

words: William Brooks
photography: courtesy of GL Watson

Elementary for GL Watson

THE WORLD'S FIRST YACHT DESIGN OFFICE, WHOSE EARLY PROJECTS INCLUDE *S/Y BRITANNIA*, IS USING ITS COMPREHENSIVE ARCHIVE TO RECREATE SOME OF YESTERYEAR'S FINEST, INCLUDING *NAHLIN*

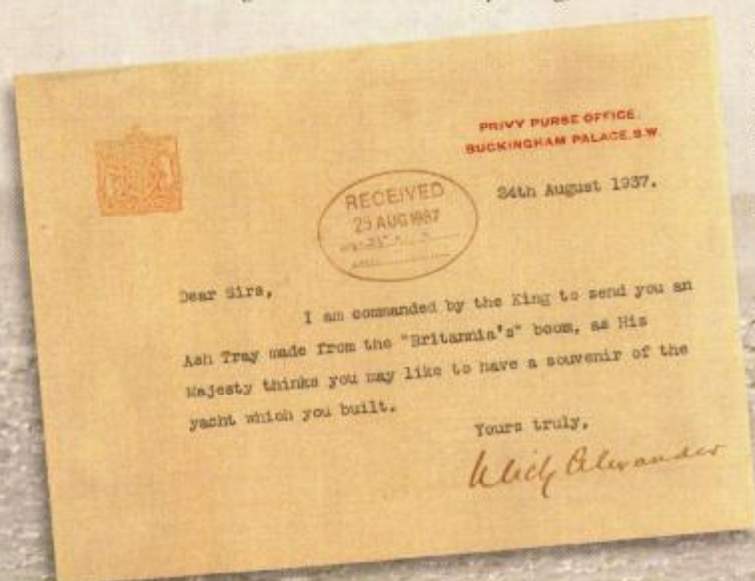
Visiting GL Watson's offices in Liverpool explains a great deal about this company. From elegant top floor premises in what used to be the headquarters of Martins Bank, it enjoys stunning views across the Mersey and North Wales and studious atmosphere reigns. The fit-out is modern and sleek but peppered with mementos of the history of yachting with which the firm is so closely connected. A framed letter from Buckingham Palace records the scuttling of *Britannia*, perhaps the firm's most famous design; a bust of Kaiser Wilhelm II, German Emperor and King of Prussia, is a thank you present for the successful design of *Meteor II*; and a collection of models highlights the role the firm has played in yachting since it was established as the world's first yacht design office in 1873.

All be it one of the great venerable names in yachting, the firm wears

its history lightly. This is perhaps because through some 1,500 designs, in some senses, little has changed in the firm's approach. Managing director William Collier explains that although the firm has always had a core value of design excellence, it has also always been involved in construction supervision and in-service support. The detailed engagement with high-quality design and long-term relationships with the resulting yachts and their owners has never changed.

The firm has recently invested significantly in conserving its archive. The room that is set aside for this has something of a museum atmosphere until we start looking at individual drawings. Far from being overwhelmingly archaic, the drawings still appear fresh and the staff that deal with them explain them with an easy familiarity. This stems not just from an enthusiasm for the dramatic designs that include four America's Cup challengers and palatial steam and sailing yachts for virtually every significant yachting family in Europe, prerevolutionary Russia and the US, but also because the archive remains in frequent use.

