



Left: Portrait of Watson, probably done posthumously
Right: *Thistle*, the first GL Watson America's Cup challenger, 1887



GL Watson Design Company

Putting the legacy to good use



How classic yacht detective William Collier turned the archive into a restoration resource, by *Martin Smith*



Left: William Collier with the archive at their Liverpool offices (above)

If you want to restore an historically important artefact, first you must acquire ownership of it. William Collier, responsible for the acquisition and subsequent resurrection of some of the world's most beautiful yachts, took over the renowned yacht design company of GL Watson in 2001 and is now using his unique knowledge of the firm's important yachts to offer a holistic design and project management service to the modern yacht restoration industry.

The GL Watson offices, in a former bank headquarters in Liverpool, are perhaps the quietest place I have visited in more than



Left: Rainbow. 'the first modern schooner in Britain', commissioned 1897



The archive

Some drawing archives can be rather drab affairs. Even though the historical significance is obvious and exciting, the cerebral nature of paper-based engineering means that only a certain amount of love for and knowledge about the subject is brought to life. The GL Watson archive is different. Perhaps because the company never built its own boats the drawings are complete to the minutest detail. Or maybe it was just a love of the medium, instilled by Watson himself, or even simply that the company thrived through the Arts and Crafts period, but whatever the reason, many drawings in the collection are works of art, desirable in their own right.

As an historian, the archive was an important part of the deal for William Collier when he took over GL Watson in 2001. A huge programme of conservation and cataloguing was put in place to make what is there accessible and to ensure that the original lines of some of the world's most beautiful yachts are not allowed to deteriorate further.

Displayed proudly on the wall at the head of the office are the lines for one of Watson's crowning achievements, the America's Cup challenger of 1901 *Shamrock II* and an example of what is being done with the archive today.

The mounted plans are fully 6ft long and look for all the world like the originals, but William is quick to point out the process that turns them from a simple working design into a wall-hanging. The original plans are first

copied using a photographic process and then fixed to a lustrously thick, see-through plastic akin to clear glass. The effect is impressive as the textures and imperfections of the original seem to be brought back to life by the depth of this transparent medium. The weave of the linen can be seen – and the smudges and foxing. This would be a glorious topping-off present for any restoration project.

But it's not just the drawings, richly detailed, coloured and shaded as they are, that make this collection special. There are more than 10,000 photographs – including a sneaky, out of the water, yard shot of *Columbia*, Watson's opponent, proving that espionage was alive and well in the America's Cup even in 1901. Many of Watson's own pocket books, where the great man laid down all his thoughts, calculations and design ideas, are here too. One has all the costings for *Britannia*, along with the final total – £8,300 – that the King should be charged for her. Following this are lists of weights and then a tiny, rough image: the very first, slightly wobbly, sketch, 2in by 2in, of the *Britannia* bow.

The impression of Watson that comes across is of a man of ideas, but a methodical and businesslike one. The question is, can the archive itself be turned into a viable business today despite the cost of restoring and maintaining it? William is certain that it can, though he's unwilling to go into details of his plans at present. What is certain is that a huge investment is being made into maintaining this collection for posterity.

ten years of work for Classic Boat, but they also emanate a cool, stylish efficiency that is unlikely to be found in any boatyard. Dotted among the computer screens, clear desks and large-format printers of the bright, high-ceilinged offices are some impressive and valuable maritime artefacts: glass-cased original models and framed plans of Watson's triumphs are mingled with sepia photos and various ancient boat bits displayed as artwork.

William does assure me that during project meetings the place is a lot noisier, but here is a place in which I feel I could be creative.

During the formative years of the classic restoration boom, William Collier became the go-to man for those wishing to locate and purchase forgotten classics, thanks to the huge store of information on the location, provenance and ownership situation of these vessels that he had amassed during the years when these craft were simply regarded as outmoded products of a bygone age and were left to rot.

When values changed and the historical significance of vessels such as these became matters of importance, people began to wonder how many such craft still remained – and William was ready with the answers.

The path that led William to garner this knowledge began during his childhood. It was his grandfather, "a *Riddle of the Sands* yachtsman, filled with the romance of sailing wooden boats", who was the driving force behind his education into this era of yachting. Holidays would be spent touring boatyards and houseboat moorings spying these formerly majestic yachts where they lay stored or converted to houseboats. There was *Adela* in Lowestoft, *Mariquita* in Pin Mill and many more further afield on which the young William was given chapter and verse, little knowing how this would become of use later on.

Fairlie Restorations

A Watson dayboat rebuilt



Fairlie will be on our Boat Show stand with Watson's 25ft St Patrick, and previewing its new own-brand Fairlie 55. *Martin Smith* went to see them both

Making money in the classic boat restoration business is tough at present – the factors are obvious, and long-established firms such as Fairlie Restorations are finding it necessary to think beyond the usual in order to keep their workshops full. A visit to the Hamble-based yard early this autumn revealed a couple of unusual projects in the workshop. One is a conventional restoration, but smaller than the usual run of Fairlie projects; the other is a new design, carrying the Fairlie marque. Both these projects will be represented on the Classic Boat stand at this year's London Boat Show.

