



# The art of conversion

AS REFITS GO, A CONVERSION IS PRETTY EXTREME – TAKING A BASE BOAT, USUALLY FROM A COMMERCIAL BACKGROUND, AND TRANSFORMING IT INTO A YACHT. FOR ONE COMPANY, BASED IN THE PHILIPPINES, THIS IS NOT THE EXCEPTION, BUT THE NORM

words: Tim Thomas

photography: courtesy of HYS Yachts

It is often said that great things come from chance encounters, and for Philippines-based HYS Yachts (formerly Harbour Yacht Services) this couldn't be more true. The two yard heads – engineer Mark Prangnell and naval architect Simon Jupe – met when they were on neighbouring yachts anchored in Singapore in the 1990s.

'I used to work for Bill Dixon, and we had a guy who wanted to build a wooden schooner in Malaysia,' explains Jupe (pictured top right). 'I came out to project manage it. I was rigging the schooner in Singapore – it was around 1990.'

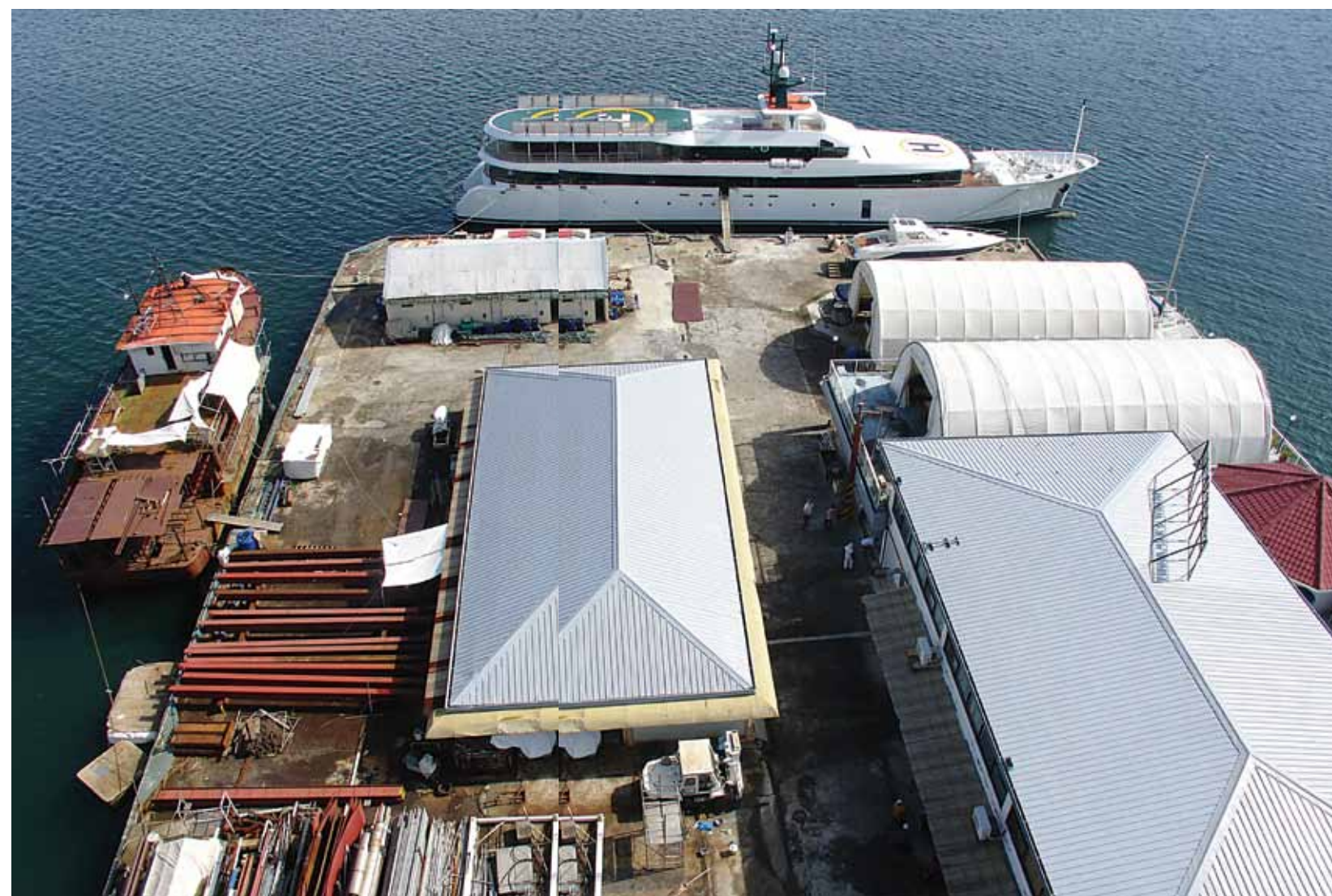
Prangnell (pictured top left) takes up the story: 'I was working on board an 1896-built 36 metre yacht as engineer at the time, so we've known each other for a while. I then worked for Prometheus Marine, and did a few big refit projects in Singapore. I was sent to the Philippines to do some work on a Filipino-owned 90-footer (27.4 metre), did six months and then realised there was no one here who could do what I do. So I bailed from Singapore in 1997.'

