Some of our life chapters start with an explosive fanfare of fate, some creep up on us in the shadows. It is how we react that is important, we can wallow in a self-indulgent funk or we can stride forward with confidence.

Scruffie Marine started after a perfect storm of multi-adversity but our 25th Anniversary this month is founded on unwavering persistence, hard work and unshakable confidence – we chose to stride.

Our first boat slipped off a makeshift trailer into the water on Easter Saturday 1990 and now, 327 boats later, we're still here.

The name Scruffie was chosen by a Courier Mail journalist who asked “well what kind of boat is it, then?”

“It's a simple no frills knockabout family sailing boat you can build from a kit,” I replied, then adding something like “a boat that doesn't stand on ceremony.”

“A bit scruffy, then?”

“Well yes.”

“Okay, a scruffy boat then” he said as he scribbled away on a dog-eared notebook. Later I spelt it with an ‘ie’ to make, well, less scruffy ... We’ve often thought of changing it – the joke quickly wore thin but re-branding is a costly exercise and you’d have to re-brand the designer too – something he wouldn’t take kindly to. Besides, the customers just won’t have it.

The simple essence of the original Scruffie 16 lives on in every single kit boat we produce. The tried and tested build systems initiated by many and lauded by the boating media have been fine-tuned and fettled to make the boats easier and quicker to build. With the Secret 20 we designed a composite hull with double chines, strip-planked and faired off to a nicely rounded bilge. Forwards a 4mm ply section is bent around the bottom and glassed over, continuing the rounded sections to the boat, the whole hull then glassed. “I wish I had thought of it,” said Dick Phillips of the UK magazine Watercraft in 2009.

The boats have stood the test of time and this month we’ll ship out Shimmy No 84 (AUS) – A lightweight version, Queensland Red Cedar trimmed with tanbark sails and a Torqeedo electric outboard.

Beginnings

Life in our miniscule part of the universe is subject to linear time and punctuated by an infinite number of significant events, some clearly signposted, others as a result of the toss of a coin. Particle physics or fascinating multiverse theories aside, it's what we live with.
We can never stand still, however, and many innovations have been tried and accepted or rejected. In ’98 we were the first to use custom 3D routed rigid foam hull sections as a part of a catamaran kit. The 20-footer weighed just 360kg all up and went very well indeed. But we only ever sold one. It was an expensive project but the experience was priceless. This system has since been adopted by other kit catamaran manufacturers.

Some years ago after much hand wringing we ventured into the world of fibreglass production, a move accompanied by much gnashing of teeth, especially as it coincided with the fallout of the Great Wall Street Shuffle – the shuffling of capital from us to them. Undeterred, “Forward!” I cried.

Secret 33 – Sparks Must Fly
And now another significant milestone is being passed – the new Secret 33.

Now when you set up production for fibreglass or composite boats most people build a fake boat, albeit beautifully finished one, in MDF. This is used to build the mould and it’s then thrown away or used to decorate bars. In a similar way a strong-back is used as a mould for strip-planked boats. It all seems such a waste to me. Of course hundreds of moulds are taken from existing boats, old and new, and this is our preference. We’re building Secret 33 No 1 in foam core glass over what amounts to a Scruffie Marine kit, this one will be a yacht (we’re building them with interchangeable keels.) The framework is, of course, our usual set of interlocking bulkheads overlaid with closely spaced stringers. The 15mm foam core sheeting, in 2.4 up to 12m lengths is then bent, kerfed, and cajoled over the framework, filled, faired and glassed all over.

The catalyst for all this furious foaming is an order for two electric passenger ferries for Perth. An honour gratefully accepted. We’ve been serious about electric boats for a decade or more and a good many of our sailing boats carry electric outboards – Torqeedos or Protruars. Our first all electric passenger launch was the GRP Sienna 19, a 5.9m motor boat also available as a lugsail yawl. The motor we fitted was a Torqeedo Cruise2, powered by a bank of lithium batteries charged by the canopy mounted solar array. Such is the efficiency of the Secret derived hull and efficient power train that she uses half, yes half, the power of similar electric production boats and in several years as a hire boat not once has shore charging been required.

