

Charles E Nicholson (1868 – 1954)

The son of Benjamin Nicholson, who had joined William Camper in the Gosport yard in 1842, Charles E Nicholson, usually referred to as 'CE,' not only inherited a family business but had a uniquely gifted eye for a yacht and a driving quest for pioneering improvements.

In his teens he was sent to France to learn French as the yard had good clients there but with no technical training, aged 18, he started work with his father and elder brother and had his first yacht LUCIFER built a year later.



His DACIA in 1892 was such a success that six weeks after her first sail she was sold for twice her building price. This certainly launched his career as a yacht designer, but as the yacht measurement rules at the time encouraged unseaworthy and too lightly built yachts, he campaigned to change these rules and also for Lloyds to produce rules for yacht construction.

In the first decade of the century the demand for steam yachts was still strong but they were almost all built on the Clyde. The Gosport yard had no space to build large steel steam yachts but CE managed to break into this market by having the hulls built elsewhere and fitted out in Gosport. Again innovation played a part in this, such as convincing the Duc de Valencay that he should be the first to dispense with the clipper bow and have a straight stem with no bowsprit. The continued demand for large steel yachts led to the purchase of the Southampton yard in 1912, leaving Gosport to concentrate on wood, composite and smaller steel yachts.

In 1906 he had the satisfaction of building NYRIA as the first large racing yacht to be built to Lloyds scantlings and in 1912 he not only built PIONEER, the first diesel powered yacht of consequence, but also ISTRIA, a racing yacht that introduced many new weight savings in construction and was also the first yacht to have a Marconi topmast.

His first attempt at the America's Cup was with SHAMROCK IV for Thomas Lipton in 1914. Advances due to his experience with ISTRIA led to double skin planking, longitudinal framing, a bulb keel and a plywood deck. War was declared as she crossed the Atlantic so she was laid up until the Cup races in 1920. She was much the faster boat but could not save her time on handicap.

The First World War brought conversion and repair work but most new builds were under sub-contract from firms such as J I Thornycroft to build Coastal Motor Boats etc. Such a subservient role was not to CE's liking and he commented he had "not built up the largest yachting business in the world as a sub-contractor." His hands were also tied by the yards being "controlled establishments" where the Government became a statutory partner who contributed no capital, assumed no liabilities but took a large share of the profits.

As a relief from these constraints he established two new companies. By 1916 it had become apparent that seaplanes could be very effective against the growing submarine menace so Charles founded The Gosport Aircraft Co. in partnership with Sir Charles Allom, the owner of ISTRIA. It is difficult to find exactly how much design work was done by CE but he was responsible for the hull of the largest N4 Type which had a wingspan of 149 feet. The structures used double diagonal 3mm mahogany planking with longitudinal Sitka spruce stringers.

There was also a demand for small coasters and a great shortage of steel in 1917, so Charles formed the Laminated Wood Ships Company. He had patented the system and obtained orders for a 695 ton wooden ship and an 830 ton steel ship for comparison, and he then built a further two wooden ships before he could return to his yachts.

It was in 1920 that he convinced Mrs Workman, the owner of NYRIA, to introduce a new fashion and fitted her out with a Bermudan rig, the first large yacht to have this, and a resounding success. Part of his success was that he was also a very good helmsman and tactician. He once bought back an 8 Metre from a customer who thought her no good and promptly won about 200 prizes in her, illustrating his dictum for being a successful designer; "Get the right man to sail your boat."

The years between the wars marked CE's heydays with America's Cup campaigns in 1930, 1934 and 1937 with SHAMROCK V, ENDEAVOUR and ENDEAVOUR II. In this period alone he designed and built over 200 yachts from 6 Metres to J Class, from 5 ton cruisers to three masted schooners over 500 tons and from racing motor boats to the 1629 ton PHILANTE, now the Royal Yacht NORGE.

During the Second World War he was responsible for the design of at least two types of MGBs, including those that brought ball bearings from Sweden and in 1946 he installed the world's first marine gas turbine in an MGB for the Admiralty. Soon after the war he started the 5.5 Metre Class which would be cheaper and better than the 6 Metre Class which he called "pot bellied little horrors."

His last designs were the ocean racer St BARBARA for the Royal Artillery YC in 1948 and the cruiser ZOOM in 1952.

Being a family business there was a considerable amount of paternalism in the yard and philanthropic works in the town. He was a lenient JP and in 1934 he became the first Honorary Freeman of the Borough. He was the first yacht designer to be made Royal Designer for Industry in 1944 and was awarded the OBE in 1949. In 1997 he was posthumously inducted to the America's Cup Hall of Fame.

As his grandson Christopher said, "One of the features of my grandfather's amazing versatility was his ability to apply art and science in the appropriate proportions for the project of the moment."

In an obituary by Francis Herreshoff, he finished by saying, "Charles will always be remembered by his friends and acquaintances for his pleasant personality, for he was undoubtedly the most popular man in his profession."

Jeremy Lines

Further reading:

Charles E. Nicholson and His Yachts - Franco Pace & William Collier.
Adlard Coles Nautical. London.

Great Years in Yachting - John Nicholson.
Nautical Publishing Co. Lymington.

Camper & Nicholsons, Two Centuries of Yacht Building - Ian Dear & Jeremy Lines.
Quiller Press. London.