

‘The Silhouette’
An investigation into the development
of yacht building, with particular
reference to the small sailing cruiser
known as the Silhouette

Dissertation submitted in part-fulfilment of the
requirements for the B. Ed (Honours) degree of the
University of Exeter

David A. Reeves
May 1979

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Abstract.

In 1953 there came into being a small sailing cruiser by the name of 'Blue Boy'. This small cruising yacht was to be the first of a class of boats known as the 'Silhouette'. The Silhouette as a class has, since its introduction, played a major part in the introduction of leisure sailing in this country.

The principal builder of the boat was to become one of the leading developers of materials and production methods in the industry. Many of these developments made possible the enormous increase in the number of small cruisers built during the 1960's. The great activity of the yacht industry during this period was to fulfil an even greater demand by a public with more leisure and more wealth than it had previously experienced.

This dissertation is about the Silhouette and the people and events that made it and the technology that it pioneered possible. To do this the investigation is directed toward;

- (i) the people who contributed; the designer, the builder, and the owners; without whose demand it would not have been possible.
- (ii) the design of the boat and the subsequent modifications and variations during the period 1953 to 1979.
- (iii) the production methods and the materials that made possible the boats success and its availability.

And finally the dissertation looks at the Silhouette's future and the future of many other small sailing cruisers that followed in its wake. The Silhouette may have passed its heyday but it has lost little of its importance as it continues to bring pleasure to many. In its Mark 5 version it is hoped by its new builder to begin again. A future that remains to be uncertain but which, no doubt, will be worthy of record.

Acknowledgements

Although some of the contents of this dissertation come from my own experience I am much indebted to many people for their help, information, encouragement and goodwill, without which the dissertation would have fallen sadly short of content. To name just a few such people I must begin by conveying my thanks to the central characters; Robert Tucker for his long and detailed letters and for permission to use the plans of the Mk II; George Hurley and Fred Hawkins for their time and patience and Frank Bartlett for his long interesting letters containing much valuable information. These people have helped to fill in much of the historic details. Also concerning historic detail I must thank Mr. Jack Word, retired boat builder, and his wife, also Mr. E. Neal, Chairman and Secretary of Gus Lee & Boswell Limited of Great Yarmouth, for their contribution toward the early history of the Silhouette in Norfolk.

My thanks must also go to many friends and colleagues who worked at the Valley Road factory between 1968 and 1975. To Ken Bower for his contribution toward the chapter on production methods and materials. Ken's experience covers most of the Silhouettes produced in Plymouth, beginning as an apprentice building wooden Silhouettes and ending as Works Manager of Hurley Marine.

For the continuing tale of the little boat my thanks to Mr. Russell Curnow, the new builder and promoter of the very latest version. Mr. Curnow will be re-introducing the boat at

the same time as this dissertation is presented.

In the presentation of the dissertation my gratitude must extend to Mrs Lynne Jervis for her typing and to Mr. John Etches, marine photographer and good friend, and to his wife who printed photographs for me from negatives held by them and taken many years ago.

Finally for the encouragement by lecturers at the College of St. Mark and St. John particularly Mr. Tony Hall whose encouragement has been most helpful.



Introduction.

During the holiday months of the early 1950s, by the quiet waters and reed covered banks of the Norfolk Broads, there were conceived the ideas that led to the design of a boat that was to change the lives of thousands of people. Robert Tucker, a naval architect, and a friend were 'dinghy cruising', quite a common form of taking a holiday by the young and adventurous of the 50s. Dinghy cruising meant that two, or in some cases as many as four, people sailed their dinghy by day and camped on the bank at night. They would carry all the camping gear; tent, blankets, groundsheet and cooking equipment in the dinghy during the day stopping at night to make camp and sleep "on the cold hard ground" as Bob Tucker put it.

Mr. Tucker, a practising naval architect, felt that it would be a good idea to make a 'dinghy' with a lid on. This would reduce the amount of gear carried and offer the comforts of a padded bed, or bunk; to put it in its nautical term. This arrangement would eliminate the hard, damp, and sometimes cold, atmosphere which accompanies sleeping on the bank. There was, of course, limitations, as there is upon the design of any boat; the boat would have to be small enough to be handled to be handled by two people and it could not cost very much to build due to limited funds. The other limitation, and one that removed the concept of a dinghy, was that the boat would

have to be more stable than a dinghy, as Robert Tucker put it, "we did not fancy a capsizable craft."

