

Thunderstreak – Iconic Bertram 31 Ready to Return Home? The Saga Continues...

Like all good stories, Thunderstreak, a 1963 vintage Bertram 31' race boat has lived life in chapters. Heroes, villains, drama, despair and victorious resurrection have all contributed to her past and created her glorious present. Thunderstreak is perhaps the most decorated race boat, following this year's historic Cowes Powerboat Festival at its 63rd anniversary where she won not only her class, but surpassed boats in other classes, as we watched her fight through rough seas that would sink lesser vessels. She is set to retire after this successful 3rd winning race season under the ownership of driver, investor and historian, Hugo Peel.

Thunderstreak's future depends on the keen appreciation of a new owner, one dedicated to her honor, integrity and history—a tough find, but the story of Thunderstreak should entice that buyer, that collector to see the glory of a priceless racing wonder and to covet her.



Chapter 1 - Beginnings

As the deep-vee hull design of C. Raymond Hunt revolutionized boat building in 1957, Bertram incorporated the design and became a brand name known for performance, based on the sail and powerboat racing expertise of Dick Bertram. Celebrities came calling for the hull and Tommy Sopwith was one, the wealthy, debonair and dynamic racer, son of Sir Thomas Sopwith, yachtsman, America's Cup Racer and designer of the WWI Sopwith Camel bi-plane fighter. Tommy Sopwith raced Thunderstreak in the 1963 Daily Express Cowes-Torquay powerboat race, flying past the stern of Hugo Peel's father's boat, leaving an indelible impression on his every sense. "It was love at first sound!" Peel reminisces, of the vibration he felt in his heart and soul from the thunder of Holman-Moody powered racer.

While the boat raced in the early 60s, it disappeared in the 1970s and after 30 years, was found when a sharp-eyed Classic Offshore Powerboat Club member, spied her, recognizing the Hunt hull, disgraced, abandoned and carrying a houseboat top in an East London marina. While a new owner did a decent cosmetic refurbishing and some racing, fate had Thunderstreak pass by Hugo Peel while boating on the

River Medina in his Paragon 31. The sound of a V8 Ford big block engine caught his ear, reminiscent of that Cowes Torquay race in 1963. Peel was again smitten, but this time, he purchased the boat.

Chapter 2 – Total Restoration – Phase 1

Under the direction of powerboat racer turned Project Manager, the late Peter Hewitt, in 2017, Hugo Peel undertook a total reconfiguration and renovation of the boat. Both structure, with a total Awlgrip repainting of Sopwith's original colors, and power were addressed, starting with stripping out the original V8 Ford Engines which were re-bored, bead-blasted and re-mounted with new pistons, rings, rockers, valves and shaved heads, all blue-printed. Unfortunately, those engines did not survive long past installation and a new engine program ensued. After reviewing a number of options, the standard MerCruiser 435 HP, V8 fuel-injected engines with Bravo X-drives were chosen for speed, durability and reliability. However, their weight and configuration would require a full strip-out and rebuilding of the engine compartment and transom. The team opted for the upside of the massive restoration project and in 2019, work ensued, including re-wiring, re-plumbing, new stringers, bulkheads, flooring and engine bed with new crossbeams, stringers and a mightily reinforced transom.

“Massive” perhaps understates the scope and breadth of the renovation project undertaken by Solent Marine Services, which required the assistance of Winn Willard of Ray Hunt Associates and its naval architects to ensure that the boat could handle the horsepower and be ready to race. All with consideration that the boat was originally built to achieve 30 MPH—very fast for the 1960s.

Spring 2020 brought the debut of the completed boat with Hardin Marine external race steering, extended trim tabs, new stainless steel fuel tanks and fittings, Axiom plotters and a polycarbonate and stainless framed dashboard screen. There was a constant tweaking to every facet of the rigging and cockpit layout, by Will Marine of Poole, England, the new race engineers. And then there was the steering wheel. The old Destroyer type wheel looked out of place in the revamped cockpit with newly upholstered racing bolsters. Hewitt searched through his trophy cabinet and gifted his own leather and stainless wheel to the build—it was the finishing touch and remains a credit to his memory and of his contributions to the team project.