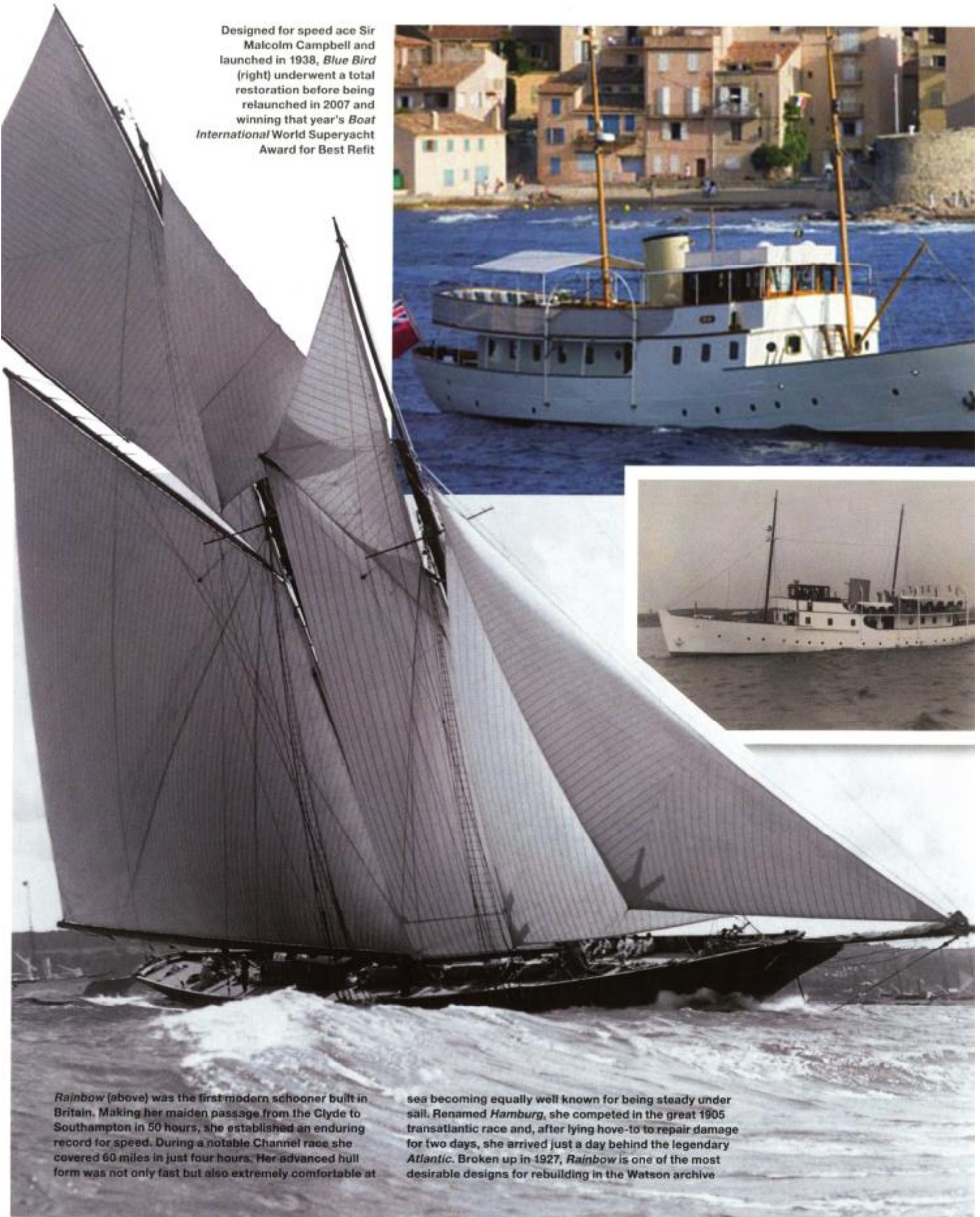
Watson's role as designer and project manager in the 2007 restoration of its





The most successful racing yacht of all time, *Britannia* is an icon in yachting. Launched in 1893, she was raced by Edward VII both as Prince of Wales and King before passing to his son George V. After more than 40 years of service, *Britannia* was scuttled in 1936. This photograph was Watson's favourite. Buckingham Palace sent a thank you letter to the firm