From the original ideas formulated on the banks of the Norfolk Broads, with the limitation of size, price and stability in mind Robert Tucker set-to to design a "nice little cruising yacht" (Tucker 1978), and in 1953 the first Silhouette was born. Sixteen feet six inches long with a beam of just over six feet, 'Blue Boy' cost £85 to build.

'Blue Boy', built purely as a one-off boat for the designer's own use, had a single chine hull with bilge keels that reached only just below the hull proper. This arrangement kept the draught down to twelve inches - a need imposed by the Broads themselves. The boat's rig was simple, based upon an old fourteen footer's jib and a spare main from a British Moth dinghy. Launched on the Medway in 1953 'Blue Boy' was the first Silhouette and last seen by her maker still sailing the Broads during the summer session of 1968.

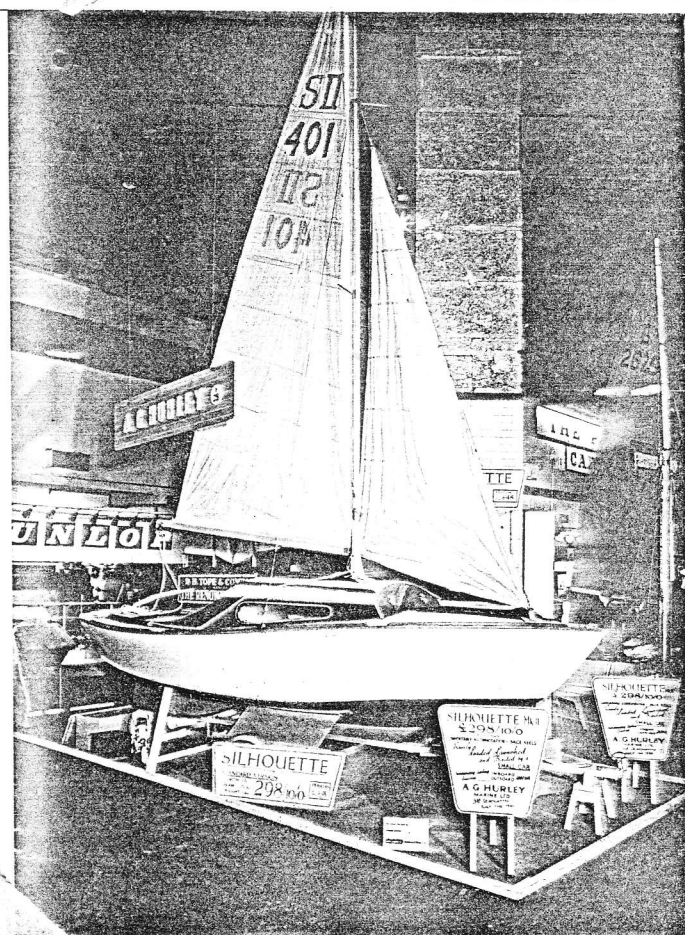
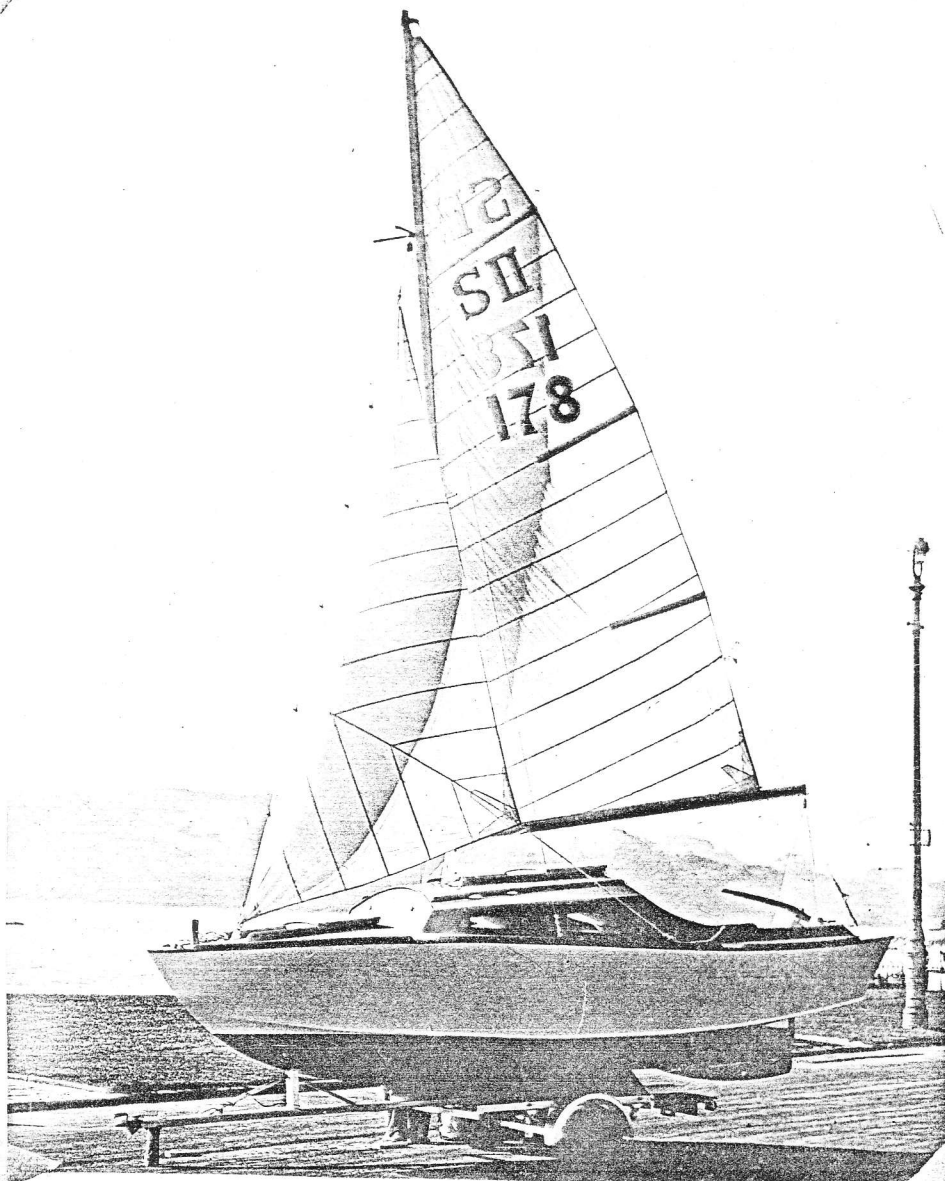
The success of 'Blue Boy' and enthusiastic comments from friends encouraged Robert Tucker to redesign and build another version. Silhouette mark 2, number 1 was named 'Susanne' and was built for just over £100. Bob had become very interested in American yachting and in 1955

