

THUNDERSTREAK

Built in 1963, a classic Bertram 31' undergoes a historic transformation.

Performance boat enthusiasts appreciate technology and how hulls and engines work together to create the power they love to *feel*. But before the technology we've come to expect the performance that kick-started powerboat racing began with engineers, designers and builders like Ray Hunt, Dick Bertram and Carl Kiekhaefer, who created what became the performance industry. Their history laid the groundwork for the outrageous power we have today. Their tales are the backbone of the performance industry we love.

The 31 Bertram known as *Thunderstreak* is an example of how, in 1963, Dick Bertram pulled a new Bertram 31 Competition model from his production line for millionaire pilot, yachter and racer Tommy Sopwith to replace the 37' boat that he had ordered but was seriously damaged before delivery. Sopwith equipped the boat, named *Thunderstreak*, with Holman & Moody 7-litre Ford V8 engines with Velvet Drive gear boxes, Aqua Glide Vee-drives on the shafts and entered England's Cowes-Torquay race—one of the most storied and

rough races on the international circuit. Hugo Peel, then a young lad, watching the race from his father's boat *felt* the power of the boat as it thundered by and called it "Love at first sound!"

When that engine blew up, disappointing Sopwith with a DNF (as did a number of other racers who gave it additional tries with modified power), *Thunderstreak* disappeared into a storage shed in Cowes. Some 35 years later, it was spotted as a dilapidated houseboat by a sharp-eyed Classic Offshore Powerboat Club member,

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Left: The 1963 trials in Solent, with Tommy Sopwith at the helm (nearest) with Ford/Holman & Moody engineers.

Below: Robin Doxford raced Thunderstreak in 1978 with equal lack of success.

