



# LOVE AT FIRST SOUND

THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF A RACING LEGEND.  
BY MARILYN DEMARTINI





John Simmonds took over for the late Peter Hewitt as Project Manager for the final restoration of *Thunderstreak*.



The 60-year-old 31 Bertram, *Thunderstreak* roars through the chop during the 2024 Cowes Around the Island race.

## Thunderstreak – even the name evokes drama.

Offshore powerboat racer Tommy Sopwith named his 31 Bertram competition model *Thunderstreak* when he bought her from Dick Bertram. Back in 1960, this new boat model, with a Ray Hunt deep-V bottom and low deadrise design, had won Bertram the Miami-Nassau race by showing incredible prowess in rough water. Dick Bertram was an accomplished sailboat racer and that original 31-footer would be replicated as a plug for the fiberglass powerboat he went on to create in its successful wake. “There were so damned many yachtsman waving checkbooks at me,” he would say. “I *had* to go into business!”

Tommy Sopwith, millionaire, socialite and heir of Sir Thomas Sopwith Sr., inventor of the Sopwith Camel bi-plane fighter, was one of those checkbook-bearing yachtsmen. After winning the 1961 running of the storied Cowes-Torquay race with a wooden, Ray Hunt-designed 25-footer called *Thunderbolt*, Sopwith was intent on winning again in 1963 with the 31-foot *Thunderstreak*. Cowes-Torquay is an offshore,

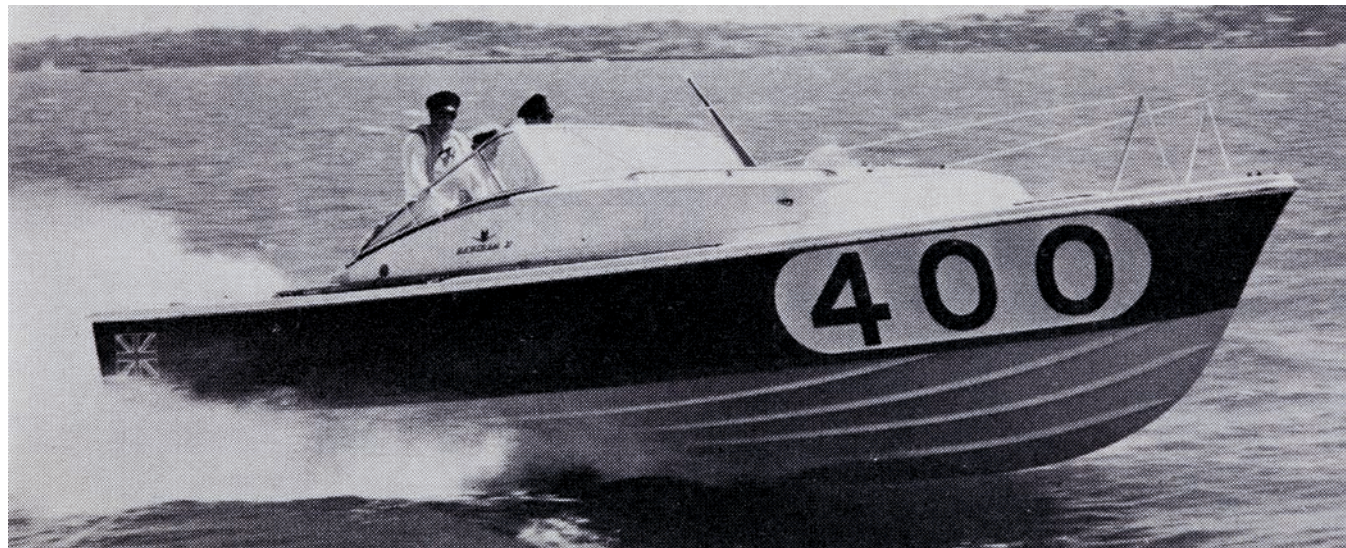
230-mile event that has for decades been revered as one of the roughest and most treacherous tests of race boats and racers, and it remains a coveted title for adventuresome offshore competitors to this day.

But Sopwith would never have imagined how the name *Thunderstreak* would impact the boat’s illustrious future. Nor could he know how much a young English lad, perched on the transom of his father’s boat during that 1963 Cowes race, would have his life changed. “It was love at first sound!” Hugo Peel recounts. Peel would mature into a successful businessman who himself could never have predicted how his own relationship with *Thunderstreak* would one day unfold.

In the 1960s, the boats built around Bertram’s Ray Hunt design were sometimes stronger than the engines they housed. During the 1963 Cowe’s race, Sopwith’s thunderous powerplants failed, earning him a disappointing DNF following his 1961 win. He soon abandoned *Thunderstreak* for other boats and ventures.







Sopwith (center), a millionaire and socialite celebrates with teammates Charles De Selincourt (left) and Don Shead (right), noted English boat designer and builder, after winning the 1970 Cowes-Torquay-Cowes race in Shead's design, Miss Enfield II.



But other Bertram 31s with names like *Moppie* (Bertram's wife's nickname), *Glass Moppie*, *Blue Moppie*, *White Tornado* and even *Mona Lou*, the 25-foot Bertram owned by Mercury Racing's Odell Lewis, went on to win numerous races and prestige in the U.S. and Europe. *Thunderstreak*, though, was all but forgotten. After being relegated to storage, she was found 30 years on as a forlorn London houseboat. The sharp eye of a Classic Offshore Powerboat Club member spied the Hunt hull and a new owner, Robin Ward, restored her to respectability. In 2015, American offshore racer Jeff Hall traveled to Cowes to compete with Ward, but that year they broke a V-drive. The following year, they snapped a shaft, putting a hole through the hull and nearly sinking just seven miles from the finish. "It was like there was a dark cloud over that boat," said Hall.