the design of the Silhouette Mark 2 was published in the American yachting magazine 'Rudder.' To meet the US market tastes the designer had increased the beam from six foot one inch of 'Blue Boy' to a 'massive' six feet eight inches. In an attempt to eliminate the effects of spray breaking over the shoulder of the little yacht Robert devised the 'Serpentine sheer', an innovation that was to become almost the trade mark of his subsequent designs. The increase in beam and the addition of the serpentine sheer added another nine inches to the sixteen foot six inches of 'Blue Boy' and 'Susanne' became seventeen foot three inches long: the length of all Silhouette's from that day to this.

'Susanne' had other improvements from her predecessor^{cessors}; the biggest change being the moving of 2 cwt, of inside ballast out onto a stub keel and deepening skeg and bilge keels to match: the world's first triple-keel boat; now a widely used shallow draft keel arrangement used by many designers. 'Susanne' still sails, although, when last heard of by the writer, suffering badly from dry rot.

It was in 1956, at a boat show, that Mr. Tucker met Mr. John Caunter. This meeting was to hail the beginnings of the production, on a large scale, of the Silhouette Mark 2s. Mr. Caunter arranged with the Yarmouth boat builders, Gus Lee and Boswell, to build the boats for him

Rever Marine
Launceston Based
C. J. Honey Smith & Co. Ltd.
3



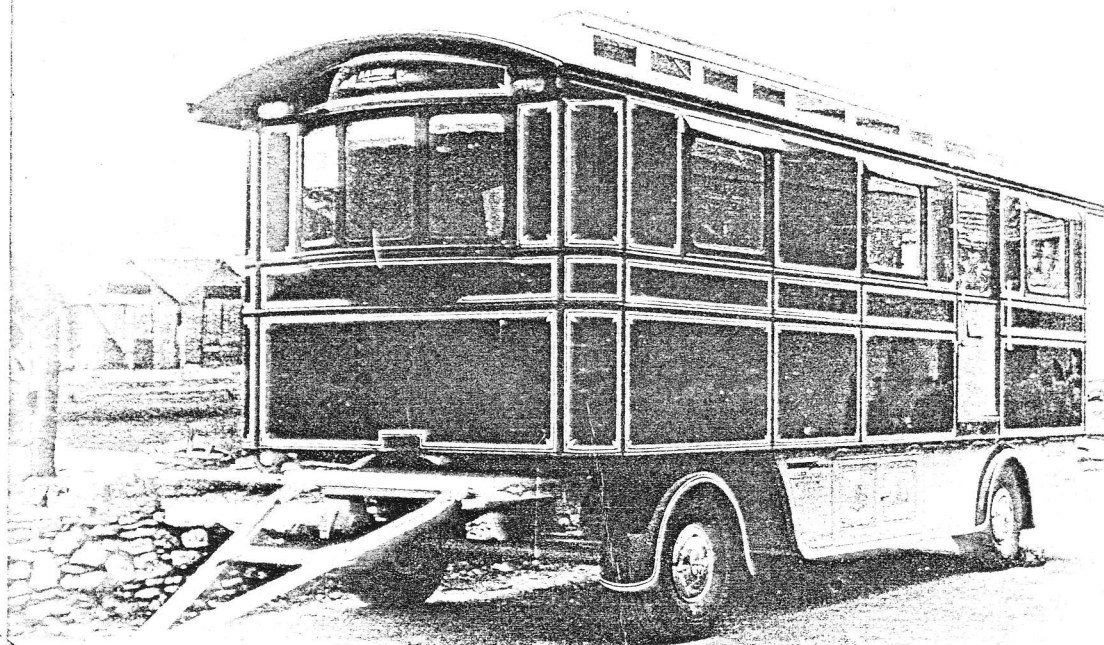
↑ SILHOUETTE MK.II. Note skeg and 'Serpentine' shear.

← SILHOUETTE 401 at Olympia. Note three keels.

