

# Three Nova Scotia BOATBUILDERS

By Andy Adams



**W**e recently had the opportunity to travel to Nova Scotia and meet with three of the many boatbuilders in that province. We were curious to see the quality of their workmanship and to talk about the challenges that they've been facing as the Canadian dollar continues to rise against the US.

Only a few years ago, the Canadian boatbuilders enjoyed a currency advantage in the American market, while today, the

Canadian dollar is at about \$.95 US, and continuing to rise. It is possible we could see parity in the near future.

With the currency advantage gone, all of Canada's boatbuilders face greater challenges when it comes to selling in the huge and previously lucrative American market. Those challenges become even more pronounced, for custom or semi-custom builders.

That can be a strength, typically, people who buy custom or

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semi-custom boats tend to be experienced boaters who know what they want. They come to Nova Scotia because it is one of the few places where they can get the boat of their dreams built for them. Another strength is that many of the shops only need one good commission to have a busy year.

The weakness is that in taking on that one good commission, the boatbuilder puts all his eggs in one basket. Another weakness is the fact that when buying in low volumes, as custom builders do, it is almost impossible to buy parts and components as cheaply as a higher volume US yard could.

All that has made for a very challenging business environment and a bit of a buyer's market as well. So, to see how they are faring, we visited three different shops, each somewhat representative of the skills and products available through of Nova Scotia and indeed, much of Atlantic Canada.

That is to say, workmanship of a very high order is widely available.

Boatbuilding in Nova Scotia began with the first European settlers and reached its zenith in the late 19th century, when the province launched vast fleets

of wooden-hulled vessels.

In Nova Scotia, the building of yachts goes back farther than many people might imagine. The Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron (RNSYS), located in Halifax and founded in 1837, lays claim to being the oldest yacht club in North America. As early as the 1840s, yachts were being built and in 1917 the yawl *Elsie* was launched in Baddeck for Alexander Graham Bell, who had his summer home nearby.

William Roue, of the schooner *Bluenose* fame, designed several notable yachts in the years between the wars.

The boatbuilding traditions were honed by the often cruel sea conditions and strength and seaworthiness are attributes that are seen as essential. Fine yacht finished interiors, however, have not been as closely associated with Nova Scotia boatbuilding and that is unfortunate.

While generations of fishing and cargo vessels have become the vessels we think of as Nova Scotia-built boats, in fact, the joinery work and fine finishes on the boats we looked at were equal to anything we have seen from other markets. And, even with the Canadian dollar

so high, these boats may well represent outstanding value for the money.

The Nova Scotia Boatbuilders Association (NSBA) is an active and beneficial organization that works with both commercial and recreational builders to promote all Nova Scotia-built boats. This year, (as this issue of *Boating Industry Canada* is on press) the NSBA is holding its First Nova Scotia In-Water Boat Show, August 2nd to 5th, in conjunction with Mahone Bay's 18th Annual Classic Boat Festival. There, potential customers will have a chance to climb aboard boats from several Nova Scotia yards and talk directly to the builders while, at the same time, enjoying a popular festival in a picturesque seaside town at the height of Nova Scotia's tourist season.

That is a great way to see several of the 46 boatbuilding businesses that the NSBA represents.

Another way was for *Boating Industry Canada* to travel to Nova Scotia and visit Covey Island Boatworks, North Atlantic Yachts and the Big Pond Boat Shop. We talked to the boatbuilders, looked around and went for a few rides too.

## COVEY ISLAND BOATWORKS



Our first stop was Covey Island Boatworks in Petite Rivière. John Steele, one of the four principals in this employee-owned business showed us through the shop.

Covey Island Boatworks builds handcrafted yachts, power and sail, 30' to 80'. John told us, "It's pretty much all custom work. Not much repair or re-fit. This summer, it is 28 years since we incorporated."

He continued, "We have had some great commissions. We are about to launch *Sir Edmund*, a 49' Chuck Burns high performance racing schooner for a west coast (US) customer with plans for long-distance, double-handed races. It is

*Sir Edmund* is a magnificent new racing boat built this past winter.





John Steele is describing the creation of *Sir Edmund's* very light weight but warm and inviting Quebec maple veneered interior and galley.

a very high-tech boat. I'm going to take you to see it in Lunenburg."

*Sir Edmund* was constructed at Covey Island with a seven-layer, cold-molded hull using Port Orford cedar veneers over a CoreCell™ core. Each veneer was vacuum-bagged for the best possible bond.

Testimony to the construction skills weighed in at the scales. "Dry weight when we lifted the hull turned out to be 3,978 lbs. compared to the designed weight of 3,986," John told us.

Supervisor Colin O'Toole said there was little room for error in following the specs for this kind of bluewater racing boat. "We have to work with weight restrictions, but still build a boat that is strong as well as light."

Covey Island Boatworks has translated more than eighty unique dreams into low maintenance, custom and semi-custom vessels.

[www.coveyisland.com](http://www.coveyisland.com)

## NORTH ATLANTIC YACHTS

Located in Halifax, North Atlantic Yachts tackles both custom construction and restoration & repair.

The company's primary goal is to build yachts that use the latest in materials and technology married to modern designs, often with classic styling.

Like Covey Island, the foundation skills came from working in traditional

plank on frame construction but most projects now are composite foam core/fiberglass utilizing the latest vacuum-bagging techniques. The company has a special interest in power cats and is

Glen Cairns of North Atlantic Yachts is seen here at the helm of a new Buzzards Bay 33 power catamaran



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