Free power, free of pollution, free of profit-sapping overheads – everyone’s a winner. Sienna’s big sister will use a pair of new generation Torqeedo Cruise 4.0s and be rudder steered. For day to day ferry services, up the north bank of Perth water and down the south the batteries will need an overnight plug in to top up the solar input, and lithium batteries can be quickly recharged.

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Mar’s Shimmie on the Norfolk Broads.
topped up between trips if need be, but this will rarely
be necessary. The new Secrets are unashamedly
vintage in appearance, an important part of the brief,
but thoroughly modern under the skin. They’ll fly too!
Thank you project head Kevyn for having the vision
and the persistence to carry it through and thank you
for choosing us – here’s to many more and not just in
Perth.

And Now Back to the Archives
The lead photo shows me and two of my sons
sailing Scruffie No 1. This was the first of many
pictures taken by professional photographers. From
early ’92, however, most were taken by Scruffie owner
Ray Cash, without a doubt one of the country’s best –
recently chosen to cover the G20 sortie and the
swearing in of the new government in Queensland.
We’ve been delighted by his work over the years
and many examples have graced these pages. Our
website and blog are identified by his stunning photo
of Secret and Stornaway on Moreton Bay. Ray can be
contacted at raycashphotography.com

The sepia photo shows the original Secret in a
bit of a hurry crossing the English Channel. An old
friend’s father commissioned her in the ‘30s from
Shuttlewoods of Paglesham, a yard famous for
traditional working craft, notably smacks and smack
yachts like Secret. The difference being mouldering
oilskins in the hold, rather than rotting fish. With war
clouds looming and a new bride to placate, the old
man kept her a secret as long as he could but she
found out. Thankfully she then became a family secret
– the boat, that is. Still sailing in the UK, her DNA lives
on here at Scruffie HQ.

Stornaway – Scruffie Grows Up
The first Stornaway was originally a stretched 16
with a counter-stern. She quickly underwent a whole
series of modifications, including widening the hull aft,
remodelling the stern, rig and rudder. Stornaways are
our second best seller with 77 of them out there.

All of our kit boats are built around a solid timber
keel and the frames and bulkheads slot in to the keel
and to each other. There aren’t many production
boats built this way, most of them use centreboards or
the devil’s own dagger-boards, sliding down through
vestigial keels.

Ah dagger-boards! I can tell a tale or two of those
evil contrivances, in fact here’s one.

As a young student who knew everything about
sailing, I once took out a lovely young sweet-natured
girl, blessed with cascading ringlets of shimmery
bronze. The boat was her dad’s, a nice little clinker
dinghy with a dagger-board. It was dead calm as we
launched so I began to row out up the narrow muddy
Leigh creek. Within minutes I had caught an oar on
the muddy, fishy bank and splattered her lovely hair
with flecks of black estuarine goo. She shrugged it off.

On the way back I touched ground and the rigid non-
retractable rudder tore out the bottom transom pintle.
I managed a makeshift lash up and we continued, the
broken rudder banging on the varnished transom.
The final humiliating end to this day of maritime
disasters came as we were tacking back up the creek
to the cockle sheds. The devil’s dagger-board was
down, the water was shallow, the wind was brisk
and gusty from the west. We picked up speed on
the final leg and the dagger collected a bit of bank
that shouldn’t have been there. The boat stopped
dead in the water but the crew carried on – both
thrown forward, her lovely lips making contact with an
unyielding mahogany thwart.

Blood trickled.
I was mortified.

I apologised for the seventh time but it was way too
late.

Her features set in a grimace that did not bode well
for future dates or meeting the parents.

We packed up the gear and trudged silently up the
hill. We parted at her gate without a word and I never
saw her again.

I have never, ever, built a boat with a dagger-board.
Even today most of my smaller boats carry boomless
mains.

More stories, articles, and even recipes on the
Captain’s Blog blog.scruffie.com

Cherchez la femme
I did and at the end of 1994 I found Annette!
In those first few years I struggled on with two boys

As the wind piped up I set sail on a dead run and a
little wayward gust caught the little mainsail unwares
and the little boom gaily swung over collecting the little
angel on the forehead en route – involuntary tears
welled up. Mine, I think.