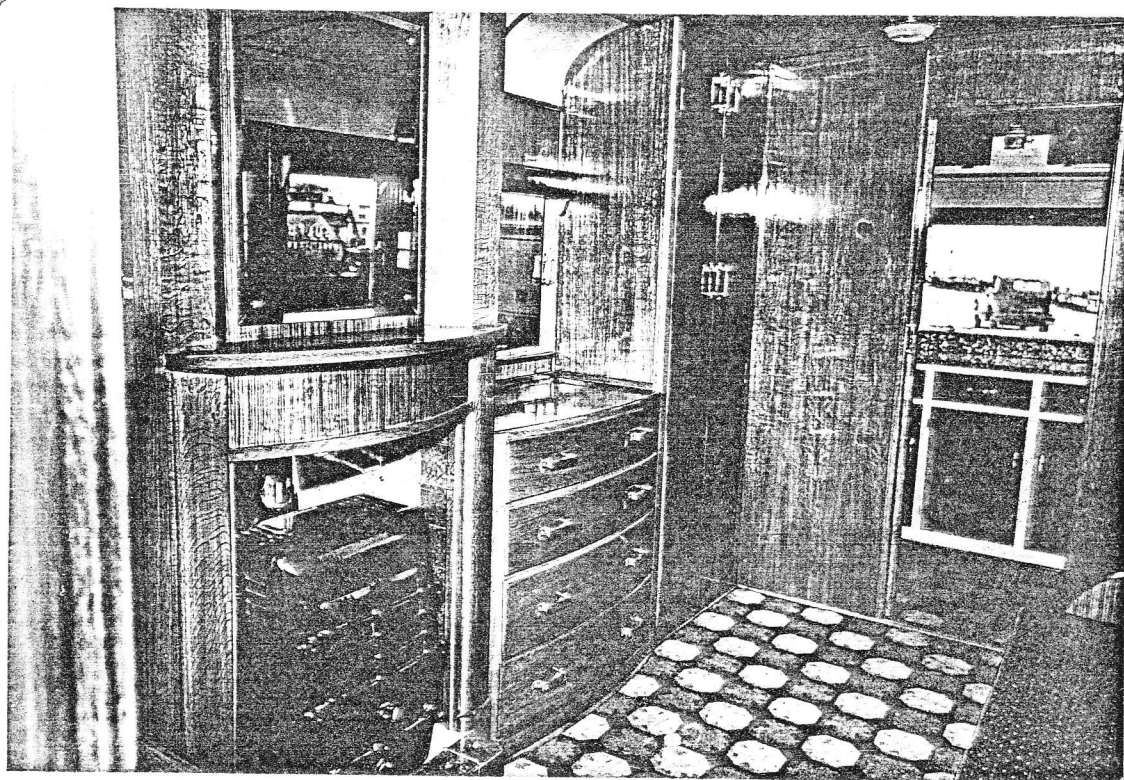
Page 5
line 3
Ferial Marine

The yard built the first twenty four boats which were transported, one or two at a time, down to Sheldon, in Devon, where Mr. Caunter ran a yacht agency, Dinter Marine. Of these twenty four boats, number seven, was put into the 1957 Boat Show in London at a price of £245. At that same show, which in those days was not only a boat show but also a caravan and camping show held at Olympia, in 1957, was an exhibitor who was to be drawn into the web of the Silhouette and whose name was to be permanently linked with the boat and the leisure boat industry. That exhibitor was Mr. George Hurley of Plymouth, George owned and ran a small business in Devonport, Plymouth, building caravans and dealing in the sale of calor gas. At Olympia, A. G. Hurley Esq, as Mr. Hurley's company was known, was displaying caravans. Mr. Caunter, who needed a boat builder in the West Country to make Silhouette's and to cut out the long transport problem from Yarmouth, introduced Mr. Tucker to Mr. Hurley, a partnership that was to change the yachting scene for many people, for many years to follow.

George Hurley born in the first decade of the twentieth century, son of a master-mariner and West Countryman, began his working life in the Naval Dockyard in Devonport. He started his business career in 1946 when he set up in Spencer Avenue, Plymouth, repairing fairground ('Showmen's



SHOWMAN'S WAGON Built by A.G. Hurley 1952



INTERIOR OF ABOVE.

Page 7
line 2
Richmond Walk

as it is sometimes called) equipment and caravans. From Spencer Avenue George moved his operation to Tweedside, High Street, Stonehouse and began building caravans, both showman's wagons and caravans for the up and coming tourist and residential caravan trade, growing throughout the country and particularly in the West Country. In February 1952, the company, A. G. Hurley Esq., moved to Richmond Walk, Devonport to build not only caravans but commercial lorry bodies also.

1953 found George and his family living in one of his own caravans on the Richmond Walk site while they waited for a house to be built. The business, meanwhile, grew and commercial vehicles came to play a bigger and more important life in the company's affairs. By this time George employed five men along with his brother-in-law Mr. A. F. G. Hawkins. Fred, as he was known to most, came to play his own part in the life of the Silhouette, becoming company secretary, the post he held until 1975. The small company did reasonably well building the bodies of meat container lorries and delivery vans. It was the contract for the meat container lorries, for a company by the name of 'Greenaway' of Launceston, Cornwall, that encouraged A. G. Hurley into boat building.

