

# William Collier

The man who runs the historic firm of G.L. Watson has a lifelong passion for classics, but he has big plans for taking the company into a new golden era. Paul Ashton



*Portrait by KOS. Other photos from G.L. Watson*

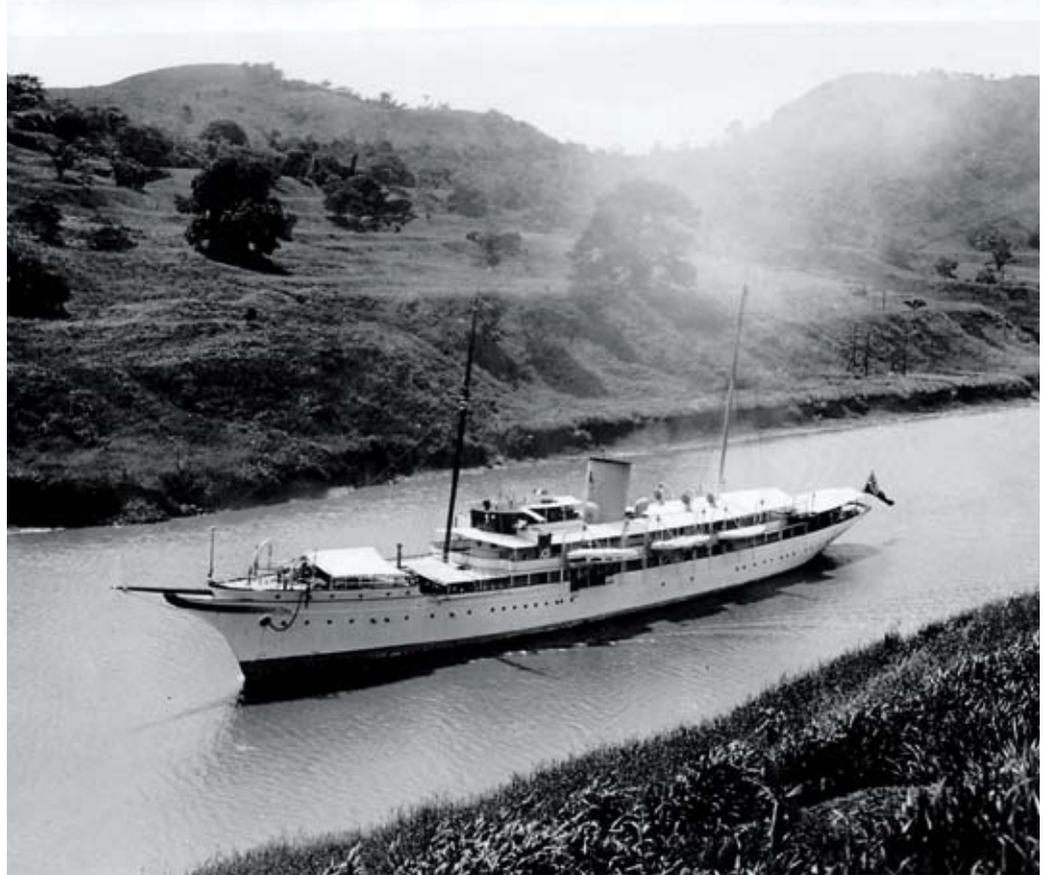
**T**here are precedents for businessmen who liked the company so much that they bought it, but seldom has the fit been as good as when William Collier took over the venerable firm of GL Watson in 2001. This year, the company is on the brink of revealing to the world a fully restored *Nahlin*, the 91-metre yacht that it designed in 1930. This has been a long-cherished project of William Collier's since he started out as a broker, and it's tempting to see the restoration as a pleasing culmination of his vision and a company building on the strength of its foundations. But William is already looking for new challenges: "Classics are the first child. We have done modern refits, but we've never done a new build – that's what I'd like to do next."