This was definitely not going to plan.

We sailed on, morosely.

We picnicked on the sunny sandbank, envious eyes
cast over to other happier, unblemished, mud-free
sailors.
Back to the Secret, then

We’ve certainly had our fair share of challenges but we’ve also been building up a good rhythm and learning as we go. Our most recent build, the Secret, has been well and truly turned with the new 33s. No corners have been cut and indeed THE CORNER has been well and truly turned with the new 33s.

We exported kits to nine different countries, most to the UK and America and by 2008 half our business was overseas. Then someone mentioned the goal posts, the sign posts, and even the gate posts. We took a collective deep breath, tightened our belts and gave it a go.

The boatbuilding business is that, like the Sienna, many different models and varieties will be built from the same hull, power or sail. No 1 will be a sailer and a scale sketch appeared in the last issue of AABB.

While I’d prefer an over-canvassed gaff cutter with an outrageous jackyard topsail, I have drawn this as a yawl with an eye to working the Swan River and the Rottnest run. A lower main mast is essential to clear the bridges and while the gaff is being dipped to clear the lowest, she still has plenty of power with the staysail, jib and mizen.

While the electric ferries have a draught of under 600mm, the sailing version with their deeper 1-tonne ballasted keels draw a metre or more for the Secret. I’ve been studying a number of comparable boats in the Spirit of Tradition sector and most of them draw 6 or even 8ft with a fin keel – a fixed dagger board – no good for the shallows or overconfident teenage skippers and a bit of a problem with the trailer unless you had a 30ft drawbar or a handy mobile crane.

There’s then the weight – the boat and trailer must total no more than 3.5 tonnes to suit most newer 4 x 4s and of course a beam of 2.5 is the limit without flashing lights, flags, and nerves of steel. There’s an end to slipway fees of course and electric outboard on a sliding track is quickly serviced or even replaced, unlike an inboard diesel.

While I really can’t see a big market for a kit version, we’ve already had enquiries about home fit-out, so I could be wrong.

We couldn’t have done it without ... Our suppliers, our service providers, the locals here on Tamborine Mountain, and most of all the customers whether they be schools, commercial operators or you, dear reader.

Here are some of the people, in particular order, who continue to make it all possible.

That Oregon Place has supplied us with beautiful close grained Oregon Pine or more correctly, Douglas Fir for 25 years. Every single boat we’ve built has incorporated Oregon in its construction. The narrow, high run from high up in the Cascades and is shipped out from Portland on the Columbia River. Oregon State law allows only sustainable logging and rightly so.

Keith Smith has been supplying us with rich Red Cedar and Silky Oak for over 30 years. He’s a builder who’s leaving his mark on this business.

I’d also like to thank my staff, Ian and Andy, and my supportive sons Robin, Chris and Andrew, my late parents and many of their points. Sounds like one of those truly embarrassing Oscar acceptance speeches where a tearful actress in a fearful frock thanks everyone from the local newsagent to the third cousin twice removed.

So I’ll stop right there.


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A special thanks to Martin for looking after our web stuff – definitely recommended.

Australasian Amateur Boatbuilder / KitBoats

It was 1993 when I first began working for Australian Amateur Boatbuilder and I met Derek very soon after, and have enjoyed in particular, the borderline eccentric characters that I’ve come across, and you Derek, surely, are one of these.

Congratulations to you and Annette on your milestone of 25 years, you’ve been one of the constants for me working on this mag and often brought into my day a breath of fresh air when composing your columns, with no shortage of ‘guidance’ from you it has been relatively painless and the tears shed have been of laughter. Thankyou.

Our regular conversations have often diverted away from boats and all things nautical, my dogigo would suggest, and along the way we have discovered a mutual liking for Pink Floyd music, so I’ll just take this opportunity to say I’ve nearly forgotten you for ‘pads on your crazy diamond’ a few times back.

Peculiar one read this column recently I note that we’ve avoided no less than 5000 words to sails, knees and shoelaces ... who says we don’t cut edge stuff at AABB huh?

That’s我爸 德安特 and Annette’s here to some more years ...

Wendy