

Gerry Gerrand and son Wade look over the brochure for Gerry's current favourite hull, an Eldorado 85.



Buccaneer Boats marks 40 years

Editor Grant Dixon interviews Gerry Gerrand, a man who has stamped his mark on the fibreglass boat building industry with the iconic Buccaneer brand over the last four decades...

It is ironic that the man who instilled a love of boating in a young Gerry Gerrand should die tragically in a Coromandel boating accident. Gerry's grandfather was lost when he was around 'seven or eight years old'.

"My parents had nothing to do with boats; Dad would have to put a life jacket on to take a duck punt across a drain," Gerry reckons. "It was my grandfather who got me into boating and fishing."

When he gave up a 'perfectly good job' to found what is now an iconic Kiwi boat brand, Buccaneer, his dad said he was 'crazy'. But giving things a go has always been part of the Gerrand philosophy, and has resulted in a number of innovations and model styles over

the years.

Gerry built his first boat around the age of eight. It was constructed of some old iron found on the farm, with the stern made from timber.

Gerry reckons it probably wasn't the greatest design, but it had a bow and a stern and, more importantly, it floated when launched in a drain on the family farm.

Gerry left St Paul's Collegiate in Hamilton at the age of 16 and scored an apprenticeship building wooden boats at Hamilton's Rollo's Marine, under the tutelage of Rollo Dutton.

Some of the course involved regular block courses to Auckland, where he picked up lofting and design skills. A good eye for design was to put him in good stead for future years.

Gerry always kept his future in mind throughout this time. Around two and a half years were spent creating boat plugs and moulds – an aspect at the heart of fibreglass boat building – while still working full time for Rollos. He was given a dinghy mould from Epiglass, and he 'practiced' making fibreglass boats from this.

The day wife Jenny gave birth to son Wade, Gerry left Rollos.

“I started building my first boat in a shed on the farm, with my parents questioning my decision. There was no money coming in and it was six months of learning before I produced the first Buccaneer boat, the 4.7.”

At that point, he would never have dreamed of the numbers of hulls that would follow over the next 40 years.

“It started off at one boat a year, to one a month, then one a week, one a day, to one every work period. At the height we had 27 staff on the payroll.”

In those early days there was no such thing as core materials, just bulk resin and fibreglass cloth. Today there are vastly different resins and gelcoats, which have a low styrene emission – far better for the staff and the environment.

Initially there were limited models – a far cry from today’s 20 different Buccaneer configurations, ranging in length from 4.4 metres up to 7.35, with some hulls having two or three different deck options.

The hulls themselves have evolved too, based on Gerry’s own boating experiences. The first 4.7 had a moderate 17-degree vee; some models today have 22.5-degree deep vees.

Gerry says power-boat racing and rallies helped a lot in formulating hull shapes, as did his own fishing and family boating needs and experiences.

“Auckland’s Atlantic 100 and, in particular, the Epiglass 40 race, was as much about economy as speed, and it taught us a great deal about hull design and efficiency.”

Buccaneer was one of the first to produce a fibreglass hardtop boat. This came from Gerry’s experiences fishing on Lake Taupo’s often changeable conditions.

“I saw the need for a hardtop to add a little comfort to our weekends away.”

Asked to nominate his ‘favourite’ Buccaneer boat, Gerry was quick to mention the Eldorado 685 Hard Top. It is his current personal boat, used for overnighting on the likes of Lake Tarawera, and is well suited to trolling, jigging and fly fishing.

“some people suggest it is a niche boat, but I disagree – it’s a great family boat and the grandkids love it with its freedom to move around, while the centre cab provides them with some space

of their own.”

Buccaneer Boats has always been an innovative company, with Gerry not scared to step outside the square. He was one of the first to build boats incorporating a full fibreglass one-piece hull liner – bow to stern, gunwale to gunwale.

“Building boats this way does use more costly materials, but takes less time. There are no wooden stringers or floorboards. The biggest effort goes into creating the plugs.”

Jerry says it results in a better job, giving the boats longevity as well as making them slightly heavier and stiffer. The internal spaces are filled with a polyurethane foam, making them quieter and with positive flotation.

