his backyard. Named *Endeavour*, she is still sailing today.

Wilson and Brinsley Eric Thomas set up BET Wilson, and Wilson built the 11m launch *Waihora* for Logan Nix – another launch still around today – before setting up the workshop to build plywood runabouts, including many as kits for the Farmers' Trading Company.

His first apprentice was Bill McKay, and other employees included Chris Roberston and John Spencer, both of whom have featured in previous columns. Another who approached Wilson for a job was a young Bruce Farr, but Wilson – rightly – suggested he should join someone with a proper design office and steered him towards Jim Young.

By this time, sons Bob and Richard, although still at Milford School, were expected to help out sweeping floors after

school and during school holidays.

"Dad was a really hard taskmaster – we weren't allowed to have holidays like everyone else, we had to work," recalls Bob.

Initially Wilson had set up in a factory he built on Porana Rd capable of containing two boats, but by the 1960s he'd moved to a bigger factory (that he also built) on Wairau Rd with a shed capable of holding four or five boats.

By then Wilson had five staff, led by foreman Robert Black, including Jack Logan whom Wilson had recruited from John Salthouse. Logan became responsible for most of the engineering work while Black – a fantastic tradesman, according to Bob – was given a minority shareholding in the company by Wilson.

The yard was busy through these years, building at least six Matangis and two of the larger Camelot motor-sailers – both designed by Bob Stewart – and several single-skin, displacement launches to his own design, all around the 10m length. Bob and Richard remember him drawing these launches on the kitchen table at night.

"I was always keen on design and I used to watch him get started [on a boat] then I'd have to go to bed. And in the morning I'd race out of bed and there'd be a boat drawn," remembers Richard.

However, while Wilson was more than capable as a designer, as boats became increasingly expensive he preferred to stick to building rather than designing.

The yard also built Dragon class yachts for the likes of Bob Stewart, Robert Stone, Danny Green and Laurie Davidson. Bob remembers the Dragons were all


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beautifully built in Honduras mahogany, with splined planking. In his typically conscientious fashion, Wilson spent some time with the official Australian Dragon class builder learning the various tricks to their construction.

He was a good tradesman and believed in leading from the front.

"He was on the tools all day and did the accounts, quotes and designing at night," says Bob. "And the boatbuilding was flat out, two guys planking one side, two the other and it was a race who could finish [their side] first."

Wilson had the ability to build a boat as expensively, or as inexpensively as the client required. For example, some Matangis were finished to a high standard while others were finished off much more simply. He understood when good finishing was important, and equally when it was a waste of time and money.

"He just knew how to get a good finish, without going overboard. If you sanded the bilge, he would give you a serve [telling off]; but if you didn't sand the correct place he also give you one," says Richard.

Wilson was conservative in his approach to boatbuilding, and he had an innate understanding of the structure of a timber boat and how to maximise its strength. He was held in such high regard by his peers he became the Lloyds inspector for New Zealand. His conservative attitude also meant Wilson changed over to multi-skin, glued construction later than some Auckland boatbuilders such as John Lidgard.

Wilson also possessed an unrivalled knowledge of kauri: how to select it, cut it and store it. He kept huge stocks of heart kauri, and he always knew how to cut it to best advantage. According to Bob, there was never any sap kauri used in any Wilson built-boat and even the joinery doublers were built in heart kauri.

Wilson played an important role in the one-ton era, as has been detailed in recent columns. In 1965, Wilson built the one-tonner *Rebel*, his own design inspired by the Dick Carter *Tina of Melbourne*.

Following her launch, *Rebel* won seven of eight races in the RAYC winter series, and encouraged by her success, Wilson entered *Rebel* in the 1967 Sydney-Hobart where she

Pathfinder under spinnaker





finished 12th, the first New Zealand boat, ahead of *Jupiter* and *Renegade*.

Wilson also entered *Rebel* in the trials run by the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron for the 1969 One Ton Cup, which were eventually won by Chris Bouzaid and *Rainbow II*.

Undaunted, Wilson and sons Bob and Richard entered *Rebel* in the 1968 Southern Cross Cup (SCC), which included the Sydney-Hobart race. *Rebel* was again the top New Zealand boat in 9th place, ahead of *Renegade* and *Outrage*.

This began a hectic period for Wilson of building and sailing one-tonners, beginning with *Tempo*, a Wilson design for Norman Vitali and Cliff Johnson, then a number of S&S one-ton designs: *Satanita II* for Ron Wilkie, *Young Nick* for Lou Fisher, *Kishmul* for Ted Buchanan, and *Pathfinder* for himself.

Wilson campaigned *Pathfinder* in the

1971 SCC, which included the Sydney-Hobart race, which he won. *Runaway* and *Wai-Aniwa*, skippered by John Lidgard and Chris Bouzaid respectively, finished second and third, and New Zealand took out the SCC team win.