The GL Watson-designed *St Patrick* is as traditional as they come, but, at just 25ft (7.6m) LOA and 18ft (5.5m) LWL, it's about the smallest boat that the yard has ever tackled. That's not to assume there are linear economies of scale though: the effort that's going into the little boat is every bit as much as for their bigger projects.

The boat's owners William Collier and Antony Harrison, also co-owners of the GL Watson design business, are long-time collaborators with Duncan Walker at Fairlie and keen that the boat is restored as authentically as possible. This extends to their insistence on the use of Fife's close-seamed hull construction, as per the original. The method is tricky, to say the least, as it involves laying a single strand of caulking in a slight concavity formed on the edge of each plank. Coupled with the full-length plank runs, this makes spiling and fitting planks rather time-consuming, not least around the tuck, where the edges can be near vertical.

It had been the intention to re-use as much of the original boat as possible, but, in fact, little of the original will remain: before it was



Above: The BRA 18ft (LWL) class *St Patrick* under sail and (left, right and far right) under restoration at Fairlie



Through his growing interest, William acquired a network of information regarding the whereabouts of scores of these forgotten relics, until, eventually, the world turned and the yachting world began to acquire the set of values that we see today: the beautiful classic yachts became desirable commodities once more and knowledge of them began to have a value.

In the late 1980s when he was working for Camper and Nicholson's brokerage in Cannes, there was a noticeable rise in the number of inquiries for vessels for restoration. William was instrumental in the sale of *Cintra* and soon after, while sailing

aboard *Puritan* in the Med, he came under the gaze of Albert Obrist. "Mr Obrist came aboard one day and took me to one side, wanting to know how it was possible that I could have sold a Fife without his knowledge," explains William. Mr Obrist was setting up Fairlie Restorations, which it was intended would specialise in the acquisition and resurrection of just this type of craft, so someone who could know of likely candidates could be of value.

The upshot of the conversation was that William was brought alongside the Fairlie team to locate the yachts, establish current ownership and to broker the acquisition of

the vessels – and he was very successful. *Mariquita*, *The Lady Anne*, *Fulmar* and *Kentra* were all deals that he had a hand in and are now resplendent in the ownership of loving and wealthy custodians.

Wanting to develop a more detailed understanding of the yachts he was working with, William undertook a PhD on the History of Yacht Design and Construction based upon the Camper's history. The research also led him on further journeys of discovery as to the location or demise of many more famous yachts and the archives that documented them. In the past, many of those who commissioned yachts were

bought by her new owners, the boat had been out of the water for many years and the ravages of drying out had caused a number of issues. The centre line, much of which remains original, had shrunk appreciably width-wise; sacrificial wooden cheeks have been added that will be removed as the ancient timber gains more moisture and swells back to its former dimensions. The original planks, however, were so badly dried out that they feel more like tinder than timber.

For Fairlie Restorations, much of the *St Patrick* rebuild is business as usual: the attention to detail, the careful selection of materials and restoration methods, the consultation with owners and the scheduling of the project are all just the same as for more normal, bigger projects, it's just that she takes up less yard space. Fife probably dashed off one of these BRA 18s - *St Patrick* is one of four built in 1919, for a member of the Salcombe Yacht Club - in a matter of weeks but, if he had known the regard and the care that would be lavished over these boats in years to come, the dour Scotsman might well have been impressed.

Fairlie 55

The new Fairlie 55, designed by in-house naval architect Paul Spooner, aims to blend modern underwater profiling and construction techniques with classic looks above the water. It's a difficult balance, but one that Fairlie believes it will get right.

But why not a classic Fife design, albeit, perhaps, utilising modern construction methods? Market forces, replies Duncan Walker, Fairlie's managing director. "Customers just don't want to buy replicas. They're happy to spend money having a derelict hull rebuilt, but when it's a new boat, they want something different."

The design drawings and model show a boat that above the water has a clean and certainly graceful line, with long ends encompassing a generous, round-ended coachroof and modest bulwarks, and a modern, high-aspect bermudan rig, while below the water, the minimum surface principle means a fin and a 6,600lb (3,000kg)-bulb keel, a skeg rudder and a propeller on a sail drive leg.

The first Fairlie 55 is in build - see Yard News, p64 - and will be ready for launch during the 2011 season. She will be marketed through the brokerage firm Ancasta.



Right: *Nahlin*, built by John Brown & Co in 1930 for Lady Yule, chartered by Edward VIII, bought by King Carol of Romania and discovered there by William Collier in 1989. Now restored under Watson's direction and owned by inventor and industrialist James Dyson



Presents were often given to the designer to mark launch - this is a statue of himself from the Kaiser

*"The first aim had been achieved - it could be inferred that *Nahlin* did still exist"*

also wealthy landowners, so the records kept by the National Trust and English Heritage became a rich vein of information. In the end, the PhD gave William not just an understanding of yachts, but of the businesses that built them too.

Of his hugely successful method for locating lost boats, William says, "It's fairly easy from yard records, to find what boats were built, and then you can roughly trace them through Lloyd's Register." But, though this might give an indication as to their resting place, it is really only the starting point. From here books, magazines and press cuttings from the period are all scoured to find mention of any information. And it was one such quest that led to William's latest and largest project and eventually brought about his purchase of the GL Watson design office.