Some models have been accepted more quickly by the boating public than others. The 550 Classic and the Billfisher range are examples.

“We only built three Classics in the first year, and ended up building three a week for the next few years – and they are still going strong today.”

Billfishers have a similar tale to tell, eventually taking off among the ‘hard core’ sportfishers to create their own market. History is repeating itself with the Eldorado.

Another idea Gerry had was creating full electrical looms for his boats, a concept he took to BEP Marine, who took up the challenge. More recently Gerry also saw the benefits of incorporating SeaDek decking to his boats, with most leaving the factory with this innovative product on board.

In the research and development department, Jerry has a rigid-hull inflatable underway, built on the 605 hull.

“I just wanted to play with one, so instead of buying it, we’re building one.”

He is not sure if it will end up in the Buccaneer model range – “time will tell”.

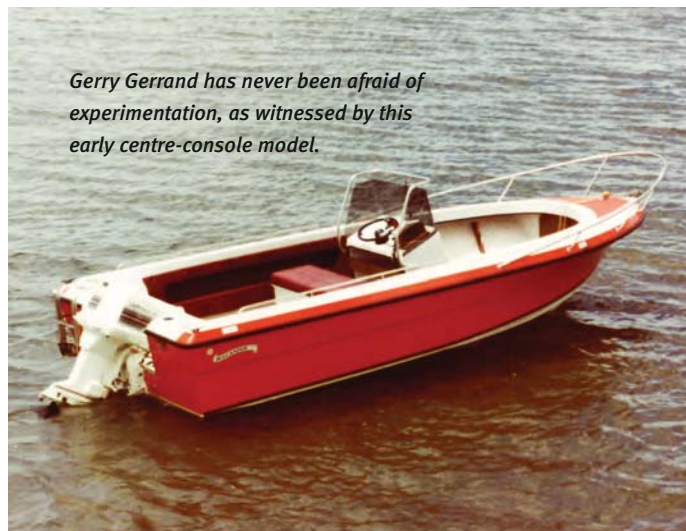
Being able to adapt and change quickly to market forces has been a Buccaneer hallmark.

Fortunately, Gerry has interests in farming and commercial property, which provided a fall-back position when the industry had to deal with the likes of boat-sales tax, the sharemarket crash, and the more recent global financial crisis.

“I started building my first boat in a shed on the farm, with my parents questioning my decision.”



Buccaneer Boat’s number one hull was this 4.7, with number 5739 rolling off the production line as this feature was written.



Gerry Gerrand has never been afraid of experimentation, as witnessed by this early centre-console model.



...power-boat racing and rallies helped a lot in formulating hull shapes...

These slower years were used to develop new models and manufacturing processes, so when the good times rolled around he was able to meet the market full on.

Gerry pays tribute to a number of long-serving staff members who have a true passion for fibreglass boat building and the Buccaneer marque. One such person is David Harris, who joined the staff 27 years ago.

“Dave sold his small business and planned to work for us for just three months while he found another business. Twenty-seven years later...”

Another is Kevin Philpott, who served his apprenticeship with Buccaneer Boats 17 years ago and remains on the team today.

Jerry describes fibreglass boat building as a ‘dirty, dusty business’, but one where people with passion excel, especially those with attention to detail.

“Our customers have become more and more discerning, so we must have the product to match.”

Gerry rues the difficulty in getting staff into the industry. He has always been one to take on apprentices, but finding people willing

to get involved is difficult.

“I don’t know where all the school leavers are, but they aren’t beating down the door to get into boatbuilding!”

Both wife Jenny and son Wade are involved in the business today.

“Jenny has been hands-on for the start, helping with the manufacturing process in the early days as well as administering the business.”

Wade went into commercial fishing after leaving school, working for Sanfords on their deep-sea trawlers for eight years before heading away for his OE. He came back for a mate’s wedding and only planned to stay for three months, but remained, and is an integral part of the business today.

