



The ROC Log

Rampart History

Ramparts Revisited.

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Establishing a yard on a site that dries out at low water is hardly practical when your business is yachts, but George Desty was building motor boats – some of the finest ever made

During the 1950s and '60s the Rampart Boat Building Works was one of the best known motor yacht yards in England. It had a reputation for building sturdy, quality gentlemen's motor boats that were traditional in style while being fast, well specified and having good seakeeping abilities. As the years passed, the company managed to remain competitive long after the arrival of GRP, building two or three motor cruisers a year until it was one of the last yards still building production wooden boats on the South Coast.

The man behind the Rampart Boat Building Works was George Alexander Desty. Born in 1885 to a Sunderland shipwright, George served his apprenticeship at a small boatyard at Woolston on the River Itchen under his uncle, John West. He later joined Harland & Wolff Shipbuilders in Southampton before moving to the nearby yard of John I Thornycroft (see CB178/179).

It was while working at Thornycroft's that George started to build dinghies in his spare time, turning the front parlour of his house in Woolston into a workshop. Space was limited, and when an order arrived for a 10ft (3m) dinghy – a boat too big for the 'workshop' – George knocked out the room's bay window and erected a corrugated iron structure in which to build bigger boats. Needless to say, George's landlord was not amused and George and his wife, Mary, were asked to leave.



Teal - Rampart 30: Teal was the first in a long line of gentlemen's motor yachts to leave the Rampart yard and the basis for all its future designs. Launched in 1929, she was designed by John I Thornycroft and is a typical 1930s motor cruiser. Her raised topsides gave her a spacious interior and the low-slung cabin top provided full standing headroom.

Following their enforced change of home, George and his wife moved onto an old MFV and George started to build dinghies at Chessel Farm at the head of the River Itchen, a plot of land rented from Camper & Nicholson. As the demand for his dinghies increased, he decided to leave Thornycroft's to set up on his own. Restricted road access to the yard at Chessel Farm made the location unsuitable and in 1919 George bought two plots of land on Vespasian Road in Bitterne Manor, near Southampton. The Rampart Boat Building Works was soon established on this site and remained there until the need for more space prompted another move in 1985.

The company rapidly expanded on the 0.4-acre site during the early 1920s, employing more men and building a large range of dinghies and dayboats. Horace, George's son, joined the company in 1924, at the age of 13. In those early days the

company proudly boasted that if an order for one of its dinghies was received by the second post on a Monday, it would be built and fitted out by Friday.



12ft motor launch : Another precursor of the gentlemen's motor yachts was this 12ft (3.7m) round-bilged motor launch. Constructed of mahogany clinker planking on ash or oak timbers, the 12-footer had an inboard 11/2hp petrol Stuart Turner engine and was capable of approximately 7 knots. A 15ft (4.6m) version with a 6-7hp Morris Vedette engine was also available.

Unlike most of the yards in the area, Ramparts did not build yachts. Rather, the majority of its early business concerned dinghies and skiffs. Its location, on a site that virtually dried out at low water and which was above the Northam Bridge with its meagre 15ft (4.7m) clearance, meant that building deep-keeled yachts was practically impossible. However, shallow-draught launches were ideal and gradually the yard started to produce more and more. It was Teal, built in 1929, that marked the company's move towards gentlemen's motor yachts and the start of a highly successful 52-year association with this type.

Teal was built of pine on oak for a Mr AHP Clark of Lyndhurst in Hampshire. She was to a John I Thornycroft design with 30ft LOA, a beam of 8ft 6in (9 x 2.6m) and powered by a 12hp Thornycroft petrol engine. Although Teal

proved to be a great success, it would be another two years before a second motor cruiser was built at the yard. Two weeks after Teal's launch, fire destroyed the yard's building shed along with 15 dinghies and the moulds for 32 boats. Still the business recovered, going on to produce between two and three motor cruisers and numerous dinghies a year.