A single line in a book, *The Steamboats*, produced in 1970, alerted William that GL Watson's renowned 1930 steam yacht, the 300ft (91.4m) *Nahlin*, had been seen near a Romanian town in a neglected state in 1967. And, although travel to pre-revolutionary Romania was heavily restricted, he made some inquiries.

With the uncluttered thought processes of a private investigator, he ascertained that there were only two shipping authorities in the militarised Romania, the merchant and the military: so he telexed both with requests to 'purchase' *Nahlin*. The merchant service replied, stating firmly that the boat was not for sale; and the first aim had been achieved - it could be inferred that *Nahlin* did still exist.

In 1989 the necessary visas were obtained to allow William to travel to the country on an 'academic tour'. While there he purloined a car, heading to where the vessel had been indicated to reside, and there she was, moored on the banks of the Danube and in use as a floating restaurant. A cursory look over and, one might assume, a meal aboard gave William the information that he needed: she was in a bad way,

A brief history of GL Watson Design Company

Born 1861 in Glasgow, George Lennox Watson began his love of sailing while spending childhood holidays on the waters of Inverkip on the Firth of Clyde. At the age of 16 the ambitious young man was apprenticed into the shipyard of Robert Napier and Sons, where he was involved in the early use of hydrodynamics in yacht and ship design. It was this, coupled with a love of innovation and excellence, that propelled him to become one of the greatest yacht designers of all time.

He set up the world's first dedicated small yacht design company when aged just 22, and rapidly gained an enviable client list. Notable customer who sought his work included Sir Thomas Lipton, the Vanderbilts, the Earl of Dunraven, the Rothschild family, Kaiser Wilhelm II and of, course, Edward, Prince of Wales, subsequently King Edward VII. His notable yachts include King Edward's *Britannia*, *Rainbow* (the first modern schooner to be built in Britain) and the America's Cup defenders *Thistle* (sold to Kaiser Wilhelm II, who renamed her *Meteor*, and for whom he also designed *Meteor II*), *Valkyrie I*, *Valkyrie II* and *Shamrock II*.

Though he died at the age of just 53, by this time he had designed 432 vessels, equating to one launched every 3½ weeks of his career. Watson became the chief consulting naval architect to the RNLI in 1887 and the company continued to design lifeboats until the late 1960s.



Left: Ailsa Shipyard dry docks, around 1900. The man in the centre with the bowler hat is believed to be GL Watson

On the death of Watson, running of the company was taken over by his head draughtsman, JR Barnett, who had been alongside Watson since the year before work started on *Britannia* and had fully assimilated the great man's working methods. Barnett continued the company's tenets and the drive for engineering and technical excellence until he retired in 1954, and then continued to produce drawings and have involvement with the designs until his death, at the age of over 100.

The company has had just six managing directors, including William Collier, since Watson's death in 1904.

"Though he died at the age of just 53, by this time he had designed 432 vessels, equating to one vessel launched every 3½ weeks"



**Left: Model of early Watson lifeboat *Edith and Annie* in the Watson offices
Right: Half models of *Vril*, a cutter yacht of 1876, and below, *Red*, a 19ft one-design class from 1876**



but she was saveable and she was still a yacht of great beauty. William returned home to share this news with the broker Nicholas Edmiston, who had been instrumental in getting William on *Nablin's* trail, and the pair set about devising a plan to repatriate her.

In fact, almost a decade was to pass but eventually a prospective owner was found and in 1999 William returned to Romania, post-revolution, to bring *Nablin* home. Initially, she was stored in a disused dry dock in Liverpool, and following a change of owner in 2005, her historic rebuild was completed this year.

His involvement in the *Nablin* project brought William into contact with the then owner of GL Watson, Greg Copley, and during negotiations for the use of plans and other information, it became apparent

that the entire company was for sale. Thus began the latest phase of William's career. Along with business partner Anthony Harrison, now a director, the company was purchased along with its historic archive, then housed at the Mitchell Museum in Glasgow, in 2001.

Since then, the company has been heavily involved, as exterior designer and project manager, in the restoration of Sir Malcolm Campbell's *Blue Bird* motor yacht, designed by Watsons in 1938 (see page 60).

Today, the yacht restoration and construction business is very different from GL's day, but the company that bears his name retains complete knowledge of the construction and aesthetics of yachts of this vintage. One of the firm's specialities is exterior design, and in large part this involves overcoming the problems inherent

in incorporating today's nautical certification or technological requirements, which can so easily compromise the all-important exterior view of a yacht – an often tortuous path.

Alongside these skills, in the design field, the company offers design services for crew and service areas and an 'interface' section that ensures specialised contractors are seamlessly incorporated into a project. GL Watson also provides project management services and fulfills the role of owner's representative – a key role in ensuring the successful outcome of these often huge projects.

Now, 137 years after GL Watson set up the world's first dedicated yacht design business, his values of aesthetics, engineering excellence and business success are held in the same high regard, and his name is as strong as ever.