SUPERSAIL

World’s biggest sloop gets even bigger

Mirabella V, now renamed M5, will be in the news again next summer when she emerges from a refit 13ft longer, with a new interior, a restyled superstructure and some changes to her underwater appendages. David Glenn reports from Falmouth
SUPERSAIL
with David Glenn

Inset: before: main picture: after

DIMENSIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Value 1</th>
<th>Value 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LOA</td>
<td>79.20m</td>
<td>260ft.0m</td>
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<tr>
<td>LWL</td>
<td>61.00m</td>
<td>200ft.0in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beam</td>
<td>14.82m</td>
<td>48ft.7in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Displacement</td>
<td>720 tonnes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draught (keel down)</td>
<td>10mm</td>
<td>33ft.0in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sail area</td>
<td>1,923m²</td>
<td>20,730ft²</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Supersail

Mirabella V, 2003

Since Mirabella V was launched in November 2003 she has made the headlines either for her statistics – she's still (for now) the biggest sloop in the world at 247ft, with the tallest rig at 290ft or for her mishaps off Cap Ferrat. Less than a year after her launch she dragged her anchors and went aground on a lee shore.

Her first owner, Joe Vittoria, who made his fortune running and selling the Avis car rental business, famously said there were 37 billionaires in the world and he needed at least 20 of them to make the giant sloop affordable as a charter yacht.

He pulled all sorts of publicity stunts, including superimposing a double-decker bus on Mirabella's newly moulded empty hull and making size comparisons to the height of the Golden Gate Bridge. He might make comparisons with London's latest architectural wonder, the Shard, though even Mirabella's rig would only reach a third of Europe's tallest building.

For almost ten years Mirabella has gathered dust, but early teething problems with the large roller in the mainsail that forced it to tack with a reef, damaged battens and quite reaching 20 knots that designer Ron Holland predicted – have proved that a 320-ton yacht of these dimensions takes more than a shake down.

Built in Britain

In 2011, Vittoria sold Mirabella V to a fellow American. He embarked on a major refit, including a complete restyling of the exterior sections, which extends her length to 260ft. The yacht, now renamed M5, is fitted with the same 320-ton hull.

Above: 292ft rig on the dock at Pendennis. Above right: a London bus is superimposed on Mirabella's hull during her original build at VT

The yacht's waterline length remains the same and, cleverly, the structural elements, including chainplates for the huge backstays, have been untouched. The change provides a much larger deck space and, combined with a subtle restyling of the superstructure, the effect will be more attractive.

Another reason the British public liked to keep tabs on Mirabella V was because she was British-built by VT Shipbuilding, which used their composite knowledge of moulding minesweepers to good effect. Through a government grant incentive scheme, they were also able to offer Vittoria a keen price.

VT no longer build yachts and their operation in Woolston, Southampton, where Mirabella was built, has gone for redevelopment. But M5 is still very much alive and has returned to the UK for her year-long reincarnation.

Dry dock under cover

Pendennis Shipyard in Falmouth are one of the very few superyacht yards in the world able to dry-dock a yacht of this size. By the time it takes to build a brand new 130ft yacht, the work covers everything from the new stern and a rig overhaul to a complete refurbishment of the interior, the fitting of a retractable side-boarding ladder and recladding her twin rudders. All propulsion and generating machinery will be replaced.

I recently toured Mirabella with designer Ron Holland and veteran captain Rocka Romcke, who with Pendennis's Steven Hills and refit manager Tyrone Harvey is

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masterminding the project. Looking from above at the vast glassfibre/foam composite hull sitting in the dock is one thing, but it isn’t until you step onto the floor of the dock, look up at the hull and get close to the vast 150-ton lifting keel bulb that you appreciate what a monster this is.

And there’s quite a lot of work going on underneath the yacht too. Ron Holland explained that when he designed Mirabella nothing quite like it had been done before, so he was understandably anxious to build in wide safety margins. With its enormous main sail, measuring almost 17,000ft², including the original considerable amount of roach. Holland insisted on oversized rudders plus plenty of protection for the skids upon which they hung.

In the event, the yacht proved to be extremely well-balanced under sail. The main sail roach has now been removed, so the yacht can be tacked without fouling the backstays. This has let Holland shorten the rudders by removing their original sacrificial tips and the extensive fairing leading forward from the skids, thus reducing weight and a large area of wetted surface area.

780 tons at 20 knots

Mirabella came tantalisingly close to sailing at 20 knots in its pre-refit configuration and, while the new transom won’t provide any more waterline length while static, when she neels it should extend. With new sails there is little doubt that in the right conditions this huge 780-ton yacht will reach the 20-knot mark with relative ease.

The yacht’s lifting keel, which reduces draught from 33ft to 12ft 10in, continues to work well despite being damaged when she went aground in the south of France. It is moved by a single, five-ton vertical hydraulic ram, which has been sent to its makers in Germany for an overhaul.

Industry rumour had it that Mirabella’s most step gave way. This is an exaggeration, but there has been some degradation in this area. Fortunately the hull matrix here is massive and monolithic.

