

# The Hookham Cat Principle

Very few designers and boatbuilders can actually claim to have created a unique design, but the recently retired Port Macquarie NSW based boatbuilder, designer and shipwright Mark Hookham is one of the handful that can. Creator of the ubiquitous Markham Whalers, and later, his family of Dominator powered cats, Hookham has had a profound impact on Australian recreational boatbuilding standards. In this special look back at how it all began, in his own words, he explains the history and motivation behind his exceptional 50 year boatbuilding career.

by Mark Hookham

In the beginning there was a very serious 16 year old surfer / board rider / Newport Surf Club lifesaver, who hated school, could not wait to finish the Intermediate and had no plans for any future career.

Fresh out of Manly Boys High School (of which we were in the very first intake of the then brand new school opened in 1958) and looking for pocket money for the holidays, I talked Bruce Steber, a local boat builder, clinker dinghy specialist and one man business, into giving me a part time job over the Christmas - New Year period. Bruce operated from a shed at the rear of his house in Ocean St Narrabeen. At that stage of my life, I had absolutely no knowledge of boats or any interest in becoming a boat builder.

During my short initial period with Bruce, witnessing a truly talented craftsman and the sheer beauty of watching a boat, plank by plank, being created by an outstanding



wooden boat builder, I became infatuated with the whole process.

After the top plank went on, we would fit steamed ribs, stringers, seats, tea tree knees and finally, prepare for the painting or finishing process.

Within two weeks, we had a finished, traditional, beautiful looking dinghy. I was hooked.

I talked Bruce into a full time apprenticeship and became his first employee.

Bruce was a master craftsman and an expert in his field. I never tired of the work and I have never regretted the decision to become a Shipwright / Boat Builder. I still get an adrenaline rush when I think back to those early days in the back yard of

Left: This is the production GRP version of the unique 3.8m multi-purpose family cat Hookham designed, which won the 1976 Chrysler Outboards design competition in *Australian Boating* magazine. Heaps of fun, stable, safe and sailed surprisingly well.

Right: So near, yet so far. The single engined Whaler promised much but never delivered, despite the Chrysler 90 being rigged on the transom every way possible with every prop available. At this point, Hookham was ready to give the whole project away, as weeks had been spent on three versions trying to get it sorted.

Ocean St. Narrabeen.

A bit of trivia that may appeal to those who know us. Allan, Bruce's son, and now head honcho of the famous Steber International boat building company, was two years old in those early days. He would sit, (with runny nose and all) in his nappy, under our feet playing in the wood shavings whilst we were