Jupe, meanwhile, was running a consultancy covering both commercial vessels and yachts, and was advising brokers and captains on the then new MCA coding.

But how did HYS emerge from these disparate strands? I

managed to pick up the distribution for Onan (generators), and that led me to doing smaller boats as a one-man band,' continues Prangnell. 'Then one Filipino with a 60-footer (18.2 metre), a passionate boater, called me and said he was thinking of buying a Feadship. It was on at \$35 million, and he didn't know if it was what he wanted. I suggested perhaps that he should buy an older yacht, do it up, use it as a trial horse and learn where he wanted things. That was in 1999, and that first vessel – an old cadet training ship from Japan – became our first project (see page 86). I got Simon – who was still based in Singapore – to do the design.'

More than a decade and nine conversion/refit projects later, HYS continues to go from strength to strength, with a solid ethos and a waiting list of clients. There are no swanky offices or tiers of management, just Prangnell on site – he works on the projects every day alongside the Filipino yard workers – and Jupe working largely remotely from his home in Thailand. Meanwhile, the yard workers are now fully up to speed with what is required in terms of superyacht finish. The yard itself is located in Subic Bay, which was for a long time home to the American fleet. As a result, there is a wealth of shipbuilding experience and



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While some conversions retain the look of the original donor vessel – such as the 37m fisheries training vessel *Wakachiba*, which became *Blue Hunter* (below, on the right) and subsequently *Dr No* – others, such as the 48m fishing research vessel *Hokko Maru* (below, on the left) which became the 50.8m *Northern Sun*, are almost unrecognisable

knowledge of associated skills in the area. ‘Most of the workers have been with us for 10 years,’ says Prangnell, ‘and the learning process is now over.’

The thrust of HYS is still conversions. ‘Conversions are usually driven by clients,’ says Jupe. ‘We’re not aware of other people doing it on a continuous basis. The owners are typically very experienced, and want something nonstandard – they have very specific ideas and requirements, which up until quite recently haven’t been satisfied. For this part of the world in particular you need self-sufficiency. Yachts built on a commercial platform are rugged and autonomous and able to run 24/7. There’s a feeling of security – for the crew and engineer too – because things are fixable rather than too complex. Also, with most of our projects, you can leave the Philippines and get to Panama on one tank of fuel, so you don’t need to bunker mid-Pacific.’

HYS sources its project vessels largely from Japan, and has connections with good brokers who keep Prangnell and Jupe informed every week of what’s coming up at auction. ‘We tend to favour Japanese government ships,’ says Jupe, ‘as they are quite local to the yard, they are exceptionally well built, and they are in impeccable condition. They are generally hydrographic and research ships, and some are quite young – *Dr No* (recently completed for Tom Perkins) was just 13 years old, for example.’

The key is finding the right boat, but it is getting harder. HYS finds that most clients prefer the 40 to 50 metre sizes, but many of the vessels coming up for auction now are 70 to 80 metres. ‘We look at vessels from other parts but they tend to be run down,’ says Jupe. ‘It doesn’t take long to do an assessment, to look at the technical areas, the overall geometry, and work out the potential.’

With suitable donor ships becoming harder to find, will HYS ever consider building new? At the moment, it has



The transformations can seem extreme, as with Japanese meteorological research vessel *Shumpu Maru* (top) which, in just 10 months, became the 48.5m *Western Isles*



drawings for a 75 metre new design that a client is interested in, but the plan would be to have the hull built at a specialist yard – perhaps in China or Taiwan – and then treat the project like a conversion. The hull lines are based on the existing naval architecture of a Norwegian seismic research vessel.

The other advantage of conversion is cost. ‘You could have a 40 metre vessel like *Dr No* with a 4,000 mile range,’ explains Prangnell, ‘or you could have a 30 metre Azimut with a 400 mile range...’ But there is more to it than that. ‘It’s not cheap for cheap’s sake,’ explains Prangnell, ‘it’s engineering back to the heart of what engineering is and building a yacht on top of it.’



The transformation of the vessels includes both the practical and the cosmetic – from reworking the interior GAs to finishing them to modern superyacht standards. For more information and to see more of the yard’s conversions, head to [www.hys-yachts.com](http://www.hys-yachts.com)