Ernie Miner, then, a young man, now in his 70s, worked for George as a carpenter, Ernie had permission from George

and was building himself a 'Redwing' dinghy on the premises in Richmond Walk. The manager of 'Greenaway' called to see about his meat container lorries and saw the 'Redwing'. Mr. Hurley was approached and asked if he would be interested in boat building also if he was interested in machining some castings for a new outboard motor Greenaway was developing. The idea being that A. G. Hurley built a boat to promote the outboard motor and to machine parts of the engine. These enquiries and the meeting at the 1957 Caravan and Boat Show mentioned earlier coincided to tempt George into going into boatbuilding and production of Silhouettes in Plymouth was begun. Ernie Miner's building the first Plymouth boat for Mr. Spurls of Plymouth.

Short of space at Richmond Walk, A. G. Hurley Esq. applied to the trustee's of the Grande Theatre, then closed down as a theatre, in Plymouth, to rent the building in which to build boats. This agreement was signed on 29th January, 1958 between the trustee's and A. G. Hurley Esq., Boat Builder of Richmond Walk, Devonport. (See documents 'A') This need for space found A. G. Hurley applying for building permission, by June of 1958, on a derelict site in Richmond Walk, "to carry out 'Coachbuilding and Boatbuilding' two workshops, 'A' being 4000 square feet and 'B' 2000 square feet. (See documents 'B') 1958 had brought a complete change to the little company of A. G. Hurley

In the boat show of that year they entered Silhouette Mark 2 number 70 at an all-up price, including sails, mast and spares of £265.

This increase in boat building activity brought problems of space and by the early 60s George had several 'factories' either pre-fabricating parts for, or finishing, Silhouettes, dotted about Plymouth: Grand Theatre 1958, the new building in Richmond Walk from 1959, Eagle Works, Sutton Road, Plymouth, leased from Bryson Brackets Limited 1963-64.

(See documents 'C'). In 1965 the works of Sulfuro-Fertilizer Limited in Newport Street, Plymouth, were also being used by A. G. Hurley Limited (See documents 'D')

By 1966 production of small sailing cruisers throughout the world was catching on but Hurley led the way. As far back as 1961 Hurley had reached a production number of 17 boats built per week, they had contacts with the rapidly expanding American market and were exporting most of their production to the USA. A company name 'Silhouette Marine Incorporated' was set up in New York to market the boat, and who in turn were to influence the introduction of glass fibre as a building material. (See document 'E'). During the mid 60s A. G. Hurley Limited had expanded their range of boats; Robert Tucker had designed the Midshipmen, and Ian Anderson, one time works manager at Hurley's had

designed for the company a small speed boat called 'Tigres' and a twenty foot sailing cruiser 'Felicity', offering the latter as a motor cruiser version.

Other names and events combined to bring change to the Silhouette. In 1961 Robert Tucker had made a few changes in design, bringing the Mark 2 into line with modifications that had happened during the development of the boat and customer demands. *At this time* Two of these customers, although not

buyers had hired a Silhouette for a holiday. *Pat* (This side of the business was another of Fred Hawkins duties) *bought for* The *chartered two Silhouettes.* customers were Mr. Tony Simmons and his friend

