SMOOTH SAILING

Pendennis Shipyard is one of the leading superyacht build and refit companies in the world. And it’s a British success story. Tim Hulse dons his hard hat and pays a visit.

On the move
Lionheart, a 43.4m J Class yacht, is transported by the yard’s 640-tonne travel hoist.
The sturdy, dark wood dining table in the Pendennis Yacht Club has a story to tell. It’s made from the original planking of Adela, a sailing yacht built in 1903 that ended up old and rotting in the mud of Lowestoft in Suffolk. Brought to the Pendennis yard 20 years ago, she was lovingly restored over a two-year period, and later remodelled. Now she’s a stunningly beautiful, race-winning schooner, her classic looks complemented by cutting-edge technology.

And there are plenty more stories like Adela’s at Pendennis, a shipyard in the small port of Falmouth in the West Country that competes with the very best in the world when it comes to the bespoke construction, refit and restoration of superyachts.

The walls of the Yacht Club (a slightly grand name for the two-storey brick building that stands at the heart of the yard) are covered with pictures and mementos of boats that have either been born here or have had new life breathed into them. There’s a photo of Hemisphere, the world’s largest privately-owned sailing catamaran, custom-built by Pendennis and launched in 2011. Leaning in a corner there’s a signed guitar donated by a famous musician in thanks for some work done on his yacht. (Pendennis’ clients include other celebrities, as well as noteworthy business figures, but the company remains tightlipped on their identities. The world of superyachts is one in which discretion is the watchword.)

Elsewhere in the room there’s a picture of Malahne, a 50m classic motor yacht from 1937 relaunched earlier this year from the yard. Her 30-month restoration programme has been called the most ambitious ever, reclaiming the boat from a rather unfortunate 80s pimping and returning it to its original Art Deco glory. And there’s a picture of the motor yacht A2, which arrived at Pendennis in 2011 as Masquerade of Sole and left 18 months later, almost unrecognisable from her former self.

“We remodelled all three decks inside and out and remodelled the stern, extending the boat by five metres, took out all the electrics and engineering equipment, and put in a new engine room,” says Toby Allies, Pendennis sales and marketing director, in the offhand manner of someone for whom the extensive reconstruction of a large motor yacht is a regular event. ‘She looks completely different now to when she came in.’

Indeed she does. The gleaming, prize-winning rebuild would look very much at home in any of the world’s most glamorous marinas.

The history of Pendennis goes back to 1988 and the management buyout of a company originally owned by the famous yachtsman and entrepreneur Peter de Savary. In the years since then, Pendennis has built 30 bespoke yachts and carried out more than 200 refit projects of varying scale. It’s quality, not quantity, that counts here. And for everyone at the yard, this is not just business as usual – there’s an emotional attachment to the work.

‘It’s a very passionate company. We get very excited about the projects that come through,’ says Allies. ‘You can’t not have an emotional attachment. For the owners it’s very emotional, and you’re part of that journey. You meet them...’
and you’re involved in their build, the creation of their dream. You live through the highs and the lows with them.’

The company now has more than 350 employees and in the last few years it has invested more than £20m, helped by money from the European Regional Development Fund, in order to keep up with changing times in the superyacht world. Back in 1988, a 50m yacht was considered large, but nowadays that’s the average size of a boat visiting the yard. To accommodate modern-day behemoths, its shore side facility has been almost completely rebuilt. There’s now a non-tidal wet basin where boats can tie up alongside before and after the main work is carried out on them, and superyachts can be lifted and transported by a giant 640-tonne travel hoist to one of the huge new construction halls next to the basin. This leaves space in the pre-existing dry dock for the real giants – it can accommodate boats up to 100m.

On the day I visit, an 85m+ motor yacht has arrived for a major refit. It’s currently floating in the dry dock, its top deck perilously close to the roof, and in the evening, divers will go down to make sure that the blocks on which she will rest are perfectly positioned to hold her once the water has been pumped out.

Meanwhile, her crew are removing the last of their possessions, which will be stored in another hall close by. In the months to come, as the refit takes place, the crew will make Pendennis their base, with their own offices in another building. At any one time, around 60 crew members from different boats are likely to be on site.

In the hall next door to the dry dock is the other major project at Pendennis this summer. The 46m motor yacht Constance, built in the 1980s and now acquired by a new owner, is halfway through a major refit. Surrounded by scaffolding, a large hole has been cut in her side to remove the old engine room equipment before new engines are installed, internal structures altered and other areas upgraded. She’ll also get brand new teak decks and a coat of new paint. It’s a project that will take around 12 months.

In the wet basin sits Lionheart, a 43.4m J Class yacht that’s as shiny and sleek as a whippet and built to emulate the classic America’s Cup racing yachts of the 1930s. She’s fresh from a winter refit just prior to a victorious performance at the Falmouth J Class Regatta, and now she’s returned for what Allies describes as ‘a little TLC’ before heading off to Cowes for the RYS Bicentenary Regatta.

All this work takes skills of the highest order, and Pendennis invested in its future by launching an apprenticeship scheme back in 1998. Since then, it’s taken on 12 new apprentices every two years, on a four-year course. The vast majority of those who finish the course end up working for the company.

‘It’s an engineering-based mindset here. We’re very keen on solution-finding,’ says Allies. ‘And that’s why the apprentice scheme has been so successful. You’ve got people who are very committed to training and skilling future generations within the business.’

There’s even a post-apprenticeship scheme in place, creating opportunities for further training and qualifications, and allowing the very best to travel and get experience on the global Pendennis fleet before returning to the yard. And, of course, the quest for new business is never ending, especially for the opportunity to return some forgotten, mud-covered relic to its gleaming, seaworthy beauty.

‘There’s always been a desire to restore classic yachts, but it’s very, very difficult to find them,’ says Allies. ‘You’re reliant on people tracking through the mud and seeing where they are. Recently industry experts found a boat in California in a trailer park. It was a 1930s German-built classic motor yacht that had been dragged there by tractor. Now they’re looking for someone who fancies having a go at restoring it.’

And would he fancy the job? Silly question.

‘You bet I would!’

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**Revival meetings**

Built in 1903, Adela was rotting in the Suffolk mud until Pendennis lovingly refitted and remodelled her. Below: Malahne was restored from her 80s refit to her original 30s design.