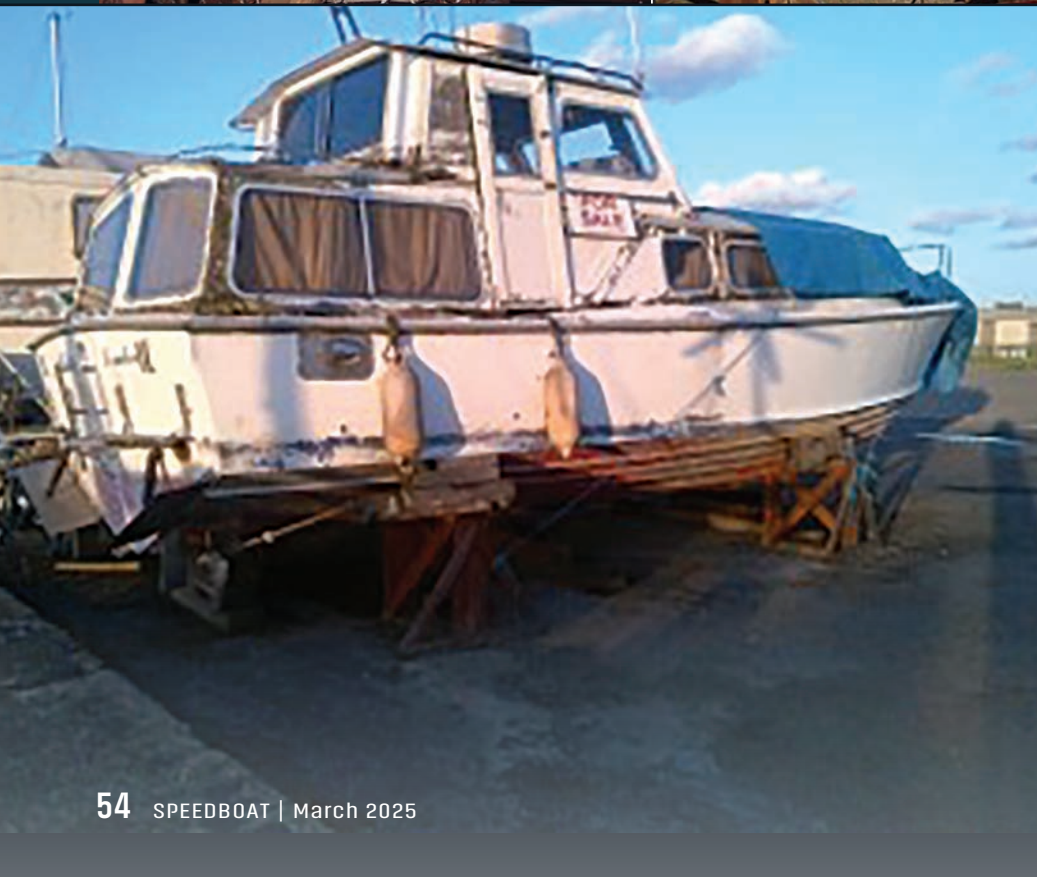
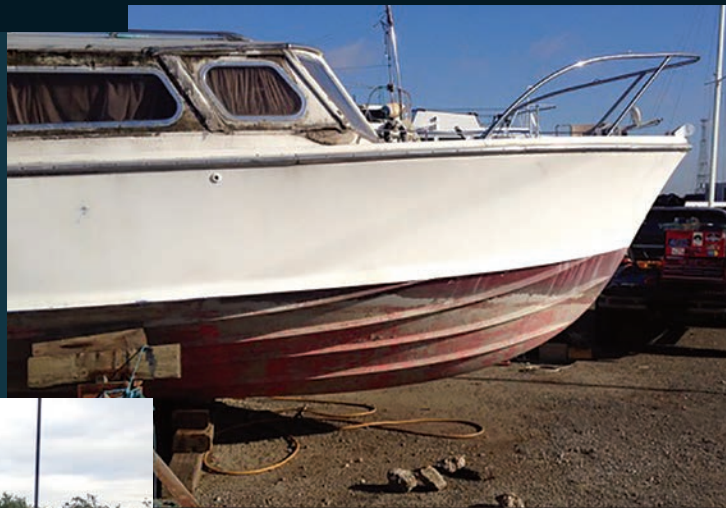
Bottom: Awards ceremony with *Team RYS* (left to right): Tommy Sopwith HRH Princess Alexandra, *Daily Express* newspaper proprietor Sir Max Aitken, racer/designer Don Shead and navigator Charles de Selincourt.

Left: Maintaining the “Historic” class designation, Hugo Peel used original owner Tommy Sopwith’s racing number, H400.”



THUNDERSTREAK

Discovered in East London marina, the hull was used as a houseboat by Mike James and Robin Ward.





Left: Team Royal Yacht Squadron on *Thunderstreak* after the 66.6-mph record Round-the-Island Race in 2024.

Below: H400 passes Hurst Castle on the way to line honors, Class 1st and selling UK National Championship for the third consecutive year at Lymington Challenge, 2024.

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Commodore Mike James. The boat was rescued by Robin Ward and rebuilt to its former appearance. Again, it earned a DNF in the Cowes-Torquay race of 2015, and in 2016, Ward nearly made it to the finish when he hit an object hidden in the rough waters and was beached.

Just when it would seem that *Thunderstreak* was born under bad stars, in 2018, Robin Ward had his repaired boat out for a ride on the River Medina when the sound of its 7-litre Ford V8s caught the finely tuned ear of Hugo Peel, who was also out for a cruise in his 31' Paragon. When Peel sighted the 31' Bertram, he recalled the day he heard that rumble at the Cowes-Torquay race. Music to his ears, he made a deal, bought the 31' Bertram and began his quest for a total restoration.

Peel also ran into a number of issues, as the old wooden boat and its V8s needed extensive work. His refit team decided on MerCruiser 435-hp HO V8s with Bravo 1X sterndrives. That necessitated a full strip-out and rebuilding of the engine compartment, as well as re-wiring and re-plumbing. It also needed new stringers, bulkheads, flooring and engine bed with new crossbeams and a seriously reinforced transom.