Wilson then built the S&S-designed *Quicksilver*, considered one of the finest timber boats ever built in New Zealand, campaigning her in New Zealand and Australia, including the 1973 SCC, although she only managed 25th in the Sydney-Hobart. Sadly, this campaign would prove to be Wilson's swansong. A year or two earlier he'd had a cancerous kidney removed, but the disease came back with a vengeance and Wilson died in October 1974, aged just 50.

Bob and Richard – in their early 20s – were faced with filling some big boatbuilding and sailing shoes. We discover how they fared next month. ■

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The Brin Wilson story

Part 2

Bob and Richard Wilson

Boatbuilder Brin Wilson's death in 1974 left his sons Bob and Richard with big shoes to fill. Fortunately, both rose to the challenge of keeping the family business going. Eldest son Bob Wilson left school in 1966, aged 16, and started his boatbuilding apprenticeship at the Naval Base, which he grew to hate.

"We were so used to working hard with Dad, but at the base when I finished a job and wanted to start the next one, they told me to go off and hide because I was working too quickly," says Bob.

After a couple of years Bob Wilson left the base and started back with his father. Shortly afterwards, Doug Bremner asked him to work for his company Marine Plastics, the Sea Nymph manufacturers which he'd recently bought from Wilfred Hoelen. Bob says, while he learned a lot

about fibreglass building runabouts, he was less than impressed with working with GRP all day, so when his father got sick with cancer, he rejoined BET Wilson.

Meantime Richard Wilson had also left school aged 16 and started his boatbuilding apprenticeship with his father's good friend Chris Robertson, who was working from a shed at Salthouse Bros yard in Greenhithe.

He also did a lot of racing miles with his father, including the *Rebel* campaign for the 1966 Sydney-Hobart race. Once out of his time, Richard joined Lynn Carmichael in the original *Chico*, a Gary Mull design that Keith Eade later produced in GRP. David Wylie, now the owner of Boat Haulage, was another crew member.

Richard Wilson and Wylie ended

"...one of their first moves was to rename the company Brin Wilson Boat Builders Ltd."

up boatbuilding in the USA for some months, before Wilson got the call that his father wasn't well. He returned home to join his brother at BET Wilson.

Brin Wilson's attitude was that he could beat his disease, and despite the gloomy prognosis, as far as he was able it was business as usual right up until his death in 1974 at the age of just 50.

The Wilson brothers were in their



Pouring a lead keel

early twenties when they took over BET Wilson. One of their first moves was to rename the company Brin Wilson Boat Builders Ltd. Although both brothers were skilled boatbuilders by this time, neither had much experience at book keeping or staff management.

In the best tradition, they learned on the job: Bob did the books and quoting, while Richard managed the staff and did the design work he was passionate about. Like their father, both worked full time on the factory floor.

The brothers were also fortunate that there were three decent commissions underway, including the S&S designed *Lisa* for Ron Wilkie, and the Bruce Farr-designed *Kailua* for John Senior.

Quicksilver was back on her home berth too. Prior to his death, Brin Wilson had intended to campaign her in the 1975 Admirals Cup, and her racing form prior to trials was impressive. Sadly, there weren't the funds to campaign her in the Admirals Cup, so Richard Wilson skippered her back from Hobart early in 1974, after the 1973 Southern Cross Cup.

Enough money was found to enter *Quicksilver* in the trials for the 1975 SCC. *Quicksilver*, skippered by Richard, finished the trials second behind the Farr-designed *Prospect of Ponsonby*, with the Brin Wilson-designed *Tempo* third, winning the SCC for New Zealand.

Richard was essentially self-taught in design, and it was his passion. His first commission was a follow-on from a study plan his father had drawn just prior to his death, the 11.88m planing launch, *Guevara*. Next was the 11m yacht

Harlequin, a masthead cruiser/racer. *Harlequin* went so well the Wilson brothers built one each: *Tribute* for Richard and *Graduate* for Bob, plus *Ruffian* for American Russ Johnson and a couple of others. These boats and many others kept Brin Wilson Boat Builders busy until the introduction of Muldoon's infamous Boat Sales Tax in May 1979.

While a large number of boatbuilders fell, Brin Wilson Boat Builders survived, but things were tight for a time. Hoping to create more work, the Wilsons built the 12.2m yacht *Marinero* on spec. Hoping to sell her offshore, Richard sailed *Marinero* to San Francisco, but the market for timber boats was weak there and after a year without any interest, Bob Wilson moved her to Seattle where she sold quickly.

Richard had another crack at an Admirals Cup campaign with the Ron Holland-designed *Spritzer*, which was built and launched in only 16 weeks. However, her masthead rig didn't reach as well as the fractional rigged boats and proved an Achilles heel. *Spritzer* is now in New York where she is being used as a training boat.