While on a cruise on the Isle of Wight's River Medina in 2017, Hugo Peel, a member of the esteemed Royal Yacht Squadron, heard a sound that turned his head. It was the rumble of a Ford big-block V8 engine, and when he saw the refurbished *Thunderstreak*, the nostalgia of that 1963 race filled him with the emotion of a smitten young lad. Peel bought the boat.

The iconic 31 Bertram still needed much TLC. Peel entrusted the late powerboat racer Peter Hewitt as Project Manager for *Thunderstreak's* next renovation. A total structural overhaul—down to an Awlgrip re-painting of Sopwith's original colors—included stripping out and re-boring the V8s, which were bead-blasted and re-mounted



Simmonds was the architect of *Thunderstreak's* rebuilding and surveyed every inch of the new engine package before and after each race. Above: The new engine block of the H400 raceboat and the transom, hull and deck had to be totally rebuilt.





with new pistons, rings, rockers and valves. Unfortunately, one of the brand-new—and essentially impossible to duplicate engines—failed, putting the whole project in jeopardy. After serious consideration, a repower ensued and the team chose new 435-horsepower MerCruiser V8 fuel-injected engines with Bravo X-drives. However, the weight of the repower required a full strip-out and rebuilding of the engine bay and transom, including re-wiring, re-plumbing, stringers, bulkheads, flooring and crossbeams.

Ray Hunt Design President Winn Willard and his naval architects also got involved in the renovation, ensuring that the boat, which was originally built to race at 26 knots, could handle the extra power. “*Thunderstreak* remains one of my favorite projects,” says Willard. “I’ve enjoyed following its path over the years.”

Tweaked by the race engineers at Wills Marine of Poole, England, *Thunderstreak* was outfitted with Hardin Marine external race steering, extended trim tabs, new stainless fuel tanks, Axiom plotters and a polycarbonate- and stainless-framed dashboard. The old Destroyer-type ship wheel looked ill-fitted against the newly upholstered racing bolsters and dash. Hewitt, who had painstakingly overseen the renovation, searched through his personal race trophy cabinet for something else, finding and gifting a leather and stainless wheel to the build—a finishing touch and credit to the master.

With both Tommy Sopwith and Hugo Peel having been members of the Royal Yacht Squadron and the boat’s storied past, *Thunderstreak* received permission to race under the Royal Yacht Squadron team name



The Team: Royal Yacht Squadron with owner, Hugo Peel, throttle man, Adrian de Ferranti and navigator, Richard Jessel return from the 2023 Round-the-Island race.



and fly a white ensign of “historic” racing class designation, using Sopwith’s original number: H400.

Tommy Sopwith passed away in 2019 at the age of 86, but for the post-pandemic 2021 racing season, Hugo Peel assembled a formidable team in his honor. It comprised of throttlemaster Adrian de Ferranti, navigator Richard Jessel and former Royal Navy and His Majesty’s Coastguardsman John Simmonds, who joined as project manager after Peter Hewitt passed away in 2021. Each came from different boating and sports backgrounds but all melded together in a single spirit and mission—to win.

The team continued a scrupulously disciplined 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. They ran hard—perhaps too hard—in one race, causing some serious damage. Afterwards, Simmonds sent a clear 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 pilots understood Simmonds to be saying, “She’s an old lady, treat her well.” And so they did. Team Royal Yacht Squadron demonstrated their joint racing talents by driving, throttling and navigating with skill and coordination, taking *Thunderstreak* to her limits of 52 knots with success, rather than into overdrive with repercussions. It seemed the dark cloud had lifted as the new race season in England began. Indeed, at the Isle of Wight Race, she topped 60 knots. “She took off like a frightened frog!” Peel said in his English accent.

Team Royal Yacht Squadron, labeled “Gentlemen Racers” due to both their senior status and demeanor, came to outrun younger and more powerful teams by using wisdom, data and finely honed skills.

The next three years saw victory after victory and numerous trophies and titles—an irreproachable reputation and record.

When I visited in August of 2024 for the 63<sup>rd</sup> running of the Cowes-Torquay Powerboat Festival, its first joint venture with the P1 Offshore racing circuit, I witnessed *Thunderstreak* at her best, maintaining a roaring sound and a commanding presence despite torrential rain and treacherous seas.

She surpassed bigger and higher-horsepower boats, taking first in her class in the Cowes-Poole-Cowes Race, second overall and earning another 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 Royal Yacht Squadron stood at the awards ceremony complete with a British marching band wearing broad smiles and plenty of pride. *Thunderstreak* proved her mettle, a testament to hard work, a huge financial investment and commitment to win.

The next chapter of *Thunderstreak*’s story is now in the hands of Berthon International’s yacht broker, Hugh Rayner. Hugo Peel somewhat reluctantly retired his racing helmet at the top of his game at the age of 75. He decided *Thunderstreak* should perhaps return home to her birthplace in the U.S., in the hands of a collector, an adventurer, an ardent admirer of history and as an example of Dick Bertram’s world-class boatbuilding—and perhaps as an iconic pace boat for offshore racing. While Peel will not offer an “asking price,” he considers her “priceless,” especially after the fortune invested in her renovation. As John Simmonds quipped after the team’s last Cowes Powerboat Festival Awards Ceremony, “It’s amazing how four old men got so much fun out of a 63-year-old broad!” □