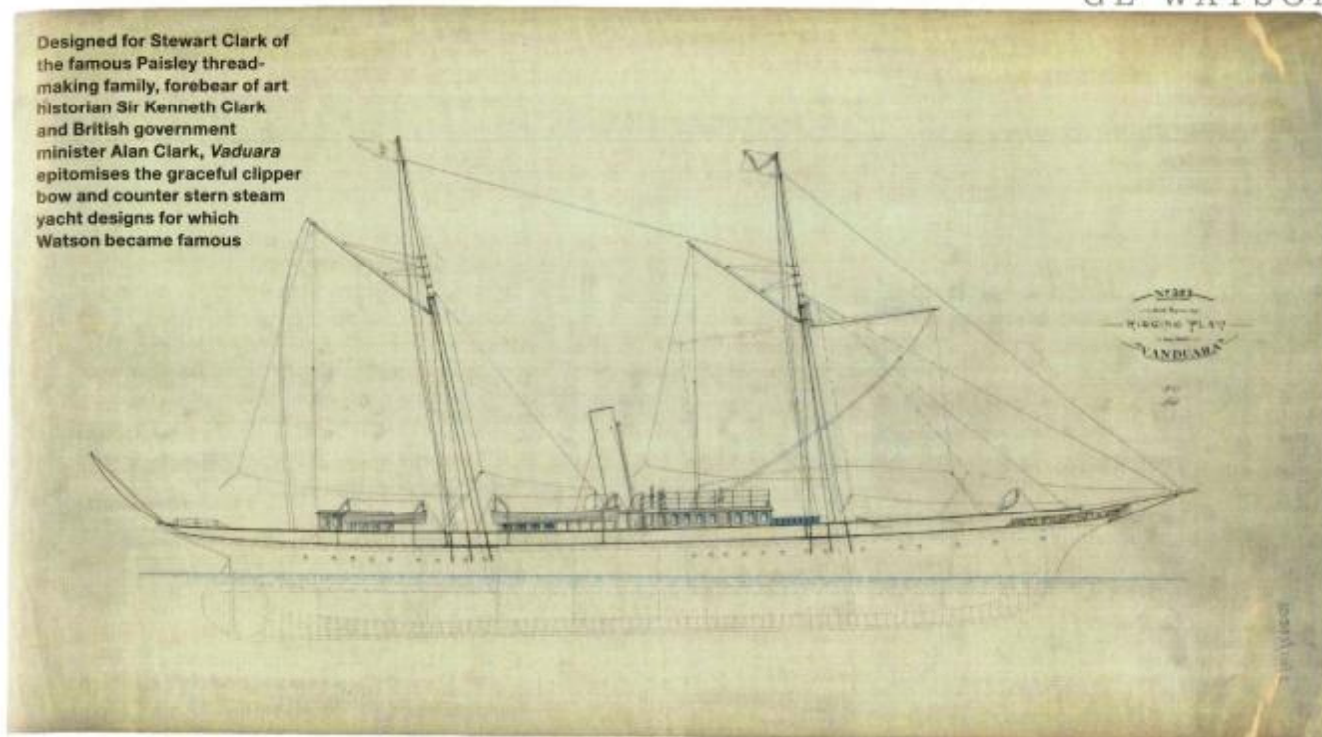
Designed for speed ace Sir Malcolm Campbell and launched in 1938, *Blue Bird* (right) underwent a total restoration before being relaunched in 2007 and winning that year's *Boat International* World Superyacht Award for Best Refit



Rainbow (above) was the first modern schooner built in Britain. Making her maiden passage from the Clyde to Southampton in 50 hours, she established an enduring record for speed. During a notable Channel race she covered 60 miles in just four hours. Her advanced hull form was not only fast but also extremely comfortable at

sea becoming equally well known for being steady under sail. Renamed *Hamburg*, she competed in the great 1905 transatlantic race and, after lying hove-to to repair damage for two days, she arrived just a day behind the legendary *Atlantic*. Broken up in 1927, *Rainbow* is one of the most desirable designs for rebuilding in the Watson archive

Designed for Stewart Clark of the famous Paisley thread-making family, forebear of art historian Sir Kenneth Clark and British government minister Alan Clark, *Vaduara* epitomises the graceful clipper bow and counter stern steam yacht designs for which Watson became famous



1938 design *Blue Bird* won it a World Superyacht Award and access to the original design material was key to the success of the project. Around the office I see evidence of work on a small 1880s sailing yacht which Collier explains is a replica project for a French client and drawn directly from the archives. In fact it seems that with the firm's ongoing projects and the significant number of archive enquiries there is rarely a day that passes without reference to this precious collection of thousands of drawings and photographs.

