The Pendennis partnership

Mike Carr & Henk Wiekens | Joint MDs, Pendennis

WITH A HOST OF WORLD-CLASS SUPERYACHTS TO THEIR NAME, THE JOINT MDs OF PENDENNIS TALK INNOVATION, QUALITY AND INVESTING IN THE SKILLS NEEDED TO MATCH THEIR CUSTOMERS' EXPECTATIONS.

INTERVIEWED BY CHARLOTTE BAILEY

When the founders of Pendennis, Mike Carr and Henk Wiekens, took over the yard 20 years ago, five years after its conception by Peter de Savary, they could not have envisaged how much the superyacht industry would change as the yard grew. "When we started, we were one of the biggest organisations with 70 to 80 people working here, and we could handle quite a large part of the fleet that was around then," Wiekens, sitting at a table made from the wood of one of Pendennis' earliest builds, Aela, "Now the sizes have changed so much it is just unbelievable. We had no idea it would grow so rapidly." However, walking around the Paimouth yard on a brisk morning in late December and seeing the constant work happening in the huge dry docks (soon to be expanded even further), it is clear that the yard has grown with the yachts that continue to return to it for refits and shows no sign of slowing down. In the largest facility, no (ex. Mediterrannea), the biggest sailing sloop currently in existence, has just had its 3m (10ft) stern extension fitted, part of a refit project.

Expansion plans will see a 9m (30ft) increase in height of the existing dry dock, the build of three new seaward-facing halls, a support complex with workshops, office and crew quarters, plus two wet docks and a wet basin to hold back the tide on the north-facing area of the yard. "This development is very exciting as facilities are so important. You're always a little bit behind what you really want, because our ideas are far more ahead than our reality check," says Wiekens.

The development is not only for refits, it will give the yard greater scope to take on larger new build projects, such as 2011's Hemisphere, the world's largest sailing catamaran, which garnered awards and won industry-wide admiration for its innovative design.

Mediterranean presence Pendennis opened a new refit yard in Palma in July 2011, not for works on a similar scale to the huge undertakings at the Cornwall yard, but smaller jobs and annual surveys. More significantly, it enabled Pendennis to establish a presence in this important hub. "Palma was an important step for us because of the fleet of customers we have now," says Wiekens. "We needed to make sure that we could give the right service in the right place, without clients having to come all the way to Cornwall. And Palma is a very logical and strategic place to service our clients: either boats pass through there on the way back from the Caribbean or on the way over, so we can easily help with any work they need." The yard's presence there, he adds, is vital in giving a client peace of mind about a job. "If a boat has been worked on for six months there, then some changes or finishing touches are needed in Palma, it is much easier if the same people can be used." Palma, says Carr, is also a useful point for starting client relationships with a small job that may lead to a sale at a later date.

This all-round knowledge has always been a strength Pendennis' managers have focused on, whether for refits or new build. One of the yard's key strategies has always been to offer a full service in one place: "We are one of the few organisations in the world who..."
we can do a lot of design work with the client; then do everything else completely in-house if needed. But that gives us an added product. You’re not over a barrel with outside subcontractors,” explains Wiekens.

Increasing expertise
There is another reason for offering this one-stop service: it is not only beneficial to the customer, but for the yard too, instead of being a subcontractor being able to use an experience working on a project as a learning tool, it is the Pendennis workers that benefit from the knowledge gained each time, so their expertise is constantly increasing. “As we do these jobs the knowledge and experience stays in the company. So it’s a very wide circle of activity. We are lucky here with our workforce, it’s quite young and dynamic.”

Inded, constant improvement is one of the key tenets of the way Pendennis runs its business. The apprenticeship scheme, established in 1998, is one of the most successful in the country. “We could see that the one barrier to growth was having skilled people, so we set it up with the help of Jill Carr, an experienced teacher,” says Carr. The scheme offers work across different departments and then a specialism. So far it’s

Left: Mike Carr values skilled people and so set up an apprenticeship scheme
produced 190 workers, and around 100 of them are still in the workforce. “The growth of the company from 200 to 900 (of whom over 300 for the last 15 years) is filled with apprentices,” says Carr. “Not only are they doing the hands-on skills, they’re now vertically integrated into the organisation. The joinery manager was one of the first apprentices, one of our naval architects was part of the scheme plus two leading designers in the electrical area, as well as Tim Tregear, who is currently running Palma. The organisation of the apprentices is well scattered and if you look at the age profile it’s quite young, in the early 30s, which is pretty unique in a shipyard environment.”