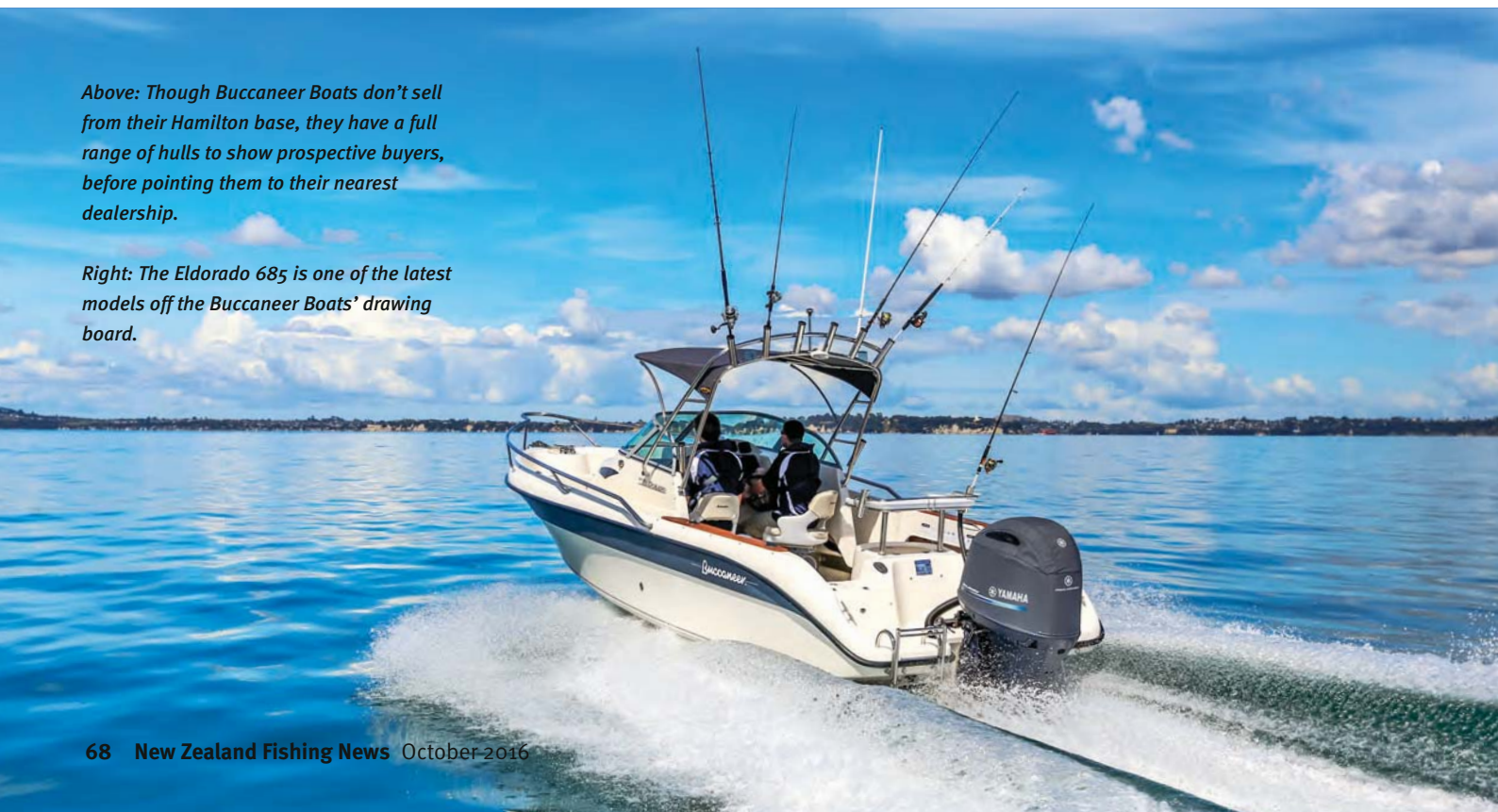
Gerry and Jenny’s two daughters, Toni and Kara, both enjoy boating with their families.

Asked about the future, Gerry says he has concerns for our manufacturing industry, suggesting that perhaps only the niche industries will survive in the long term – “and hopefully boat building will be one of them!”



Above: Though Buccaneer Boats don’t sell from their Hamilton base, they have a full range of hulls to show prospective buyers, before pointing them to their nearest dealership.

Right: The Eldorado 685 is one of the latest models off the Buccaneer Boats’ drawing board.





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