The pull of heritage is never far away, however: GL Watson, founded in Glasgow in 1873, is the first yacht design house in the world, with a portfolio of classics that includes *Thistle*, *Shamrock II* and *Britannia*, as well as the Watson lifeboat, and its offices in the elegant former Martins Bank building in central Liverpool are proudly dressed with yacht models, photos and memorabilia of projects past. These days, the core of the business that has been patiently built up by William in recent years is project management, owner representation, naval architecture and interior design work – and cataloguing the vast archive.

William's love of sailing came as a youngster – "traditional English yachting, bashing around in the North Sea, fairly unpleasant"; and a crewing job on a 50-footer in the Mediterranean. It's no surprise that in 1988 he found himself working as a broker for Camper & Nicholsons in the South of France. It was a fun and lucrative time, but there was a gnawing sense that he hadn't quite found the right career path. "The lifestyle was great, but I was always interested in classic yachts. The scene was just getting going, with *Altair*, *Tomahawk* and *Endeavour* all making the headlines. I realised there was a growing interest but people didn't know a lot about them." William was in a good position to help – he'd read and researched extensively and he could point to his practical experience: "I knew where a lot of classics were because I'd been round the East Coast mud-berths!"

An early influence was Albert Obrist, the Swiss industrialist who then owned the newly restored Fife *Altair*. "I'd been racing when *Altair* came alongside and Albert Obrist came out on deck. He said: 'Are you William Collier? You sold a Fife yacht without telling me!' We ended up having dinner, where he outlined his plans for Fairlie Restorations, the company he'd set up to restore Fifes. He became a Camper's customer."

By focusing more on classics, William's job was changing – the deals were complicated legally, and often involved travelling to faraway spots. "It was detective work, jumping on a plane to Canada or Australia to find these old Fifes. It was an exciting time. Finding the yacht and buying it was only the start of the story. There was a lot of work in overseeing a



*He found Nahlin floating on the Danube in 1989: "She was AMAZINGLY intact. This was a DOABLE project"*

project, as a client could get bad advice. It was important to stay involved." He was moving away from sales-and-purchase brokerage work into consultancy.

"I wanted to understand more technically about classic yachts. I had a publishing deal, though I didn't know if it was the right thing to put my career on hold while I wrote an arcane book! But I quit Campers in 1993 and I was still able to keep up some consultancy work while I researched. The project became a PhD at Liverpool University – which allowed me to go rooting around getting into archives," he says. This not only gave William a taste of Liverpool but also an insight into the fledgling yachting business. "It made me realise that yards succeeded and failed for the same reasons. You need to have decent management in place and decent structures. It was ever thus," he says.

But life wasn't just satiating his inner-historian by blowing the dust off archive material; in the background there was *Nahlin*. "I'd had the idea of rescuing her back in the Campers days, but I didn't even know she existed. I went looking for her in 1988, but got nowhere with the Romanian authorities, who claimed to have no knowledge of her." But he sent a cheeky telex to the state shipping authority with an offer to buy a yacht that nobody knew anything about. It drew a surprising response: 'she's not for sale'. That was all the confirmation he needed that she existed.

In 1989 he travelled to Romania and found her, floating on the Danube 100 miles from the sea: "She was amazingly intact. This was a doable project." It was a project that became a temporary casualty of the

**Top:** *Nahlin* cruising the Panama Canal in 1931.  
**Below:** William (left) makes sure *Blue Bird* is dressed overall for her recommissioning in 2007.  
**Bottom:** The five-tonne cutter *Vrii*, GL Watson's first great racing yacht from 1876, currently being studied as a potential rebuild project.



1989 revolution, as the officials he was dealing with vacated their posts and the last thing on any Romanian's mind was the fate of a yacht on the Danube. In the mid-1990s, Nick Edmiston – who William had known since his Campers days – brought on board a backer interested in the project. With Nick handling the brokerage side and William technical matters, it was game on, though it was touch and go whether they could get the boat out of Romania. But in October 1999 that's what they did, and by 2000 she was at Cammell Laird on the Mersey.