Grateful - Rampart 30: Douglas Fairbanks Jnr commissioned Grateful for his girlfriend Gertrude Lawrence, the music hall singer, in 1934. She was 30ft (9.1m) LOA while, in order to maintain good headroom in the saloon, she had a long, low coachroof. Fairbanks and Lawrence remained good friends with the Desty family for many years, often returning to the yard.

The lines for the boats that followed Teal were developments of those from Thornycroft. "We never had any proper line drawings, though," says John Desty, George's grandson who worked at the yard between 1961 and 1992. "We built the boat and then drew the lines afterwards. We'd start with the moulds of a standard boat and if we wanted to alter the hull shape then we'd pack out those moulds. We'd do it by eye until it looked right. The softwood moulds had a limited life, too, so when we replaced them we re-drew the lines."

"The customer's specification would be built into the boat too," adds Peter Desty, John's brother and co-director of the company. "If someone wanted longer berths, then we'd stretch the boats to fit them in."

Pre-1939, the yard built a range of 30ft-plus (9m) boats.

The first 40-footer (12m) was Lady Lou, built in 1937 for a Mr HL Rutter (CB120). Lady Lou was one of at least six Ramparts

known to have been used in the 1940 Dunkirk Evacuation.

During the Second World War the yard was mainly occupied with the repair of Admiralty craft and the towing of boats and timber from Southampton Docks to yards up the River Itchen.

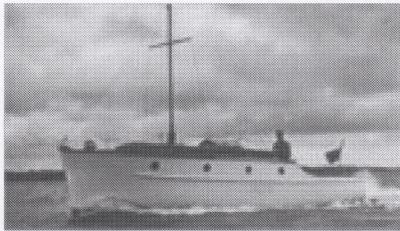


Helena - 20ft motor cabin cruiser : This 20ft (6.1m) motor cruiser was one of the yard's early designs and has beautifully clean lines. 20ft LOA on a 6ft 7in (2m) beam, the two-berth cabin cruisers had 5ft (1.5m) headroom down below. Planked in mahogany on oak, they were powered by an 8hp Stuart Turner, BMC Vedette or Parsons Prawn. Accommodation included two settee berths and joinery was varnished mahogany.

Soon after the war it returned to building pleasure motor cruisers. George died in 1946, aged 61, and the business was taken over by Horace and his sister Doris.

By this time the yard was building a whole range of craft between 30 and 48ft (9.1 & 14.6m). It continued to build dinghies until 1962, but later concentrated on the extremely popular larger designs. The company usually built one 48-footer and two of the smaller 30-something boats each year, with two boats being built in the shed at the same time. "The boats were often so close together that you could hop from one to the other," says Peter. "It made planking up awkward, particularly when fitting the sheerstrakes – you'd have to get up on the other boat and push it round from there."

The early boats were planked up in mahogany, but when good quality mahogany became scarce in the late 1960s, iroko was used instead. The early boats also had Canadian rock elm timbers, but Dutch elm disease brought about a ban on elm imports and so danta, a deep-red timber from West Africa, was used instead. While as strong as European beech, Danta doesn't bend quite as well as elm and so the timbers were 'dry laminated' – sliced end for end, swapped around, steamed into place and then fastened back together with copper clenches.



Lamia - Rampart 30 1947 : The Rampart 30 was the smallest motor yacht that the yard produced. Measuring 30ft LOA on a beam of 8ft 9in (2.6m) and planked in mahogany or larch on oak timbers, Lamia was powered by a 20-40hp Morris Commodore engine.

singer Gertrude Lawrence. Grateful was launched later that year in an occasion that the local paper, the Southern Evening Echo, reported as being "an unrehearsed, but delightful little comedy". It took four attempts for Gertrude to smash the bottle of champagne over Grateful's bow, and the fourth attempt was only successful because she broke it with an axe.



