

Bright sparks



Chris Dobson set up as a marine electrician just as the credit crunch arrived. With his trusty ex-British Gas van he drove back to success, and he now runs UK Marine Electronics in Whitehaven

After many years of working in industry designing and building one-off machines, I decided that it was time to turn my hobby into a business. At the time I was living in Yorkshire and although I was close to the port of Goole, seagoing vessels were way beyond my experience. So slowly I started to offer my services as a marine electrician to narrowboat owners. I had recently rebuilt my own boat on a very tight budget, and although it was only just over 18ft long I spent many happy weekends with my children on Lake Windermere.

As time went by we progressed to larger and faster boats and of course they had more and more problems, all of which I fixed myself.

In March 2000 a 10-knot speed limit was introduced on Lake Windermere, effectively making our power boat all but useless. So, we moved to the sea in North Wales. Our first berth was at the new and totally undeveloped Deganwy Marina. The facilities were limited to a couple of Portakabins and very basic, but it was the start of a journey that would take me to where we are today.

After completing the Day Skipper course I remember our first venture out to sea in our 24 foot Bayliner powerboat. Despite meticulous planning and constantly checking the weather forecast the first trip out was both thrilling and terrifying in equal measures. Our route took us on day one up the Menai Straits, via the notorious Swellies, to Caernarfon. Day two took us out of the shelter of the Straits, through Caernarfon Bar and onward to Port Dillaen. It was there that the wind speeds increased to what appeared to be a terrifying storm. In

Right, the yard at Whitehaven and below, development in the workshop



fact it was little more than a Force 3, but in a 24-foot motor cruiser, getting soaked by waves splashing over the bow constituted a storm.

However I had become a boating junkie, and shortly afterwards I purchased a 24 foot Beneteau Antares. After kitting it out with the latest electronics and new battery systems I spent the next few years cruising round Anglesey and across to the Isle of Man.

In 2005 I made the decision to become a full time marine electrician. I let my home in Yorkshire and rented a small flat overlooking the Menai Straits and the Swellies, and also rented a run-down shop in Beaumaris, to run my new venture from. I put everything into that place and along the way met and worked for a lot of interesting characters, like Stan Zalot, who runs Puffin Island cruises. After months of work, putting everything I had into the business we finally opened on the same day the credit crunch began, in August 2007. Business dried up very quickly and in order to survive we had to get rid of the shop. I could just manage to buy a second-hand British Gas van which was perfectly set out as a tool kit on wheels. This helped me to survive and start to recover from the credit crunch.

During this period, I was always accepting challenges for the weird and wonderful, including designing and building an electronics system for a lone transatlantic rower. The system performed brilliantly, and this spurred me on to accept more challenges.

In 2009 a friend took his boat to

Whitehaven where Marina Projects had just taken on the lease for the harbour. Come along, he said, there is no one here working on boats. There was no going back. I started working out of my trusty British Gas van, and over the next 10 years built the business slowly. We became Raymarine dealers, Navionics Dealers and did a lot of work with Victron Energy products. Finally, Victron approached me and eventually became a full Victron Energy dealer.

Today located in the boatyard building at Whitehaven, I specialise in marine electronic and power systems.

Current and recent projects include:

- Pilgrim, the yacht featured In the Victron video on our site, where an advanced lithium power system and a brand new Raymarine navigation system were integrated.
- As well as Victron power systems we are also specialists in NMEA2000 systems and are working on a joint project with Sky Marine Alert to produce a one-app solution for remote monitoring and security of your boat.
- The refit of an Itama 75 in France, despite being a luxury vessel in its own right it is fact a logistics vessel for a 75m superyacht. Two years ago, I upgraded all the navigation electronics and this refit is installing an 8KW Victron power system.
- Upgrading the electronics on a brand-new Lagoon 52. I am currently designing the power system which includes a massive lithium energy storage system. The installation will be in Gibraltar when the current crisis is over.

■ The continuing maintenance and upgrading of a privately owned Sealine F42-5. This vessel was purchased in Windermere, and after being fitted out with a complete Raymarine navigation system we helped launch her in Gibraltar and spent a week showing the new owners how the systems worked. We make annual visits to check the systems out.

■ Closer to home I look after the electrics on the Windermere Jetty Museum, and it is a real privilege to work on these classic boats. Our current project is *Penelope II*, a passenger launch, we have designed and carried out the wiring and supplied the diesel engine for this vessel. In the past we have wired the classic Chris Craft *Jane* and the steamboat passenger launch *Osprey*, both have been in service at the museum for the past year.

■ On the not so boaty side, we have recently received an order for a power and tracking system for a habitation pod on an off-road MAN truck which will travel around the world. The client said "Design it like a yacht – it has to be that good."

We temporarily closed the business in April, mainly because it would be irresponsible to remain open and also to reduce costs to a minimum. However we continue with our design and quotation services, which can safely be carried out from home, and as *Cruising* went to press we were hoping to start working safely in the Whitehaven yard. You can find out more at www.ukmel.co.uk.



Top, Chris fits a Raymarine radome on Pilgrim's mast. Left, the master switch system and right, Victron's Smart BatteryProtect unit