Naturally, the *Nahlin* project brought him into contact with GL Watson. "I wanted access to as much of the *Nahlin* archive as possible, so I opened discussions about licensing that material. I ended up buying the business," says William. It's fair to say that GL Watson hadn't had the best of times since the 1950s, despite its immense success in the first half of the century. After the war no one wanted the type of big yachts they designed, and there just weren't the royal clients around. William folded his own businesses into GL Watson but it was a quiet start – "we had nothing to shout about". That changed with the restoration of *Blue Bird* in 2007, Sir Malcolm Campbell's GL Watson-designed yacht from 1938.

Whichever way you look at it, this is a sepia-tinted history, but William underlines that it's not just about classics: "We're slightly over-pigeon-holed with this classic label. We're not into 'National Trust' type restorations. You have to restore some aspects authentically, but owners don't want period bathrooms and we have to meet modern regulations." He uses the example of one restored GL Watson yacht that needs a 4 megawatt generator today; in the 1930s, it had two 28kW units. "The skills you need to restore a classic large yacht overlap exactly with modern yacht construction. We are, after all, a yacht design house, and that's why I'd like us to get involved with new builds – we're about quality design regardless of period."

So how does William feel about modern retro design? "In some cases the owners and designers get it right. You have to do your homework. Take the modern J Class *Savannah*. The owner went to great lengths to work out what it was that gave him the proportions he required. *Nero* is another example of how it can be done right. But it frustrates me when you end up with a pretty hull with a not-so-pretty block of flats on it, or worst case, a not-so-pretty hull with a block of flats. We have the archive here. We could have given them a sheerline that sorted it out."

Raw materials used on classics are hard to source but the company recently took delivery of a supply of spruce from an unusual source. "It came courtesy of Sarah Palin and Alaska's Bridge to Nowhere [a proposed multimillion dollar link to a small island airport]. They decided not to build it, but they did build 'the road to the Bridge to Nowhere', and to do that they had to cut down some large spruce trees. We went out there to get them," he says.

*"As long as there is a COMMON idea about what you can ACHIEVE, there's nothing that we can't or shouldn't do"*



The world is very much changed since the Kaiser went racing aboard his GL Watson *Meteor* in 1897 and Edward and Mrs Simpson holidayed aboard *Nahlin* in 1936. "The current generation of yacht owner is taking more control of their time on board. That is feeding into yacht design, and it means that a classic design with lots of exterior spaces and a smaller formal superstructure will suit those owners with lifestyles that fit. From our point of view it's about supporting the owner's vision of how they want to go yachting. For a company like ours the challenge is very different to a broker who is selling something that is largely operational. We have to say: 'Underneath this, there is this. And we can turn it into that.'"

With 22 staff in total (eight in the Liverpool office and the rest working out of the *Nahlin* office on site in Germany), it's a busy time for GL Watson. "I'd like to be in the Liverpool office a week a month. I don't make it!" says William. Antony Harrison is the resident director who runs the company on a daily basis. But there is some time for extra-curricular. William is on the board of the America's Cup Hall of Fame, and he spent last Christmas sailing in the Sea of Cortez. He has also bought a classic of his own, now at Fairlie Restorations. "It's one of four identical 25ft Watson designs – the first racing yachts built after World War I, built by Fife. It had been in a garden in Scotland for 40 years!"

But William is looking ahead. "We're flexible about what we get involved in. It's my view that as long as you can work with an owner where there is a common idea about what you can achieve, there's nothing that we can't or shouldn't do. We'll take on any project. In the end, whether it's a classic or a new build, the project has the same structure, with the right people, the right resources and good partnerships," he says. He speaks with the confidence of a man on the brink of the launch of *Nahlin* – one of the most eye-catching superyacht restorations ever, and a project that he's been working on for over 20 years. And as any historian will tell you, if there's one thing that's better than contemplating history, it's making history. **SYW**



**Top:** Sailing classic yachts is William's greatest passion – here he is working a winch on *Kentra*.

**Left:** George Lennox Watson, who started the world's first design office in 1873 – and launched a new design on average every six weeks for the next 30 years.

**Below left:** William dons a hard hat in his project management capacity.

**Below:** *Blue Bird* – launched in 1938 – was restored by GL Watson in 2007.