Modern-day Ray Hunt Associates and its naval architects participated in the renovation supervised by the late project manager, Peter Hewitt, ensuring that the boat could now handle speeds of 55 mph—as it was originally built for the then, fast speeds of 30 mph!

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. Every facet of the rigging and cockpit layout was tweaked by new race engineers. The old Destroyer wheel looked out of place in the revamped cockpit with newly upholstered racing bolsters, so 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 contributions to the team project.

Thunderstreak emerged from her shed looking factory-fresh. But she also enjoyed an added salute to her legend. Since both Tommy Sopwith and Hugo Peel were and are venerable members of the Royal Yacht Squadron and given her historic background, *Thunderstreak* was given permission to race under the name Team Royal Yacht Squadron. That title may not resonate with some in the U.S. but the respect born by the Cowes-based Royal Yacht Squadron and running its ensign flag was indeed a big deal

to Hugo Peel. Maintaining the “Historic” class designation, he used Tommy Sopwith’s original number, H400, a tribute to her DNA.

Though the pandemic threw a wrench into the works, by early 2021, *Thunderstreak* was race-ready under Peel’s assembled team of 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.

Early racing days were hard-driven and once resulted in serious damage to *Thunderstreak* prompting Simmonds’ 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.” Sage advice to all boaters! The team understood the boat did not need “coddling”—she is a toughly built GRP race

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Left (left to right): Adrian de Ferranti (throttles), Richard Jessel (navigator) and Hugo Peel (owner/driver).

Below: Trophy haul! *Thunderstreak* has won every trophy possible between 2020 and 2024.



Above: Members of the Royal Yacht Squadron clean up at 2023 BPRC Cowes-Torquay-Cowes races.

Below and right: *Thunderstreak's* MerCruiser sterndrives and extended Lenco trim tabs, gearbox cooling-showers. With its many championship decals, the boat is shown en route to win the Cornish 100 race.



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boat, but they understood the message: "Respect my boat—She's an old lady, treat her well," and so they did. They managed driving, throttle and navigation with skill and coordination, taking *Thunderstreak* to her limits with success, rather than into overdrive with repercussions.

Since Peel and Simmonds run precision operations, copious testing included over 20 sets of propellers, tweaking instrumentation and changing the ballast in various degrees to find the sweet spot for the boat's ideal speed and handling. *Team: RYS* came together to race and win, within the boat's capacity, often outrunning younger and

more powerful teams, using wisdom, data and finely honed skills. The next three years saw more victories and trophies than could be collected. *Thunderstreak* and *Team: RYS* were labeled "Gentlemen Racers" as they presented themselves and their boat in such 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* stood with broad smiles, chests and pride. They had done it. They had achieved their mission to win and *Thunderstreak* had proved her mettle.

Like most smart athletes, Peel chose to retire at the top of his game, hanging up his racing helmet at age 75. The future of *Thunderstreak* now belongs to a new adventurer, a collector of fine boats, a 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!"

Peel believes *Thunderstreak* should return to her U.S. roots, and asked if I thought she would make a good poker-run boat. She makes an impression at any dock, provoking compliments, questions and kudos as the "old broad" still strikes a beautiful profile and performs admirably. She would need a few added comfort options like sun pad lounges on the relocated engine covers and some refinishing of the cabin, which was emptied for weight savings, but for the connoisseur of classics, *Thunderstreak* could be a fun and impressive pleasure boat. She is sturdy, totally renovated with modern technology and needs a new home where she'll receive proper respect and yield great pleasure. We enjoyed the trip to scenic Cowes to experience her powerful ride and sound and she can arrive in the U.S. via a number of yacht shipping agents. Dick Bertram gave her pedigree, Tommy Sopwith gave her history and Hugo Peel gave her an illustrious present and presence. While I see him as the hero, he gives that title to *Thunderstreak*. Her next chapter could be yours! **SB**



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