Mirabella is also in for her ten-year Det Norske Veritas classification survey and, according to Tyrone Harvey, the hull itself is in very good condition; there are some small areas of cracking near window corners in the superstructure, but her composite hull is in good shape.

Before M5 was dry-docked her 50-ton mast had to be pulled, another statistically mind-boggling operation. The 292ft tube and rigging were removed using four cranes, a team of 40 men and a specialist firm called Marine Results. Even removing the boom vang required a detailed plan as it weighs 900kg, is more than 31ft long and, just for the record, can pull 112 tonnes.

One shroud: 2.2 tons

The mast was one of the first carbon tubes built for a superyacht by Halmatic at Portchester in Portsmouth. It’s still in excellent condition and while the vertical rod rigging will remain, the diagonals are likely to be replaced using carbon spars. Captain Rocka Romcke reminded me that the current V1 shroud rod, which runs from the deck to the first spreader, weighs 2.2 tons, so any chance to reduce weight was welcomed.

The yacht’s Doyle-designed and built sails (the biggest sails in the world) will be replaced and will still be segmented; in other words, cut in separate panels and joined at the battens. The advantage of this is that the sail can be bent on or removed more easily and damage to one panel doesn’t mean the entire sail has to return to the loft.

M5’s new stern section has been moulded by outside contractors Green Marine in Hythe and engineered by High Modulus, the firm who did the original big number-crunching for the yacht. M5’s new
back-end is bonded in place and awaiting its
tack deck before a large new stern
opening system is completed using the old
lower door from the original transom and
another door which folds into the new
moulding. This will provide access to the boot
to an engine house, a 26ft Hinckley
fender, four Laser sailing dinghies and
various other toys, including two radio-
controlled scale models of *Mirabella V*.

The last time I was aboard *Mirabella V* I
was having dinner in the main saloon watching
the coast of Sardinia slide by as we enjoyed
Vittoria’s hospitality on one of the yacht’s
very first voyages in 2003.

Standing in roughly the same place
last month, I was astonished by the change.
All the wall coverings as well as the
upholstery, furnishings and furniture had
been removed, leaving the wiring and
pipework exposed and acres of silver-lined
insulation material fastened to the
bulkheads. The only item left in the master
suite was the bath (and even that might go).

Beaulieu-based Redman Whiteley Dixon
have been commissioned to redesign the
total accommodation and Superyacht
Interiors New Zealand will build and fit the
new look interior. They were responsible for
the Fendennis-built *Alakai* and you can see why
the yard was keen to get them back.

*M5*'s enormous volumes ensure that her
owner and 12 guests are not short of room
and there’s still comfortable accommodation
for a crew of at least 16, including up to six
deckhands, four engineers and two chefs.

Some of the interior layout will change
and in the saloon there will not only be direct
access to the internal bridge area, but a line
of sight from the top aft to the transom. In
effect this area of the yacht is being opened up
to link it with the external seating, which will in turn have uninterrupted views aft.

Two new 1300hp Caterpillar main
engines will be fitted, along with three new
generators, new switch and control panels
and the air-con system will be upgraded with
air-handling units in each cabin.

The main engine replacement will bring
more efficient fuel consumption and the
generators will be configured to handle two
of the most power-hungry items on the
yacht: air conditioning and galley equipment.

**Technology playing catch-up**

When *M5* is relaunched next summer she
will undoubtedly attract the attention of the
yachting and national press, who will be
reminded what the superyacht building
industry in the UK is capable of. From a
global point of view *M5* will remain the
largest sloop afloat for some time until the
Ed Dubois 101m supersloop (see
*Supersail World* supplement) is launched
in three or four years’ time.

But perhaps more importantly, the
refit sees this enormous yacht
coming of age. Some
commentators say she was
ahead of her time in 2003 and
that superyacht technology
was not advanced enough to
make her viable. Today she
may still be big, but she is by
no means the biggest modern
sailing yacht afloat. At last the
industry and technology
have caught up with her.

**Man at the helm**

Taking command of a yacht like *M5* is
no mean task and preparing for a refit
on this scale requires an experienced
hand. Jovial Australian-born Rocka
Romcke joined the Australian navy
when he was a 16-year-old. He relates
that his mother, recognising a certain
lack of progress at school, picked him
up early one day, saying: “Come on,
entries close at 4 o’clock!”

The navy capitalised on Romcke’s
prowess for engineering, which until
then had been confined to doing up
motorbikes. He eventually found
his way to Antigua after spending holidays
on a family friend’s yacht in Turkey and
by the age of 20 he was running the
Herreshoff schooner *Vagant* for Peter
de Savary, who at the time owned the
Pendennis yard and had launched the
Blue Arrow America’s Cup campaign.

Via various yachts, including *The
Other Woman* and the first *Mirabella* (there were three *Mirabellas* before *M5* was launched), he became involved in

**Above:** Ron Holland dwarfed by *M5*'s bulb keel, seen here in the fully lifted position.

Right: Holland with *M5*’s captain
Rocka Romcke

**Below:** only the original bath remains in the owner’s suite

*Photographed for *Yachting World*[.*](#)

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