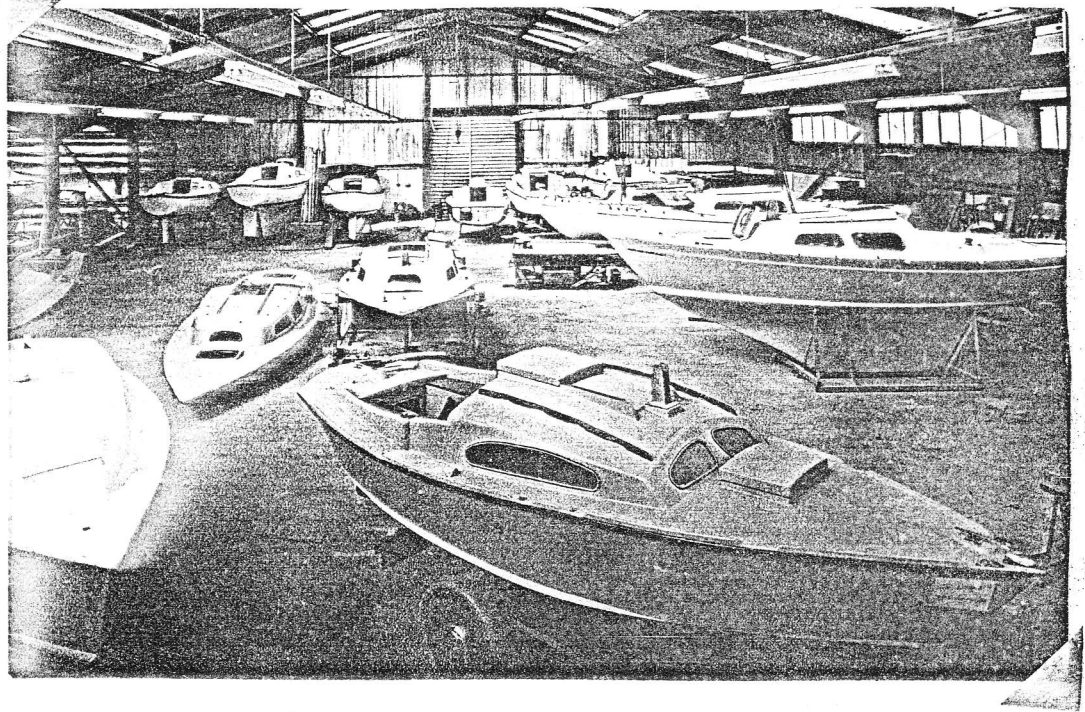
Mr. Patrick Hallam. These two friends worked for a company in *7* Cordingley, in Hampshire, and they knew about glass fibre. During the week of their holiday they suggested to Mr. Hurley that he should build his Silhouettes in this new material. This meeting and the pressure from the Americans, brought A. G. Hurley (Marine) Limited into the glass fibre boat building, a method of building that led to the boating boom of the late 1960s. Moulds were made, Pat Hallam and Tony Simmons employed and Hurley was on the way to becoming one of the largest GRP manufacturers in the boat business. *Pat*

By 1964 A. G. Hurley (Marine) Limited had received the *Lloyds Approval Certificate* approval of the Ship & Boatbuilders Federation, for the standard of manufacture of the Silhouette Mark 2 in both

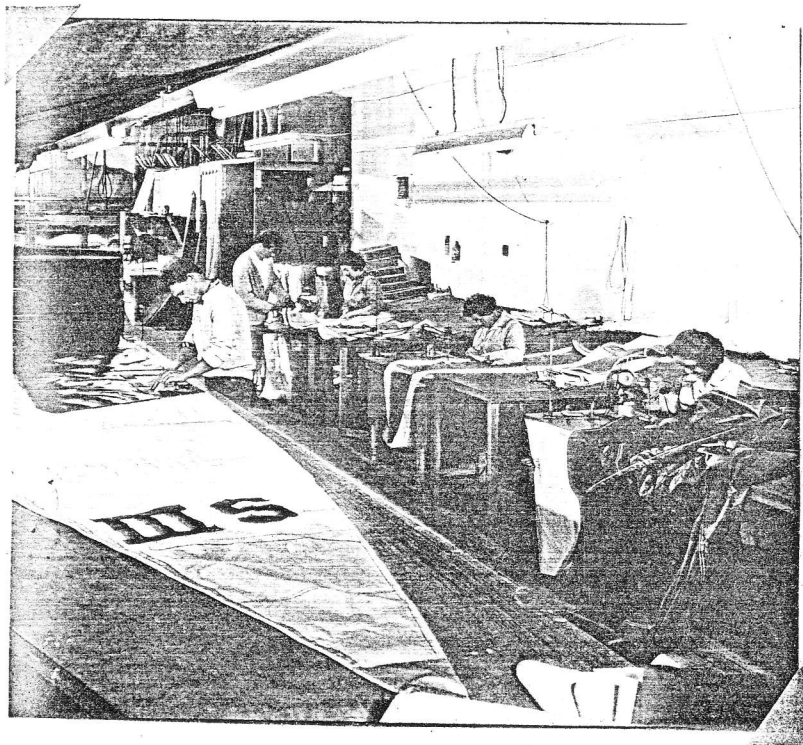
Pat worked for AG Hurley for several years leaving 18 Sept in business building at Bucklebury. Tony Simmons was Hurley's partner taking over from Pat Hallam left 87.