The Wilson brothers worked with many different designers. One favourite was Bruce Clark, who they first worked with on the 18m sloop *Mertsi Louise* for John Spencer. Bob Wilson then commissioned Clark to design him the 12.2m yacht *Toronui*, "a great boat" he recalls.

The company got orders for another six of this design, including *Innocenti*, *Quintessence*, *Allegresse* and the slightly longer *Azzuro*. Richard also collaborated with Clark on several other powerboats such as *Infinito* (14m), *Idle Hour* (11.6m),

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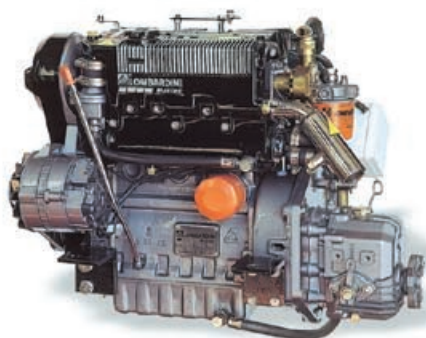
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Audacity (12m), *Escapado* (15.2m) and *Shannon Star* (12m).

Another project was the S&S designed, 19.8 m powerboat *Harrier* for Doug Bremner. Originally designed for steel construction, the Wilson brothers had the huge job of converting *Harrier's* steel construction into timber. This boat was a step up in size and complexity over anything their father had built – so big in fact that moving *Harrier* out of the shed required jacking up the roof.

By now Brin Wilson Boat Builders had 20 staff, and although the company maintained full order books throughout the mid-to-late 1980s, things were slowing. At one stage, the Wilson's considered going into GRP production with a Farr designed 9m yacht. Farr prepared some drawings, but in the end the Wilson's couldn't bring themselves to do it.

"It may not have been the smartest thing to do – to walk away from that drawing – but satisfaction-wise Bob and I both preferred building boats in timber," says Richard.

The sharemarket crash of 1987 was another blow to the business. Then in 1988, Len Pike approached the Wilson brothers asking if they'd be interested in taking on the boatbuilding operation at the recently-opened Gulf Harbour Marina.

The sharemarket crash had made the Wilson brothers realise that repairs and maintenance was going to become an important part of future business, but their location in Mairangi Bay wasn't suitable for haul-outs. They took up Pike's offer, but it was a scary move.

"I remember the first morning coming down into Gulf Harbour Marina and there



were only around three boats in the marina. And I'm coming down the hill with a van full of staff thinking, oh God, what are we going to do here," says Richard.

"We were the first [business] there and the early days were hard work", says Bob. "Our first job was repairing a GRP powerboat that had gone on the rocks and ripped its bottom out. But we had little idea of what to do with GRP, we just had to learn as we went along."

Spritzer being built, 1979



Spritzer sailing



However, work increased as the marina filled. The company picked up a mixture of jobs: refits, insurance, maintenance, and a few new builds. The new 100-ton travel lift at Gulf Harbour made a big difference to demand.

In 2000 the Wilsons began questioning their future involvement. They realised the company needed a fresh injection of enthusiasm, but after more than 30 years involvement, neither felt capable of mustering it. After considerable thought, the decision was made to sell Brin Wilson Boatbuilders to Nick Saull, who'd started with the company as an apprentice aged 17 in 1985.

Since taking over, Saull has expanded the company into new areas. He still carries out refits, insurance and maintenance work, but has expanded into osmosis repair work by buying specialist Mike Menzies' operation, Osmosis Solutions, and adding an inflatable boat repair division.

Additionally, with the help of the MIA, he has instituted a total quality management system (QCDSM, Quality, Cost, Delivery, Safety, Moral), enabling the company to more accurately track, manage and document all work done in the yard,

in turn leading to greater efficiency and higher quality.

The Wilson brothers remain very involved in the marine industry. Richard Wilson now has the role of Curriculum Leader of the Bachelor of Applied Technology Marine programme, still enjoys designing boats and until recently raced Zephyrs.

Bob Wilson spent two years managing Oracle's towboat in the 2003 America's Cup, before taking over the management of the *Gypsy Moth IV* rebuild after her argument with Rangiroa Atoll in the Tuamotu Islands. He currently manages Osmosis Solutions for Saull.

The third Wilson son, Chris, moved offshore some years ago and is now captain of the *Janice of Wyoming*, a superyacht built by Alloy Yachts for a US businessman.

Brin Wilson Boat Builders Ltd has come a long way from the days its founder built a motorsailer in his friend's back yard. If anything, the company's rich history demonstrates that to be successful over the long haul – in this case, 57 years – a company must change, evolve and grow. Just like we all must do. ■

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