

Finding a niche for propellers

When Tim Findley is stretched for something to write about he heads off to Henley's Propellers, his former business on Auckland's North Shore, to scout for a story. This month he found one on Henley's prop repair floor.



Usually a peep into the repair shop reveals some interesting tales to be told...

This story is likely to be much more entertaining than endless variations of 'Tim's tips on tightening vee belts'. The trouble is, most of the stories behind bent shafts, dinged props and twisted rudders involve customers who do not appreciate publicity when it comes to their boats. Nor do skippers enjoy being portrayed as 'wally of the week'.

Accordingly, several juicy stories will have to simmer away for a few years in order to dilute the personalities involved. Besides, I like my nose the shape it is.

Henleys, being propeller people, and the propeller being the bit of boat most likely to be damaged, get to hear all kinds of

improbable tales as to how such damage was occasioned. Interestingly, no pleasure craft skipper was ever responsible for a grounding.

"My idiot brother-in-law" or "my daughter's no-account boyfriend", are favourite culprits. "Just handed him the helm for a few minutes," they say.

One thing that we can be grateful for is the number of uncharted rocks these folk have discovered. One wonders about the efficiency of our hydrographic office when so many are reported within a few miles of the marina and are right in the middle of a much-frequented channel!

Telling tales

Here's a very recent story... A well-known Auckland boat-broker is at the helm of one of those terrible Taiwanese pleasure palaces I swear could not be designed with serious sea-going in mind.

"Gosh, you'd have to know your buoyage around here," said the prospective client, eyeing a passing cardinal mark.

"Know the Gulf like the back of my hand," responds the broker, a bloke who could out-arrogant and out-ego the worst of South Auckland's car dealers.

Bump, lurch, bang and thump, over the

reef she went. Luckily, aside from bent rudders and a totally written-off starboard prop and shaft, the boat suffered surprisingly little damage.

A submarine or whale were said to be the likely villains, our broker reported to the coastguard.

"Please stop shouting. Hold the microphone a few centimetres from your mouth and speak in a normal manner," was the coastguard's response to a highly excited call for help.

The coastguard finally elicited that, firstly, the owners of the pleasure palace weren't sinking and, secondly, they still had a perfectly good port-side engine, transmission and steering.

"In that case, we'd advise you to return to your home marina and make haul-out arrangements."

In the meantime, the prospective client's wife, who was now more than ever convinced a chalet at the ski fields is a better prospect

than owning a boat, said. "The outboard on the dinghy seems to be at a funny angle."

"Hmm," says client, and points out the problem.

The dinghy was down, as the broker had taken his clients to lunch at a popular Waiheke winery.

Most likely, the dinghy had crashed into the swim board when the launch came to its unscheduled halt. Somehow (one suspects the outboard's clamps were not sufficiently tightened) the outboard had pivoted on one clamp and was now almost horizontal to the water.

"Good grief," moaned the broker, pulling the tow rope in. "What else can go wrong?"

His query was answered seconds later as the jolt of the dinghy being pulled alongside flipped the outboard, inches from their fingers, into the briny.

Unfortunately for the broker, today's savvy marine assessors swiftly seize chart plotters,

GPS screens and the like. The screen's history revealed a track right over a well-marked reef. So, no submarine or whale to be held to account.

The moral of this story is to be very, very careful what sailor's yarn you spin to your insurance company. If you are found fibbing, they may just decline your claim.

Back to business

So having been privy to a number of juicy tales and denied the possibility of writing them up, I fell back on the old "How's business anyway?" question.

Thing is, if Henley's Propellers had stayed in my hands we'd all be sitting around twiddling our thumbs, living off repairs. New prop business, courtesy of the re-power market, for New Zealand boatbuilding has taken a horrible dive, so new boat business was scarce indeed.

However, my ex-partner Mark Power, who is now owner of Henley's, saw the demise of



A super efficient high speed prop awaits final inspection before shipping.

domestic building and aggressively promoted Henley product offshore.

The assistance of the worldwide web, and the promotion of Henley expertise has seen worldwide sales of their specialist high speed and super-efficient propellers.

I've mentioned Russian, Chinese and British clients but here again, there's non-disclosure barricades as in one case, the client's a transatlantic contender. In another, the client's a US military contractor developing stealth craft.

Where has this success come from? Don't these countries have propeller makers of their own. Yes, they do. But here's the niche Henley's are exploiting: expertise. And there's very little competition. These well-known overseas companies are all a hundred times bigger than Henley's and are producing propellers for the world's shipping. But when approached for something outside their particular range, they have no answer. In fact, most don't even want to know.

Years ago, a bloke I knew of exploited this niche very well, and if you had any sort of application away from day-to-day propellers, you went to him and he charged heaps.

"So you don't price base your propeller product?" I enquired.

"Absolutely not," was the response. "Our prices are based on knowledge, expertise and the accuracy of the actual propeller."

And sure, there's a huge amount of work done, and being done, on the efficiency of ships' propellers. Of course there is. Quite frankly, today's modern hulls, with super-efficient engines and the best of propellers can return a fuel burn per voyage literally hundreds and hundreds of tonnes less than earlier ships.

But that's big ship propellers, which is very serious stuff, and those companies are really not interested in odd, but wealthy, transatlantic contenders.

Henley's is, and as a result is gaining worldwide acceptance.

"Of course, the specialist prop is only part of the business. We've formed associations with Twin Disc in the States and Thordon in Canada. We represent them here and they market our off-the-shelf product in their own countries."

My experience of exports was limited to the south-west Pacific, from Queensland to Tahiti.



These old unkempt boats are giving way to a smart, modern fleet.

Apparently, all those old customers still exist in one shape or another.

What about Fiji?

"What about Fiji?" I enquire.

"Funny you should ask. I just got back, and I'm impressed by what's going on," was Mark's response.

Seems that the Thordon marine bearing has been such an enormous success that it is in demand for flood and sewage pumps, seriously outlasting conventional bearings.

"Not quite fit and forget, but doubling or quadrupling conventional bearing life. Hydro stations are taking to the bearing in a big way, and that's one of the reasons I was up in Fiji. Haven't been there for over 10 years, but quite a change."

Mark went on to say that, political situation aside, Fiji is making quite identifiable strides. There is better roading, power lines everywhere and significant numbers of new cars on the road.

Remarking on these impressions to Brett Haywood, an ex-West Coast boy, now with a fleet of clean, efficient liners. Brett responded that the Fijian bureaucracy had completely changed.

"Now the government want to help," Brett says.

There's a good FAD programme which

is working well. Fish handling has improved markedly and so on. Of course, things come at a cost and judging by the number of Chinese fishing boats provisioning in Fiji, one wonders how high the price is.

Anyway, the point I wish to make is that this is not the Fiji of the 1980s. Management is interested in doing business and the laid-back ex-pats are giving way to the enthusiastic competence of people like Brett Haywood, encouraged by a government that wants him there.

It's a big change from my day when the success of the business deal came very secondary to tennis, gin-and-tonic and gossiping about other ex-pats.

Fiji has gold-mining and sugar, with forestry, fishing and a revamped tourist industry offering employment.

There can still be a little cultural acclimatisation – you can't always do business the way you're used to doing business, but that's the same when approaching any different culture. Seems the present system is getting things done, and the average Fijian apparently thinks it's great. Besides, coming to grips with somebody else's culture is educational, and is a prime source of anecdotes!

Point is, Fiji is on the move and for Henleys at least, it's business as usual.