Of the firm's current projects, the most eagerly awaited is the recommissioning of *Nahlin*, the 91.4 metre steam yacht that Collier rescued from Romania some ten years ago. Of this the only evidence is a framed photograph presented to the firm by *Nahlin*'s first owner, Lady Yule, noting her appreciation for 'the most beautiful and seaworthy yacht in the world'. After a stop-go period, the major works are now



The 91.4m classically elegant *Nahlin* was first launched in 1930 but sadly fell into disrepair. She is currently undergoing extensive restoration

substantially complete and Watson is exercising a typically multifaceted role. It is the exterior designer, interior designer for crew and service areas as well as being the owner's representative at the Blohm + Voss yard where the project is completing.

If further details on what remains a confidential project are not forthcoming, Collier is more open with regard to the challenges of restoring such vessels using technologies that span from the era of steam and riveting through to today's cutting-edge techniques. For him, the key is to identify the features that made a vessel significant and ensure that these are accurately restored while also acknowledging that private yachts are not museum pieces and modern owners require uncompromised accommodation and services. The impact of the current regulatory environment is not insignificant either but this is not apparently an area for compromise since with quality design it is possible to comply with the most onerous current requirements. What does this mean for *Nahlin*? In simple terms, for a yacht that was acknowledged to be the most beautiful of the counter stern and clipper bow type when she was launched – a highly authentic and detailed exterior. As to the rest, circumspection reigns.

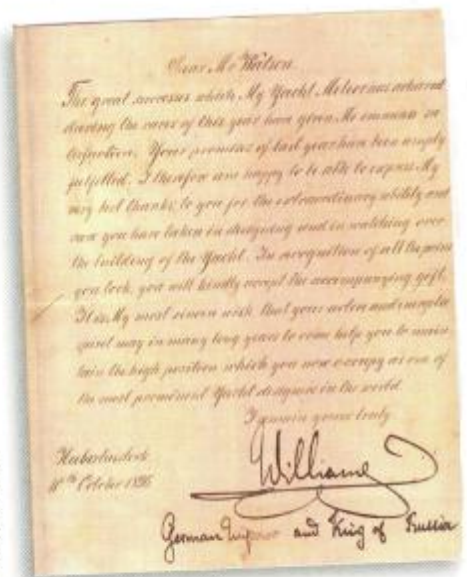
Another Watson design around which there has been a great deal of speculation is the replica of *Britannia*, due to compete in the Westward Cup this summer. Extraordinarily, the firm has not had any involvement whatsoever. Some drawings such as lines and sail plans are in the public domain and it is on these that the new yacht is based. Was more archival data available? The answer is in sheet after sheet of immaculate, detailed drawings decorated with the Prince of Wales feathers filed under design number 270 in the archive room.

As to whether there will be other replicas of large Watson-designed yachts, this is a near certainty. With *Eleanora*, *Elena* and the soon-to-be-commissioned *Atlantic*, the trend is very much alive and Watson is sitting on one of the largest archives of large classic sailing yachts. Does the firm have favourites? The range of choices is large but America's Cup challengers



Designed for Prince Luigi Amadeo, whose father sat on the Spanish throne while his grandfather occupied the Italian, **Bona** (left) at 32m was one of the smallest First Class cutters designed by Watson. Launched in 1897, she dominated first class racing and defeating the Kaiser who had enjoyed unrivalled dominance the previous year with his Watson-designed **Meteor II**

Right: a letter from the Kaiser dated 1896, expressing his gratitude to 'one of the most prominent yacht designers in the world'