She emerged from her shed looking factory-fresh and all-new, but with added salute to her legend. With both Tommy Sopwith and Hugo Peel as venerable members of the Royal Yacht Squadron and her historic background, Thunderstreak was given permission to race under the name, Team: Royal Yacht Squadron, and under the ensign flag while maintaining “Historic” class designation, using Tommy Sopwith's original number, H400.

Then the Pandemic threw a wrench into the works in 2020, but by early 2021, Thunderstreak was race-ready!

Chapter 3 – Competition – 90% Preparation, 10% Racing

Peel's assembled Team: RYS included throttleman Adrian de Ferranti, navigator Richard Jessel and former Royal Navy and His Majesty's Coastguard, John Simmonds, who joined as project manager after the death of Peter Hewitt. Each came from different boating and sports background but all melded together in spirit and mission—to win. Their early racing days were hard-driven and once resulted in some serious damage to Thunderstreak. After that particularly damaging run, Simmonds sent a message to the team, “You have a choice—continue to race the way you are and break the boat up or change the way you drive the boat.” The team heard the comment loud and clear. It was not that she needed “coddling”—she is a toughly built GRP race boat but Jessel interpreted it succinctly, “Respect my boat—She's an old lady,

treat her well” and so they did. They managed the driving, throttle and navigation with skill and coordination, taking Thunderstreak to her limits with success, rather than into overdrive with repercussions.

The team continued its copious testing program that included over 20 sets of propellers, tweaking instrumentation and changing the ballast in various degrees to find the sweet spot for the boat’s speed and handling. The Team: RYS came together to race and to win, keeping within the boat’s capacity, often outrunning younger and more powerful teams, using wisdom, data and finely honed skills. The next three years saw victory after victory and more trophies than could be collected, many of them perpetual trophies presented in the annual racing award ceremonies, then returned, only to be re-awarded the next year. Thunderstreak and Team: RYS were labeled, “Gentlemen Racers” as they presented themselves and their boat in gentlemanly fashion and as the seniors on the circuit. With an irreproachable reputation and record, Thunderstreak became the undisputed winner of her class, surpassing bigger and higher horse-powered boats--which brings us to 2024. After winning the Cowes-Poole-Cowes Race in her class and taking 10 trophies for categories from “Best Presented Boat” and “Oldest Driver Finishing” to the “First Historic Boat to Finish” and the “Boat Designer’s Trophy,” Team: RYS team stood with broad smiles, chests and pride. They had done it. They had achieved their mission to win and Thunderstreak had proved her mettle.

Chapter 4 – Thunderstreak’s Future

After reaching the pinnacle of racing and seeing his significant investment reaping so many rewards, Hugo Peel feels reluctantly ready to turn the page. Retiring his racing helmet at the age of 75 seems wise and as many professional athletes have learned, it is best to retire at the top of your game. His years of energy, time and funding to this racing project has brought great joy not only to the team, but to race spectators and ardent fans of classic boats, Peel has brought the Bertram 31 full-circle, from its prestigious racing roots, back to its successful racing present.

The future of Thunderstreak belongs to the adventurer, the collector of fine boats, the connoisseur of classics, the person who deserves to inherit the heritage of a grand dame of racing. As John Simmonds quipped after the Cowes Powerboat Festival Awards Ceremony, “It’s amazing how four old men got so much fun out of a 63-year-old broad!”

She makes an impression at any dock, provoking compliments, questions and kudos and the “old broad” still strikes a beautiful profile and performs admirably. The Bertram 31 already has a cult following, but the H400 is a standout with pedigree. Her story will live on, her hull deserves a new port and perhaps a return home to her U.S. roots, where Dick Bertram started the legacy that Tommy Sopwith bequeathed and Hugo Peel sealed in Thunderstreak H400.

To be continued...when she is sold. As to the price tag, Peel comments, “She is priceless.”

