



# The Gerry Gerrand Story

Photos **John Macfarlane**  
and **Gerry Gerrand**

Boatbuilding in New Zealand can be tough and those who remain in business are the exception, not the rule. This August Gerry and Jenny Gerrand celebrated the 40th anniversary of Buccaneer Boats and this is their story.



**B**orn in 1949, Gerry Gerrand grew up on a Waikato dairy farm and, through his paternal grandfather, was exposed to boats and fishing. This left an indelible impression: by age nine he'd decided on either boat designing or bee farming as a career. Boats won.

After leaving school in 1964, Gerrand took up an apprenticeship with Rollo's Marine building plywood runabouts. However the market for plywood runabouts died towards the end of Gerrand's apprenticeship and he transferred to the showroom selling boats and chandlery.

After 12 years with Rollo's Marine, Gerrand left in August 1976 to found what would become Buccaneer Boats. The name Buccaneer came from Gerrand's desire to have a name higher in the alphabet, plus it suited his attitude – "I've always been a bit of a pirate."

Now married to Jenny and with two children, it was a brave move giving up a regular pay cheque. However, Gerrand had spent the previous two-and-a-half years building plugs and moulds for his first boat, a 4.7m cabin boat, typically designed by eye rather than using drawings.

"I can look at something and visualise it finished," he said.

Gerrand had little experience with GRP and, armed with some tips from surfboard builder Mike Court, taught himself GRP construction by laying up dinghies in a mould borrowed from Epiglass NZ.

Setting up his business in a shed on the family farm, Gerrand demonstrated his first 4.7 to four retailers and



came away with four orders. Incidentally, one of those dealers, Roger's Boat Shop, is still a Buccaneer dealer today. The 4.7, and its bigger brother the 4.9, would prove extremely popular models and Gerrand would eventually build nearly 500 of them.

Initially finishing one boat a month was considered good progress, but as demand increased, production ramped up to two per week. The first eight boats were entirely hand laid GRP before Gerrand bought himself a chopper gun and taught himself how to use it.

"Some people say hand laid GRP is better [compared to a chopper gun] but I'd dispute that. A good gun operator can build a better hull than even a good hand layer," he said.

Muldoon's 1979 Boat Tax hit all boat and caravan builders hard but, unlike many, Buccaneer survived. By the early 1980s the farm shed had become too small and Gerrand bought premises in Hamilton. Having more space enabled a bigger range of models and easier production, and eventually Buccaneer were building 11 boats a week. Apart from having to cut back production during various global financial downturns, the most recent being the 2008 GFC, the Gerrand's haven't looked back since.

Maintaining a profitable New Zealand boatbuilding business for over 40 years, especially one predominantly targeting the local market, doesn't happen by accident. A smart, canny operator, Gerrand has developed and implemented a number of key principles, the first being his hands-on management.

"Boatbuilding in New Zealand doesn't really suit corporates. There's been a few corporates getting into boatbuilding and they've often failed."

While Gerrand is involved in all aspects of bringing a Buccaneer to market, he freely acknowledges the contribution made by his longstanding and loyal staff, some of whom have been with Buccaneer for decades. In a similar vein, a loyal and knowledgeable dealer network is critical to success.

Production cost is another key principle, according to Gerrand. "You hear a lot about lean, mean manufacturing these days. Well, I've always operated lean and mean. When we make boats and moulds I'm always asking myself, 'How hard will this be to build?' Because time is money."

This doesn't mean cutting corners, though. If some aspect of laminating a hull or liner doesn't go well – a rare event – Gerrand never hesitates to pull it off the mould, cut it up and start again.

"My attitude is, 'Your first loss is your last loss.' Trying to patch something never works and always bites back later."

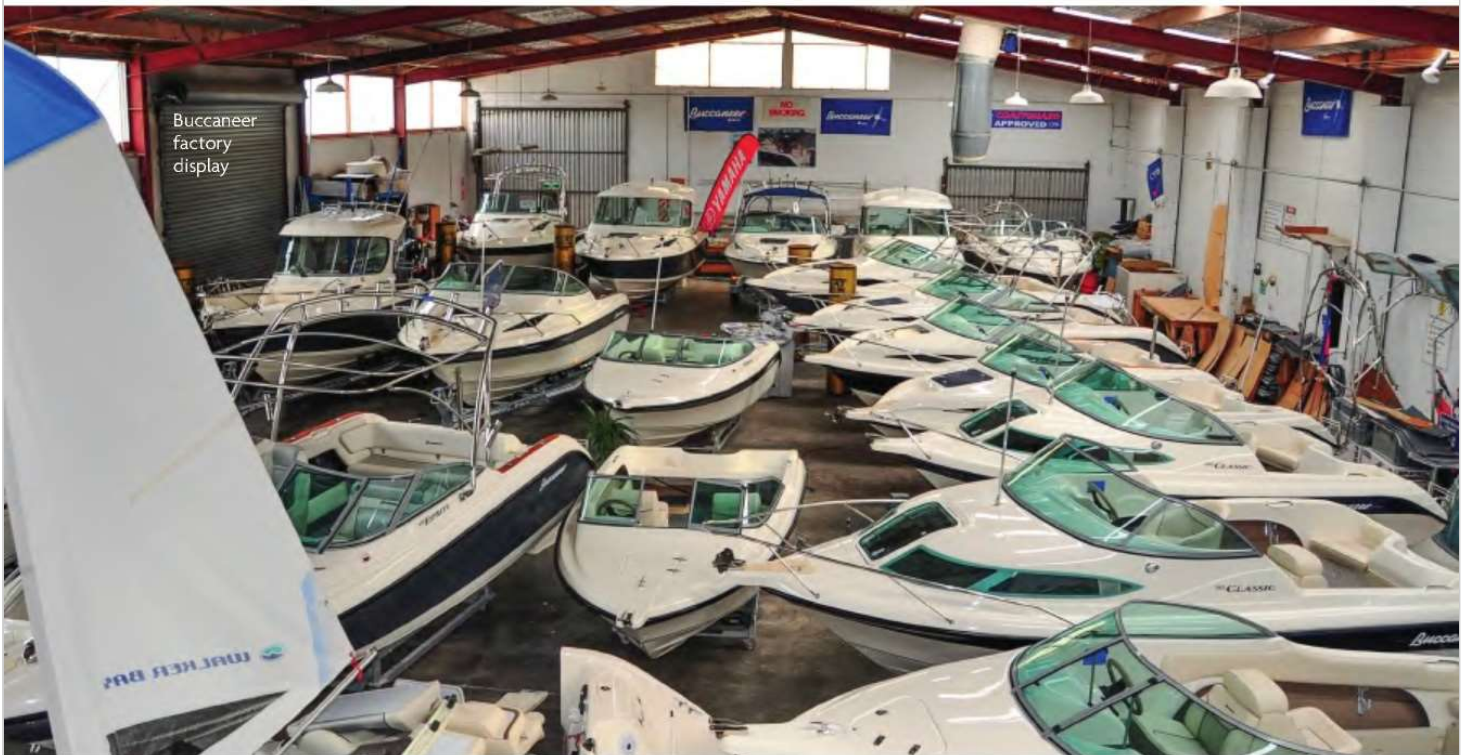
Gerrand is very clear about Buccaneer's core business: "Our skill lies in efficiently building boats between 4.5m and 6.85m. To be successful building boats greater than 7m you have to be a manufacturing retailer."