re pages 10/11
all Hurley boats up to 20ft
where built 15 SRRNP
approved standards
glassfibre and its original, marine ply. By 1967
approval was granted for the Mark 3 version of the Silhouette and for the new boats, the Hurley 18 and Hurley 20, both cruisers were designed by Ian Anderson, all three boats were in glass fibre. So advanced were the ideas and methods used by Hurley, in GRP production methods, and so high were the standards that the Ship and Boatbuilders Federation began to use the Hurley standard as the ideal. This standard was also used, and the conditions needed to reach these standards, that Lloyds, the ship insurance group wrote their rule book for the building of GRP yachts around the methods and processes used by Hurley.

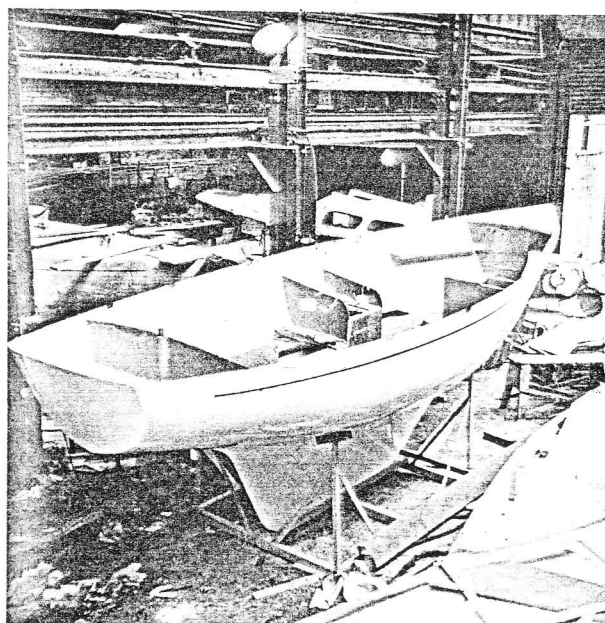
14th Oct 1964
The demand for Hurley boats grew and on the 13th April, 1965 an agreement was drawn up between Maxwell Commercial Properties and A. G. Hurley (Marine) Limited to build a new factory at Valley Road, Plympton on a site of reclaimed land owned by Maxwell Properties. The Factory, five miles outside of Plymouth and three miles from the sea, was to be purpose built for yacht manufacture and would eliminate the use of 'factories' dotted all around Plymouth. The 'factory' had 40,000 square feet of floor space including a Mould shop, purpose built and air-conditioned to produce the ideal conditions for GRP moulding, a sail loft to make the sails for each of the different types of boats being built, a machine shop to make up prefabricated wooden parts, offices, a canteen and stores facilities. Outside the new factory



Interior Valley Road Factory.



Sail loft.
Valley Road.



Building area
Tweedside.

was a 'test tank' in which boats could be tested for leaks and engines run before delivery. Also outside there was storage space for yachts awaiting transport. The 'factory' was to offer all that was needed to meet the growing needs and demands of the leisure boat building 'explosion' of the late 60s. The modern factory never exceeded the old production number of seventeen boats per week but it produced a greater range of boats, many more sophisticated than the early Silhouette. By 1969 the workforce of the company now renamed Hurley Marine Limited had grown to nearly 200, George Hurley had retired due to ill health and the company had a Board of Directors chaired by Mr. Woodrow J.P.

holding
The old company in Richmond Walk, A. G. Hurley Limited continued as a commercial vehicle builder and supplied the aluminium masts and spars for the boats built in Valley Road. It also continued as the parent company.

A. G. Hurley also made road trailers for the boats. This ability to trail your Silhouette behind the modest family car was one of the great selling points of the boat. Owners could, if they wished, take the boat home at the end of the day, or take it on holiday with them. It was not uncommon to find owners using the boat as a caravan in the lay-byes on their way to the south-coast or to