



Cleaning up your act

Twenty years ago John Stokes saw a gap in the market for a high-end valeting service using specially created products. Now GR Pro-Clean is going from strength to strength

The story began in 2002, when John Stokes wanted a new challenge. With the support of his family, he left his long-term sales manager role and took on a new franchise business with a company called GR Pro-Clean who specialised in environmentally friendly products, created specifically for the cleaning of white fibreglass boats. For the first few weeks things were a bit quiet, then finally, the first client requested a boat clean... and was delighted with the results.

For the next few years progress was

slow but steady. Working carefully and meticulously John could clean three to four boats a month, but of course this was not enough to sustain a viable business. Things had to change, and as admin wasn't one of John's strong points his wife Linda set up the "office under the stairs" and for the first time organised the filing, accounts, and invoicing systems, which she still over-see's today.

John started to look further afield for sales – into Essex and East Anglia, and then the Thames which proved to be a

much more fruitful option at that time. Sadly, this still wasn't enough to call it a full-time job, so John made ends meet by taking on work as an HGV driver and occasional gigs as a part-time singer and guitar player.

By 2007 the business had expanded into the Thames area and had begun to develop good professional relationships with marinas and boatbuilders, at one point providing valeting services to Sunseeker at the London Boat Show. John started to build a team, initially





Opposite, above and below: The Repair Shop for boats? The owner of this cabin cruiser couldn't believe the transformation. Above, sailing yachts get the same treatment. Right, the team outside the Shepperton base with Chris and John in the centre.

of casual labour, and then of part-time professional valeters. "For me, the business had to succeed," comments John. "Failure was not an option." John found that once he had done work for a client, they kept coming back, perhaps because he put his heart and soul into doing the best possible job for them.

The original founder of the GR Pro-Clean business, a Norfolk-based chemist with a passion for sailing and clever cleaning products, offered John the opportunity to take over the business as a whole. "This was too good to refuse," says John. "We felt that the products were amazing and we decided that for now we would run the business as a stand-alone operation. Then having acquired GR Pro-clean we were also offered the products as well, which we now market under our Ensearch label.

'It's been a privilege working with my son. We've had an amazing journey'

"We have two brilliant unique core products, Fibreglass Hull Cleaner and All Over Boat Cleaner," says John. "These are used to prepare the gel coat before we commence polishing and they ensure that we get the best possible final result. The correct use of these products is fundamental to our success. In terms of polishing and waxing we are constantly researching new products, currently we're getting high quality finishes using the Yachttec range of polishes and are so pleased with the results we have been achieving that we have now become their local area distributor."

A natural choice for the expansion of the business was the recruitment of John's son Chris, who had been involved with



the business since he was just 14. Chris was appointed director in 2011 at the age of 21. He is now responsible for most of the day-to-day activity in running the business and will take over as managing director following John's retirement in September 2021. You are just as likely to see Chris machine polishing in the morning as having a business meeting in the afternoon. "It's been a privilege working with my son", says John. "We've had an amazing journey and I'm happy that the business is in the safest hands."

Working together, they had to decide whether to continue as "a man with a van", or to expand the business. Canopy cleaning, regular monthly wash-downs, cleaning and brightening teak as well as internal valeting and even bilge cleaning were added to the list of services.

Chris was determined to build a brand which would be recognised by clients, but that meant taking on more employees, which brought its own challenges. "Sometimes clients were coming to us and asking, 'Could John or Chris do the job personally? We had to find a way to keep that personal touch and build relationships with our clients at the same time as introducing a new person who would be responsible for looking after their pride and joy. That's a crucial part of the way we work," says John.

Nowadays all of the staff have significant professional experience before they join GR Pro-Clean. Some have worked

Some services on offer

GR Pro-Clean can of course clean and polish your boat inside and out, but it also offers a few services you might not have thought of.

Most services are available **at all the marinas on the Thames**, including St Katharine Docks, Limehouse and South Dock. Call GR Pro Clean to discuss other options.

