

Sails of the centuries



Jeckells the Sailmakers first made sails back in 1832. **Camilla Herrmann** visited the company's loft in Wroxham, Norfolk

Chris Jeckells, the current boss of Jeckells the Sailmakers and the seventh generation of the company to be involved, has a lot of tradition to live up to.

The founder of the company, back in 1832, was a fisherman in the North Sea. "He wasn't a very good fisherman," says Chris. "He was always last back to port, and got the worst price for his fish. His sails were worn out and he couldn't afford to buy replacements, so he decided to make his own. He didn't have a clue how to do it, so he laid the panels in what was then considered the 'wrong' direction. When he rigged the sails he found he was first back to port!" He was obviously better at making sails than fishing, so he started making sails for the other boats, and the rest is history.

Much more recently, in the 1970s, Raymond Jeckells, Chris's dad, used to sail with Chris and his brother as crew. Raymond wanted his sons to be able to sail fast downwind without the hassle of a spinnaker pole. He recalled that older generations had made a sail called a balloon jib. With a bit of work he created a new downwind sail which was rigged initially with four shackles, later two and then none. The family called it the "Lazybones" sail, but it became the cruising chute.

Chris started work at the family firm as soon as he was allowed to: sailmaking has always been his passion. In 1981, his father told him that he needed to develop his own projects. At that time the first spinnaker snuffers were being made in the US. Chris describes them as looking like "a giant Slinky" and for a 28ft boat the cost was almost £200. He told his father "I could make a thing to control a spinnaker or cruising chute – at a sensible price!" He took a plastic bucket, chopped a hole in the bottom, and sewed it to a nylon tube, then went out and tested it until it was workable. They originally called it the Yo-Yo... because it went up and down.

Jeckells modified it so it had a canvas funnel instead of a

bucket, and took the new snuffer to the next London Boat Show with a simple pricing structure: £19.99 for a boat up to 25ft, £29.99 for a boat 25-30ft, and £39.99 for a boat 30-35ft. It was easy to make, easy to use – buyers got a black-and-white instruction sheet – and easy to stow. At that first show Jeckells sold 180. The idea took off, and although many details have been changed, the basic principle remains the same. And over the years, Chris reckons he has spent more time at the London Boat Show than anyone else in the world.

In the 1970s and 1980s British sailmaking was a very different world. At one time Jeckells was making sails for many of the British yacht builders, including Westerly and MacWester, and had five lofts at its base in Wroxham, Norfolk. Nowadays there's just the one loft, but sailmaking is a vastly more efficient process. Jeckells was among the first lofts in the country to introduce Macintosh computers with 3D design software, followed by the installation of laser cutting. Every sail is now made of laser-cut panels which can be handled individually until the complete sail is assembled, so much less space is needed. A complete set of sails can be cut and marked up for a Wayfarer dinghy in just 183 seconds.

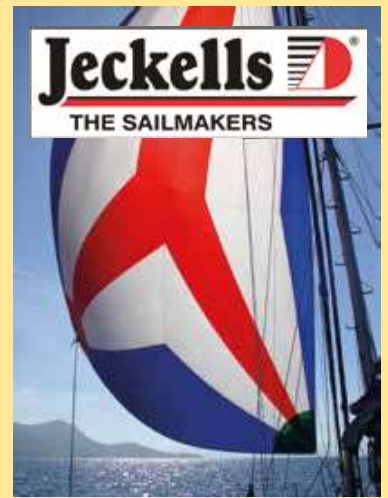
Of course not every innovation goes completely smoothly. Chris first saw lasers being used industrially at a factory in Hertfordshire, where they made holes in teats for babies' bottles. "I came back and I said 'I know what the future is'. No more problems with threads rotting – we'd spot-weld sails together with a laser. Well, it was the worst idea ever, because melted polyester goes crisp, which is the last thing you want in a sail."

