

# From bluebacks to chart apps

Imray Laurie Norie & Wilson is one of the best-known names in modern maritime publishing. **Camilla Herrmann** visited the St Ives headquarters to find out how Imray has grown from its historical roots to where it is today

St Ives is a quiet market town on the River Great Ouse in Cambridgeshire, 50 miles from the sea. A few metres away from the river, on Broadway, is Wych House, a large elegant house with square nineteenth century facade. A small plaque by the door lets you know that this is the headquarters of Imray, Laurie, Norie and Wilson. It's an unexpected location for one of the best-known names in yachting publishing.

It's also unexpected that of the 25 or so people working in the building, not one is a cruising yachtsman. The focus of the company is firmly on publishing, and they leave expertise in sailing, and knowledge of ports, anchorages, tides and much more, to their authors.

## History

Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson was formed in 1904 from the merger of three existing producers of charts, pilot books and reference works for seamen.

- **James Imray and Son**, which had used the Imray name since 1836 but had origins going back to 1781, was a chart publisher based in the Minories in London, also selling nautical instruments and its seminal reference work, *The Lights and Tides of the World*, which was published until 1957.
- **RH Laurie**, dating originally to 1746, was a chart publisher in Fleet Street responsible for nautical directories covering the oceans of the world.
- And **Norie and Wilson**, operating under that name since 1883 but going back to 1793, was a chart publisher operating in Leadenhall Street and perhaps best known for *Norie's Nautical Tables*, a set of mathematical tables which remains an essential requirement for anyone learning and practising astro-navigation, and is still in print with the most recent update in 2007.

By the end of the 19th century all three firms



were encountering problems. The core of business for all of them was the "blueback charts", navigation charts backed with blue manila fabric which were used by merchant shipping around the world. But the growth of British and US government charting agencies, and especially the UK Admiralty charts, was undermining this strength. Bluebacks were generally more expensive than Admiralty charts, but offered additional information with inset charts of ports and harbours – a tradition which is still maintained in today's Imray charts.

William Wilson, then managing Norie & Wilson, realised that where three small companies might fail, a single larger one had the critical mass to succeed. The three firms combined over several years with the merger complete by 1904.

The first half of the 20th century saw frequent ups and downs for the united company, as the Admiralty gradually edged Imray out of its core market of navigation charts and reference works for merchant seamen. As early as 1892 the Norie and Wilson catalogue included a selection of publications for yachtsmen and had opened a yacht fittings department in The Minories, which operated until 1914, encouraged by William Wilson who was a keen yachtsman. It foreshadowed the direction the company would



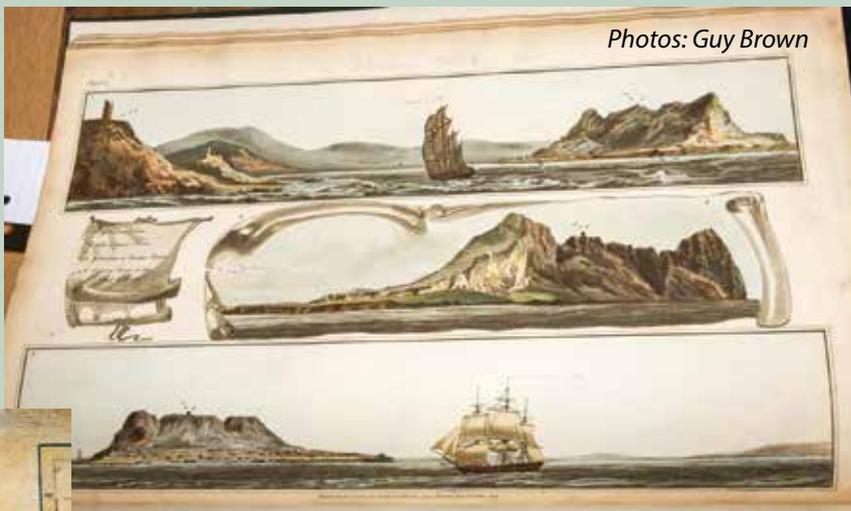
The "Little Wooden Midshipman", who once stood outside Norie & Wilson's shop in Leadenhall Street, is now in the Charles Dickens Museum – he featured in *Dombey & Son*. He is still visible on every Imray publication



## The Imray archive

Given its history it's not surprising that Wych House is full of historical material, including Nelson's favourite chair in a corner of the boardroom. The archive room includes a wonderful selection of blueback charts, pilot books filled with hand-tinted illustrations of bays and entrances, and maps which really could not be used as charts, including one which portrays England as John Bull riding on the back of a whale.

Photos: Guy Brown



take in the latter half of the 20th century.

Both the first and second world wars saw major reductions in sales of Imray charts and a number of different changes in direction. In the late 1930s the Wilsons prepared a contingency plan to move Imray out of London if war began. There were only four litho presses in the UK which could produce large format charts and of these the closest to London was Enderby's in St Ives. In late August 1939 the entire operation was moved to St Ives with almost all the staff leaving London. By September 2 they were all settled in Wych House. On September 3 war was declared.

After the war Imray restarted chart production in London, but the expected orders never came and production of a worldwide chart list came to an end in the early 1950s. At this point more than half the company's revenue was from sales of *Norie's Nautical Tables*. One area of growth was in fishing charts and specialist charts with grids for navigation systems such as Consol and Decca.

The Y and C series of charts were introduced for yachtsmen in the 1920s.