The last point is significant. Most GRP boatbuilders are manufacturing retailers, and as such collect margins on engines, trailers, fit-outs and electronics. But because Buccaneer doesn't sell directly to the public, their only profit margin comes from their GRP boatbuilding. While this means less income, this approach allows Gerrand to focus solely on building boats.

Since the GFC dealers have tended to cut back on holding stock so the public sometimes has trouble seeing particular Buccaneer models. To support his dealers, Gerrand has created a factory display of the current model range. However, the Buccaneer factory is busy so Gerrand prefers potential buyers to make an



Line up of Buccaneers at a dealer open day



appointment through their dealer or the office rather than turn up unannounced.

The boating market is constantly changing and Gerrand responds by ensuring Buccaneer produces something new each year, whether it's a new model, a refresh of an existing one, or a construction improvement.

While some new models develop from customer requests, Gerrand isn't afraid to bring out models such as the Billfish and El Dorado, which have created their own markets. Likewise, while some of his building innovations have been relatively minor, such as getting BEP to make wiring looms and switching or using Seadeck composite decking instead of carpets, others have been far more complex.

An example of the latter began around 2009 with the staggered

introduction of GRP one-piece hull liners to the Buccaneer range. Whilst moulding a GRP interior liner requires more materials and adds some weight, the benefits of increased strength, faster assembly and a gel-coat finished interior more than compensate.

"Using a hull liner means we don't need a tape measure because the position of every fitting and component is fixed by the liner, which saves labour costs," Gerrand said.

Buccaneer's interior liners are glued into the hulls with Plexus adhesive and the spaces between hull and liner are foam filled, making the boat stronger, stiffer and quieter, as well as providing positive buoyancy.

Another key principle is Gerrand's famously fussy eye for detail, which ensures every Buccaneer is built right. He also prefers avoiding trouble before it starts, for example by declining



LEFT: Hand consolidation of chopper gun applied GRP. RIGHT: typical Buccaneer hull and liner join, foam filled.



**“A good gun operator can build a better hull than even a good hand layer.”**

customer requests which he knows will cause problems later.

“I’ve always told people what they’ve gotta hear, not what they want to hear. There’s been occasions where I’ve told people that maybe a Buccaneer isn’t for them.”

Another significant key in Buccaneer’s success has been by diversifying into commercial property and farming. This diversification gives multiple income streams, helping bridge the inevitable ups and downs of New Zealand boatbuilding.

“Many boatbuilders diversify into other marine products, but to me that’s not diversification,” he said.

However, it’s not all plain sailing. In common with many manufacturers, Gerrand is finding it difficult to attract both apprentices and skilled workers. While he’s a firm believer in training apprentices, despite contacting nearly 20 colleges in the area during the past 12 months, he hasn’t been able to get a single

apprentice wanting to learn GRP production boatbuilding, a depressing thought for the future.

And in New Zealand’s fourth biggest city, Gerrand has trouble attracting skilled laminating staff. For example, he’d spent the previous eight weeks advertising for skilled workers and the best he could get was an inexperienced teenager who will need full training.

Currently, with the market for composite boats picking up, a few more experienced staff would enable more boats to be built to meet this demand. This is especially relevant given the gradual return of the export market, which died with the GFC. When interviewed, Gerrand had just exported his first boat to Australia in eight years and there are more orders on hand.

Buccaneer Boats was founded on August 6, 1976 and since then has built 5,735 boats and counting, so after 40 years is retirement an option? Apparently not.

“People ask me when I’m going to retire – my answer is ‘I’m tired, but not retired.’ I like what I do and I like to come to work each day, so it won’t be any time soon.” ■

Thanks to Gerry and Jenny Gerrand, composite boatbuilding in the Waikato remains alive and thriving.

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