Jeckells can and do make racing sails, especially for smaller boats, but their typical customer is a cruising sailor who wants a





Sailmaking through the 20th century. Top, Chris's grandfather and great-grandfather using electric light for the first time. Above, all-male team in the 1950s. Below, busy years of the 1960s



Sail away with a Jeckells cruising chute – CA members' prize draw, see page xx.

Above, panoramic view of the Wroxham loft, purpose-built in 2004. The laser cutting table is covered in dark red sailcloth. Far right, Chris Jeckells is proud of making sails in the UK

set of durable, performance sails. And every sail is still made in the UK – something Chris is very proud of and many customers ask for. The team can travel anywhere in the UK, or indeed in the world, to measure up your boat and discuss requirements. For example, a tall skipper won't appreciate a low boom. And genoas are designed so that at most points of sail the helmsman can see under them, which is always helpful in busy waters. Chris used to spend six months a year away from home but these days, even before Covid-19, he spends a bit more time in Norfolk.

Chris is passionate about getting things right and making sure the customer is happy. He tells the story of a Kent-based customer who ordered sails for his Victoria 30. When Chris phoned a few weeks after delivery to check that all was well, the customer said, "Well Chris, I wasn't going to say anything, but as you've phoned, I'll tell you that the sails are crap." They met that evening at Gillingham Marina, 140 miles from Wroxham, and the customer explained that he could tell he wasn't going fast with the new sails because his gunwales weren't underwater. Chris persuaded him to strip off the new sails and re-rig the old ones, go for a sail and log the speed, then reverse the process and log the speed with the new sails. A few days later the customer called Chris back. "I'm sorry," he said, "I've been a complete prat." The boat was going faster with the new sails, but thanks to their efficiency she was heeling much less. ➤



Above, cruising chute ready to be shipped. Below, selecting sailcloth for the laser cutter. Right, materials ready to use and below right, the sewing machine operator sits in a cutout on the loft floor



Jeckells has also worked with charter companies to increase the life of a typical yacht sail from one year to three, by reinforcing and strengthening where required – no mean feat, considering their hard life.

Chris says that many sailors, including some of his customers, have no idea how much technology goes into a modern sail. He goes all over the country giving talks about sails and sailmaking, and says: "At 90% of the talks someone comes up afterwards, waits until everyone else has moved on, and then tells me 'Up to now, I never realised that sails weren't flat!'"



Jeckells values its staff, and its independence. In the 1920s Chris's grandfather took on a business partner but bought them out after a year or two. More recently Jeckells became part of a sailmaking group, but soon decided to go its own way again. The boom and bust years of

Jeckells aims to recycle or preferably re-use where possible. Sailcloth roll-ends may be used for bags or other small items... or in this case, made into a sail

the 1970s and 1980s showed the company the value of being able to pay its bills and have considerable reserves available. That's paid off during the Covid-19 crisis: so far no staff have been made redundant and there are no plans to lay anyone off. "We owe it to our staff to look after them," says Chris. Employees typically join the company and stay, in some case for 50 years or more. There are normally apprentices working with the company and they are currently looking for two more.

When we visited Jeckells in October 2020 they were the busiest they had ever been at that time of year. Sails were being sent out all over the world, with packages heading to Malta, the US and Australia's Northern Territory – interestingly, the cost of couriers has come down considerably in recent years. "I'm not sure if this is people starting the season late or finishing it early," said Chris. Brexit is another concern, with the likelihood of more paperwork and perhaps delays in deliveries, although the company is well prepared in terms of stocks of materials. Whatever the outcome, Chris is confident there will be a market for Jeckells sails for many years to come.

■ Jeckells the Sailmakers offers CA members 10% off sails, sail handling systems, rigging and reefing systems. Please email sales@jeckells.co.uk or call 01603 782223 for a quote.

Seeing double?

Jeckells the Sailmakers, www.jeckells.co.uk, is not connected to Jeckells & Son Ltd, upholsterers, covermakers and chandlers, jeckells.net – although they were originally founded by the same family and are both based in Wroxham.