The apprentices and the employees can expect to learn the basics of how the company is run: every person working here is a salesman for the company so employees must maintain constant professionalism. “You can’t have an off day, you’re always on show,” says Carr. In addition to teamwork, he says, they learn “a sense of business awareness, a value in terms of what things cost, and a need to get things done, in time, to a budget.”

As well as investing in apprentices, Carr and Wiekens believe in training at all levels throughout the company, including middle and senior management. And since the yard is one of the only superyacht builders in the UK, so as not to be at a disadvantage to its competitors in the Med when it comes to staying informed about superyacht issues, monthly talks are given by outside experts. Recent speakers have included Tim Wilshire of Burgess on the state of the market from a brokerage perspective, Yachting World editor David Glen on the perception of Pendennis by the yacht market, and an expert on warranting about ways to keep caring down in that area.

What do you think your industry in particular is going to be doing in the next 50 years?

How do you see the role of the company evolving?

How has your personal leadership role evolved?

What’s your prediction on the key drivers for the superyacht market?

What’s your view on the key drivers for the superyacht market?

What’s your assessment of your company and your role as CEO?

What’s your prediction on the key drivers for the superyacht market?

How are your main goals as Pendennis achieved?

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the more you realize you actually know very little," he jokes.

Core values

Once the process is moving, the key is to make the experience enjoyable for the client. "We’re in the business of making things that nobody needs but people seriously want, and only want if it is a lot of fun (to make)," says Wiekens. "It reflects on us personally if a project is a success or not. Your reputation is only as good as that last one, especially in this business." Carr agrees. "Even with the people you’re struggling to please you have to deal with them in the same way as the people who are pleased. You have to try and turn the situation around. We have the core values of being honest and providing the best service and we make the customers feel special, because they are. They are sponsoring our business." Enjoyment of a project extends, too, to the employees. When asked about what qualities a potential employee or apprentice needs, both CEOs cite the same one—enjoyment of each day’s work. This, they say, leads to the successful work ethic that produces the high-quality workmanship for which the yard is known.

**CAREER DETAILS**

Mike Carr
- **Current role:** Joint managing director at Pendennis
- **Work experience:** Carr was sponsored for his degree in naval architecture at Southampton University by Yvonne Thornycroft, and joined the graduate scheme in 1982. He left and went on to build three 60m (197ft) Hunt class micronautics. He joined Pendennis in 1989 as the refit manager and was promoted to joint MD in 1992.

Henk Wiekens
- **Current role:** Joint managing director at Pendennis
- **Work experience:** Having grown up in Holland, Wiekens began an apprenticeship at 17 as a fitter and turner engineer. In 1978 he started his own business, Weke-Wiek, building 12 to 15m (40-50ft) yachts with a friend. In 1983 they took the company to New Zealand. He joined Pendennis as a project manager in 1989, becoming joint MD in 1992.

**Expanding into the next era**

As for the future, Carr says the expansion means keeping a stronger focus than ever on running the current projects without distraction. "Our main challenge for the next five years will be selling boats and making sure we continue to make a competitive offering while keeping the quality right," he says. "We’re about to embark on a major investment programme in the shipyard to bring the facilities up to speed and getting through that is a major challenge. We live in a very optimistic environment: everybody in this business would like to say everything’s fine, but no one really knows what could happen next year. So it’s important to keep making sure that our cost base can remain viable in the world economy."

Expansions of this magnitude are never taken on board lightly in financial terms, but Pendennis has planned pragmatically so that the business is protected. "We’ve been careful to ensure that there are cut-off points along the way in case we need to stop," says Carr. "It’s a big thing to do but it’s important because we need to buy it, to make our facilities better, to improve our efficiency, and we need to present a face. Everyone else is moving on and in the first instance you need to attract the client in by demonstrating that you are world class. It’s a very capital intensive business – if you look at what we potentially make out of a job and what we’re inverting here, we have to make a significant profit for a few years if we want to pay for what we’re doing."

For now, though, the MDs have faith in their workforce and in the yard’s future. The way business has gone so far seems to be working. On completion of a recent project, one client, a very successful businessman, was asked by the Pendennis heads whether he had any advice for the yard that might be beneficial to future projects. "He said, ’Keep doing what you’re doing. Just keep producing quality in an honest environment.’” remembers Carr with a smile. “You couldn’t get better praise than that.”

Pendennis’ refit yard opened in Palma in 2011 to complement the Falmouth yard.