The series was gradually extended from 1945 onwards and sold consistently well. In 1979 the Imray lolaire charts of the Atlantic and East Caribbean were added to the catalogue, in association with CA member Don Street, and in 2000 Imray introduced chart packs which covered popular sailing areas in a number of small format sheets. This series is still growing with the Brittany pack launched only a few months ago. In 2005 Imray took over the chart business of its main remaining UK rival, Stanfords, and with Admiralty Leisure folios now focused only on the UK, and Admiralty Small Craft Editions withdrawn in 2010, Imray is now a leader in charts for leisure sailors.

Book production also moved towards support for the leisure sailor. The *Pilot's Guides* to the English Channel and Thames Estuary had sold well to yachtsmen since their introduction at the beginning of the 20th century. These were joined in 1939 by *Inland Waterways of Great Britain* and after the war this was joined by guides to waterways in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. In 1973 Tom Wilson wrote the *Yachtsman's Pilot from Antwerp to Boulogne*, and in the

late 1970s and 1980s these were joined by pilot books to the Mediterranean including Rod Heikell's *Greek Waters Pilot* which has been a consistent best-seller for Imray since its introduction, and in succeeding years a wide range of other guides and pilots for cruising sailors.

## Imray today

Lucy Wilson, commissioning editor, and her sister Pip, operations director, are part of the eighth generation of Wilsons to be involved in the company – their father, Willie Wilson, is managing director. Ian Rippington, commercial director, is part of the Imray clan. Staff turnover, both in Wych House and in the warehouse and printing section, is almost non-existent. Once employees arrive they often stay until retirement.

Today's Imray has four main areas of focus: chart production, book production, sales of Admiralty charts, and digital apps.

Charts are produced and updated

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Left, Pip Wilson, Ian Rippington and Lucy Wilson continue the family tradition. Above, Caris software allows cartographers to view an Imray chart overlaid on another source chart, and can change the colours of lines and text so that it is very clear if there are differences.

by a team of four cartographers, plus a chart editor. The team uses customised software from Caris to draw and correct charts from a wide range of sources. The core information is from the Admiralty and other national hydrographic offices, and corrections such as the Notices to Mariners, but information also comes from survey ships, other chart producers, Imray's pilot book authors and individual reports. Each entry is routinely checked three or four times for accuracy.

In keeping with Imray tradition, most charts include chartlets of ports and

harbours. The finalised charts are printed on Imray's own presses next to the warehouse in St Ives, with the majority printed on water- and tear-resistant paper which brings its own technical challenges. Around 1500 copies of the most popular charts such as C12 (Eastern English Channel) or C30 (southern North Sea) are printed, with updates every year or two, and C30 is currently unique in also including both waypoints and route lines. Innovations such as this are part of Imray's investment in keeping ahead of the market. Data from Imray's charts is also used by other chart producers for both paper and digital charts.

Surprisingly, perhaps, sales of Imray's paper charts are holding steady overall in spite of the extensive use of chart plotters. "Some are down, but generally sales of charts of UK home waters have improved," says Lucy Wilson.

The core strength of the book department is the group of authors of Imray's guides and pilot books. Many books are issued in partnership with the RCC Pilotage Foundation and with other groups such as the Clyde Cruising Club; authors such as Tom Cunliffe, Rod Heikell, Brian Navin, Dag Pike and Peter Cumberland are well known in their own right. The three staff working on book production are engaged in a constant round of updates and new publications – on the day we visited in July 2015, these ranged from a new update of *Atlantic Islands* by Anne Hammick, to the ninth edition of the *Italian Waters Pilot* by Rod Heikell, a guide to the River Nene and, of course, the 2016 *CA Almanac*.

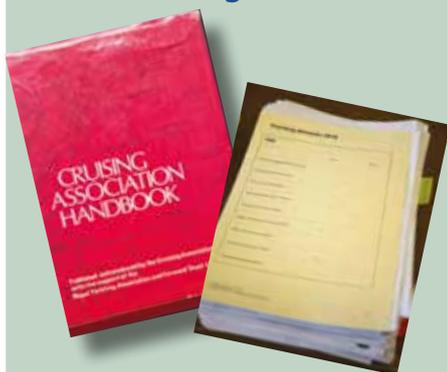
Imray also works in partnership with publishers in France, Germany, Italy, Turkey and Russia who use material from its pilot guides in foreign publications.

Digital printing carried out in the UK makes it practical and cost-effective to produce specialist pilot books in very short runs of 300 or so. Niche publications which also appeal to armchair travellers, cover coastlines such as Chile, Norway, East Africa and a forthcoming guide to Cape Horn and Antarctica. Litho printing for the more popular books is now done in Malta and eastern Europe and the shortest feasible run is about 1500 copies.

Digital technology is a key part of Imray's future, with the inexorable move to plotters, computers and tablets meaning that many sailors expect to view all or most of their navigation information on a screen. At the moment Imray's apps, all for iPhone and iPad only, are divided into three groups – chart apps, information apps, and book apps.

Lucy Wilson, her father Willie, sister Pip and commercial director Ian Rippington get together frequently to discuss possible developments for Imray. Their intention is to retain all Imray's unique selling points, but to move with the times. Who knows what the next 200 years might bring...

## The Cruising Almanac



Production of the *Cruising Almanac* began in 2002 when it was converted from its previous format as the *Cruising Association Handbook*. Chartlets and production are handled by Imray but the information comes from the CA and its members. The Almanac is a David to the Goliath of *Reed's Almanac*, but it sells consistently well and has now given rise to a series of apps.

If you know of a boating business with a story to tell, let us know and we'll feature it in *Cruising*.