- **Nationwide** canopy cleaning and re-proofing service including repairs and alterations. This is the only service available across the UK. Canopies are treated in a dedicated workshop and a clean will typically cost a few hundred pounds for a canopy which is basically sound, and return it to a near-new state.
- Bilge cleaning: in the engine bay and areas below the bottom levels of decking, safely removing and cleaning contaminated water.
- Shampoo clean of carpets and headlining removing staining from mould growth and mildew.
- Treatment of damage where hot swarf from an angle grinder leaves tiny fragments of hot metal embedded in the gel coat, which rusts to 'freckles' on the surface. A fully trained valet takes a couple of days to remove these stains completely, ready for polishing.

CA
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Worth over £2000

GR PRO-CLEAN
CLEAN - PROTECT - MAINTAIN

WIN a professional boat clean

INCLUDING
Canopy Clean and Re-proof Service
and a £100 cleaning bundle

www.grpro-clean.co.uk

The advertisement features a large image of a white boat being cleaned by two people. Below this, there are two smaller inset images showing a boat canopy before and after cleaning, labeled 'BEFORE' and 'AFTER'. The background is a dark blue gradient with white and yellow text.

Franchising into the future

When John first started cleaning boats, he was a franchisee... for a company that he later took over. Now the wheel has come full circle and next year GR Pro-Clean, with Chris in charge, plans to start looking for its own franchisees, learning from John's experience 20 years ago and the many changes since.

Rather than recruit more staff and acquire more offices, John and Chris decided that the best approach would be to find self-employed individuals who had the same passion for work and relationship building that they have, and offer them a ready-made business package. They have already done much of the work to get this ready, but with the pandemic affecting so much in the business world, they wanted to ensure that they had a genuine "business in a box" ready to offer.

In some areas of the UK, the busy Solent for example, there are already many competing cleaning businesses. So Chris won't be handing over a franchise package until he is sure that each territory is really viable; that means not just plenty of boats, but also owners willing to spend money on keeping them looking their best.

Turn to page 9 to find out more about our CA members-only summer prize draw with a prize worth £2000

on superyachts around the world, others are professional sailors, one is even a waterman. Each employee is given a branded van, a complete set of branded clothing and is expected to represent the company in a professional manner. In addition Chris wanted to ensure that the company was highly visible so began to look for suitable premises. In the spring of 2014 he set up the first marina-based office at Penton Hook, near Staines. A further base at Shepperton Marina, Middlesex, was opened in 2017.

By 2020 more than 500 customers were being served each year across marinas up and down the River Thames, and canopies from all over the UK were arriving at the dedicated cleaning and re-proofing facility.

To get the very best out of GR Pro-Clean, John and Chris really like to see a boat when it's in a very poor state – dirty, scuffed, neglected and smelly. If you have seen *The Repair Shop* on BBC1, that's the kind of reaction they like to get from customers... delight, astonishment and a little bit of disbelief. "Clients frequently say 'You're never going to get that out'", says Chris. "But our aim is to get it back as close to showroom condition as we can, whatever the age or state of the boat."

A full clean, machine polish and wax of an average 30ft boat will certainly creep into four figures but is good value when you consider the end result. "Increasingly people are seeing this as part of the regular spend on their boat," says John.

"In my world cleaning is not a subjective thing," adds Chris. "Either a boat is clean or it's not. Our aim is to present our client's boat in the best possible condition, it really is that simple." The fundamental values that the business was founded on, of first-class service, transparency and emotional investment are as true today as they were 20 years ago. "We're only ever as good as our last job," says Chris.

With an eye on the future, John and Chris will still work closely together, hoping to share their concept with others who are passionate about the work, with the launch of GR Pro-Clean franchising across the UK in 2022, so watch this space... there's a lot more to this story.



Discount for CA members

GR Pro-Clean offers a **10% discount** to members on all its canopy cleaning services (UK only) and boat cleaning services (Thames area). See its website www.grpro-clean.co.uk, email info@grpro-clean.co.uk or phone 01733 572496