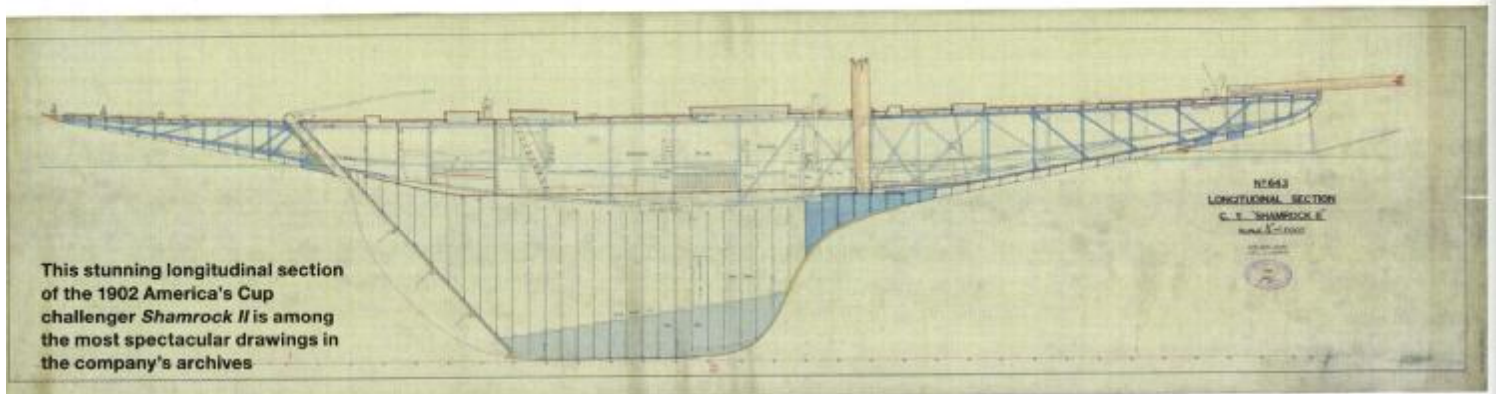
Thistle and *Valkyrie III* clearly appeal as does the schooner *Rainbow*, which Collier describes as 'one of the greatest offshore racing yachts of all time', or more modestly, the now little-remembered *Bona*, a smaller version of the legendary *Britannia*, built for the Italian royal family.

Will Watson's legacy and current engagement with classic yachts mean that this will always be the firm's core business? Certainly, there is a great knowledge and skills base in this area and this is invaluable for future projects but for this firm, classics are primarily about quality design and mere antiquity does not in itself justify restoration or contemplating a replica.

Noting the company's work with existing designs and collaborations with interior designers such as Bannenberg & Rowell and Remi Tessier, Collier presents another vision of the firm's strengths. 'With so many potentially conflicting demands within one project, much of our role is in harmonising these to assist all those contributing design work to achieve coherent and quality solutions. If existing design means that some parameters are in effect crystallized, the challenge is all the greater. On classics in particular, much of our design work is in finding elegant solutions to the lack of space and incorporating modern infrastructure. The success of this type of design work is in its invisibility. While this is rewarding in itself, the appeal of a more outwardly visible creative role is self-evident.'

In the future we can expect to see a new generation of Watson designs that will seek to continue the firm's reputation for excellence and the firm hopes to take on roles that are more comprehensive than solely that of designer. Its on-site presence and detailed project knowledge is a key factor in the Watson approach. Could it extend to a supporting role in the realisation of third-party designs? 'Certainly, if the quality of the design is there as well as a desire to see a high-quality implementation, there is the possibility of a meaningful contribution of the type the firm welcomes,' says Collier.

As GL Watson & Co approaches ten years in the ownership of William Collier and partners it is clear that its strengths lie in a strong knowledge base and a commitment to yachts that spans from the earliest stages through to years of sustained enjoyment. The range of in-house expertise is surprising, with the firm straddling various aspects of design, project management, owner representation and a wide range of consultancy activities. Apart from the attention its projects attract, it has also been remarkably low key and this seems to be driven by the nature of the firm's clients. The Liverpool location is an intriguing one but there is no mystery; walk-in clients are not a feature of the business, Liverpool is a city they like and with two international airports within 40 minutes of the office it is a practical location for a company where two thirds of the staff are based at shipyard site offices.



This stunning longitudinal section of the 1902 America's Cup challenger *Shamrock II* is among the most spectacular drawings in the company's archives