Ponda Rita - Rampart 48 : 1972 Ponda Rita was a twin-screw Rampart 48 built in 1972. 48ft LOA, on a beam of 12ft and draught of 4ft 1in (14.6 x 3.7 x 1.3m), she was carvel constructed of 1 1/4in iroko planking on steam bent 1 3/4in by 1in danta laminated timbers, spaced at 7in (17cm) centres. She had a teak-laid deck and was fitted out in mahogany marine ply. Down below she had two occasional berths in the fo'c's'le, two berths in the stateroom, a galley, saloon and aft cockpit. An alternative aft cabin version was also offered.

highly regarded, business was beginning to slow. Glassfibre had a huge impact on the industry and was fast becoming the predominant type of construction. So it was that the last Rampart motor cruiser, Naul Dany, was built in 1981.

A standard Rampart took seven months to build. Most were built on spec but had usually been sold by the time the hull had been planked up, thanks to their competitive pricing. "We built the best we could while keeping it as economical as possible because we knew we were in a small market and that we had to make the boats competitive" says Peter. "This was especially so during the years when GRP came in," he adds.

The typical Rampart owner was a businessman in his 50s or 60s with grown-up children and time to concentrate on boating. Many owners returned to the yard with their boat year after year for an annual refit, or to buy a bigger version. But Ramparts attracted celebrities too. In 1934 Douglas Fairbanks Jnr commissioned the yard to build a 30-footer for his girlfriend, the famous music hall

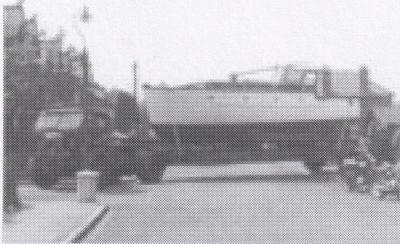
All three of Horace's sons served their apprenticeships at Ramparts: John joined in 1961, Peter in 1964 and Robert in 1966. "Dad was a strict taskmaster," explains John.

"We referred to him as the Governor because when we were at work he was the boss and he was determined that we would not gain any advantage out of being his sons."

There was a workforce of between eight and ten men and a new apprentice joined the yard every year. "You started by making tea and sweeping up," says Adrian White, who began his training in 1963. "Once you'd mastered that, and were good, after a week you might pick up a tool," continues John. One of the advantages of working at the yard was that Horace insisted that everyone had to go out on sea trials. "Dad used to do it to make people appreciate the environment that the boats were built for", says John, "and to emphasise the importance of making sure everything was done right."

By the beginning of the 1980s 146 motor cruisers and countless dinghies had left the Rampart yard but, while still

To compensate for the lack of building work, the Desty brothers turned towards the restoration market and found a lucrative business in repair work for insurance companies. **"It built up from one job in the 1970s to a turnover of well over half a million pounds in 1990 when I left the yard. We also started fitting out the glassfibre Frances 26s and Victoria 30s for Victoria Marine," says Peter.**



Lysid - Rampart 32 : Lysid was a slightly bigger version of the Rampart 30 and featured an open-backed wheelhouse. She was built in 1957 and remained in the same family on the River Crouch in Essex until 1999. She's shown here in 1957, newly completed and loaded on the back of a Baker's Transport lorry, en route to her new home at Burnham-on-Crouch. Many contemporaries of Ramparts favoured steadying rigs on their motor yachts, but while offered as an optional extra by Ramparts, very few were fitted to its boats.

In 1985, with the repair and fitting-out work booming, Ramparts finally moved from its tiny site to the huge yard of Maxim Marine. **"That's when the company really changed," says John. "We were now employing 100 people and in 1989 turned out near on 100 boats."**

The Rampart Boat Building Works eventually merged with Victoria Marine, signalling the end of a long and highly successful boatbuilding career, and the Desty brothers left the business in the early 1990s to pursue other interests.

Ramparts are still highly regarded and fetch a good price. There's a **loyal owners' association**, which has kept track of 20 of the boats. Although a block of flats now stands on the old site at Vespasian Road, the legacy created by one man in the front parlour of a house in Woolston lives on.